



Publishable or not? Analysis of technical issues among manuscripts of faculty researchers

Marjon Malacapay ^{a1} Central Philippines State University, Philippines

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Abstract

Manuscripts that are poorly prepared for publication remain one of the leading reasons why journals reject completed research papers. Although prior studies have identified the skills and challenges faced by academics in scholarly publishing, limited attention has been given to the technical issues within specific sections of manuscripts. This study addresses this gap by employing in-depth document analysis to examine flaws in manuscripts submitted for in-house review. Thirteen manuscripts from faculty members were evaluated by three external expert panels, and significant comments were thematically categorized. The analysis revealed that the introduction section contained the greatest number of weaknesses, particularly in establishing a sound theoretical foundation, integrating empirical evidence, and linking concepts coherently. Study designs were frequently assessed as weak, inappropriate, or inconsistent with the stated methodological approach. Furthermore, discussions often lacked clarity in articulating the rationale behind the study and its broader applicability. These findings highlight the persistent challenges faced by academics in aligning research design, theoretical grounding, and argumentation within manuscripts. The study emphasizes the need for capacity building in academic writing, particularly in structuring arguments, strengthening theoretical frameworks, and ensuring methodological coherence. Addressing these areas can improve the quality of manuscripts, thereby enhancing the likelihood of publication in reputable journals and contributing more effectively to scholarly discourse.

Keywords: academic publishing; faculty development; manuscript preparation; research design; scholarly writing.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Marjon Malacapay, Central Philippines State University, Philippines
E-mail address: marjcm1992@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

It is through publication that scholars across the globe share their thoughts and ideas with the rest of the scientific community. For the faculty of an academic institution who conduct research, having a strong research and publication record is necessary for them to move up the career ladder, to secure tenure, and to pursue professional development (Hyland, 2016). For this reason, the pressure on them to publish scientific research articles in high-ranking international journals has increased throughout the decades (Li & Flowerdew, 2020). However, not many researchers enjoy the process of writing as it is time-consuming and exhausting (Derntl, 2014). Even today's seasoned authors who were already successful with their first submission faced numerous rejections when they first started their publication journey (Ramsay-Baggs, 2012). Indeed, it is discouraging for inexperienced researchers whose papers are rejected by journals after they have submitted them for publication (Khadilkar, 2018).

In recent years, submissions of low-quality manuscripts competing to be accepted for publication in a prolific journal have been exponentially increasing in the scientific community (Kelly et al., 2014). Even though there are many journals to choose from, many completed research papers never make it to the point of publication for a variety of reasons. The quality of the manuscript is one of these reasons. Lowry et al., (2020) pointed out that the poor quality, novelty, and impact of finished research papers submitted for peer review are a few of the reasons why they are often rejected. Perhaps this outcome of the faculty could be attributed to their lack of interest and commitment to conducting research-related activities. Years later, several researchers have shed light by identifying and enumerating such factors, including the difficulties in research conceptualization, literature review, searching, using, and evaluating sources of information, selecting research designs, crafting research instruments, selecting the correct statistical tools, a lack of regional and international collaborations, and manuscript preparation for publication. A study of academicians in Turkey (Aydın et al., 2023) identified cognitive, social, physical, and affective barriers, including difficulty writing in English, following IMRAD structure, time constraints, and family/administrative overload. Similarly, Öztürk and Taşkın (2024) found that metric-based performance evaluation systems often push academics toward prioritizing quantity over quality, fueling the growth of questionable publications. Maral (2024) also revealed that heavy administrative and teaching loads significantly reduce research time in Turkish universities, contributing to the prevalence of publications in lower-quartile journals.

The aforementioned underlying factors best explain why, despite the efforts of the Commission on Higher Education and higher education institutions, many of the faculty are still not able to pursue such academic endeavors. They are still challenged with how to foster a culture of research among their faculty. Most research papers ended up as conference presentations only and did not reach the journal publication or utilization stages, respectively. Despite the massive number of research papers being presented in the past and today, only a few are published. The progress and performance of the university's research function, including its faculty researchers, reveal a more serious challenge. For example, a survey among nursing faculty in Saudi Arabia found that difficulties in following guidelines, lack of writing knowledge, language challenges, financial constraints, and high teaching load are major barriers to publishing in indexed journals (Hakami, 2023)

The dictum of "publish or perish" as a criterion for promoting faculty to higher posts in higher education is already being observed. On this premise, this study was carried out to explore the depth of the shortcomings of completed research manuscripts submitted by the faculty for internal review. In this regard, mapping out its root causes could lead to an improvement in both faculty and university research productivity. Furthermore, this paper could contribute to the advancement of knowledge on factors affecting the low publication frequency of faculty in scientific journals, since there are only a limited number of studies that have explored this issue deeply and thoroughly. Similarly, Alotaibi (2023) reported that the lack of administrative and financial support, heavy teaching loads, and institutional barriers prevent many faculty from completing and publishing their research

1.1. Purpose of study

Most existing studies have been limited to surveys or analyses of research papers submitted to specific journals for publication. These investigations have overlooked the opportunity to evaluate the quality of research papers produced by faculty members at the institutional level before submission for journal review and publication. The findings of the present study may serve as a foundation for strengthening research culture among faculty members and enhancing research productivity across universities.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

A faculty member's ability to write high-caliber research publications has been evaluated by many authors. To guarantee that the data collected in this study are reliable and pertinent to the research problem, the researcher employed the qualitative-descriptive research design as a study framework. The objective of the design is to give a thorough overview of each feature of a phenomenon in a naturally occurring environment without intervention or manipulation of any variables (Lambert & Lambert, 2011). The researcher assumed that this design was still best suited to the objective of this study, even though other scholars seemed to dismiss it since it differs from other qualitative research designs and has received little discussion in the literature.

So, in order to identify the existence of specific words, ideas, or concepts in a particular text, the researcher employed content analysis as a method. This approach is very helpful for organizing and drawing meaning from the qualitative data that has been gathered (Bengtsson, 2016). Given that the primary objective of this study is to look at the incidence of explicit and implicit terms in the data, the researcher specifically preferred employing the conceptual analysis approach rather than the rational analysis approach (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

2.1. Participants and data collection

To begin the process, the researcher first sought permission and consent from the personnel in charge of archiving the documents to use them in this study. The papers were then submitted anonymously to protect the author's identity. There were 39 manuscripts submitted for in-house review by faculty researchers of different disciplines and specializations that were considered, but not all were shortlisted due to the inclusion and exclusion criteria set by the researcher. The researcher or researchers have no research publications or any pending submissions to a journal that are under review, have experience presenting research papers, and have two or more completed research papers in the current year of data collection. These were the inclusion criteria, while manuscripts written by published researchers and those who had written research papers for the first time were excluded. With this set of criteria, 13 research manuscripts qualified for rigorous content analysis.

2.2. Analysis technique

Content analysis began by reviewing the research question, followed by the coding of significant terms into manageable content categories. After coding significant statements, the text was grouped according to words that frequently appeared in the manuscripts. Then, the analyzed data from these manuscripts were managed by grouping related data into one theme or statement and then arranging it accordingly for the readers to understand (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Researchers utilize this systematic coding and categorization approach when examining massive volumes of textual data covertly to identify trends and patterns in the words used, their frequency, their correlations, and the structures and discourses of communication (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). To increase the reliability of the measures, each code was verified by external experts.

3. RESULTS

Table 1

Technical issues in major sections of a research paper

Sections of a Research Paper	f	%
Abstract	2	1.71
Introduction	52	44.44

Background of the Study	37	71.15
Conceptual Framework	8	15.38
Statement of the Problem	4	7.69
Hypothesis	2	3.85
Scope and limitation	1	1.92
Methodology	26	22.22
Research Design	9	34.62
Respondents of the Study	2	7.69
Sampling Procedure	1	3.85
Data Gathering Instruments	3	11.54
Validity and Reliability	3	11.54
Data Gathering Procedure	6	23.08
Data Analysis	2	7.69
Results and Discussion	34	29.06
Results and Discussion	16	47.06
Conclusions and Recommendations	18	52.94
References	3	2.56
Total	117	100%

The frequency counts and percentage distribution of technical issues in four major sections of faculty research manuscripts are compared in Table 1. In the table, it can be seen that of the 117 issues identified by experts, almost half (52, or 44.44%) are from the introduction section, followed by the results and discussion section (34, or 29.06%).

A closer inspection of every major section shows that the background of the study (37 or 71.15%) under the introduction, the research design (9 or 34.62%) under the methodology, and the conclusions and recommendations (18 or 52.94%) under the results and discussion section have the most errors.

Table 2
Specific Issues on Research Introduction

Theme	Sub-Theme	Significant Statement/s
Weak theoretical background	Narrow theoretical concepts	"The intro is too vague to discuss the research gaps. E1, P6"
		"The background of the study must be elaborated to capture the necessary literature gaps E1, P8."
		"The intro section did not build the support needed to explain the contribution of the study. E1, P11"
		"Weak in the urgency and logic on why the paper should be conducted, E3, P4
		"Dig deeper into the theoretical insights. What does the study provide, E1, P8?"
		"Needs in-depth literature review, E1, P1"
		"Needs thorough lit review to determine the gaps, E1, P7"
	Lack of empirical data	"Do you have empirical data that the phenomenon is really increasing? E3, P8"
		"Focus on the context, E3, P19"
	failed to connect the literature and constructs	"What were the insights of the current literature on the relationship of these two constructs? E1, P13.
		"The object. Cannot be linked to literature review, E1, P1"

"Enlighten me on your main objective. E3, P15"

"The methods section may not be relevant without pointing out the literature gaps. E1, P12"

Irrational selection of concepts and variables

"The study looks into 3 constructs: How are they identified?, E1, P4."

"The selection of variables is not properly motivated, E1, P12."

"How did you identify the factors? E1, P8"

"Why did you choose the model and not the other models? There was no explanation why this model was primarily used in this study. E3, P6"

Table 3

Specific issues on research methodology

Theme	Sub-Theme	Significant Statement/s
confusing and inconsistent procedure	Design and approach mismatched	"Clarify the research design. Phenomenology approach, in fact, quantitative-descriptive-correlational was employed, E2, P1"
		"You mentioned quantity and quality in the design, when in fact, your approach was purely quantity? E3, P1"
		"The paper failed to use the qualitative data from the interview to provide thick descriptions of the numerical self-reporting rating. E3, P14"
	The selection of respondents is unclear.	"What is the basis of selecting the KII participants, E2, P2?"
		"How many are the total number of respondents? What was the response rate? E3, P12"
	Questionable Data Gathering Instrument	"I am not sure if the sample size is enough, E1, P5."
		"How do I know that this is the most appropriate questionnaire? There is no discussion on the comparison with others in the literature, E1, P1."
		"use multiple data sources, E3, P22"
		"How could you ensure the reliability, rather than the standardized test? E3, P13"
		"Do you think the validity is achieved in the findings of the study if the tool is used to measure for other grades? E3, P13"
		"The author may want to modify the instrument based on the cultural context of the participants, E3, P21."
		"How did you gather in this part? Kindly enlighten the readers by clarifying it in the paper. E3, P5"
		"How did you gather the data, E3, p1?"
	Incompatible procedure	"Who were the analysts? Include the training or background of the analysts. E3, P14"
		"Use triangulation to verify the data, E3 P17."

The procedure conducted is not aligned with the instrument used, "E3, P17."

"The errors were ranked and assigned with percentage values. I suggest that it should only be ranked and assigned percentage values. E3, P14"

Table 4

Specific issues with results and discussion

Theme	Sub-Theme	Significant Statement/s
Ambiguous Value	Inadequate theoretical and practical significance	"... what does it contribute, E1, P1"
		"The findings are purely descriptive, failed to discuss how these contribute to the literature.E1, P3"
		"The findings are purely descriptive, failed to discuss how these contribute to the literature.E1, P4"
		"What is the major contribution of the study in relation to the domain literature, E1, P5?"
		"What contribution does the study make to the perspectives of language development? E2, 3"
		"What is the most significant uniqueness of this study as compared to all other studies? E3, P10"
erroneous conclusion		"You should include the manuscript with the plan on how to offer back the results of the study, E3 P19."
		"The conclusion section is an iteration of the salient findings. E3, P2"
		"The conclusion section seems to have parroted the themes, but it failed to mention the general implications, some limitations, and other caveats in using the findings of the study. E3, P8"

Lack of Novelty and Impact	“So what do the findings imply? E3, P3” “The paper needs to provide practical implications to highlight more gaps to be resolved later. E3, P3” “How would your analysis be contextualized around that theory, E3, P7?”
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Tables 2, 3, and 4 show the breakdown of issues in the introduction (Table 2), methodology (Table 3), and results and discussion sections (Table 4) of the manuscripts of faculty-researchers analyzed through document analysis. The weak theoretical background due to failure of connection to literature and constructs, irrational selection of concepts and variables, and lack of empirical data were the major issues of the introduction section. While there is confusion and inconsistency in the procedure due to the design and approach being mismatched, the unclear rationalization of respondent selection, questionable instruments, and incompatible gathering procedures were the weaknesses of their methodology section. In terms of its results in discussion, experts agreed that there were ambiguities in terms of its value due to the inadequacy of theoretical and practical significance, incorrect concluding statements, and lack of novelty and impact.

4. DISCUSSION

The construct of manuscript preparation among faculty researchers was given much emphasis due to its importance to their professional development. Once submitted and published, their work could not only help them climb the ladder but also increase their university's reputation and impact. Yet, there are still faculty members who are experiencing misfortune in their attempts to publish their work. For these reasons, colleges and universities invest much of their resources either by sending their faculty to research-related seminars or workshops or by inviting experts who scrutinize their papers during in-house reviews. In the context of this study, experts found out that the introduction section of almost all papers submitted for in-house review is the one with the most issues. Every researcher knows that journal reviewers mostly look at the sufficiency of the introduction, such as the background information, clarity of the research questions, and scalability of the hypotheses (Kelly et al., 2014). Furthermore, another issue was found in the research designs of almost all of the papers under the methodology section. Pierson (2004) highlighted that the most common reason for rejection is poor study design due to its non-replicability. Perhaps, to increase the likelihood of acceptance, this section should be further improved. Likewise, the conclusions and recommendations of their research manuscripts were also found to be incorrect. According to Lambert and Lambert (2011), manuscripts that are ill-founded and not based on the actual study's findings are frequently rejected.

Rigorous analysis was also performed by the researcher on the comments made by the evaluators on the manuscripts of faculty researchers to explore and synthesize the major concerns. Perhaps one of the most disturbing findings is that most of the manuscripts of faculty who haven't experienced publication have weak theoretical backgrounds. This outcome is contrary to that of Basilio and Bueno (2019), who found that teachers have average skills in using and evaluating information that they could use in completing their research introduction. Though they have exposure to research writing from their undergraduate and graduate studies, this empirical result could be due to their inexperience with or exposure to the publication process compared to those who are frequently publishing and frequently cited researchers (Amara et al., 2015). Another unanticipated finding was that their research methods were confusing and inconsistent with their data collection procedures. Lambert and Lambert (2011) explained that the research procedure (data gathering process) of a paper should not be lacking, poorly described, or presented confusingly to increase their chance for publication (Kibret, 2017). Indeed, the research process should not be overly ambitious and should be repeatable if faculty aspire to have their research manuscripts published.

On the other hand, editors always look for something new. Thus, for thesis manuscripts to be accepted by high-impact international journals, they must provide new and valuable knowledge to the scientific community (Ali, 2010). Editors generally value research findings that are applicable in real life (Basilio & Bueno, 2019). However, the empirical result is trivial in the sense that faculty members are attending seminars and writing workshops for technical writing. Perhaps Maningas (2020) suggested that colleges and universities should focus on topics about packaging manuscripts for presentation and journal publication. It can therefore be assumed that the neophyte researchers will participate in not just trainings that focus on research paper writing, but also more on publication. Caingcoy (2020) connects the erroneous and low-quality research papers of higher education faculties to their neutral attitude and motivation to do them. Wa-Mbaleka (2015) further attributes this low manuscript quality and productivity of faculty to their limited time, lack of training on publication, fear of rejection, lack of interest, faculty laziness, limited funds, and lack of institutional support.

5. CONCLUSION

This study insinuates that there is a smaller opportunity for the research manuscripts submitted for in-house review to be published in an international and high-quality journal. This is due to its weak theoretical background, narrow theoretical concepts, lack of empirical data, and failure to connect each literature and construct with each other. Moreover, most of the study's designs were identified as weak, inappropriate, and even mismatched with the approach used. Thus, it is evidently clear that the logical discussion as to how the study came about and how its findings could be applicable outside the research setting was vague and even subtle.

The results suggest that faculty-researchers could improve their writing and presentation of the article to make incremental arguments and improve their chances of being published. Thus, potential mentoring from senior or published researchers towards new breeds of researchers is evident. However, the results of this study are limited to the papers evaluated and used for further analysis in accordance with the nature of the design employed by the researcher to treat the data. Thus, future researchers shall remain cautious in interpreting the findings of this study.

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