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Heresies and sacred cows in scholarly marketing publications☆

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ABSTRACT

Merriam-Webster defines *heresies* as “dissent or deviation from a dominant theory, opinion, or practice.” This *Journal of Business Research* special issue and the editorial examine heresies and sacred cows in marketing research. Seven papers investigate different aspects of typical academic business journal presentations. Each manuscript critically analyzes generally accepted practices for the pursuit of publication in academic journals and reveals ways these practices may do more harm than good, hindering the goal of presenting true growth of knowledge through publication. The editorial provides an integrative schema for the manuscripts in the special issue. Providing a series of broader topics to tie the papers together, this special issue illustrates how the findings of each study can help improve our pursuit of knowledge. In addition, the editorial discusses heresies and sacred cows not covered by manuscripts in the current issue. The editorial concludes with recommendations for both authors and reviewers that may enhance the approach to research, methodologies employed, and reporting of scholarly research.

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Marketing academics, like those in other disciplines, conduct research motivated by a desire to publish reports of their research in academic journals. Herein lays a potential dilemma. The demands of maintaining the highest standards in research may conflict with the norms of the publication process. When senior faculty train doctoral students and mentor junior faculty, this dilemma evidences itself when an emphasis on “playing the game” of publication takes precedent over presenting a descriptive account of the research in a meaningful way. Sometimes, this process plays out subtly, such as through suggestions of building a paper’s reference list with an eye toward flattering particular members of a journal’s ERB who might review the manuscript. Other times, academics may withhold a preponderance of evidence to emphasize primarily desirable results—in other words, those results that are consistent with the author’s enlightened predictions. Taken to the extreme, study data and/or results may be, implicitly or otherwise, a work of fiction to present what the author perceives to be the received view (Enserink, 2012). The pressures and desires to become an author in a noted journal are strong and, after all, researchers

often have a lot of confidence in their theories (Stapel, 2012). Thus, they may feel justified in writing a narrative instead of a report.

A cursory look at today’s journals suggests a dogmatic presence in the manner in which authors present research. For example, is there a specific way that authors *must* present an empirical marketing research article to survive the review process and eventually end up in a journal’s pages? Clearly, authors must write well and present discipline-relevant topics. However, must papers stay generally within well-defined boundaries and styles of presentation to appease reviewers and editors? Must an article first present some deductively driven hypotheses based on an already known and named theory, followed by an empirical test that presents results corroborating those same hypotheses? Must articles generally follow current precedents and “generally accepted” procedures? Must the articles use fashionable theories, typically derived outside the discipline, at the expense of discovering new theories from within marketing? Finally, must the researchers employ trendy methods and analytical tools even if they possess little understanding of their actual relevance, precision, or appropriateness?

The articles in this special issue examine themes related to current trends in marketing academic articles. In this essay, the special issue editors provide a brief overview of each paper and its contribution. In doing so, they call attention to just a few of the common practices and procedures applied in the academic marketing literature, with an eye toward understanding those that may constitute “sacred cows” more than vehicles for building a better and more meaningful literature. In a

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classic commentary on the marketing literature nearly 35 years ago, Peter & Olson (1983, p. 116) argue not that marketing is science, but “science is marketing.” Interestingly, when interviewed about the motivation for fabricating study results as a basis for academic journal publications, Stapel expresses the same notion:

It was a quest for aesthetics, for beauty—instead of the truth... it's hard to know the truth... you need grants, you need money... science is of course about discovering the truth, about digging to find the truth... but it is also communication, persuasion, marketing. (Stapel quoted in an interview by Bhattacharjee, 2013, p. MM44).

If a journal article reports truth objectively, the prose should avoid falling into a narrative. However, when some passionate motivation slips in and interferes with the objective presentation of study results, the line between fiction and nonfiction may blur. Thus, when research is presented in a manner other than that in which it is conducted—when it is presented more with an eye toward passing review than simple description, when the meaning becomes obscured by technical complexity intended to impress reviewers, when trivial (albeit perhaps statistically significant) effects are presented as important, when data are portrayed or treated with more precision than the research method allows, when hypotheses are conceptualized post hoc based on study results, when results that do not present the “desired” outcomes are not reported, articles stray from the basic presentation of the truth. The narrative that the authors might have written without any research remains uninterrupted.

Hunt (2010, p. 306) presents a thorough discussion of various ways that research can come to present fiction. He portrays a continuum between truth and TRUTH, with the former being an objective representation of reality and the latter being the T-hoc RUTH that MUST exist. Hunt uses the table to illustrate how dogmatic philosophies result in a lack of regard for reality. The mere existence of a continuum implies that the difference between truth and TRUTH is not always so clear. Even if not dogmatic in philosophy, does academic research slip into dogma in presentation? When papers are written with the idea in mind that they MUST contain things (such as carefully deduced hypotheses, specific analytical tools regardless of applicability, statistically significant results, supported hypotheses, etc.) or MUST be written in certain ways (deductively testing in the context of justification), the literature risks

becoming in part or perhaps fully TRUTH rather than truth. Fig. 1 depicts this notion graphically.

Below are a series of assumptions about the publication standards for papers that appear in marketing journals. The articles in this special issue critically examine these widely accepted beliefs to see if in fact they represent appropriate standards for scientific discovery or may be sacred cows of the discipline.

1. Journal articles should be deductive

Researchers may not like to consider themselves as bumlbers, but Alba (2012) points to stumbling as the way most scientific breakthroughs occur. In fact, Alba (2012) reminds the marketing and consumer research academy of the simple admonition that scientists advance knowledge more often by discovering an unexpected regularity than by testing an expected regularity. Given that scientific progress lies in discovery, it's somewhat ironic that the academic literature, and the ubiquitous review process, often works to stifle discovery so much so that even academics with a distinguished publishing career may find it difficult to answer the “what did you discover” question (Armstrong, 2003).

In the typical marketing article, the introduction section precedes a section on “conceptual” or “theoretical” development, followed by a section describing an empirical study. In some papers, the author(s) may refer to their work as exploratory, simply as a way of lessening the criticism of problems with generalizability or other shortcomings of the methodology. In the end, marketing authors sacrifice discovery in favor of justification, although the scientific method clearly requires attention to both (Hunt, 2010). The lack of theories originating in marketing may be one price paid for the affinity of the academy toward the hypo-deductive presentation of research. Authors perceive reviewers as much more comfortable with some *famous* theory based in another discipline than with the derivations that would reflect a theory born in marketing.

In this issue, Daugherty, Hoffman, and Kennedy (2015) point to the dearth of reports of inductive studies in the marketing literature, in contrast to the “hard sciences” or applied fields like medicine. They illustrate an inductive orientation by applying a “reverse approach” employing neurological measures to illustrate differences in brain

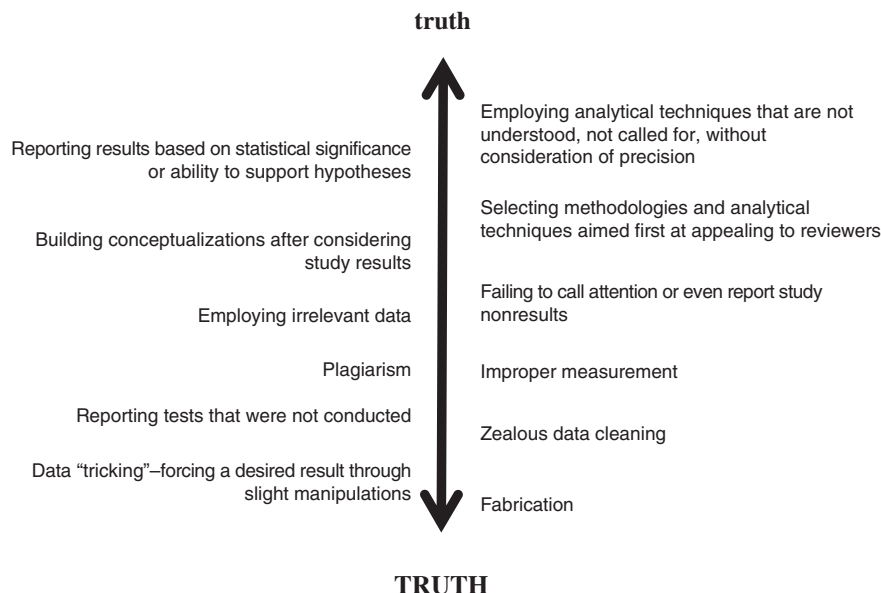


Fig. 1. Some issues affecting the truth of scholarly research.

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