Why Do Research Articles in Economics Get Desk Rejection in Reputable Journals?

Abstract
The desire of every academic is to publish in reputable national and international journals. Unfortunately, this desire more often than not turn out to be a nightmare particularly for academics in developing economies, whose research outputs are usually rejected at initial desk review. Such research outputs generally end up with predator journals that have no formal peer-review process, but are primarily set up for profit maximization. Consequently, the scholarly contributions of such academics remain very meagre, and almost unnoticeable. To halt this trend, this paper identifies nine (9) pitfalls common among economic researchers in developing economies and proffers possible solutions for overcoming them so that their future research efforts can add value to the body of knowledge.

Key words: Economic Research; Journal Articles; Developing Economies; Nigeria
JEL Classifications: B40; A29; O10; N17

1. Introduction

There are a number of reasons why academics must publish in reputable refereed journals, namely: to solve societal problems and enhance the well-being of individuals; to enrich knowledge and the literature and contribute to the development of the academia; to earn their promotion and advance their career[1]. For instance, in the University of Nigeria, academics are required to publish a certain number of papers in journals indexed in Thomson Reuters and Scopus to merit promotion to the rank of a Senior Lecturer or associate Professor/ full Professor. However, the standards required by such scholarly journals are quite high. Consequently, most researchers in developing economies, especially Nigeria, are usually faced with desk rejections by such reputable journals. In what follows, we draw from our own personal experiences as well as those of other experienced researchers and editors across the globe to explain what economic researchers in developing economies must do to ensure that their research outputs advance beyond desk reviews and ultimately get published in reputable refereed impact factor journals.

2. Reasons for Desk Rejections

(a) Motivations and Contributions to Knowledge (Inability to identify a clear research problem or gap in the literature)

The essence of any piece of research, not matter the level, is to contribute to the body of existing knowledge. Thus, any study, empirical or theoretical, that fails to clearly identify its contribution to the literature is most likely going to be rejected after a desk (internal) review. In other words, such papers are not considered worthy to undergo formal peer-review. This is because such a study or paper will simply amount to academic exercise as it will add nothing to the existing body of knowledge and are therefore considered irrelevant. Editors are generally interested in papers that analytically and coherently review the existing literature with a view to unambiguously highlighting the contributions of the instant paper to knowledge.

One sure way of achieving this is to carry out an extensive review of previous studies under the topic of research interest. This will allow the researcher to clearly identify the following points: (1) what other researchers have already done and done very well with a consensus in findings; (2) what other researchers have not done; (3); what other researchers have done but could be done better or improved upon; (4) what other researchers have done, though done well, but lacks consensus in findings. With respect to the first point, there is not basis or justification for further studies under such a research topic as there will be nothing new to add to the body of knowledge. The only possible justification here is when one wants to replicate such a study in a different country or region where the topic is also relevant, but such study has hitherto not be done in such places. The second point provides a great opportunity to add something new to the existing literature. That is, to bridge the gap in knowledge. This point is actually the main essence of research and it is what almost all reputable journals look out for when a research paper is submitted to them for possible publication. But identifying this gap does not come easy. Like noted before, it requires detailed review of the literature. The third point, though not as strong as the second point, also provides a basis to contribute to knowledge and can as well be a good justification to get a research paper published in a reputable journal. For example, in economics, many research papers are flawed methodologically, although the justification for such a research papers are sometimes well articulated. Proposing and implementing a better, well-developed, adequate and robust method of analysis could therefore earn a researcher publication in a good journal. The fourth point also provides a basis to contribute to knowledge. Although previous studies have be done on the given topic or area of research interest, and the exiting studies were decently done, the lack of consensus in findings suggest that the research topic is far from conclusive in the literature. This provides justification for further studies and an argument to convince journal editors.

But sometimes, many researchers carry out extensive review of literature, but fail to identify the points discussed above which they can use to convince journal editors that their papers are worthy of publication. The main reason is because what many researchers do in the name of literature review is simply abstract summary. Summarizing one abstract after the other is an old-fashioned and unintuitive way of reviewing literature. What is required is a synthesis of previous studies. This entails using sub-points to group similar studies on the basis of data used, methodology employed, findings and so on. This way, previous efforts of researchers in the subject matter can be highlighted and exiting gap clearly identified. However, presentation of gap in the literature should be devoid of exaggerations that tend to mislead the readers and the general public. This also means that the research questions and objectives must neither be in doubt nor ambiguous. Further, we must stress that where the subject matter of the research appears trivial or makes insignificant contribution to knowledge, editors will be reluctant to consider the paper for peer review. Overall, the use of stylized facts can be quite useful, but this must be supported by sufficient, relevant and current literature.[1, 2, 3, 4]

(b) Lack of Access to Quality Papers during Literature Review.

The quality of any research paper, to a large extent, depends on the quality of sources reviewed or consulted. However, many researchers in developing countries lack access to quality papers domiciled in high-end journals, since most good journals are not open access journals. They require individual purchase of articles or institutional access. Both are not very cheap from a developing country perspective, especially the former. The implication of this is that many developing country researchers depend solely on papers published in open access journals for their literature review. The unfortunate thing is that most open access journals, with the exception of a few, are *predator* journals. These are journals that have no standard peer-review system, but are set up mainly for profit maximization as against contributing to the scholarly community. So, if all the papers a researcher could access during his/her own research work are low quality papers that could easily be downloaded via google for free, it is almost certain that such a paper will end up as a low quality paper that cannot pass through desk review in reputable journals.

Access to quality papers is one secret to writing a high quality research paper that could get published in reputable journals. High quality papers expose current global trend on a given topic of interest, show current debate, and reveal latest empirical methods and analytical skills required to write a decent paper. Thus, reviewing such high quality papers written by the very best in the field globally provides a big learning process and capacity development for early career and developing country researchers. We can therefore say that access to quality papers is a must for developing country researchers if they must publish in reputable journals. Institutions of higher learning in developed country have long realized this, the reason they provide institutional access to top journal across the word to their staff and students. The reverse seems to be the case in developing countries. Most institutions of higher learning in developing countries do not provide institutional access to their staff. For academics in such institutions to access quality papers, they must pay from their pocket. A paper in a typical quality journal goes for as high as $35 to $40. But institutions can provide access in a much cheaper way through annual institutional subscriptions. We therefore recommend that all institutions of higher learning in developing countries should make the provision of intuitional access to quality journals a priority if they really want their academic staff to produce decent papers that could be published in reputable journals.

(c) Data Access, Quality of Data and Descriptive Data Analysis

Empirical findings are as good and correct as the source and collection process of data used. Thus, data credibility and quality of descriptive data analysis are of utmost importance in empirical economic research. Indeed, experience has shown that data from most national statistical agencies (such as central banks and national bureaus of statistics) sometimes undergo revision, thereby making the goals of research replication and comparison very cumbersome and at worst impossible. Economic, Financial and Social data from sources such as Thomson Reuters Datastream, OECD iLibrary Statistics, IMF International Financial Statistics, The World Bank, the UK Data Service, World Trade Organization's International Trade and Market Data, Eurostat, and Nexus UK's Global Market Information Database are generally considered credible. Where administrative and/or survey data are used, the researcher should diligently justify the sample size and avoid defective tables or figures when presenting the data. All data transformations must be rigorously and transparently described. In fact, we vehemently discourage poor or insufficient data presentation, as well as the use of inaccurate or inconsistent data.[2,3]

Data is the foundation for any empirical research, especially in the field of economics where research is data driven; and lack of access to quality data is one primary reason why many researchers in developing countries cannot undertake high quality research that can be published in reputable journals. No matter the beautiful empirical research questions a researcher puts forward, not matter his/her technical know-how, nothing meaningful can be achieved without quality data. This is one key difference between developed country researchers and developing country researchers. The former take their time to search for and gather unique quality data. Some of these data might be existing data which no one has tapped. At times, they start from the scratch and build their own dataset and a lot of time, effort and sometime resources go into this data gathering process. With these, they are able to formulate and answer unique research questions that hitherto have not been answered, thereby contributing meaningfully to knowledge. No editor will want to reject such paper when submitted. For developing country researchers, data are often gathered from convenient sources like central bank statistical bulletins, general household surveys, living standard surveys and so on. The truth is that, there is really nothing new and substantial these types of data can offer because the variables therein have been used over and over again by many researchers. It is difficult to answer unique research questions and contribute to knowledge with such data, unless one is extremely creative and think outside the box. Developing country researchers should therefore take their time, and painstakingly source for quality data from uncommon sources if they really want to impress editors and reviewers and get their papers published in reputable journals. The data sources provided under this section could be a good way to start.

(d) Quality of Empirical Analysis

The methodology and empirical results section of an economic research paper is where the economist is expected to unleash his technical and analytical skills. This is where the research questions put forward are answered using data. In other words, empirical analysis helps us to take theoretical postulations or hypothesis to the data. It is like the heart of any empirical research in economics, and it is one key area we often look at in order to assess the quality of a research paper in economics. Unfortunately, most research papers are fraught with poorly described methods, use of wrong or deficient study designs, methods or models, flawed estimation results, statistically invalid estimation results, exaggeration or over interpretation of results, and conclusions that are not related to either the data or the estimation results. In fact, poor empirical method is one key reason research papers in economics get desk rejection.

In economics, empiric methods have evolved over time, going beyond basic regression analysis. Rigorous and robust methodologies that are able to address, or at least minimize, potential bias in estimation are currently emphasized in the discipline. This is important because in economics, we are not just interested in association or correlation, but we are interested in causal effect. If researcher runs a regression and say X causes Y, we want to be certain that there are no confounding factors (other factors outside X) that are explaining Y, while the researcher erroneously attributes the observed effect to only X, making the estimates of X biased. This is very important from policy point of view. Thus, any research paper that fails to explicitly address this bias (endogeneity problem) is most likely going to be rejected by a typical reputable journal. Most times, addressing this kind of bias correctly requires the use of very rigorous methods of analysis. Implementing these rigorous methods often requires advanced theoretical, statistical and quantitative know-how as well as advanced application of econometrics software like STATA, MATLAB, EVIEWS, PC-GIVE, and so on. We strongly recommend that researchers in economics, as well as other discipline, should get themselves acquainted with current methods of analysis in their area of research interest. Also, a mastery of at least one econometrics software is a must for a successful research endeavour.

An important point after empirical analysis is the presentation of results. No matter how rigorous, robust and sophisticated a model is, if the results from such a model are not clearly presented and discussed, the whole purpose of the research will be defeated and no editor will like to accept such a paper. While some researchers tend to ignore the existing literature in their conclusions, others neither provide economic interpretations of the estimation results nor relate these results to the previous literature. Where these pitfalls arise in an empirical paper, it becomes difficult to replicate the paper or compare it with previous studies. As such, we recommend that economists should always present and discuss their results clearly, relating such results to previous studies when necessary. This will guard against these shortcomings so that their research efforts can receive the recognition they deserve.[1,2,3,4,5,6]

(e) Style of Presentation and Quality of English Grammar

The common pitfalls that must be avoided include: poor writing, syntax and grammar; poor organization of work or use of format not approved by the journal; and non-adherence to page or word count limitations imposed by the journal. Even the native speakers of the English Language sometimes fall short of the desired writing standards. Economic researchers should therefore proofread their manuscripts properly to avoid these pitfalls. The style or format of presentation must be in line with the “Guidelines for Authors” that almost all reputable journals provide in their homepage. However, certain styles of presentation are generally encouraged. For example, we encourage the ‘80/20 rule’, which stipulates that 20% of the paper should be used for overall motivations and literature review while 80% should be used to present the original contributions of the paper embedded in the empirical methods and results. Besides, it is good practice to always summarize the findings of the study as the empirical discussions progress, and relate these findings not only to the objectives or hypothesis of the study but also to the previous literature. Most editors find such conventional styles interesting.[1,2,3,4]

(f) Quality and Style of Referencing

Some journals have their preferred referencing style (e.g. APA, Harvard, Chicago, and Vancouver). Where this is the case, researchers are advised to adhere to the style stated by the journal. In addition, editors are also interested in the quality of the literature cited. For example, a researcher writing for a journal indexed in Thomson Reuters but mainly makes reference or cites low quality papers outside Thomson Reuters’ indexation puts the chances of his/her paper being accepted for peer review in grave danger. Indeed, most editors are experts in their various areas. They are conversant with the overall trend in the literature so that any paper advertising incomplete, inaccurate and/or outdated literature will have a high chance of desk rejection.

(g) Country-specific Versus Multi-country Studies

Researchers in developing economies should always ask themselves two very important questions, namely: (i) who is going to be interested in the study? (ii) Are the results generalizable or *exportable*? In general, editors are mostly disposed to multi-country (and sometimes multidisciplinary) studies whose results or findings have the prospects of general application. This means that economic researchers should, as much as possible, explore every opportunity for deeper, more extensive and wider analysis capable of solving human problems across the globe. Herein lays the core essence of research.[6,7]

(h) Scope of Interest

Every reputable journal has its own scope of interest, that is, the subject matter or the kind of article it publishes. This is usually outlined in the journal's guidelines for authors and should be taken into the consideration by authors in deciding the journal most suitable for their papers.[2] For example, sending a research paper in public finance to a specialized journal in micro-development economics is most likely to get desk rejection, no matter how wonderful such paper might be.

(i) Ethical Issues

Some researchers sometimes submit their manuscript for review to more than one journal at the same time. This is wrong, and we passionately discourage it. Again, some researchers simply download articles from the internet and thereafter 'copy and paste' portions of such downloaded articles in their current work. In the end, their papers are heavily 'loaded' with substantial portions of plagiarized materials. We condemn this habit in the strongest terms possible. We also bring it to the notice of such researchers that almost all reputable journals now use online packages (e.g. Turnitin) to scan all research papers for evidences of plagiarism. We therefore advise economic researchers to transparently demonstrate originality and scientific rigour so that their write-ups and findings can make meaningful rather than incremental contributions to knowledge.[5,6]

3. Conclusion

For researchers, it is frustrating and sometimes discouraging to see their research efforts consistently rejected at the desk of reputable journals, without the opportunity of a formal peer-review. This even become more worrisome if publishing in such reputable journals is required for career advancement as it is currently the case at the University of Nigeria. This paper discussed reasons why the research outputs of developing country academics, particularly those in the field of economics gets desk rejection. Specifically, we identify nine (9) salient barriers to publishing in reputable journals. Most importantly, for every barrier identified, we also proffered possible solution. We are therefore strongly convinced that if the issues discussed in this paper are carefully taken into the consideration by economic researchers in developing economies, the nightmares presently associated with publishing in reputable journals will become a thing of the past.

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