Scholarly management journals: are they relevant for practitioners? Results of a pilot study[1]

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper: *This paper aims to verify how interesting and useful practitioners find academic management research by asking entrepreneurs and managers what they think of some articles published in leading journals that have been selected on the basis of precise criteria as representative of management research.*

Methodology: *This pilot investigation was conducted in April and May 2015. In accordance with the study design, a convenience sample of 43 entrepreneurs and managers were sent four articles published in leading management journals in 2014 by e-mail, accompanied by a simple questionnaire consisting of closed-answer questions. Although they strictly lacked statistical validity, the 23 completed questionnaires that were returned not only provide the first feedback concerning the subject of the study, but also offer some fundamental indications concerning the approach of the project as a whole that will help to refine the orientation of its next phase.*

Findings: *An analysis of the literature shows that the very concept of relevance is difficult to measure, as its defining traits are characterised by a certain level of ambiguity and the meaning that is attributable to them is rather complex. This paper highlights how management research should focus on subjects that are of real interest to practitioners, satisfy the need for rigour required by positive sciences, and be capable of producing knowledge that has a strong impact on professional communities.*

Practical implications: *The ongoing debate cannot remain confined to academic circles, but needs to involve practitioners with whom to establish a synergistic dialogue. They should ask management researchers to study problems that are relevant and interesting to them, and observe the more complex and dynamic situations that firms have to face.*

Originality and value: *In literature the importance of clarifying whether and in what ways the results of university scientific research are used in practice has emerged. This paper proposes and testes a rigorously systematic framework in order to enable us to investigate the way in which managers perceive management research with the aim of increasing the relevance of academic research strategies and the editorial policies of management journals.*

Key words: management research; relevance; academic journals; practitioners; university

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1. Introduction

The relevance of management research is a highly topical and very important subject. It is topical insofar as the debate that has always characterised this area of research (Gummesson, 2001; Starkey *et al.*, 2001; Bartunek *et al.*, 2006; Pfeffer, 2009; Lorsch, 2009) has recently been become even more intense (Chia, 2014; Hernes, 2014; Kieser *et al.*, 2015) and various journals have underlined the need to ensure that scientific research has a greater practical impact (Dahl *et al.*, 2014; Gupta *et al.*, 2014; Brexendorf *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, since the recent internationalisation of Italian academic management research, it has also become a more burning issue in Italy, as can be seen from two issues of the journal Sinergie (No. 86 of 2011 and No. 87 of 2012) and the debate hosted in the "Management Notes" section of the website of the Italian Management Society (SIMA). It is important because different attitudes towards relevance (or more precisely towards the relationship between relevance and rigour) profoundly change the nature and identity of management as a subject of research: if emphasis is placed on respecting scientific requirements and criteria, it is inevitable that research becomes more abstract and management is transformed into a discipline that seeks to identify precise cause-and-effect or law-like relationships between company behaviours and the subject of study; if more weight is given to being able to apply research results, management is seen as a discipline that seeks to produce the type of knowledge that can be used to improve entrepreneurial behaviour and performance.

The debate not only involves supporters of both these positions but, as often happens, there are also those who seek to reconcile them by proposing a third way that falls at an intermediate point in the rigour-relevance continuum (Verona, 2010). Nevertheless, despite the considerable efforts of authors to demonstrate the superiority of their respective positions, the number and variety of the approaches seem to make it unlikely that a definite unitary view will be reached (Kieser *et al.*, 2009; Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2009).

In an attempt to overcome the dichotomous logic inherent to opposing theses, it has also very recently been suggested that it is time to abandon dialectics in favour of a rigorously systematic study of relevance by investigating how the results of scientific research are actually used in practice (Kieser *et al.*, 2015). In line with this, we have initiated a project aimed at verifying how interesting and useful practitioners find academic management research by simply asking entrepreneurs and managers what they think of some articles published in leading journals that have been selected on the basis of precise criteria as representative of management research. The underlying premise is that the production of knowledge in the field of management can no longer avoid considering the practical implications of research because if we were to think that research and action in the field are distinct environments guided by different systems of logic that cannot even theoretically have any points of contact, there would be no sense in a project such as ours.

On the basis of this premise, the aim of the project is to involve practitioners in order to acquire an inevitably incomplete but at least indicative understanding of how interesting, useful and usable they consider the findings of scientific management research. Any such project is necessarily long and articulated, and so the project was divided into three phases: the design of the study, which was described in a paper presented at the 2015 international Euromed Conference (Brunetti *et al.* 2015); a pilot investigation; and the final extended survey of the selected sample, which will be carried out in the forthcoming months.

The aim of this paper is to describe the results of the pilot survey, which was conducted in April and May 2015. In accordance with the study design, a convenience sample of 43 entrepreneurs and managers were sent four articles from leading management journals in 2014 by e-mail, accompanied by a simple questionnaire consisting of closed-answer questions. Although lacking strictly statistical validity, the 23 completed questionnaires that were returned not only provide the first feedback concerning the subject of the study, but also offer some fundamental indications concerning the approach of the project as a whole that will help to refine the orientation of its next phase.

The paper will consist of a review of the literature on the subject, followed by a description of the method and the sample selection criteria and the results of the survey; the final section will discuss the results and limitations of the study, and prospects for future research.

2. Literature review

The controversy between practical relevance and the need for scientific rigour in management studies is not an innovative subject of research (for a brief history, see Gulati, 2007), as the first significant contributions date back to the beginning of the 1970s (Hilgert, 1972; Choudhury, 1986; Shrivastava 1987). However, it remains as prominent as ever (Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2009; Kieser *et al.*, 2009; Baccarani *et al.*, 2011; Brunetti, 2011; Donaldson *et al.* 2013; Hernes, 2014; Bartunek *et al.* 2014; Kieser *et al.* 2015) and has involved scholars working in various areas, including strategy (McGahan, 2007), marketing (Ankers *et al.*, 2002; Varadarajan, 2003), supply chain management (Flynn, 2008; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2011; Thomas *et al.*, 2011; De Beuckelaer *et al.*, 2012), and general management (Starkey *et al.*, 2001; Booker *et al.*, 2008).

Some authors (e.g. Wolf *et al.*, 2012) believe that the rigour-relevance problem arises because the emphasis that management studies place on scientific rigour is detrimental to the practical usefulness of the results (e.g., Starkey *et al.*, 2001), their usability (e.g., Serenko *et al.* 2011; Benbasat *et al.*, 1999; Marcus *et al.*, 1995), and their capacity to stimulate innovation.

In a detailed analysis of the literature, Kieser, Nicolai and Seidl (Kieser *et al.*, 2015) mapped the many published contributions on the basis of their prevalent approach to the rigour/relevance question and found that they fell into two macro-categories: "programmatic literature", which takes the lack of practical relevance of management studies as its main point of departure, tries to identify the causes of the "relevance problem", and suggests different solutions; and "descriptive literature", which includes theoretical and empirical works that examine how management practice deals with the output of management research.

Programmatic literature finds that the main causes of the lack of practical relevance are:

- *The inaccessibility of research studies and academic jargon*
  The language of the studies needs to be simplified and they should more effectively highlight the managerial implications of their results (Steffens *et al.* 2014; Bansal *et al.* 2012; Serenko et al, 2011; Kelemen *et al.*, 2002).
- *Research methods and techniques are too sophisticated and not very useful for solving practical problems*, and so an action research approach should be adopted in order to dissolve the difference between science and practice (Coghlan, 2011; Lüscher *et al.* 2008).
- *Knowledge is mainly produced and evaluated within the academic world* (Huff, 2000), whereas it should be mainly developed in the context of application and be aimed directly at the needs of practitioners (Nowotny *et al.*, 2001). Related solutions are devised to develop collaborative research between academics, practitioners and institutions (Van de Ven *et al.* 2006; Van de Ven, 2011) and make changes in the process of quality control such as introducing practitioners as peer reviewers.

The descriptive literature published by a large number of scholars proposes describing or assessing the interactions between management research and external stakeholders and, on the basis of the findings of Kieser *et al.* (2015), may be divided into the following main streams of research:

- *The different meanings and forms associated with "practical relevance".*
  Augier *et al.* (2007) pointed out that relevance is ambiguously defined, not precisely measurable, and complex in meaning.
  Nicolai *et al.* (2010) developed a classification of different sub-types of relevance: i) instrumental relevance, which can guide the decision-making process by means of models; ii) conceptual relevance, which offers a description of the causal relationships between, and the effects of, the analysed variables; and iii) symbolic or legitimative relevance.
- *Academic results rarely disseminate into practitioner discourse.*
  This is because scholarly journals (particularly bridging journals) are seldom read by practitioners (Rynes et. Al., 2002), and the way in which research results are described in practitioner-oriented journals is considerably different from that in which they are described in scholarly discourse (Kelemen *et al.*, 2002).
- *The use of research output is not a simple transfer, but a complex organisational process* (Nicolai *et al.*, 2010).
  Academic knowledge may be used in different ways: partially or completely, rhetorically or substantively. Moreover, its utilisation is associated with reinterpretations of the meanings of the concepts involved (Seidl, 2007).
- *Management science and practice follow different forms of logic in their operation.*
  In particular, the purpose of the scientific domain is not to describe the subject of the study, but rather to develop abstract and general theories

that allow meaning to be assigned to empirical observation, whereas managerial language is intended to facilitate practical action (Astley *et al.*, 1992); for this reason, it is necessary to build a bridge to connect management academy and management practice.

It is clear from the theoretical proposals described above that there has long been considerable interest in the question of relevance and the contrast between relevance and rigour, which has been looked at from many points of view. It therefore seems to be useful to investigate the underlying reasons by means of methodologically rigorous (and therefore significant) empirical studies capable of obtaining results that support such conceptual conclusions.

3. Methodology

As mentioned in the introduction, this study of the Italian business community's perception of international scientific management research was divided into three phases: 1) the design of the research framework; 2) a pilot investigation; and 3) the extended survey.

The research framework (phase 1): A previous paper (Brunetti *et al.*, 2015) explained the selection of the journals, the criteria used to identify the articles, the logic underlying the selection of the practitioners to be interviewed, and the plan for administering the articles and the questionnaire in detail. These are summarised in Table 1.

Tab. 1: The research framework

Selection of Journals	J1. Academy of Management Journal J2. Journal of Management J3. Business Horizons J4. Journal of Business Research J5. Journal of Management Inquiry J6. Journal of Management Studies J7. Management Science J8. Omega - International Journal of Management	
Selection of Articles	• year 2014 • 8 articles (one per journal) • 2 most cited (journals with the highest impact factor) • 6 chosen on the basis that they were the third article in the third issue	
Selection of Study Sample	• 300 practitioners • owners/managers • north-east Italy • national databases (CCIAA, Federmanager, ALVEC, ...)	
E-Mail Contacts	• E-mail for each interviewee • 4 articles (full text) for each interviewee: two were the same for all participants (most cited) + two were selected on a rotation basis	
Questionnaire (on-line platform)	• Know journal? • Article/subject interesting? • Article comprehensible? • Article/research useful (even only potentially)? • Article/research usable or might have an impact on business management? • Read other national/international management journals? • Would subscribe to this journal?	yes / no Likert scale Likert scale Likert scale Likert scale yes / no yes / no
Administration, Collection and Processing of Results	Second Step of the Research	

Source: our elaboration

The research protocol foresees a survey of a representative sample of 300 Italian entrepreneurs and managers by means of a questionnaire accompanied by the full texts of the four articles extracted from the selected journals that each respondent will be asked to read and evaluate (phase 3, the extended survey).

However, before conducting the final field research itself, it was decided to introduce an intermediate pilot survey (phase 2) in order to test the questionnaire on a smaller sample, with the aim of obtaining some preliminary results and some suggestions for improving the subsequent phase in terms of the logical construction of the questionnaire, the number and type of articles, the selection of the practitioner sample, and the means of administering the articles and collecting the completed questionnaires.

The subject of this paper is the pilot study, which was substantially a preliminary survey using the same journals as those that will form the object of the subsequent, more extensive analysis but involving a much smaller sample of interviewees.

What follows is a description of its main methodological components: a) the assessed articles; b) the "restricted" sample of interviewees; c) data collection and the questionnaire; and d) statistical analysis.

3.1The assessed articles

In accordance with the framework shown in Table 1, the eight articles came from the eight international scientific journals that were selected in the first phase of the study (Brunetti *et al.*, 2015) on the basis of their generalist nature (in terms of content and geography), their declared orientation towards practitioners (in addition to being theoretical), and the fact that they had undergone a double-blind peer review process and been attributed with an impact factor.

Table 2 shows the publisher and affiliation (if appropriate), the year of foundation, and the annual number of issues of the eight journals.

Once again in accordance with the framework, the "most cited article" was selected from the two journals with the highest impact factor (J1 and J2): in the case of the other six journals, the selected article was the third in the index of the third issue of 2014 (Table 3).

As a result, there was a difference of about 20 years between the articles in the first group and those in the second as articles A1 and A2 (the articles declared to be the most cited on the websites of their respective journals) were originally published in 1995 and 1991.

Tab. 2: Selected journals

	Journal title (Aims and Scope)	2013 5-Year IF	Publisher (Affiliation)	Year of foundation	Issues per year
J1	*Academy of Management Journal* "All articles published in the AMJ must also be relevant to practice. The best submissions are those that identify both a compelling management issue and a strong theoretical framework for addressing it. We realize that practical relevance may be rather indirect in some cases; however, authors should be as specific as possible about potential implications"	8.443	Academy of Management	1958	6
J2	*Journal of Management* "*JOM*, peer-reviewed and published bi-monthly, is committed to publishing scholarly empirical and theoretical research articles that have a high impact on the management field as a whole. *JOM* encourages new ideas or new perspectives on existing research"	8.027	Sage - Southern Management Association	1975	7
J3	*Business Horizons* "The editorial aim is to publish original articles of interest to business academicians and practitioners. (…) Ideally, articles will prompt readers to think about business practice in new and innovative ways. *BH* fills a unique niche among business publications of its type by publishing articles that strike a balance between the practical and the academic. To this end, articles published in *BH* are grounded in scholarship, yet are presented in a readable, non-technical format such that the content is accessible to a wide business audience"	1.962	Elsevier - Kelley School of Business, Indiana University	1957	6
J4	*Journal of Business Research* "The *JBR* applies theory developed from business research to actual business situations. (…) Published for executives, researchers and scholars alike, the Journal aids the application of empirical research to practical situations and theoretical findings to the reality of the business world"	2.341	Elsevier	1973	12
J5	*Journal of Management Inquiry* "*JMI*, peer-reviewed and published quarterly, is a leading journal for scholars and professionals in management, organizational behavior, strategy, and human resources. *JMI* explores ideas and builds knowledge in management theory and practice, with a focus on creative, nontraditional research, as well as, key controversies in the field"	1.775	Sage - Western Academy of Management	1992	4
J6	*Journal of Management Studies* "JMS publishes innovative empirical and conceptual articles which advance knowledge of management and organisation broadly defined, in such fields as organization theory, organizational behaviour, human resource management, strategy, international business, entrepreneurship, innovation and critical management studies. JMS has an inclusive ethos and is open to a wide range of methodological approaches and philosophical underpinnings"	5.196	Wiley	1964	8
J7	*Management Science* "MS is a scholarly journal that disseminates scientific research focusing on the problems, interests, and concerns of managers. (…) Its audience includes academics at business and engineering schools and managers open to the application of quantitative methods in business"	3.458	Informs	1954	12
J8	*Omega – International Journal of Management* "Omega reports on developments in management, including the latest research results and applications. (…) Omega is both stimulating reading and an important source for practising managers, specialists in management services, operational research workers and management scientists, management consultants, academics, students and research personnel throughout the world. The material published is of high quality and relevance, written in a manner which makes it accessible to all of this wide-ranging readership. Preference will be given to papers with implications to the practice of management. Submissions of purely theoretical papers are discouraged"	3.626	Elsevier	1973	8

Source: our elaboration

Tab. 3: List of articles

Most cited	A1. Huselid, M.A. (1995), "The Impact of Human Resource Management Practices on Turnover, Productivity, and Corporate Financial Performance", *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 38, n. 3, pp. 635-672. A2. Barney, J. (1991), "Firm Resources and Sustained Competitive Advantage", *Journal of Management,* vol. 17, n. 1, pp. 99-120.
Casual selection	A3. Evaristo, R. and Zaheer, S. (2014), "Making the Most of your Firm's Capabilities", *Business Horizons*, vol. 57, n. 3, pp. 329-335. A4. Jamal, A. and Shukor, S.A. (2014), "Antecedents and Outcomes of Interpersonal Influences and the Role of Acculturation: The Case of Young British-Muslims", *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 67, n. 3, pp. 237-245. A5. Hudson, B.A. and Okhuysen, G.A. (2014), "Taboo Topics Structural Barriers to the Study of Organizational Stigma", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, vol. 23, n. 3, pp. 242-253. A6. Collet, F. and Philippe, D. (2014), "From Hot Cakes to Cold Feet: A Contingent Perspective on the Relationship between Market Uncertainty and Status Homophily in the Formation of Alliances", *Journal of Management Studie*s, vol. 51, n. 3, pp. 406-432. A7. Lim, N. and Ham, S.H. (2013), "Relationship Organization and Price Delegation: An Experimental Study", *Management Science*, vol. 60, n. 3, pp. 586-605. A8. Schulz, T. and Voigt, G. (2014), "A Flexibly Structured Lot Sizing Heuristic for a Static Remanufacturing System", *Omega*, vol. 44, pp. 21-31.

Source: our elaboration

However, given the time and effort necessary to read the articles (and in order to increase the likelihood of receiving a response), each interviewee received only four of the eight articles. All 43 received the two "most cited" articles; the others were distributed in rotation in such a way that all of the interviewees received at least one subset of common articles (albeit limited to two) and that each article had a minimum number of readers (between 13 and 15). Table 4 shows the distribution of the articles, and the number responses received for each.

Tab. 4: Article distribution

Article	N. of recipients	N. of respondents
A1	43	23
A2	43	23
A3	13	5
A4	15	9
A5	14	11
A6	14	6
A7	15	7
A8	15	6

Source: our elaboration

3.2 The "restricted" sample of interviewees

The population considered in this research project ideally consists of all members of the Italian business community, particularly those in the higher echelons of company hierarchies (i.e. entrepreneurs and managers). Although the pilot survey involved a non-probabilistic sample of subjects directly known to the research team, we believe that it was representative of the population that will be the subject of the extended survey insofar as it consisted of both entrepreneurs and managers coming from various types of enterprise. Of the 43 people contacted, 23 agreed to take part in the study: a response rate of 53.49% .

Table 5 shows the distribution of the respondents by gender, age, education, job title, the size of their firms, and their attitude towards reading management journals.

Tab. 5: Summary statistics of the respondents in relation to the pilot survey

	Proportions (percentages)	Numerical coding
Gender	86.96% → Male 13.04% → Female	0 → Male 1 → Female
Age	4.35% → ≤ 30 years 34.78% → 31-40 years 26.09% → 41-50 years 30,43% → 51-60 years 4.35% → ≥ 61 years	0 → ≤ 30 years 1 → 31-40 years 2 → 41-50 years 3 → 51-60 years 4 → ≥ 61 years
Education	4.35% → High school 86.96% → University 8.69% → Other	1 → High school 2 → University 3 → Other
Position	26.09% → Entrepreneur 17.39% → Top/General Management 56.52% → Line/Function Manager	1 → Entrepreneur 2 → Top/General Management 3 → Line/Function Manager
Size of firm (€)	30.43% → < 5,000,000 4.35% → 5,000,000 – 15,000,000 0.00% → 16,000,000 – 30,000,000 4.35% → 31,000,000 – 50,000,000 13.04% → 51,000,000 – 100,000,000 47.83% → ≥ 101,000,000	1 → < 5,000,000 2 → 5,000,000 – 15,000,000 3 → 16,000,000 – 30,000,000 4 → 31,000,000 – 50,000,000 5 → 51,000,000 – 100,000,000 6 → ≥ 101,000,000
Readers of national/ international management journals	60.87% → Yes 39.13% → No	0 → Yes 1 → No

Source: our elaboration

3.3 Data collection and the questionnaire

The interviewees' assessments were collected in April and May 2015.

The practitioners were contacted personally by means of an e-mail that briefly described the objectives and contents of the study as well as the methods of subject involvement and collaboration, and asked to:

- provide some personal information (gender, age, educational qualifications, position, the size of their company, and whether they were readers of management journals);
- read the four articles attached to the e-mail;
- answer a very brief questionnaire (six closed-answer questions), as shown in Table 6.

Tab. 6: Pilot survey questions

Q1 Do you know the journal in which the article was published?	yes = 0/ no = 1
Q2 Is the article/subject interesting?	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
Q3 Is the article comprehensible?	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
Q4 Is the article/research useful (even only potentially)?	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
Q5 Is the article/research usable or might it have an impact on company management?	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
Q6 Would you subscribe to this journal?	yes = 0/ no = 1

Source: our elaboration

Questions Q1 and Q6 refer to the journal in which the paper was published and are designed to evaluate its *popularity* and *attractiveness* by means of yes/no answers. The other four questions (Q2-Q5) evaluate the paper itself in terms of *interest* (Q2), *comprehensibility* (Q3), *usefulness* (Q4) and *usability* (Q5) using 5-point Likert scales (1 = lowest; 5 = highest).

3.4 Statistical analysis

Although, like in most pilot studies, the survey involved a small and non-probabilistic sample of subjects, the size of which often prevented any statistically significant conclusions (particularly in relation to articles A3-A8), the collected data were analysed using some standard statistical procedures in an attempt to extract some preliminary indications, particularly in relation to articles A1 and A2, which were distributed to all of the respondents.

Subsequently, they were analysed in order to obtain estimates and confidence intervals of the proportion of subjects whose answers indicated that they were favourable or otherwise towards the eight articles, and it was also possible to verify some hypotheses mainly relating to comparisons. Finally, the correlations between the responses, and between these and the demographic and personal covariates, were calculated, and various regression analyses were implemented to investigate their dependent relationships.

4. Data analysis and results

In line with the methodology described above, the statistical analyses of the collected data will be described as follows: 1) proportions and mean values; 2) confidence intervals of the means; 3) comparisons of groups of articles; and 4) correlations and regression analyses.

4.1 Proportions and mean values

An analysis was made of the means of the valuations of all of the subjects of each article and each indicator (Q2-Q5) and the *proportion* (percentage) of subjects giving a negative answer to Q1 and Q6 concerning the journal publishing the paper.

In this way, it was possible to obtain some indications related to each article (A1-A8) concerning: 1) the *popularity* and *attractiveness* of the journal in which the paper appeared; 2) the degree of *interest* in the paper (or more generally in its subject); 3) the degree of *comprehensibility* of the paper; 4) the degree of *usefulness* of the paper; and 5) the degree of *usability* of the paper (see Table 7).

In substance, and distinguishing the judgements of the journals and the papers, it emerged that there was little of appreciation of the former, which not only seem to be *little known* to managers and entrepreneurs, but also apparently uninteresting. After having read the article, the interviewees declared that they were not interested in subscribing to the journal, which was therefore considered largely *unattractive*, albeit only on the basis of the single article.

The articles gave rise to a greater variety of judgements: for example, only half of the articles (A1, A2, A3 and A7) were considered interesting (in themselves or in terms of their subject) and, on the basis of the confidence intervals shown in Figure 1, this was statistically significant only in the case of the first two.

The average degree of *comprehensibility* seemed to be greater although this was statistically confirmed only in the case of A2 (Fig. 1): only articles A6, A7 and A8 seem to be insufficiently understandable.

Finally, the judgements concerning the degree of *usefulness* and *usability* of most of the articles (similar in terms of meaning and average scores) were more negative: only articles A1, A2 and A3 were judged positively in both cases.

In brief (and bearing the limitations arising from the small number of respondents in mind), this analysis shows that entrepreneurs and managers do not know the international scientific management journals that are highly considered in academic circles. Furthermore, although most of the articles were comprehensible, they were considered neither very interesting nor, albeit with some exceptions (particularly A1 and A2), useful or usable, which explains the generally perceived unattractiveness of the journals.

What follows is a summary of the analyses of each of the measured indicators.

1) *Q1 and Q6 – popularity and attractiveness of the journal*

All of the journals were little known and considered largely unattractive.

The answers to question Q1 ("Do you know the journal in which the article was published?") (yes = 0 and no = 1) show an absolute lack of knowledge of the journals that published articles A1, A5 and A8; the best-known (albeit with relatively low scores) was the journal containing A2, which was known to 35% of the respondents, but still unknown to 65%.

The answers to Question Q6 ("Would you subscribe to this journal?") (yes = 0 and no = 1), an expression of the attractiveness of the journal, were also basically negative. The hypothesis of subscribing to the journal did not seem to arouse much interest: all of the journals were attributed scores of more than 50%; the only exception was the third (Business Horizons), which had a result of 40% (i.e. 60% of the subjects would subscribe to it).

2) *Q2 – degree of interest in the article*

Like the other questions (Q3, Q4 and Q5) question Q2 ("Is the article/subject interesting?") was answered using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = lowest and 5 = highest). Table 7 shows the mean values and standard errors (SEs) attributed to the eight articles. On the basis of the proportion of respondents giving answers of ≥3 (which can be assumed to be positive), articles A1 (0.91), A2 (0.83), A3 (1.00) and A7 (0.86) seem to deal with subjects of interest to the interviewees, whereas the subjects of A4 (0.44), A5 (0.55), A6 (0.33) and A8 (0.50) do not seem to arouse sufficient interest.

3) *Q3 – degree of comprehensibility of the article*

The degree of comprehensibility seems to be greater. On the basis of the proportion of respondents giving answers of ≥3 to question Q3 ("Is the article comprehensible?"), articles A1 (0.77), A2 (0.87), A3 (1.00), A4 (0.67) and A5 (0.73) were judged positively, whereas articles A6 (0.50), A7 (0.57) and A8 (0.17) seem to be insufficiently comprehensible.

4) *Q4 – degree of usefulness of the paper*

The evaluations of the usefulness of the papers return to being negative. On the basis of the proportion of respondents giving answers of ≥3 to question Q4 ("Is the article/research useful (even only potentially)?"), in addition to articles A1 (0.61) and A2 (0.61), only articles A3 (1.00) and A7 (0.57) have a positive score; the subjects of the other articles do not seem to be considered even potentially useful.

5) *Q5 – degree of usability of the paper*

The judgements concerning usability (Q5: "Is the article/research usable or might it have an impact on company management?") are even worse. On the basis of the proportion of respondents giving answers of ≥3, aside articles A1 (0.65) and A2 (0.65), only paper A3 (0.80) was judged positively. The scores for the other papers were very low: A4 (0.00), A5 (0.36), A6 (0.17), A7 (0.29) and A8 (0.17).

Tab. 7: Frequencies and mean values with corresponding standard errors (SEs)

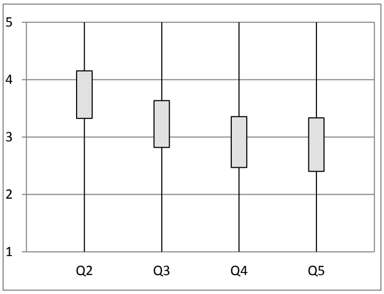
	Q1 (Popularity of journal)		Q2 (Interest in paper)		Q3 (Comprehensi-bility of paper)		Q4 (Usefulness of paper)		Q5 (Usability of paper)		Q6 (Attractiveness of journal)	
	Freq.	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Freq.	SE
A1	0.96	*0.043*	3.74	*0.211*	3.23	*0.207*	2.91	*0.226*	2.87	*0.238*	0.87	*0.070*
A2	0.65	*0.099*	3.65	*0.248*	3.48	*0.207*	2.96	*0.255*	2.83	*0.215*	0.57	*0.103*
A3	1.00	*0.000*	4.00	*0.000*	4.40	*0.245*	4.20	*0.374*	3.20	*0.374*	0.40	*0.219*
A4	0.78	*0.139*	2.56	*0.580*	3.11	*0.484*	1.44	*0.176*	1.33	*0.167*	0.78	*0.139*
A5	1.00	*0.000*	2.82	*0.423*	3.00	*0.302*	2.45	*0.434*	2.36	*0.388*	1.00	*0.000*
A6	0.83	*0.152*	2.00	*0.365*	2.50	*0.428*	1.83	*0.167*	2.00	*0.258*	0.83	*0.152*
A7	0.86	*0.132*	3.86	*0.404*	2.43	*0.297*	3.43	*0.571*	2.57	*0.429*	0.57	*0.187*
A8	1.00	*0.000*	2.50	*0.563*	1.83	*0.307*	1.67	*0.211*	2.17	*0.601*	1.00	*0.000*

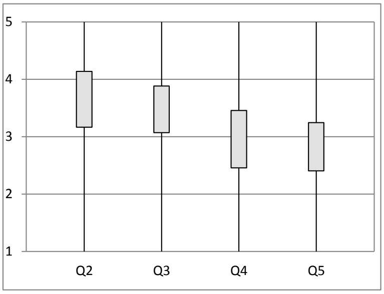
Source: our elaboration

4.2 Confidence intervals of the means

The confidence intervals of the mean values were calculated in order to assess the significance of the results of the previous analysis, but these were informative only in the case of articles A1 and A2 (the only papers with a large enough number of respondents: n=23). Figure 1 shows the confidence intervals of the mean values attributed to questions Q2, Q3, Q4 and Q5 in relation to the two papers, calculated on the basis of the mean values and SEs shown in Table 7.

Fig. 1: Confidence intervals for the mean values of the answers to questions Q2, Q3, Q4 and Q5 for paper A1 (left) and paper A2 (right)





Source: our elaboration

As can be seen, in both cases the entire range of the confidence interval of the mean value attributed to question Q2 is above 3, the central value indicating a significantly positive response of the participants. In other words, Q2 (which concerns the degree of interest) is the only one of the four questions whose confidence interval is high for both articles: A1 (3.33, 4.15); A2 (3.17, 4.14). In the case of question Q3 (the degree of comprehensibility), this is only true of article A2 (3.07, 3.89); all of the other intervals fall in the centre of the Likert scale, and so no conclusion can be drawn.

In brief, it can be said that the *degree of interest* and the *degree of comprehensibility* are the only indicators with significantly positive scores: both articles were significantly interesting, and article A2 can also be reliably considered comprehensible.

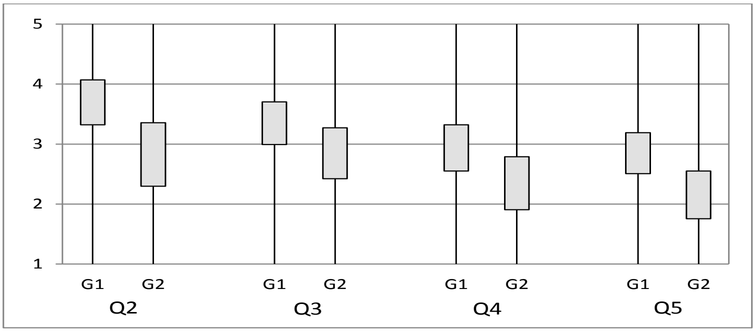
4.3 Comparison of articles A1 and A2 with articles A3-A8

The analyses of mean values, proportions and confidence intervals described above suggest better results for the oldest and most cited articles A1 and A2 than for the decidedly more recent articles A3-A8. In order to verify this perception, the articles were divided into two groups (group G1 consisting of articles A1 and A2, which had been administered to all of the participants, and group G2 consisting of articles A3-A8, which had been distributed in rotation), and the mean values of questions Q2-Q5 were calculated for each group. The mean value of each question was obtained by calculating the mean of the mean values of the scores assigned by each respondent to the individual articles making up each group.

The mean values of questions Q2-Q5 in group G1 were always higher than those in group G2, indicating greater appreciation towards articles A1 and A2.

As shown in Figure 2, the confidence intervals for questions Q3 and Q4 relatively overlap, whereas those for questions Q2 and Q5 are almost separate, thus suggesting a statistically significant between-group difference in the means of the two groups. The subsequent verification of the hypothesis regarding the equality of the mean values of the two groups led to the hypothesis being rejected in the case of questions Q2 (*interest*) and Q5 (*usability*), which indicates that, in relation to these two questions, the two groups can be considered different (with group G1 having higher values than group G2, but accepted in the case of questions Q3 (*comprehensibility*) and Q4 (*usefulness*), which indicates that the differences between the groups are not statistically significant.

Fig. 2: Confidence intervals of the mean values of four questions (Q2, Q3, Q4 and Q5) in groups G1 and G2



Source: our elaboration

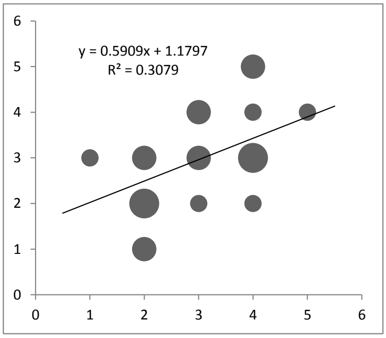
In view of the trend towards the greater appreciation of articles A1 and A2, it follows that the two oldest and most cited articles can reasonably and reliably be considered more *interesting* and more *applicable* to company life.

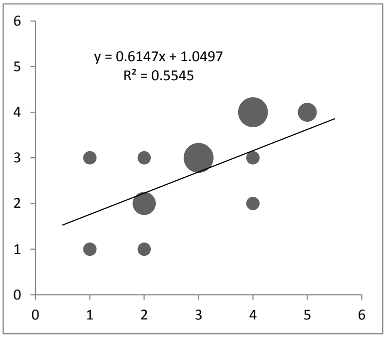
4.4 Correlations and regression analyses

A *correlation analysis* of papers A1 and A2 (for which a larger number of responses were available) was carried out in order to identify any correlations between the answers to Q1-Q6 and between these and the variables relating to the characteristics of the subjects. Surprisingly, although they were all positive, the between-paper cross-correlations of the values attributed to each of the questions were relatively low.

The correlations between the answers to questions Q4 (*usefulness*) and Q5 (*usability*): 0.555 (paper A1); 0.745 (paper A2) are worth noting. Figure 3 shows the least square regression line.

Fig. 3: Least square regression line of Q5 (y axis) plotted against Q4 (x axis) showing the correlation between the answers to questions Q4 and Q5 for papers A1 (left) and A2 (right). The size of the circles is proportional to the number of respondents





Source: our elaboration

There was also a fair correlation between the answers to questions Q2 (*interest*) and Q3 (*comprehensibility*): 0.479 (paper A1); 0.505 (paper A2). This suggests that the interest in both papers was related to its readability which, albeit not very closely, also correlated with question Q4 (*usability*): 0.334 (paper A1); 0.479 (paper A2).

Various regression analyses were carried out with the aim of identifying any dependence between the answers to questions Q2-Q5 in relation to papers A1 and A2 and the characteristics of the subjects (covariates: gender, age, education, job position, size of firm, and reading habits). In the case of paper A2, there were no significant regressions; in the case of paper A1, education seemed to play an important role in explaining the answers to Q2 (*interest*) and Q4 (*usefulness*), for which the following two regressions were obtained (the standard errors of the corresponding parameter estimates are given in parentheses):

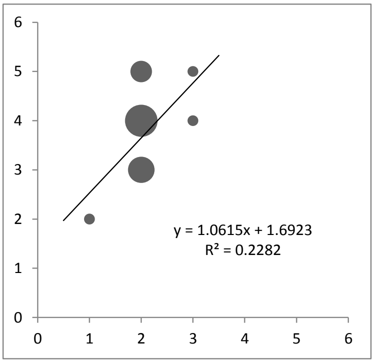
Q2=0.780 + 0.767 gender + 0.276 age + 0.815 edu. + 0.109 job + 0.116 firm + 0.101 reading
(1.086) (0.470) (0.174) (0.460) (0.248) (0.085) (0.378) and

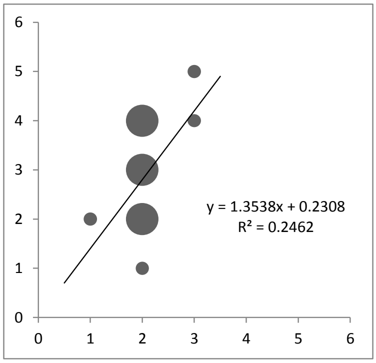
Q4=1.475 + 0.205 gender - 0.353 age + 1.288 edu. - 0.484 job + 0.173 firm - 0.214 reading
(1.273) (0.551) (0.204) (0.539) (0.291) (0.100) (0.443)

The *F* statistic significance levels were respectively 0.123 and 0.071.

Education is visibly and highly significant, and age may play some role. In the case of education, a one unit increase implies an increase of 0.815 in the answers to Q2, and 1.288 in the answers to Q4 (using the coding shown in Table 5. It is worth noting that the small sample size prevented the use of dummy variables). Figure 4 shows the marginal relationship between education and the answers to Q2 (left) and Q4 (right).

Fig. 4: Paper A1: least square regression line of Q2 (y axis) plotted against education (x axis) (left), and Q4 (y axis) plotted against education (x axis) (right). The size of the circles is proportional to the number of respondents





Source: our elaboration

Finally, regression analysis was carried out to explain the answers to Q4 (*usefulness*) not only in terms of the above covariates, but also in terms of the answers to questions Q1 (*popularity of journal*), Q2 (*interest*) and Q3 (*comprehensibility*) related to paper A1 (the only questions with significant regressions). Regression analysis was not applied for Q5 because of its similarity to Q4. In this case, the most important predictors were age (-0.687; SE *0.228*), education (1.113; SE *0.540*) and the answers to Q1 (2.065; SE *0.913*), and the F statistic significance level was 0.040. Although there was a positive correlation between the answer to Q4 (usefulness) and education, the paper was considered less useful by older respondents and those who knew the journal.

The correlation and regression analyses of articles A1 and A2 revealed some correlations between the answers and highlighted some possible relationships of dependence between the answers and the characteristics of the respondents. From this perspective, the following should be recalled:
- the correlation between usefulness and usability *revealed a certain homogeneity between the two indicators*;
- interest in a paper seemed to be related to its *readability*, which also correlated (albeit not very closely) with judgements concerning its *usability*: in other words, *the readability of a paper may condition assessments of its ability to be interesting and/or usable*;
- among the characteristics of respondents that seem to be dependently related to the given answers, education plays a significant role: *higher levels of education relate to greater expressed interest in a paper or its subject and, even more, to judgements of greater usefulness;*
- judgements of usefulness inversely correlate with age and knowledge of the journal: *respondents who are of a certain age and know the journal are more severe with their judgements of usefulness;*
- it follows that, although a higher level of education leads to a greater appreciation of the articles, the experience acquired with age and knowledge of the journal seems to lead to the view that scientific publications in the field of management are not very useful.

5. Discussion

As the aim of this study is to make a theoretical contribution based on empirical evidence, specific care was taken when developing its three-phase research strategy. The first phase involved a study of methodology and led to the construction of the research framework, which was then applied to a pilot survey of a non-probabilistic sample of entrepreneurs and managers aimed at revealing their judgements concerning the interest, usefulness and usability of some papers that had been published in a selection of the most authoritative international management journals. In order to validate the research approach, the third phase will consist of a survey of a representative sample of more than 300 Italian entrepreneurs and managers to whom a questionnaire accompanied by articles extracted from selected journals that each respondent will be asked to read and evaluate will be administered.

The increasingly intense national and international debate concerning the relevance of management research has given rise to many different and often opposing positions that make it difficult to envisage reaching a definite and unitary view. An analysis of the literature shows that the very concept of relevance is difficult to measure, as its defining traits are characterised by a certain level of ambiguity and the meaning that is attributable to them is rather complex (Augier *et al.*, 2007).

Within the context of this dialectic, it has emerged that there is need for a rigorous and systematic study of relevance in order to clarify whether and in what ways the results of university scientific research are used in practice (Kieser *et al.*, 2015). As a result, it is important to consult practitioners directly in order to collect their judgements of the usefulness of academic management research. We have therefore constructed and tested a rigorously systematic framework in order to enable us to investigate the way in which managers perceive management research, with the aim of increasing the relevance of academic research strategies and the editorial policies of management journals.

Furthermore, it is clear that the ongoing debate cannot remain confined to academic circles, but needs to involve practitioners with whom a synergistic dialogue may be established because there are many points of contact between university and entrepreneurial/managerial environments that can be optimised in order to generate and distribute value throughout a national or area system (Borgonovi, 2007). Professional communities need to be helped to "see beyond the action" and the everyday life of competition, and explore "the horizons of the possible" in order to initiate "a discussion that raises questions and seeks the answers until they are found, and then sets off again in the search for other questions" (Baccarani, 2015). At the same time, they should ask management researchers to study problems that are relevant and interesting to them, and observe the more complex and dynamic situations that firms have to face (Soda, 2015). This dialogue between the two worlds should be qualitatively refined and sufficiently detailed to ensure the growth of both, allowing one to see "their ideas put into practice" and the other to "extend their knowledge of the foundations and innovative models of management" (Carella *et al.*, 2015). It should in fact permeate the very fabric and structure of a country's economy and entrepreneurial activities. The value of research and education increasingly lies in its quality, which in its turn is intrinsically related to its capacity to explain economic phenomena and train people who are capable of governing them (Borgonovi, 2007).

The fundamental concept of management research that this study intends to support should focus on subjects that are of real interest to practitioners, satisfy the need for rigour required by positive sciences, and be capable of producing knowledge that has a strong impact on professional communities: i.e. it should exert a direct influence on managerial practices, however complex the organisational processes underlying the implementation of its results.

The academic contributions considered most interesting "are more likely to induce positive affect and are also more likely to be read, understood and remembered" (Bartunek *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, they may be essential for attracting, motivating, and retaining talented and enthusiastic doctoral students, particularly those guided by the thought of gaining and developing truly relevant knowledge that might change the world of organisations (Vermeulen, 2005, 980-981).

We agree with others that producing methodologically rigorous contributions aimed at answering important research questions and capable of arousing interest increase the visibility and impact of management research partially by motivating the readers they are intended to involve (Bartunek et al, 2006). It is therefore important to emphasise that the dissemination of research results and acquired knowledge need to be favoured by using forms of language that encourage the participation of the readers with whom the academic world intends to communicate. As pointed out by Stadler (2015), "leaders usually don't have the time to battle with the inaccessible prose of academic articles (…). It is of cumbersome jargon, heavily focused on theory, and there is so much of it that it is hard to find the most relevant articles." Under these conditions, one wonders how managers can gain access to the knowledge published in academic journals.

The largely standardised formats and styles that tend to be used when preparing a scientific article could be conveniently abolished if, rather than driving readers away, it were necessary to stimulate their thoughts and innovative spirit, and highlight the relevance and usefulness of research to entrepreneurial practices and concrete problem solving, or to identify new answers to old and new questions.

6. Conclusions

This study has some limitations which, along with the obtained results, have allowed us to consider the future course of the project as a whole in greater detail, particularly the need to adjust the protocol of the extended survey in order to strengthen its effectiveness.

The pilot study revealed a number of quantitative and qualitative inadequacies in the research framework (Brunetti *et al.*, 2015) concerning the selection of the journals and papers, the extraction of the study sample, and the structure and composition of the questionnaire. The evaluation concerned only eight articles and eight journals; furthermore, the number of involved practitioners was also limited, and they were not interested in the subjects of the papers they were asked to assess.

There are also some limitations related to the research method used for the pilot study itself. In the first place, the personal relationship between the authors and the interviewees may have partially falsified the results by orienting them towards an overestimate of the positive judgements. This risk was compounded by the assumption that the answers with a score of >3 could be considered positive, a prudential choice, given the uneven number of possible answers.

In relation to the personal information that the practitioners were asked to provide, the covariates could have been better specified, particularly in the case of education and job positions. As many as 8.64% of the respondents indicated their educational qualifications as "other" which, in the absence of further details, does not allow any further considerations to be made. Furthermore, 56.52% of the respondents said they were line or function managers, and the absence of any further information about the type of functional area once again prevents a more detailed analysis of the characteristics of these non-probabilistically selected subjects.

The identification of these limitations will allow us to modify the questionnaire in order to improve the data analysis: for example, it has been considered necessary to review the questions relating to the demographic and personal variables of the subjects in order to specify the covariates more appropriately. It is also necessary to introduce an even number of possible answers in order to avoid the risk of overestimating positive results and to facilitate the calculation of proportions.

The probability of receiving a response may be increased by reducing the number of articles administered to each subject, and using a system of rotation when distributing the articles that have been selected for evaluation in order to cover the entire sample.

The possible risk that the interviewees may be influenced by a sense of reverence could be reduced by means of te differences among the answers relating to various types of articles; furthermore, the selected articles could include one that acts as a control variable.

Finally, considering the content of the future survey, we wonder whether it would be appropriate to retain the comparison of articles published in different periods. There was a 20 year difference in the present study which, among other things, revealed a trend towards greater interest in older papers, which were also recognised as being more applicable to company practice.

In the light of the results and limitations of the present study, we have started to reconsider many aspects of the future survey: the sample of interviewees, the type of articles, improvements in the questionnaire, and the need to encourage a larger number of respondents.

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