

Assessing the Capacity of Marketing Researchers to Estimate Managerial Relevance: An Empirical Exploration

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Abstract:

The ability of marketing researchers to assess whether research is of value to their target audience of practitioners is a basic assumption underlying many of today's academic practices. Peer-reviews in prestigious marketing journals often require researchers to assess the managerial relevance. Researchers are also often expected to assert and outline managerial relevance for their own studies. However, systematic differences between science and practice call such an ability into question. An empirical study analysing 406 reviews by researchers and practitioners found that researchers struggle to accurately assess the managerial relevance of research. Moreover, their assessments tend to include an overprojection of scientific relevance at the expense of actual accuracy. It may therefore be necessary to adjust the claims of managerial relevance in journals, or alternatively the review processes themselves, if the validity of such claims is to be achieved.

Keywords: managerial relevance, systems theory

Track: Marketing Strategy & Theory

1. Introduction

For managers, taking the time to catch up on research represents an investment that needs to go along with a corresponding return. An investment that consists not only of the time for consuming the content and extracting its unknown value but most importantly, given more than 80.000 articles per year, also identifying the content with a high likelihood of serving his or her needs – the search cost (Fraser et al., 2020). It's an equation of prohibitive costs, in the absence of any known or identified preselection methods.

For a preselection, it seems sensible to first consider the ones most familiar with research outputs, the researchers themselves. Couldn't researchers just tell managers within their respective fields which research might be relevant to them? Given the sheer volume of publications, it is unlikely that a single person would be aware of all research in a domain, but the common researcher might still be able to cognitively retrieve a large number of research findings. By a large margin, there ought to be no other occupation reading as many marketing research articles as researchers themselves. Hence, "asking the experts" intuitively seems to be the most sensible thing.

This consideration makes an assumption explicit that is often held as true in the debate on relevance when researchers are simply encouraged to write articles of relevance to practitioners. It is the assumption that researchers can judge whether an article has managerial relevance. Managerial relevance is hereby defined as "the degree to which a specific manager in an organization perceives academic knowledge to aid his or her job-related thoughts or actions in the pursuit of organizational goals" (Jaworski, 2011). The assumption is only loosely held, when researchers are urged to gather feedback from practitioners or collaborate with them, firmly held whenever relevance is framed as solely the researcher's choice, and fortified when peer-reviewed journals assert such relevance for their issues.

In the absence of external proxies or validation through the practitioner target audience, it is most commonly this assumption alone that serves as the basis for adding the tag of managerial relevance to any research output. A tag that is commonplace in research articles' managerial implications ("The research is relevant to practitioners, because..."), given by the authors themselves. A tag that also found its way into the missions of many of the most regarded journals, with ten of the twenty highest-ranked marketing journals explicitly stating practitioners as part of their target group within their mission or/and editorial guidance (selection: cf. Table 1, full list: cf. Appendix A). Tags that given their extensive

usage speak of great untapped value for practitioners or of empty promises, depending on researchers' actual ability to estimate the value of research to its target audience – the managerial relevance.

Journals	Mission / Editorial Objective
Journal of Marketing	The Journal of Marketing (JM) <u>develops and disseminates</u> knowledge about real-world marketing questions <u>relevant to</u> scholars, educators, <u>managers</u> , consumers, policy makers and other societal stakeholders.
Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science	The Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (JAMS) is <u>devoted to</u> the study and <u>improvement of marketing</u> and serves as a <u>vital link between scholarly research and practice</u> by publishing research-based articles in the substantive domain of marketing.
Journal of Marketing Research	The Journal of Marketing Research (JMR) is a bimonthly journal <u>serving</u> the scholarly and <u>practitioner communities</u> in the field of marketing.

Table 1. Target group assertions in marketing journals

Given such intentions, it could be assumed that articles intended for practitioners appearing in such publications also undergo a second critical reflection for their managerial relevance, assessed by the peer reviewers. A requirement that is also formally outlined in a variety of journal review processes and based on the same assumption (Journal of Marketing Research, 2024; Journal of Marketing, 2024; Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 2024). Additionally, the assumption of researchers' ability to evaluate managerial relevance underlies the consideration of teaching faculty as a fruitful link between research and practice, by successfully selecting relevant current research to be taught to (future) practitioners (Gordon & Howell, 1959). Hence, it shall be understood whether such tags and researcher-based selections can be relied upon when searching for managerial relevant research.

MRQ: Can (marketing) researchers estimate the value of an article to practitioners (managerial relevance)?

2. Theoretical Background

A system lens, while not empirical on its own, enables a logic-based understanding of the different perspectives of two groups. Especially, the distinctiveness of the research system has already been subject to a variety of assessments, including by the sociologist Niklas

Luhman himself (Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Luhmann, 1981; Rasche & Behnam, 2009). The two most integral components, the role of communication, and the presence of autopoiesis in a (sub)system according to Luhman can also be identified as integral within the scientific system (Rasche & Behnam, 2009; Schwanitz, 1995). Publications serve as the primary means of communication and their self-referential nature is not only desired but the requirement for adherence to academic standards (Luhmann, 1981). Furthermore, the number of references in itself per communication (citations) and its channel (journal) represent the most valued aspects by the system members (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Fraser et al., 2020). It is based on these that the common researcher's work gets judged and even promotion decisions are made (Seeber et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, bidirectional communication with the outside of the system, and especially system external incentives are limited (Stremersch et al., 2021). It is based upon this closeness of the system, shaping values and understanding that a high within-group similarity is expected for researchers, stark in contrast to the between-group similarity with practitioners in the researchers' respective field of study. This matters since similarity is commonly the best precondition for an accurate prediction of others' preferences. It is due to this that consumers even outperform marketers in predicting other consumers' preferences (Hoch, 1988). Such differences become even greater when sub-systems are less entangled with each other such as architects' predicting aesthetic preferences of laypersons (Gifford et al., 2002). While exhibiting high agreement among themselves, little actual predictive ability has been found (Brown & Gifford, 2001). An inability that is even more pronounced the longer someone has been part of the system. This can be explained by the projection of one's own preferences onto others – a valid heuristic in the case of actual similarity, but a path towards a false projection in its absence (Hoch, 1987). It is a factor that could also be observed for instructed empathy in the absence of more valid alternative information, even increasing the reliance on one's own preferences, regardless of the actual similarity (Hattula et al., 2015). Actively trying to take perspectives is an unpromising endeavor in the absence of actual similarity or highly valid alternative information. It is exactly this endeavor that researchers are commonly tasked with and appear to exhibit confidence in, despite their apparent systematic differences from the actual target group. It is due to this, that the following two hypotheses are proposed:

H₁: Marketing Researchers' estimates of an article's relevance to practitioners have only a small to no relation to the actual ratings given by practitioners.

H₂: Marketing researchers' estimates of an article's relevance to practitioners are overprojections of the value it has to their system (the scientific community).

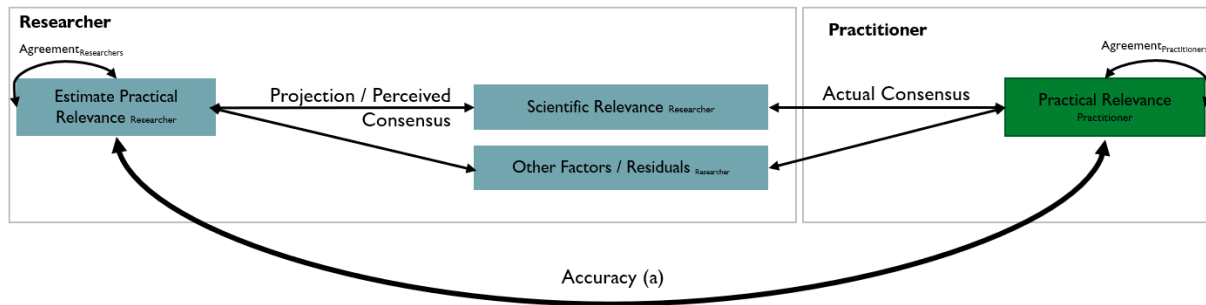


Figure 1. Conceptual model: researchers' prediction of managerial relevance

Both hypotheses can be visualized with an adaptation of Hoch's model of preference prediction and projection, in itself an adaptation of Brunwicks's original lens model (Brunswik, 1965; Hoch, 1987). It illustrates the comparison and decomposition of two different perspectives, namely practitioners and researchers given the research objective. The first hypothesis is reflected by the accuracy between the groups' relevance estimate (rating), under consideration of the within-group agreements. The second hypothesis is captured by the difference between the perceived and the actual consensus of scientific relevance with managerial relevance. If the perceived exceeds the actual an overprojection is taking place (and vice versa an underprojecion).

3. Method

To test the hypotheses, review ratings of a journal with a blind peer review, consisting of a practitioner and researcher from the domain of each article, were assessed.

The dataset consists of 406 blind reviews (one per practitioner and researcher) for 203 articles from a bi-monthly marketing journal, primarily focused on the DACH region, with articles published in German and English. The sample consists of all articles published between 2019 and 2022 across 22 editions. Within such reviews, the (assumed) managerial relevance and

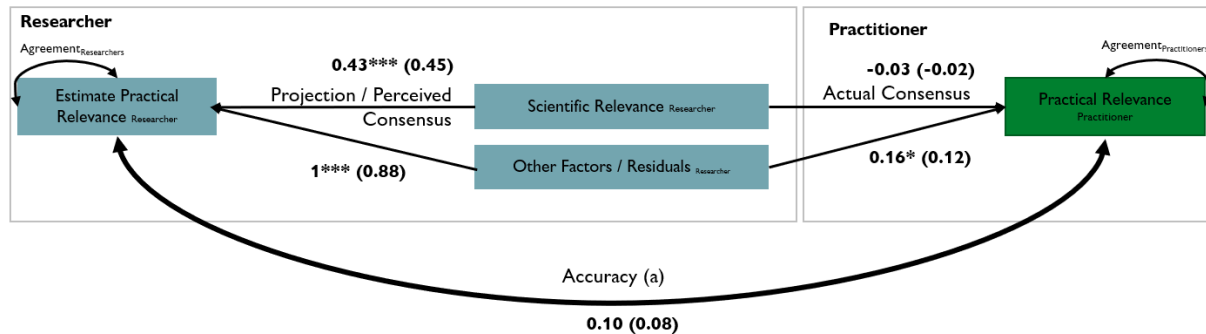
the (assumed) relevance to the scientific community of an article were rated among other factors on 5-point Likert scales by all reviewers. Based on this, the agreement between the researcher and practitioners was assessed (Pearson correlation and one-variable regression). The actual consensus and perceived consensus of researchers' scientific relevance ratings were similarly assessed and interpreted (over/underprojection). Furthermore, the residuals of the perceived consensus regression were extracted as the reliance upon other information beyond the projection of a researcher's own position.

In addition to the first study, a second study, to further extend the regional validity (US focused) and control for solely individual, rather than profession related differences of the relevance ratings (accounting for differences between and within the profession) is currently being conducted. The second study consists of 60 summaries, from randomly sampled articles in the highest-ranked marketing journals by IF during 2022. Journals were only included if they claimed to target marketing practitioners within their mission or goals. Furthermore, articles were only included if similarly a target group and implications/relevance for practitioners were explicitly stated. The sampling stopped, once 60 articles meeting the criteria were found. Based on these, summaries containing the research questions, key findings and managerial implications were created by two PhD students and assessed by two practitioners for understandability. Furthermore, the stated target group was extracted. Within the questionnaire, researchers and practitioners were presented with such summaries and asked to rate them across a set of factors. Researchers needed to estimate the relevance to its target group (e.g. Relevance to "Digital Marketers"), as well as the scientific relevance among other factors. Practitioners from the extracted target group were tasked to rate the managerial relevance from their perspective. The survey distribution to multiple practitioners from each article's target group, as well as marketing researchers within each article's field of research, is ongoing. The statistical methods to be applied are Interclass Correlations 2.1 (Koo & Li, 2016)

4. Results / Discussion

The first study finds a neglectable accuracy between researchers' ratings of managerial relevance and the one given by practitioners of $r=0.08$ ($\beta_1=0.1$ regression, non-significant), thereby confirming the first hypothesis. Furthermore, a highly significant effect and a moderate correlation between the rating of scientific relevance and managerial relevance by

researchers of $r=0.43$ ($\beta_I=0.45$, $p < 0.01$) is found, supportive of a projection. The actual consensus of scientific relevance with managerial relevance is close to zero and non-significant. Hence, supportive of the second hypothesis a major overprojection is taking place, even at the cost of more accurate other available information ($\beta_I=0.16$, $p < 0.05$). The second study's results are expected to extend these findings. This will (or won't) allow for a more valid attribution of the low accuracy to the profession itself, rather than the individual.



Notes: $n = 403$. * $p < 0.1$. ** $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.001$. The values in brackets are Pearson correlation coefficients (r). The values before the brackets are linear regression coefficients (β).

Figure 2. Results of the first study

In light of the initial findings, existing claims of relevance by both journals and researchers might need to be reconsidered as mostly aspirational rather than factual, further highlighting the need for workable approaches in identifying research of managerial relevance. First and foremost this research is intended to generate awareness of this dissonance.

Beyond this, a well-established suggestion, the inclusion of practitioner reviews across a set of journals could be a starting point, to preselect at least some share of research with validated managerial relevance. This would ensure that only research with demonstrated practical significance would be labeled as such, making it easier for managers to identify studies with a higher expected value. Prior calls for active engagement with and feedback from practitioners to achieve managerial relevance seem even more important in light of these findings (Reibstein et al., 2009). In the absence of any valid support, journals and also authors should thereby refrain from making unsubstantiated claims about relevance. This would leave room for such a type of journal that incorporates a validation via practitioners, and would also prevent potentially misleading assertions of managerial relevance. In addition, not making claims of relevance could preserve existing degrees of academic freedom for other

journals and not reduce all research to a (stated) function of immediate outcome. In addition, algorithmic selection and recommendation mechanisms, serving practitioners and incorporating continuous implicit and explicit feedback, could be explored as an alternative. This could allow for a more scalable solution and if implemented fairly, could allow research articles, regardless of their journal and author's intent the opportunity to prove themselves as relevant to a target audience (emerge or dissipate). Such mechanisms might also make it significantly easier for practitioners to identify research of managerial relevance.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Marketing journals stating practitioner relevance (by impact factor)

journal_name (Keywords: marketing, retail, consumer)		Claimed a practitioner focus?	if_2022
JOURNAL OF MARKETING	IF 5 <, General	Yes	15.36
JOURNAL OF THE ACADEMY OF MARKETING SCIENCE	IF 5 <, General	Yes	14.904
JOURNAL OF INTERACTIVE MARKETING		Mostly	11.318
JOURNAL OF RETAILING		Somewhat	11.19
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services		No	10.972
Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing	IF 5 <, General	Yes	10.176
Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management	Industry specific	Yes	9.821
INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT	Industry specific	Yes	8.89
JOURNAL OF CONSUMER RESEARCH		No	8.612
Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing		Somewhat	8.178
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN MARKETING	IF 5 <, General	Yes	8.047
Journal of Destination Marketing & Management		No	7.158
International Journal of Consumer Studies		No	7.096
JOURNAL OF MARKETING RESEARCH	IF 5 <, General	Yes	6.664
JOURNAL OF PUBLIC POLICY & MARKETING		No	6.343
INTERNATIONAL MARKETING REVIEW		No	5.774
PSYCHOLOGY & MARKETING		Yes	5.507
MARKETING SCIENCE		No	5.411