

Being published in reputable academic and scientific journals: Key criteria for acceptance

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Purpose: In scholarly journal publication, blind peer review has become an integral part of the process that helps maintain the standard and quality of academic papers that are accepted for publication. The main purpose of this study was to understand the reasons for the acceptance or rejection of a manuscript by analysing the reviewers' comments based on the ratings on eight specific areas of concern and their written comments.

Research method: The study was based on a content analysis of 248 reviewers' comments for a total of 160 manuscripts. These papers were submitted to an academic journal between September 2017 and February 2018. 62 reviewers' comments were analysed for 32 manuscripts that were accepted, and 186 reviewers' comments were analysed for the 93 papers that were rejected. The reasons for desk rejections were analysed for the remaining 35 manuscripts.

Findings: The study has identified the most important reasons for acceptance based on their rating and these are: adequacy of literature review, research methodology/study design, structure of the paper, quality of the writing, quality of the problem formulation, discussions and conclusions, findings and quality of analysis, importance/relevance, title & abstract and research contribution to the body of knowledge. The main reasons for rejections are: poor discussion & conclusions section, substandard quality of writing, poorly structured paper, weak study design/methodological issues, lack of research gap, poorly developed literature review among others.

Conclusion: Structural problems are one of the most salient issues for the manuscript. While the context of the manuscripts is generally reasonably well developed, many authors seemed to overlook or ignore areas such as use of the English language, accurate punctuation, structure of the paper that includes poorly developed tables, figures and diagrams, inappropriate citation and list of references, unsuitable research instruments and poorly developed critical review of literature.

Originality/value- The study is original and contributes to the body of knowledge as it provides insight into reasons for acceptance and rejection of a manuscript based on the contentment analysis of 160 manuscripts. This will provide guidelines to the authors with valuable information on the ways in which they can develop their manuscripts with a view to increasing the likelihood of acceptance by a peer reviewed scholarly journal.

Key words

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Introduction

In an age of open access publishing it has become seemingly more challenging to publish in quality academic and scholarly journals. On the one hand, the onus on academics to publish in a scientific and technical journal has increased significantly, as in many cases academic institutions require members of the academic staff to publish the results of their research work in reputable and indexed international academic journals. On the other hand, authors find themselves up against the daunting task not only of identifying appropriate and trustworthy journals, but of having to ensure that their manuscripts are consistent and aligned within the scope of the journal to which it is submitted. Inevitably many papers fail to make the grade and are rejected by journals for a variety of reasons, these include the likes of structural weakness in respect of the paper's organisation, a lack of coherence and clarity especially in relation to the methodology, inconsistent results, poor analysis, lack of articulation in writing, substandard English etc.

Despite the universal demand for scholarly writing and the publishing of learned papers, most institutions do not offer any formal training or specialist workshops in how to write effective papers and go about publishing them. This can frustrate young researchers and inhibits professional progress and the ability to place research in the public domain.

The main purpose of this paper was to conduct an empirical study of why a manuscript is rejected and the reasons for acceptance. Firstly, the paper looks at the various reasons for rejection and acceptance of a paper in business management and other social sciences journals. The second part of this paper focuses on identifying ten areas that require additional focus if a paper is to stand an increased chance of being accepted for publication.

Review of literature

Research and the writing of academic papers is integral to a society's development. Across the higher education sector scholarly publication has an important relationship in terms of grant allocation and academic progress as most academic institutions seek to reward those academics/scientists who produce the best research output (Audisio, Stahel, Aapro, Costa, Pandey & Pavlidis, 2009). Thus, it can be a very frustrating and sometimes a costly experience for researchers when a manuscript is rejected.

The origin of scholarly journals can be traced back to England during the reign of King Charles II (1660-1685) when in 1665 the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* first began to publish research results. The manuscripts were unstructured, and devoid of standardisation in respect of form and style. Subsequently we have witnessed the gradual evolution of the journal structure and format. Nearly 300 years ago, a peer review process was introduced in England and France to ensure that all submitted manuscripts met the quality standard and scientific validity of journals. By the 19th Century the well-developed manuscript format known as "theory-experiment-discussion" developed and over time replaced the letter form of scientific publication. Since then there has been a growing demand for standardisation of the editorial policies and procedures that led to the establishments of the IMRaD framework which has become the standard format that centres upon: Method, Results and Discussion. Since its origin in the mid-Seventeenth century the scientific paper structure has undergone substantial changes that have resulted in greater structure, focus and clarity of purpose.

Table-1: Development of scientific paper

1665	Fist scientific paper published	Unstructured Form & style were not structured/standardised
1850s	Methods and structure developed	The "methods" developed with overall paper structure knows as-Theory -experiment-discussion
1900	Standardised format developed	-Norms of standardised format -use of literary style decreased

1980s	IMRaD method developed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -More structured approach -Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion structure was adopted -This facilitates modular reading in which readers are looking for specific information
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There are many reasons why a manuscript is rejected both at the desk stage (no review is carried out if a paper is rejected at this stage) and at the final stage (once the review process is completed). Journal editors rely on the peer review process to ensure that academic journals accept and publish high-quality research papers. Therefore, it is imperative that they use a robust peer review process which sees reviewers assess papers submitted to ensure that they are both worthy of publication and within the scope of a specific journal. Academics are understandably susceptible to the pressures that emanate from the prevailing culture of publish or perish, and thus would benefit from additional insight into the review process.

Peer review is considered integral to scientific publishing (Yuksel, 2003; McKercher, Law, Weber, Song, & Hsu, 2007). For appropriate screening and the selecting of the right manuscript for the journal it is an indispensable part of scholarly activities (Kassirer & Campion, 1994). Reviewers assume the critical responsibility to ascertain whether a paper should be accepted or rejected (Horrobin, 2001) as the final decision is taken based on their recommendations. Although a considerable body of research has been conducted on the peer review process itself, only a modest amount of research has taken as its primary focus the actual content of reviewer' comments that cause a paper to be accepted or rejected (Bordage, 2001).

The rejection of a scientific paper is the norm rather than exception in academia (McKercher, Law, Weber, Song, & Hsu, 2007). Respected top-ranking journals employ robust review processes and hence accept far fewer manuscripts than they reject, in many cases they accept 10-15% of manuscripts with 70-80% rejected at initial review stage (desk rejection) (Straub, Ang & Evaristo, 1994; Daft, 1995; Summers, 2001), whereas less prestigious journals have higher rates of acceptance (McKercher, Law, Weber, Song, & Hsu, 2007).

It is generally understood that factors such as a lack of theoretical grounding, poorly designed methodology, a lack of originality, absence of robust literature review or misapplication of data may be significant reasons for a paper being rejected by a journal (Bordage, 2001; Colquitt & Ireland, 2009; Bono & McNamara, 2011; Ahlstrom, 2015). However, our own experience and observations indicates that there are other reasons too. Having both served in the capacity of editor-in-chiefs of separate international academic journals for the past 10-12 years we have witnessed many occasions when papers have been rejected for other reasons e.g. too small a sample size, defective tables or figures, irrelevant topic, insufficient information in an abstract, poor English, problems with the structure of the paper or the fact that a paper did not follow the submission guidelines. When problems are with the context (framing & organising), it is much easier to avoid rejection with a degree of focus, knowledge and understanding of the submission guidelines.

On many occasions, even when recommendations and suggestions are given to the authors by journal editors and reviewers they are still insufficient to produce a quality paper (Ahlstrom, 2015). In most cases the recommendations are mainly focused on the content of the paper such as theory, conceptual models, literature review, methodology, analysis and interpretation, as these are viewed as the most important aspects of the paper (Creswell, 2008). According to Grant & Pollock (2011) a well-developed statistical analysis may not be sufficient for acceptance if it lacks well justified and clear research questions. This is not only applicable to any specific research domain; but is equally important to a range of situations be they in empirical research (Huang, 2007; Ahlstrom, Brutton & Zhao, 2013),

qualitative or a case-based research (Zhao; Gu; Yue & Ahlstrom, 2013; Yin, 2013). Current literature as well as our own experience reinforces the belief that there are many other reasons why researchers are unable to produce good quality papers and hence these are rejected at the desk stage without even undergoing any review process or some are at the post review stage (Daft, 1995; Boradge, 2001; Ahlstrom, 2015).

A useful survey was conducted by Yuksel in 2003 based on 43 reviewers from seven international journals that focus on Tourism, Travel and Hospitality sector. Yuksel asked the respondents to identify and expand upon the three most important criteria when it came to whether they accepted or rejected a paper. Eight key areas were identified by the reviewers for evaluating empirical manuscripts. These are: research contribution to the body of knowledge, innovation and originality, paper meets the journal objectives, quality of writing, adequacy of literature review, quality of discussion, methodology and design and research implications. McConnell (2000) found that poorly developed manuscript and use of inaccurate and or colloquial English language are the main reasons for the rejection of a manuscript. For Straub et al (1994) weaknesses in respect of originality and contribution to the body of knowledge, theory and logical rigor are the most important reasons for rejection irrespective of the method applied in the study. However, a study conducted by Holchuh in 1998 found some other reasons in addition to the contribution of the study and these are: faulty design, poor quality of writing, and value/relevance of the study. The findings of Audisio et al (2009) examined a range of other aspects of a manuscript for the rejection; these being: poor experimentation design (lack of aim/hypothesis, small sample size, insignificant conclusion), weak problem statement, inadequate literature review and superficial interpretation of results.

Research Method

The study is based on a detailed content analysis of reviewers' comments on 160 manuscripts submitted during September 2017 to February 2018 to the *Journal of Business and Retail Management Research (JBRMR)*. All manuscripts submitted to the JBRMR are double-blind peer reviewed. JBRMR utilises subject specialist reviewers worldwide who have experience in reviewing SCOPUS Indexed Journal papers. All reviewers for JBRMR have direct experience of the said journal and its quality control mechanisms. Each manuscript is sent to two external reviewers for their comments. Of a total of 250 reviewers' comments on 125 submitted papers those that were successful in the initial screening process analysed based on the following criteria: a) 32 manuscripts for acceptance (total 62 reviewers' comments). These were accepted unanimously; b) 93, manuscripts for negative comments those are ultimately rejected (total reviewers' comments were (186). However, a total 35 out of 160 manuscripts were rejected at the initial screening stage and did not go through any blind review process.

A review form is used by all reviewers and they all are informed about the criteria for reviewing a paper. The review form is divided into two separate sections. The first section focuses on eight (8) specific areas: quality of the problem, adequacy of the literature review, methods/research design, quality of the analysis, quality of the writing, structure of the paper, contribution of the paper to the field, paper is likely to stimulate future research. These areas are rated with 9-point scale (1 is the lowest whilst 9 is the highest). Reviewers are also asked to make their details comments (comments to the authors section) identifying the merits and shortcomings of the manuscript. Finally, they are required to provide their final decision by using universally accepted 4-point rating scale (Accept as it stands –No revisions required; Accept with minor revisions; Revised and resubmit (major revisions) for further review; Reject).

The content of reviews for all 32 manuscripts that received acceptance with minor revision were analysed to identify the reasons or criteria for acceptance. Conversely, the content of reviews for all 93 manuscripts that received direct rejection including revise and resubmit for further review were analysed

to identify the reasons for rejection or the precise nature of the flaws. Furthermore, the study also analysed the Review Editor's comments on the 45 manuscripts, those that were rejected at the initial stage or received desk rejection to understand the reasons for desk rejection. Therefore, the content analysis is based on producing three lists: reasons for acceptance (positive comments), reasons for post rejections (negative comments) and reasons for desk rejection. No papers were accepted for publication without further revision.

To tally the various reasons on eight (8) specific areas those highlighted above, ratings were analysed by using a broad categorisation scheme. The study also analysed reviewer comments to the authors. Based on their comments the ten most important reasons for acceptance and twenty most important reasons for rejection were also identified.

Results

At least two reviewers were used to review a manuscript (both are external), however, each manuscript was scrutinised first by the Editor-in-Chief before sending them to the reviewers. Again, after receiving the reviewers' comments Editor-in-Chief takes the final decision and makes a summary of the reviewers' comments that also incorporate the Editor-in-Chief's comments/observations. In all cases of acceptance and final rejection the final decision was based on the reviewers' comments. For the acceptance of the 32 (20%) manuscripts all external reviewers were unanimously recommended for at least 24 manuscript with minor revisions that included at least three recommendations to make improvements and corrections. 8 manuscripts were accepted with some major revisions, those were submitted again for further review. These manuscripts were ultimately accepted. There were no manuscripts accepted as they stood.

In relation to the rejection for the remaining 93 (58.12%), both reviewers recommended rejection. However, within a three months period a total of 12 papers were resubmitted after revision for further review. All these papers were reviewed by the same reviewers again to ensure that the revised papers met the grade and had addressed the recommendations appropriately. However, these resubmissions were not considered in this paper.

The next two tables have identified the reasons for acceptance and rejection. The first 8 reasons are taken from the reviewer forms where reviewers are required to rate them based on 9 rating scale 1 being the lowest and 9 being the highest rating, and they are also required to make comments on each of the criteria. The last two items were added based on the number of comments received from the reviewers, thus making a total 10 reasons that are common for both cases of acceptance and rejection

Table-2: Main reasons for accepting a manuscript by the reviewers (based on total comments of 358)

Reason	No	%
Quality of the problem formulation	45	12.5
Adequacy of literature review	60	16.75
Research methodology/study design	60	16.75
Research findings & quality of the analysis	28	7.8
Discussions & conclusions	32	9
The structure of the paper	51	14.24
The quality of the writing	50	14
Originality/research contribution to the field	7	2
Importance/relevance, within the scope, stimulate future interest	16	4.46
Title & abstract	9	2.5

The table above identified the main reasons for acceptance. The most important reasons are: adequately developed research methodology and literature review followed by paper structure, quality of writing and identifying the research gap.

Table-3: Main reasons for rejecting a manuscript by the reviewers

Reason	No	%
Quality of the problem formulation	142	12.81
Adequacy of literature review	105	9.47
Research methodology/study design	155	14
Research findings & quality of the analysis	86	7.76
Discussions & conclusions	219	19.76
The structure of the paper	171	15.43
The quality of the writing	179	16.15
Originality/research contribution to the field	14	1.26
Importance/relevance, within the scope, stimulate future interest	6	0.54
Title & abstract	31	2.79

In relation to the reasons for rejection, the table above indicates that poorly developed discussions and conclusions being the most important reason for rejection, while poor writing, the structure of the paper and problems with the research gap being the second, third & fourth important reasons.

Table-4: 20 most important reasons for rejection of a manuscript (total 977 comments of 1108 based on 93 manuscripts of 186 reviewers' comments)

No	Reason	No.	%	Cumulative %
1	Poorly written, difficult to read/language problems	112	10.10	10.10
2	Reference section is messy/inconsistent reference list/citation errors	71	6.40	16.50
3	No robust discussion section	66	5.95	22.45
4	Poorly structured manuscript	58	5.23	27.68
5	Incomplete description of the problem/absence of research problem	55	4.96	32.64
6	Results are not well interpreted	54	4.87	37.51
7	Inappropriate research design/lack of clarity/not succinct	52	4.69	42.20
8	Poor discussion/conflicting statements/statements are not supported by sources	51	4.60	46.80
9	Unjustifiable sample size/too small/inappropriate sampling method	49	4.42	51.22
10	Abbreviation not spelled out/use of English is below standard	49	4.42	55.64
11	Theoretical & conceptual framework is inadequate	48	4.33	59.97
12	Poor literature review	46	4.15	64.12
13	Poorly discussed research findings/poorly presented data	46	4.15	68.27
14	No research limitations & scope for further research	42	3.79	72.06
15	Important variables are not addressed adequately	38	3.42	75.48
16	Insufficient literature review	34	3.06	78.54
17	Incomplete research analysis	28	2.52	81.06
18	Long paragraph/sentences are overly lengthy & lack precision	28	2.52	83.58
19	Not well-structured abstract/too broad/insufficient information	24	2.16	85.74
20	Inappropriate research hypotheses/not well sources	23	2.07	87.81

Reasons for desk rejection

The content analysis of those 35 papers that were rejected at the initial stage and did not go through the review process found that these papers were rejected mainly due to the unsuitability of the topic. The following tables indicates the reason for the rejection of these papers:

Table-5: Reasons for desk rejection

No of paper	Subject is not relevant	Incomplete paper	Poor structure	sampling	Poor written English	Subject coverage
26	X					Accounting, finance, economics, agriculture economics & outside the scope of the journal
4		X	X			Within the scope
2			X		X	Within the scope
1			X	X	X	Within the scope

Discussion

The study shows that overall patterns of various reasons for rejecting or accepting a manuscript are similar across all manuscripts irrespective of the geographical spread of the authors. The content analysis demonstrates that the reasons for rejecting and accepting a manuscript do not arise randomly, rather some reasons are occurring significantly more frequently than others. For instance, poor English and problems with the structure have been identified in most of the manuscript as not only common but are primary concerns. In many cases this may be due to the author/authors' background with them not having English as their first language.

During the analysis, it was evident that nearly a quarter of the reviewers of those that recommended rejecting a manuscript did not provide any disappointing ratings on the review form and failed to provide any explanatory comments on some of the criteria. This unexplained reason or not identifying the areas of flaws causes frustration amongst both the authors and the Journal Editor as it does not help them to understand why a manuscript is rejected and how the manuscript might be improved. It is essential that reviewers make their comments to justify their recommendations and provide useful guidance for authors. However, when accepting a manuscript the pattern was different, invariably reviewers gave balanced ratings and made explanatory comments as to how the manuscript might be improved and the nature of changes to be made clearly in the "note to author" box. It is worth noting that it has been observed that editors always pay more attention to the negative comments rather than positive ones when a manuscript is rejected (Choi, 2002).

Another important point is that not all reviewers are focusing on the same aspects of a manuscript when they are making their comments, rather different reviewers have focused on different aspects of the manuscript. Some reviewers tend to give more focus to the contextual side of the paper such as methodological aspects, identification of research gap, findings and analysis, literature review, discussion and conclusions, while others focus more on the structure of the paper that includes written English, punctuation and references on top of the contextual side. In some cases, reviewers are more enthusiastic to make detailed comments on each rated criterion to clarify matters for the author/authors, while some reviewers are less focused. There are occasions when comments are brief and can appear to lack objectivity. This serves as a reminder of the role that the cognitive aspects of a reviewer play when he/she assess a manuscript (Kassirer and Campion, 1994). The foibles and idiosyncrasies of editors and reviewers is a factor that is certain to having a bearing on decisions. In is noteworthy that in the main there is no

formal training programme for reviewers despite the critical role they play in the publication process (McKercher et al, 2007).

The research findings appear to confirm those of previous studies. For example, the reasons for rejection given by the reviewers confirmed most of the list of Bordage (2001), Daft (1995), Byrne (2000), Audisio et al (2008). The study suggests that the most important areas authors should focus on for higher rate of acceptance are: research method/study design; discussion & conclusions; quality of writing, structure of the paper; identification of the research gap, adequacy of literature review and findings. These confirmed the previous studies such as McConnell (2000) who found use of poor English language and poorly developed manuscripts are the main reasons for rejection. Findings also mirrored to a large degree those of Holschuh (1998), Straub *et al* (1994), Audision *et al* (2009).

The study has several practical implications. Findings will enable the authors to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the review process and hopefully better appreciate the areas that warrant attention if a paper is to stand a better chance of being accepted for publication. Journal editors will benefit from the findings by gaining additional insight into the challenges of the review process and understanding the specific guidelines they can develop both for the reviewers and for the authors. Practical consideration should be given as to how best equip and support reviewers for their role in the process.

Mitigating subjectivity

The debate about subjectivity sees postmodernists positing that subjective processes along with other factors such as social relations interfere with objectivity (Ratner, 2002). Those engaged in scholarly endeavours benefit considerably from the quest for greater self-awareness. Scrupulous effort needs to be made to avoid making assumptions and this includes an openness to viewing things differently. Academics like anyone else are just as susceptible to the cognitive bias that is known as Anchoring Bias. Fixed ideas, preconceived notions and misconceptions are notoriously difficult to shift and thus it is essential that these are factored into thinking especially with regards to the review process. Ensuring an extensive pool of specialist reviewers helps dilute opportunities for skewed thinking about unfamiliar topics and regions. The onus is upon journals to ensure that a conscious effort is made to ensure that reviewers represent the world at large. Equally those in leadership roles need to be vigilant when it comes to monitoring the type of feedback received, especially if it manifests witting or unwitting bias. Academics of the highest order are not immune from prejudice and Editors-in-Chief and Editorial Boards must ensure transparency, opportunities for reflection and appropriate channels for diverse stakeholders to voice any concerns. Similarly, in the quest for objectivity it is important to appreciate that just as some individuals might frame things negatively, there are those who are overly sympathetic, something that can be just as unhealthy. In the research process it pays to construct neutral questions and seek out empirical facts.

Recommendations to authors

Academics need to be aware of the way in which academic journal ranking has become a part of the contemporary process for appraisal and promotion in higher education institutions (Nkomo, 2009). It is important to appreciate the fact that academic journals are not monolithic entities, and whilst they each have their own histories and areas of focus it pays to be mindful that these are human concerns replete with all the usual challenges present in any entity that involves academics. It always pays to invest time in selecting the right journal. Whilst some venerable journals may continue to deserve lofty reputations, others are living off old reputations and may lack the relevance that they once enjoyed. Time lag matters, as generally for the highly regarded journals not only does the review process take a considerable amount of time, competition is often intense and thus acceptance rates are relatively low. Be sure to peruse a

journal's previous editions, paying close attention to the subject matter and originality of the papers featured. Authors would do well to beware of incurring the ire of reviewers and editors by submitting papers that are formatted incorrectly (Dunleavy, 2003). Careful thought needs to be given to the length of a paper (usually the optimum length is 6-8,000 words), unfortunately many submissions are overly lengthy, some giving the impression of being a badly truncated doctoral thesis. There are also understandable misgivings about papers that have a whole host of authors. Careful attention must be paid to the accurate use of the English language. Editing and re-editing prior to submission can iron out errors that might otherwise jeopardise the success of the submission.

Table 2 and Table 3 provide useful pointers for consideration. A perennial concern is about the use of English that is either colloquial or verbose. Clarity of meaning is often lost by overly lengthy sentences, or those that lack precision and tightness of meaning due to insufficient or inaccurate use of punctuation. It is as well to remember that increasingly journals expect to see authors making use of gender-neutral pronouns in their writing. Authors should take extra care to avoid having insufficient or inappropriate citations. Furthermore, a common point of weakness highlighted by reviewers is that of the choice of literature used, frequently this emanates from a narrow range of sources that are often rather dated. The author/authors must work assiduously to ensure that their argument is laid out in purposeful and methodical manner. It helps if a paper is reader-centric and alive to the importance of context. All papers benefit from editing and revision.

For the more reputable academic journals the review process takes time. Patience is important, as is the ability to accept criticism. Reviewers comments may well touch a nerve, but if taken in the right spirit enable an author to hone their work. Persistence invariably pays off, but only after a lot of fine tuning and reworking to ensure that rubrics are followed to the letter and all criteria met. Heuristic learning affords opportunities to see things afresh, providing every effort is made to be detached and objective in the process. Method and integrity are central to all worthwhile academic endeavours.

Limitations and possible directions for future research

The current dynamic of academic publishing is such that it is inevitable that any research of this nature can only provide something of snapshot of what is taking place. New technology and increased data mining are certain to have considerable impact on the ways in which academics approach their endeavours and those charged with reviewing academic papers go about their important work. Furthermore, there is the ongoing debate around open access journals, one that sees some academics taking a decidedly jaundiced, even occasionally openly hostile view of such journals, fearing that they presage a perceived further erosion in academic standards. Altmetrics and archiving are already altering not only ways of working, but also the ways in which research is appraised and assessed for impact. Subjectivity, whilst allowing for a degree of personal discernment and discretion is but a step away from fallibility. A broader time frame and larger sample size would almost certainly provide additional insight, as well as raising further questions about rubrics, processes and the ability to test the voracity of claims and findings. Analysis of a range of journals across a variety of subject specific journals might have generated additional and or different findings and insight.

Whilst it is perfectly reasonable to question the degree to which academics take cognizance of the scope of a journal, it is equally important to give thought to the training and professional development that reviewers receive in respect of their pivotal role. One possible avenue of future research could be in relation to the possible causes of the disparities in reviewers' responses. Questions could also be asked of those in leadership roles in higher education, particularly in relation to the degree to which institutions help academics at all levels to have a clearer understanding of how academic journals work and the ways in which some journal rankings are not always what they might at first seem. Heuristic learning and

experience for all their undoubted merits are no substitute for appropriate guidance, scaffolding, periodic training and professional development. In the light of the increasing number of paper submissions from outside the Anglosphere time and energy needs to be invested in ensuring that Confirmation Bias is not becoming an impediment to those academics who do not have English as their first language. In addition, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is another dimension that is likely to shape future developments, and thus additional thought could be given to the way in which technology is shaping the review process and ensuring that it remains fit for purpose.

Conclusion

As academics strive to making a positive and purposeful contribution to the body of human knowledge it is imperative that they appreciate that their research is all the better for it being scrutinised and peer reviewed. Rather than viewing the current paper review process as some form of adversarial contest it would be much healthier to see it as a refining mechanism, one that helps authors hone their skills and thus produce and write better papers. This research recognises that there needs to be key criteria that must be assessed as objectively and robustly as is humanly possible. Authors can help matters considerably by choosing the journal that they submit a paper to with greater care, whilst also being mindful of the scope and guidelines of any journal. By endeavouring to understand the role of the reviewer they might come to better appreciate what is expected of them and adapt their writing accordingly. Equally, it is important that the journals themselves work assiduously to ensure that those who submit papers for consideration for publication receive helpful and constructive feedback.

This paper has elucidated something of the need for authors to be more methodical both in their approach to the choice of the journals that they submit to, and equally in the way they set about constructing and writing a paper. Appraisal and analysis of reviewer comments provides a useful means to understand areas where authors fall short, by so doing weaknesses are identified and can be flagged up in guidance and journal rubrics. Academics by better appreciating the key criteria that enable an academic paper to be accepted for publication are likely to become more attuned to expectations and hopefully more successful in their submissions.

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Appendix A

Reasons for accepting a paper

There is a total of ten categories identified for the most important reasons for acceptance. These categories are based on the external reviewers' comments when recommending for acceptance. There are eight specific areas as indicated in the research methodology section, reviewers are required to rate with 9-point scale in the review form in addition to make their details comments identifying the merits of this papers to make recommendations for acceptance. Two further items were identified as most common observations and comments made by the reviewers (Title & abstract; relevance & currency). A total of 360 comments were received (269 positive comments and 91 comments for improvements/further revisions). No papers were accepted as it stands. All 32 papers were accepted with minor modification/some further modification.

Categories	Comments by the reviewers	Total comments
Quality of the problem formulation (45 positive comments)	Well-grounded in literature & theory, focused, well-articulated;	13
	Research problems are clearly identified, clear research gap;	4
	Well-developed hypotheses with adequate sources, sound conceptual & theoretical framework;	7
	The reader is clear as to the knowledge gap provided;	4
	This paper is well thought through	5
	The article articulates the statement of the problem very well	7
	The paper has a clarity of purpose that is evident throughout	5
Adequacy of literature review 38 Positive comments 22 comments for improvements	Well-developed literature review, Well-grounded in literature;	19
	Good use of current sources	12
	It is grounded in an extensive literature review and takes cognizance of relevant theories	7
	The researcher(s) should endeavour to update the literature review by adding more recent studies	11
	Most of the sources used in the literature are quite old.	7
The literature review needs more theoretical background.	4	
Research methodology/study design	Appropriate methodology, methodology section is well explained, methodology is fundamentally sound/The research designed was appropriate;	22
	Sufficiently large sample size, justifiable sample size	6
	Well defined research instruments	5

42 positive comments	used a well-established measure/scale for analysis/ Appropriate use of statistical tools	6
18 comments for improvements	Used right data collection method	3
	The sampling techniques were not properly and adequately stated/justify the sample size	14
	The researcher(s) may choose to use other tools such as Structural Equation Modelling and Confirmatory Factor Analysis for more robust research analysis.	4
Research findings & quality of the analysis	Adequate data analysis well presented	7
	Table, figures & diagrams are clear and easy to understand/Well explain tables & figures;	3
28 positive comments	The results were logically presented.	3
	Very well analysis and reliable findings	6
	It tests interesting hypotheses	1
	It utilizes sophisticated statistical analysis (SEM/ AMOS)	3
	The data sample is quite large and the findings providing an interesting conclusion	3
	The findings are simple and clear,	2
Discussions & conclusions	Compared & contrasted well with the current literature	11
	well discussed, supported by adequate sources	4
24 positive comments	significant conclusion & flow from the findings	3
	Research implications discussed well	2
	Limitations acknowledged & Scope for further studies discussed	4
8 comments on improvements	It is also important to include some acknowledgement of the limitations of the study, as well as any scope for future research	8
The structure of the paper	Well-structured and followed the guidelines	13
	Tables/figures are appropriate	4
27 positive comments	Adequate use of citation, List of references are adequate, it has a robust References section;	3
	The structure of the paper is properly designed	7
24 comments on improvements	Paper is too lengthy	3
	Author should check and be sure that in-text matches with all end-text	5
	There are numerous errors in the reference list, e.g. incorrect punctuation, missing references	5
	The paragraphs are too long, some words run together	9
	Should avoid using abbreviations - and, wherever used, the terminology should be explained first.	2
The quality of the writing	Clear and well written, Easy to understand, Smaller sentences/The paper is generally very well written and has a clear purpose;	31
36 positive comments	Precision and clarity are invariably helped by sentences being succinct	5
	Few grammatical mistakes exist in the paper	4
14 comments on improvements	It is advised that English proof reading is performed to the paper, Certain linguistic errors detract from its credibility, and thus it requires careful editing, the paper requires careful editing;	7
	Poor sentence structure/flow /paragraph construction	3
Originality/research contribution to the field	The strength of this research is that it has contributed to existing studies/ This paper contributes to knowledge	5
	There is a need for a clearer sense of local context	2
7 positive comments		
Importance/relevance, within the scope, stimulate future interest	Relevant and current, well fit within the scope/ contemporary topic/ Impressive narrative with currency and relevance;	6
	Add value to the Journal/Generate/stimulate future interest	4
	The scope of the paper is suitable	3
16 positive comments	Substantive rationale in terms of quality, uniqueness of the research issue in this paper	2
		1

	The paper deals with a current topic having both practical and theoretical relevance	
Title & abstract	Good title, title is clear;	4
6 positive comments	Abstract is well developed/Structured abstract and succinct;	2
	The title is very cumbersome as is and does not adequately convey the very interesting question you are investigating/The title of the research work must be properly written (use of capital letters).	2
3 comments on improvements	Author may like to re-concise the abstract	1

Here are some reviewers' comments on various issues as stated above were taken as example:

"The paper is a mature and well-reasoned analysis of an increasingly significant topic. There was a clear attempt to provide insight into local history and context"

"This paper is an absolute delight to read, not least because it is well written and approaches the topic in a measured and objective manner. The author/authors have provided a useful insight into local context-----"

"This paper is written with method and purpose and makes some pertinent observations. Whilst it is evident that board size is a factor, there are also issues such as gender and the number of non-executive directors that have a bearing. One area that is also germane is the degree of board effectiveness and how this might be measured. As this paper is being submitted to an international academic journal it is important to provide a thorough overview of the local context and certain cultural norms as they will shape and influence the nature of boards."

"One aspect does undermine the paper somewhat and that is the English language deployed. It is imperative that the paper is thoroughly edited, once that is done it should be up to the required standard"

"The Conclusion and discussion section are very superficial. I suggest splitting it and giving a more detailed discussion of the findings, especially explaining them relative to the literature – which of the literature is supported by the findings, which is contradicted, and what does this mean? "

"I am a bit worried that the literature is rather old, with only 16 references out of 76 being newer than 5 years, and few of these are in the literature review – most of them are methodology references. An attempt should be made to find more recent literature"

"The literature review needs to be concluded with a clear indication of what is known on the specific topic of research and which gaps of knowledge are going to be filled by the study"

Appendix B

Reasons for rejecting a paper

Reasons given by external reviewers when recommending the rejection of a paper. This includes a revise and resubmit option. Based on the reviewers comments the following table has identified a total of the ten most important reasons for rejection including eight most important categories, reviewers are required to rate with 9-point scale in addition to make their details comments identifying the merits of this papers to make recommendations for rejection. Two further items were identified as most common observations and comments made by the reviewers (Title & abstract; relevance & currency) Total comments: 1,108

Categories	Comments by the reviewers	Total comments
Quality of the problem formulation (142 negative comments)	Incomplete description of the problem/ research gap is not well identified/absence of research problem;	55
	Theoretical and conceptual framework is not well developed/missing/inadequate;	48
	Inappropriate research hypotheses/not stated/not well sourced and lack of justification;	23
	Research purpose is not stated/absence of research aims and objectives/Research questions are not appropriate;	16
Adequacy of literature review Improvements (105 negative comments)	Outdated review of literature/many old literatures/ review is not critical;	46
	Literature review is insufficient;	34
	Lack of theoretical & conceptual background;	14
	Unsubstantiated statement/ large chunks without literature source	11

Research methodology/study design (155 Negative comments)	Inappropriate research design/lack of clarity/ The research methodology is not succinct/lack of clarity/fault methodology; Sample size not justified/too small/inappropriate sampling method/Sample designing is not scientific; Subjects are not clearly explained/described/ Important variables are not addressed adequately; Sample population is not stated/sample audience is unclear; measurement scale is not explained sufficiently.	52 49 38 10 6
Research findings & quality of the analysis (86 Negative comments)	Inadequate analysis/Poorly discussed research findings/poorly presented data; Insufficient data presented/Inadequate/incomplete research analysis; too many tables & figures, not well presented, inappropriate format of tables & figures;	46 28 12
Discussions & conclusions (219 Negative comments)	Not robust discussion by comparing & contrasting the results with current literature; Results are not well interpreted/under interpretation/over interpretation; Poor discussion/conflicting statements/statements are not supported by sources; No research limitation & scope for further research; Conclusions is not aligned/ Mismatched of conclusion Vs Research Finding	66 54 51 42 6
The structure of the paper (171 Negative comments)	Reference list is inconsistent/ inconsistencies and omissions in the referencing/ Citation error/The reference section is written in messy format; Poorly structured/did not follow the submission guidelines; words are run together/long paragraph/sentences are overly lengthy and as a result lack precision; Inappropriate format of tables/figures/diagram; Too lengthy paper	71 58 28 12 2
The quality of the writing (179 Negative comments)	Poorly written/difficult to read/confusing sentences /Inappropriate English/ linguistic errors/ weak use of English; written English communication is below the required standard Abbreviations not spelled out Spelling errors /wrong use of words are evident.	112 49 18
Originality/research contribution to the field (14 Negative comments)	This paper is not adding value to the existing knowledge/lack of originality/contribution to the body of knowledge is not clear	14
Importance/relevance, within the scope, stimulate future interest (6 Negative comments)	Not important or irrelevant topic Lack of practical implication	4 2
Title & abstract (31 Negative comments)	Not well-structured abstract/too broad/insufficient information/ The abstract does not provide the significance of the paper; The abstract is unreadable and must be rewritten from scratch; Title is not representative/Too many words in the title;	24 5 2

Some example of reviewer's comments

"The bibliography justifies my belief that a rigorous study has not been conducted here to justify the outcome presented. For a topic that has so much potential, the author (s) did not consult many scholars in the study area for valid decisions to be reached in the study"

"Literature review is insufficient. For instance, justice was not done to employee work attitude and commitment in the literature. The writer was silent on these concepts but repeatedly mentioned them. One would have thought that these were the major concepts upon which the study is based".

"The paper is not technically sound. Use of descriptive research methods in this study does not justify the outcomes. The statistical methods used are too elementary for a study like this. The author(s) sought to make serious recommendations to the authorities, but the basis for making the recommendations are technically questionable"

"The research questions did not seem to address the problem stated in this paper. The author (s) may consider revising the questions to suit the problems that they want solved".

"Methodology is unclear"

"Research limitations and future studies was not mentioned"

"In its current form there are times when the paper appears to make sweeping generalisations. That said, the greatest challenge is in relation to the accurate use of English".

"This paper is a spirited effort; that has real flashes of inspiration and insight. Sadly, its credibility is somewhat undermined by linguistic weakness in relation to the use of the English language. It is imperative that the paper is checked and edited by a native speaker of English-----"

"Some of tables are unclear and lead to confusion with regards to the use of results column".

"Overall, this paper fails to demonstrate a solid contribution in a body of knowledge and it is considered as a replication study except for the unit of analysis"

"The paper is poorly written, with numerous grammatical errors, it also lacks cohesion and it is hard to understand the arguments the author(s) are making".

"The authors offer little explanation about the possible reason for the hypotheses that were not supported by the literature"
