Journal of Brand Management: Editorial guidelines and expectations of authors

Mark A. P. Davies¹ · Urša Golob² · Joachim Kernstock³ · Shaun M. Powell⁴

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Abstract

The aim of this editorial is to provide guidance to aid prospective authors whilst writing and preparing their research papers for consideration within the Journal of Brand Management, and to understand what reviewers will typically be looking for in a manuscript. A number of key generic issues are considered, as well as how sections of a research paper should be structured.

Keywords Writing an article · Manuscript publication · Scholarly writing

Introduction

Writing a journal paper is not an easy task no matter whether an early-stage or established researcher and publication often becomes a daunting exercise. With this in mind, our intention is to help by providing some guidance for prospective authors whom are considering submitting to the Journal of Brand Management (JBM). Whilst primarily intended for new authors or authors intending to submit to the journal for the first time, established authors who continue to submit to the journal might find this a useful refresher. A secondary audience may be those who are new to reviewing, whilst more established reviewers might also find this a useful read.

Whilst rigorous, insightful and well-written conceptual submissions are welcome for consideration, for this editorial we focus on research papers as these are the most common type of submission to the journal.

Before we begin, a humbling observation is that much research does not get published—at least not in the first choices of the authors, and that considerable patience and

humility often become a necessity in the incremental refinement of original drafts. Despite this challenge, authors can improve their probabilities of success for research papers that are submitted to JBM by adhering to the guidelines provided in this editorial.

Also, by choosing an appropriate journal for the manuscript authors can reach the most suitable audiences and gain recognition within academia and industry (Gastel and Day 2016). Hence, one of the initial steps in writing a paper for this journal is to consult the JBM website to identify the suitability of the research area and topic for the aims and scope of the journal. It might also be useful to search recent issues published in the journal to identify if papers have perhaps previously addressed similar topics.

As editors, we have a responsibility to shape the journal's writing style in the direction of publications that will have implications for the future. With a branding mindset, authors should consider themselves in how they are branding their own research, especially when submitting to JBM. To help authors with preparing their research manuscripts, we categorise a number of key generic issues below which often lead to readers, including reviewers, feeling uncomfortable about a manuscript, and later look at how sections of a research paper should be structured, based around a number of pertinent questions. Probably the single most influential reason for feeling uncomfortable about a manuscript relates to writing style, so that is where we begin.

✉ Mark A. P. Davies
markdav1meo.pt@gmail.com

¹ Teesside University Business School, Middlesbrough, UK

² Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia

³ Competence Centre for Brand Management, St. Gallen, Switzerland

⁴ Faculty of Business and Law, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

Generic issues

Writing style

Experienced authors who have a decent track record of publications know that success requires examining the target journal idiosyncrasies in presentation as much as what is written about the content. Often, that requires writing and re-writing the paper several times before first submission in order to refine the structure for the target journal. As authors reflect on the impact of their manuscripts for the journal, they will begin to consider whether there is an appropriate balance between clarifying the importance of the topic, developing the conceptual foundation, showing cohesion behind hypotheses or research questions and revealing a true contribution for the audience of the target journal. Paper imbalance is a generic issue, as it often indicates deficiencies in contribution to the topic. Editors and reviewers look for something new provided by the research. It is observed that an oft-mentioned criticism by reviewers on first reviews is a lack of a clear contribution. From our collective editorial experiences, this is often a significant factor leaning towards a paper being rejected.

Sometimes, the study is too broad to merit a contribution. Often, the introductory first page can indicate much about the trajectory of the paper through a lack of focus. Papers that try to say everything on a topic often end up revealing nothing. A paper that starts off meandering from one idea to another and then back again is clearly unstructured but also necessitates repetition as a previous idea is returned to. This might indicate a poorly developed idea, since without a strong core idea, story-writing becomes frustrated. Whilst these points adversely affect writing style, a reluctance to move the subject forward, stretching the boundaries and acting as a role model for others to follow up in related studies can also be an obstacle to building a valuable contribution. Whilst we need some humility in acknowledging other scholarly work, there is also a need to be creatively bold, but striking the appropriate balance is not an easy task.

Hence, authors should spend time in reflecting on how they present their research manuscript, as if the submission is a brand in itself, which ideally should embrace a clear and compelling abstract and introduction, a representative and up-to-date literature review, hypotheses or research questions, followed by methods, analysis and results, discussion and conclusion, limitations and future research.

When submitting papers, do the authors write for the target audience of the journal? Has appropriate consideration been given for the correct use of language throughout, as well as the clarity of the writing? Does the writing style

seem irritating (too much repetition) or over-labouring, with explanations that appear long-winded, or that have not appropriately considered the level of existing knowledge amongst the brand management readership community? Importantly, submissions must complement the knowledge of the target audience that we might expect.

Overall, a strong submission should be comfortable to read by the journal audience, both logically in what is reported and how it is reported in relation to layout and structure (e.g. based on adequacy of paragraphs, lengths of sentences and syllables per words).

Clarity of explanations, including any technical terms or concepts likely to be unknown to the readership community, or where there is no consensus on how they are understood, should be formally defined, either when the term or concept is first presented or deferred until the literature review. For example, terms like engagement and involvement have wide and sometimes diverging explanations, so it's important the authors clarify and justify their personal position for their research context. When these terms are not the focal point of a paper, definitions can be brief, but when these terms are operationalised within research questions or tested empirically, the rationale for the definitions often needs a fuller explanation.

Where the range of definitions is divergent for a particular concept, the authors should aid the readers by summarising the main published definitions before outlining and justifying their own “qualifying definition”—which ideally will incorporate at least some of these. The aim is to demonstrate absolute clarity of the author's position on a concept. Recursive definitions that include the word itself in the definition should be avoided. Ideally, authors should state their “qualifying definition” in their own words to convey to readers how they understand it. Only repeating someone else's quotations may not reveal this.

Evidence-based research

Research claims made should follow the evidence to maintain objectivity and credibility. Research questions and hypotheses need to be justified by supportive literature that is relevant to the terms and concepts used. If support is weak or out of context, this raises concern. In cutting-edge, exploratory studies, this may not always be possible, but in advancing established theories and frameworks, the research inquiry should logically follow from prior studies to advance knowledge. Are claims that appear as opinions supported by appropriate references?

Paper balance

Authors should conform to the manuscript word limits for the journal. Whilst overly short papers can indicate

insufficient development, lengthy submissions are also in danger of being rejected since they should normally be reduced in scope prior to submission. Either way, a close inspection might reveal one section to be disproportionate to another. For example, papers that have only a page of literature review are unlikely to be successful and may well be candidates for desk rejection. However, balance just isn't about having adequate sections in place—it's also about balance of arguments. A paper deliberately slanted one way to achieve a political statement about branding that is not representative is also unlikely to be appreciated by editors and reviewers alike. This leads into sections of the paper, which we now discuss.

Sections of the paper

Writing a research paper requires a logical and systematic approach no matter whether the research approach is qualitative or quantitative. Although not an explicit rule, the structure of a scientific research paper normally consists of a title, abstract, introduction, a theoretical framework/literature review with supported research questions or hypotheses, methods, analysis and results, discussion, conclusion and research limitations and opportunities for further research. This rather linear storyline can be an even bigger challenge when the research is qualitative and evolves in an iterative way. However, a good storyline can be achieved with going through multiple versions of the literature review and findings and selecting the one with a clear message without unnecessary details (Köhler 2016).

Title of paper

The title is usually read first; hence, it is important that it establishes appropriate expectations about the content of the paper. Does the title capture precisely and concisely what the study is about? Is it unnecessarily cumbersome, or does it inspire and capture the attention of the reader? Perhaps surprisingly, as people with a branding interest, we would expect authors to spend time in creating an awe-inspiring title, but sometimes reviewers suggest changes to make the titles more interesting or relevant. Authors should reflect on this, as the brand name of the paper is represented by its title.

Abstract

Often, online publications without subscription only provide access to the abstracts so that to achieve a higher readership of a published paper a high degree of effort should be put into writing a clear, informative and impactful abstract. The content of an abstract helps to raise awareness of the manuscript and to build interest in exploring further. It should

capture all main points of the paper in summary form. Does the abstract explain what the study is about, why it is considered important and the results, in brief, including major contribution? Is it presented in a format and manner that is suited for the journal? A good abstract might represent a day's work, not just a couple of hours, and should be written last, after all other work has been completed. Poor abstracts therefore defeat the work of an otherwise good paper, so it is definitely worthwhile practising this art. Ultimately, good abstracts should help to increase citation rates whilst high citations can encourage abstracts to be more widely read. However, one caveat is that authors should avoid exaggerating their contributions. Essentially, an abstract should invite the reader to unwrap the paper and seek more. In this sense, the abstract acts as the packaging of the brand.

Keywords

Do the keywords capture the main essence of the paper? Is there a clear link between the content of the paper and the keywords provided? Are these appropriate for the journal? For example, a set of key words without any branding terms may raise a concern.

Introduction

The introduction provides a background on the importance of the study, and it might be construed as the sales pitch for the paper in which authors should present their arguments for maximum impact. Does it have a clearly defined focus and compelling rationale to encourage the reader to read on?

Is a clear motivation for the study outlined, building on an established and up-to-date literature that leads to a clear research gap and contribution that will advance our knowledge in a particular aspect of brand management? The research gap should advance beyond the customary acknowledged neglect of the research area that is commonly unspecified and clichéd—which often signals an under-researched paper. A lack of specification is generally a concern that might point to an under-developed literature review. The research gap should be developed, building on its importance by connecting to related areas of the research focus.

Apart from identifying the research gap, there needs to be a convincing argument that the gap is worth filling, responding to the “so what?” question. Herein, some critical commentary might be useful to highlight why the study has not previously been considered, or if previously considered, not followed through.

Does the introduction state the major contributions of the paper to whet the appetite of the reader? This includes the relevance of the paper, research focus and issues for brand management practice. The audience of this Journal includes academics, practitioners and brand management

decision makers, who are interested in new developments in the field. Inspiring research which could apply and support management judgement and decision-making is very much welcome and should be part of an introduction. Some rejected submissions lack an appropriate level of relevance for brand management practice.

Towards the end of the introduction, do the authors outline what the structure of the paper is lucidly and poignantly? Is the paper compliant with the standard structure expected for the journal, based on sections, section length, use and selection of titles and sub-titles, text and illustrations and overall length?

Literature review

Is the literature sufficiently rich, building on what is known, adequately representing the balance of literature covering the research context? A thorough literature review will help to identify what is new and useful and will help the authors to develop motivation for their research questions. Whilst the literature review needs to be comprehensive and anchored in the (wider) brand management literature, including prior literature of significance to the research topic, it is also important to include relevant papers that might have been published more recently in the last few years, in order to ensure the review is contemporary.

Is the literature presented as an *integrated review*, based on a critical perspective of previous research, comparing and contrasting salient theories and schools of thought that represent the research focus, leading to distilled themes of interest? Note this should advance beyond sequentially listing and discussing different researchers connected with the research focus, as this would not be an integrated review because the skills required in comparing, contrasting and matching perspectives are not consummated. Does the literature describe the new contribution built on appropriate theory for the context? Is the theoretical rationale both explained and justified within the research context?

Hypotheses and research questions

Do the research questions logically follow from the literature review and are supported by it? Are research questions or hypotheses presented logically from each other, naturally following from the previous, reflecting cohesion? Do they include key concepts or variables that would be expected? Ideally, hypotheses if provided should be supported by an underpinning theory that connects all variables with a study. Hypotheses that appear forced can appear piecemeal rather than cohesive, and can raise suspicion with reviewers. In a quantitative study, all independent and dependent variables should be defined. In addition, care should be taken to ensure that the directionality of hypotheses could not be reversed,

leading to a circular explanation. Perhaps the best support behind a hypothesis is when opposing sides of the argument are fully discussed and evaluated, reflecting a measured, purposeful and sensible directionality.

Also, consider whether the arguments behind any research questions appear plausible, based on what is known, and are substantive in creating sufficient reader interest, as well as insightful, making us re-think about new research perspectives. Care must be taken in formalising research questions to ensure they are specific enough to be tested empirically.

In building in moderators and mediators into any hypotheses, their inclusion must be fully explained and justified. This is often a weakness of models built on structural equation modelling (SEM) where sometimes the understanding appears, *prima facie*, data driven.

Are the causal explanations and arguments well supported with previous references? Do the lines of inquiry build on cohesive theories for testing (if positivist), or assist in developing and creating theories (if phenomenological)?

Methods

A research methods section should include enough detail to help the readers understand the study and to offer information necessary to replicate it. One of the important elements of the methods section is an explanation of how the research approach is aligned with the research questions/hypotheses and how the chosen methodology generated relevant evidence to address the research questions (Köhler 2016). Thus, the methods section needs to answer the following two questions: Does the overall research philosophy fit the research context? Does the main method seem appropriate for the context?

In the methods section, authors need to explain how they conducted their study. Ideally, are the data collection procedures clearly outlined, step by step, so that any reader might replicate them without the need to contact the author(s)? Often an incomplete description of what was done signals to reviewers another concern that the authors may be hiding something. For example, surveys should explain how the questions were derived rather than spontaneously produced. Instruments based on previous studies need to be appropriately referenced including any modifications that were made. In a qualitative study, an overview of the steps taken in the research approach should be provided along with adequate details. For example, when describing an interview approach, general information should be given (e.g. semi-structured interview) and the execution of the approach described. Interviews could be supported with topic guides so that it can be assessed how the relevant information to answer research questions was elicited without asking leading questions (Köhler 2016).

Details of the nature of the sampling method are important both in qualitative and quantitative studies as it can outline how representative the results are and can offer clues as to the generalisability of results, but is often treated lightly. Normally, a profile of respondents is expected. Authors may also want to provide information on how the respondents or participants were recruited for the sample. Is the sampling method clearly outlined and justified? If random sampling is used, how were cases selected? If non-random and subsequently advanced multivariate statistical analysis is used, the application of a non-random sample should be defended. At the very least, this should be acknowledged in the limitations section of the submission. If student samples are used, they should fit the context, such as branding in higher education, not just derived for convenience. Sample sizes also have a bearing on the choice of statistical analysis open to the authors. In the qualitative studies too, the authors need to address the issue of how the chosen sample fits the purpose of the study and research questions.

Analysis

Is the analysis grounded in scientific procedures that are (a) transparent (b) accurate and (c) thorough?

If a quantitative study, are adequate steps taken in data cleaning prior to full-scale analysis? How is non-normality accounted for, if relevant? If surveys are used, is non-response error accounted for systematically? Have outliers been managed? How is common method bias shown not to be a major issue? What about the management of control variables? What evidence is there of the validity and reliability of the measures taken?

If coding is used, as often in qualitative studies, is the coding explained fully as to whether, for example, it is deductive—drawn largely from previous literature—or inductive—from say, interviews, or observation? In order for reviewers to properly assess the data analysis approach, it is advisable to provide a description of the coding process, starting with the processing of raw data and finishing with the interpretation of the categories of meaning into which the data were ordered at the end of the process. Graphs and tables are a useful tool to help the readers track the coding process in this case (Köhler 2016). In regard to interpretation of underlying categories, it is important to answer the question on how does the author account for their own potential biases in interpretation of the data.

If SEM is conducted, there is a need to justify its use and defend the choice of scales used from previous studies where multiple others could have been chosen, and explain whether indicators are reflective or formative. Lately, quite many authors choose the partial least squares (PLS) SEM over covariance-based (CB) SEM method. In contrast to CB-SEM, the PLS-SEM method enables estimation of complex

models without imposing numerous restrictions on the data (Hair et al. 2019). However, PLS-SEM should not be seen as a simple and more appealing alternative; authors should be careful to consult the literature to determine the appropriateness of one or the other methods for their research purposes and data and offer justification for their choice of method.

Models should also be appropriately identified. Where analysis is difficult to separate from the results without undue repetition, it is sometimes more astute to combine analysis with results. With some advanced statistical testing now readily accessible to the majority, it is important to ensure care is also taken to maintain the identity of a brand management paper, rather than convey a statistical one. In the case of statistical modelling such as SEM that requires significant testing (and often re-testing), full test results, including respecifications, should be made available to reviewers (in a separate file upon submission) for the purposes of evaluation, although the full paper might eventually only comprise of selective reporting (to save on journal space).

Results

The results section should give a clear insight into the outcomes of the study. Results presented in a research paper are usually limited to those addressing the research questions and hypotheses. Are the results presented in the order of the hypotheses/research questions? Are the results statistically significant (as expected) or do the qualitative reports add support to expectations? Do the results confirm the direction of the hypotheses or research questions, adding support that the theory was firmly conceptualised? If not, do the authors rigorously defend and explain why the results do not align to expectations—there may be good reason, on reflection, that can save the study. When discussing results, are the hypotheses rewritten long-hand to facilitate recall and readability?

Is a summary table offered showing which hypotheses/research questions are supported and which are not? If mixed results, is adequate explanation given for the findings?

Similar to quantitative studies, for qualitative studies the results/findings section is primarily focused on providing the answers to the research questions. However, presenting qualitative results usually involves an interpretation and analysis of what the findings mean besides presenting core results supported with the evidence from the data (e.g. quotes). This requires additional effort from the authors as they need to compile a coherent storyline that is fluent, engaging, easy to follow and convincing to the readers, within the appropriate word limit required for the journal. An additional important question that needs to be considered here is whether the storyline gives an appropriate balance between the showing and telling of data (Köhler 2016).

The methods and analysis can signpost the transparency and authenticity of any empirical study, which together with results provide the evidence that can support any research claims made, which in turn can galvanise credibility for the paper. However, errors in omission or commission can reduce credibility, so are often considered critical sections.

Papers should be balanced in terms of rigour and relevance. When it comes to relevance, the body of management implications counts. Based on the content of the introduction section, the development of research questions and hypotheses, now it is the time to answer management issues raised in the study. With management implications, the authors present their results towards an imaginary audience of brand management decision makers. What are the implications of the research? What does it change or add to common brand management practice? What do managers ignore without taking notice of this research? Giving illustrative examples might help in this section and improve richness and presentation of study results.

Discussion

In the discussion section, authors should critically reflect, discuss and compare the results in relation to the research aim, research questions/hypotheses and previous literature. The aim is to show how the study contributes new knowledge in comparison with the existing knowledge. Do the implications of the results meet the promises made in the contribution outlined in the introduction? Do the implications of the results enhance our understanding of the subject matter and shed new light on our knowledge, building specifically on previously referenced research? Implications should be as specific as possible but are often too broad or vague to authenticate a true contribution. How does this set of results support or refute previous knowledge on the subject area in collaborating or conflicting with prior theories? Is the comprehensive evidence for each conclusion provided? Authors should discuss probable reasons for expected and unexpected conclusions.

Authors should refrain from arguing their study does things it does not—such as arguing it is the first study to do X, Y and Z—when it often doesn't. Informed modesty is likely tolerated by reviewers, whereas exaggeration can be more easily ridiculed.

Practical implications of the study are also one of the important elements the editors and reviewers would be seeking in the discussion section. Do the authors provide practical implications that are well grounded in the results and specific enough to be implemented?

Conclusion

The conclusion usually summarises the results and opens with a clear and concise statement of the major findings and their significance. Does the study offer a major take-away that is likely to excite or intrigue different stakeholders, such as academics, research students, practitioners? These might touch on new insights into theoretical foundations or practical considerations for different audiences. How might others make use of the research, such as policy-makers, if relevant?

Limitations and future research

Whilst the discussion or conclusion section might identify and discuss limitations of the study and future research avenues, this information might alternatively be provided via a section following the conclusion. Have the main limitations of the study been outlined and cogently explained? Have clear directions for future research been proposed?

Citations and references

Are the citations and references appropriate, up-to-date and capture all the main writers in the field, given the context? Are the citations and references presented in the appropriate format required by the journal? Have all sources been cited and referenced? Do the citations in text correspond fully to the references and vice versa? Have these been checked carefully prior to submission?

Illustrations

Do the illustrations, tables and figures add support to the text? Reversing this, is the text suitably cross-referenced, explaining the full coverage of models, diagrams, charts or tables? Importantly, are the tables and figures given thoughtful labels or titles that describe the context fully?

Copyright

Have any third party materials been referenced and copyright permissions secured, as appropriate?

Appendices

Appendices include information that will help readers further understand the results of the study. As an example, appendices may include the visuals used in an experimental research design, the interview guide or questions for a qualitative study, a questionnaire, full measurement instrument or any additional tables and figures that add to the understanding of the study. However, the length of the appendices should also be considered, as excessive length would not be acceptable.

Concluding Remarks

Writing a good research manuscript about one's scientific research can almost be as challenging as the research process itself. The best manuscripts fulfil the ambition of confronting big and relevant issues in the wider brand management field and tackle important and worthy topics. The research should be presented in a clear, concise and logical way and be supported by consulting and reflected on relevant previous research in the area.

The aim of this editorial is to help authors with writing and preparing their research manuscripts for consideration within JBM and to understand what reviewers will typically be looking for in a manuscript. It is our hope that by providing the above guidelines the readers and potential authors will feel an increase in confidence whilst writing up their research manuscripts for submission to the journal and we wish you well with your research.

Co-Editors-in-Chief

Journal of Brand Management

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- Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.
- Mark A. P. Davies** is a co-editor of Journal of Brand Management and an Associate Editor of European Management Review. He is widely published in marketing strategy.
- Urša Golob** is head of the Marketing Communication and Public Relations Unit at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her main interests lie in topics related to corporate social responsibility and sustainability. She publishes her work in renowned international refereed journals. Urša joined as a co-editor of the Journal of Brand Management in 2019.
- Joachim Kernstock** is head of centre of competence for brand management in St. Gallen, Switzerland. He is an experienced corporate brand strategy advisor. He works with leading Swiss and European corporates and with SME's. He has leading publications in corporate brand management and brand behaviour in Germany and within international refereed journals. Previously, he was responsible for the Lufthansa corporate marketing and brand portfolio. Joachim has been co-editor of the Journal of Brand Management since 2012.
- Shaun M. Powell** is a co-editor of the Journal of Brand Management and his research has appeared in a range of International Journals. He has co-edited several books on corporate branding and luxury brand management.