How to write a good entrepreneurship and small business article

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Abstract
Whilst everyone wants to write a good entrepreneurship and small business article, it requires skill, dedication and perseverance. Not to mention tenacity and intelligence in obtaining the right words to convey the intended meaning. This article discusses what to do in order to make sure authors write in a appropriate way regarding publishing in the small business and entrepreneurship field. The goal of the article is to answer questions and queries authors have about what they should and should not do when submitting to prestigious journals. In order to achieve this goal some of the most well known and esteemed Associate Editors of the Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship discuss their tips and advice. This will be of immense benefit to researchers in the field and provide helpful comments about how they can structure and write better articles.

Résumé
Bien que tout le monde veuille écrire un bon article sur l'entrepreneuriat et les petites entreprises, cela demande des compétences, du dévouement et de la persévérance. Sans oublier la ténacité et l'intelligence pour obtenir les mots justes afin de transmettre le sens voulu. Cet article traite de ce qu'il faut faire pour s'assurer que les auteurs écrivent de manière appropriée en ce qui concerne la publication dans le champ de l'entrepreneuriat et des petites entreprises. L'objectif de cet article est de répondre aux questions et aux

interrogations des auteurs sur ce qu'ils doivent faire et ne doivent pas faire lorsqu'ils soumettent leurs travaux à des revues prestigieuses. Afin d'atteindre cet objectif, certains des rédacteurs associés les plus connus et les plus estimés du Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship nous font part de leurs astuces et conseils. Cela sera d'une grande utilité pour les chercheurs dans le domaine et fournira des commentaires utiles pour la façon dont ils peuvent structurer et écrire de meilleurs articles.

Keywords: Academia; empirical research; entrepreneurship; literature review; small business; writing

1. Introduction

Writing is part of academic life and it is increasing in importance due to the emphasis on publication outputs. Whilst there are many articles on entrepreneurship and small business, there are relatively few that discuss how an academic should go about writing a scientific article. It is assumed that this is known whereas in reality it is a craft that needs to be learnt and then practised over time. Thus, the art of writing needs to be taught, learnt and then disseminated to others in order to increase the way academics can contribute to society.

Most entrepreneurship and small business articles are quite long and require a lot of work. There is the need to consult with previous literature in terms of what has been said and why this is important. Referencing appropriate and relevant sources as part of the literature review is extremely important. This differentiates an academic article from an non-academic article. In addition, there is an increased emphasis on complex research methods that has led to more diversity regarding article authorship.

In recent years, in the entrepreneurship field that has been more emphasis on publishing articles with international teams of researchers. This is due to many universities requiring evidence of international partnerships in academic work. As a result, there has been more researchers finding complementary research partners who can add a specific skill such as a methodology to the article. This means that commonly one person in the team will focus on the qualitative or quantitative data collection, another on the data analysis and the remaining team members on the write up of the article. This is useful particularly for journals who focus on complicated methodologies and the increased competitiveness to publish complex studies. Moreover, the benefit for non-English speakers partnering with English speakers is in the ability to write a well thought out article with correct grammar and style. This often differentiates those who do get published in high quality journals from those that do not. At the same time, more universities have formal agreements with other universities that emphasise collaboration. This means there has been an increase in articles written by authors from different geographical campuses of the same university.

Due to the rise in scientometrics related to co-authorship it is much easier to see evidence of the trend in working with international teams. This is also evident with some funding bodies and scholarship holders requiring a diverse team of researchers. At the same time, due to publication and promotion requirements favouring authors who are demonstrate international partnerships, the rate of working with internal teams of researchers in entrepreneurship research has increased. This also related to university rankings often mentioning the number of articles written with international faculty.

Senior entrepreneurship researchers play an important role in facilitating international research teams. This is due to their knowledge of a specific topic and reputation in the field. As a consequence, it is important for junior researchers to partner with senior scholars in the development of new theories and methodologies. This can facilitate a win-win scenario for all involved when the junior scholar brings their training and expertise with new research thoughts and the senior scholars can help refine their ideas and utilise their professional networks to publish the findings. In the initial stages of an academic career it can be hard to know how to publish and what journals are the most suitable. Therefore, senior entrepreneurship researchers can help guide the way by suggesting possible journal sources. In addition, senior scholars can coach junior scholars on how to respond to revise decisions. Often the revise and resubmit decision is difficult for scholars without prior experience as they do not know the language or general meaning of suggestions. Senior scholars who have handled revise and resubmit submissions before can offer valuable advice in terms of how to write a response letter. As academia has its own language this kind of coaching by senior entrepreneurship scholars is essential particularly for junior scholars who might have come to academia late in life or not be use to writing in an academic style.

The following section will provide some guidelines and tips from the Associate Editors of the Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship. This will be helpful to those in the entrepreneurship and small business field in terms of learning about their craft and improving the overall quality of journal articles.

2. Associate editor comments

3. Étienne St-Jean, University of Quebec at Trois-Rivières, Canada

3.1. Address a relevant, insightful, and interesting research question

Fundamentally, any good article should be able to contribute to the knowledge related to the field of entrepreneurship and small business. What is considered "interesting" in the field? What are the important gaps in the knowledge? To answer these questions, you need to know the current debates in the research community, notably the one who is publishing in the journal you are sending your manuscript to. It means having a thorough assessment of the literature, especially the most recent and relevant publications. To justify the gap/research question, it is not enough to say that "very few people worked on this" previously; it is more about answering why we should care about this issue, and how you contribute to providing valuable knowledge that will solve the issue. Think about who will read, and cite your paper, and why these people will be interested in it while developing your arguments.

3.2. Provide sound methodological demonstration and analysis, and relevant pieces of evidence

One of the most important piece of the paper is the demonstration (or presentation) of the knowledge created. For the empirical papers (including systematic literature reviews), this is about presenting the evidence in ensuring that anyone interested in doing a replication could do it easily. For quantitative researches, this means for example providing a correlation matrix with the means and standard deviations of all of the relevant variables used in the analyses. Furthermore, any reader should be able to judge the quality of the findings in knowing the essential elements related to the sampling procedure (and the sample), the method used for data collection, the measures or codification used, the main assessment about the validity/reliability/trustworthiness, and the analytical techniques used to test the hypotheses or to answer the research questions. Keep in mind that what is actually accepted as a "good practice" may change over time, so reading recent publications in the journal your are sending to, as well as editorials and papers about the best practices in management/entrepreneurship research would provide important guidelines to prepare your manuscript. It is of central importance to be pedagogical with the analyses as not everyone within the readership would be familiar with your specific technique, but should be able to know the basic elements of the steps and the appropriate reference to retrieve further information about it.

3.3. Tell a clear and compelling story with straightforward arguments

If you address an important question (point #1), and you are able to provide a very convincing answer to it (point #2), then you now need to "sell" your product to the research community! Some of the submitted manuscripts are "gold nuggets" but still hidden in the rock. A good paper in entrepreneurship or related to SMEs, or more generally in management, should be able to tell a good story about what is your question, why it is important to address it, how sound is your methodology, and why other researchers and practitioners should care about your overall contribution. It is not just having "good parts", but writing in making sure the readers follow your ideas and comply with your arguments. One of the most important parts to build a good story is the introduction and the abstract/title. Most readers (and reviewers) will be hooked on your story at this place, so if they do not believe that you have a compelling story, then it will be less likely that it will be accepted, or cited. It is not developing all of the possible arguments, but only the most relevant. More often than not, the shorter the better. Furthermore, the writing style is also important. Develop your arguments with ideally one argument per paragraph, with clear and plain sentences. Find a colleague that will accept to read your manuscript to provide you with some clues about how it could be improved in terms of storytelling and writing clarity.

As a final note, many manuscripts send signals of poor quality with format issues. Firstly, with many international colleagues for whom English or French is not their first language, please use a professional copy-editor to make sure that the language is not an issue. In fact, this may be helpful for everyone. Secondly, every citation has to lead to a reference in the bibliography, and vice-versa. Many software like EndNote or BibTeX is very helpful to that end. Make sure that all of the references are well indicated with all of the required information. Thirdly, the tables and figures should be easy to understand at first sight and comply with the journal norms. Finally, write a compelling letter to the editors and explain to them why their journal is the perfect outlet for their work. Make them feel that you know the journal and explain to them why your manuscript has a lot of probability of being cited by their readership if published. As they will be the first readers of your work in the publication process, this is a good starting point to engage the conversation with the research community.

4. Malin Brannback, Åbo Akademi University, Finland; Alan Carsrud, A consultant to Entrepreneurs & Family Firms

A simple definition of a good article is that it is widely read and cited. It means the article is in some sense interesting (Frank and Landström, 2016). While this sounds simple it is not. Widely cited, tends to, in an academic context, point towards readers that are academic scholars both juniors and seniors, PhD candidates, chaired Professors and Emeriti, preferably from universities around the world spanning different countries and cultures. But, what do we mean with widely read? Who are the readers?

For more than two decades there has been an ongoing debate within academic business research between scientific rigor and (practical) relevance. Entrepreneurship research has also been included in this debate (Landström and Harirchi, 2019). Entrepreneurship scholars have taken this seriously and have actively attempted to resolve the issue. For example, during 2014–2019 the Entrepreneurship Division of Academy of Management organized a series of Personal Development Workshop with the theme "Pathways to Connect Research and Practice". A quick review of 9 top entrepreneurship journals reveals that 7 claim they are aimed at an audience, which includes a whole range of non-academic readers such as entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, investors, policy makers, as well as academic scholars. Another major audience are university students, who sometimes really struggle with reading and understanding journal articles (Brännback et al. 2021). However, in the debate about scholarly rigor and relevance the main argument is that practicing real entrepreneurs do not read scientific articles. Yet, relevance is about seeking to explain or describe an entrepreneurship phenomenon that is relevant to people beyond entrepreneurship scholars (Shepherd and Wiklund, 2020). This conundrum is indeed unfortunate as practicing entrepreneurs usually are the major data source of scientific articles on entrepreneurship and small business - they are a participating audience. Academic journals have several non-academic audiences, which approach the texts with potentially different skill sets but with an interest in extracting the insights of these texts. Unfortunately, research show that the academic writing style, shallow understanding of business realities, and abstruse language tend to shun off non-academic readers (Baer and Shaw, 2017; Dziubaniuk et al. 2021).

Obviously, the officially stated aim of an academic journal and guidelines to authors are normative to how an article should be written. These guidelines often require scientific and inclusive language and specific academic conventions in order to achieve precise expressions. This in turn leads to the use of sophisticated terminology and complex grammatical structures to underline academic legitimacy.

Most academic articles are written in English, but not by native English authors. Language and the command of English academic writing style becomes important. Fortunately, most journals offer language services. Some may think these are the details to be dealt with once the submission has been accepted. A serious piece of advice is to check the language before the submission. It does not hurt if the language does not have any flaws from the start. Flaws in language can in fact impact negatively how the core message of the article comes across.

While official journal guidelines inform authors on how to construct a technically sound article, editorial teams also write editorial guidelines on a regular basis. These editorials are recurring because editorial teams change, and publishers and editorial teams sometimes seek to change the foci of a journal as the key phenomena evolve. Such editorials become extended product declarations beyond submission guidelines. These editorials reveal the current views and perceptions of the field of research, what is considered interesting, urgent, relevant, and overlooked with respect to theory, method, and relevance for scholarship and practice. While each editorial team has its own specific perspectives, they find important and what constitutes a good article.

One fundamental characteristic of a good article is that is addresses a relevant phenomenon for practice that at the same time is linked to an ongoing debate in the entrepreneurship literature. However, it will be important to contextualize the phenomenon. Relevant entrepreneurship phenomenon will vary across countries and cultures. Therefore, it becomes critical to inform the reader, why this is interesting, important, and current. Contextualizing entrepreneurship implies offering a spatial, temporal, demographic or institutional frame of reference (Welter, 2011). Authors often leave out contextual descriptions in attempts to make studies generalizable or for lack of space. But, contextualization often explains and amplifies relevance. Depending on the kind of study contextualization becomes important in the introduction of the study (deductive study) or in the analysis and discussion sections (inductive study). Contextualization will contribute to explaining why is this important. Why is it interesting to a wider audience? For example, a study that was conducted in February 2008 is likely to generate very different results than if conducted in November 2008. Why? Because of the crash of Lehman Brothers on September, 15 in 2008 (deliberate date precision here to drive home the point). Contextualizing means giving the reader some basic information of where the study was conducted. Not all studies are conducted in the US. Results conducted in Hungary may be very different from other countries; what is different and why is this interesting? Africa is a huge continent and anything but homogeneous. Many African countries include many African cultures, what kind of empirical challenges does that lead to - everything cannot be reduced to control variables. Research results from small countries are interesting if analyzing a relevant entrepreneurship phenomenon. In fact, generalizability may not always be a necessary requirement, but authors need to explicate why results are important.

A good article connects with relevant prior studies. Unless the article is a systematic review of prior studies, authors do not seek to cite everybody but makes references to major relevant work by other scholars that support the study at hand. Is the study a response to prior research that point at a research gap? How do other studies contribute to advancing and supporting the study, the analysis, the discussion, and the conclusions?

Entrepreneurship scholars commonly seek additional lenses through which to theorize an entrepreneurship phenomenon, i.e., a study often rests on two literatures (Shepherd and Wiklund, 2020) or two theoretical lenses. There is the background theory which refers to the wider disciplinary grounding of the research. Within this the focal theory sets out exactly what is studied (Carsrud, Brännback, and Harrison, 2014). For example, identity theory is the background theory to advance the focal theory, i.e., some aspect of entrepreneurial identity. In most cases the researchers have identified a research gap in the focal theory connected to a specific context (spatial, institutional, temporal, social, cultural, or economical). Theoretical contributions become particularly interesting when they challenge common assumptions in prevailing literature (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). For example, growth entrepreneurship is not always good and high growth entrepreneurship is rarely profitable (Brännback et al. 2009; Brännback, Carsrud, and Kiviluoto, 2014). Theoretical contributions based on statistical data with significant, but weak explanative power is nothing more than a weak theoretical contribution and frankly quite uninteresting.

A good article will show how the research has an impact on practice and society (Wickert et al. 2021). However, in many cases this is weak or absent. In many cases the described impact seems like an afterthought, rather than taken into consideration when designing the research. Entrepreneurship as a field of research and as practice is particularly well suited for taking on endeavors that make a difference - for the entrepreneur, for business, and society. It lies at the very heart of entrepreneurship.

5. Senevi Kiridena, University of Wollongong, Australia

Within the broader context of scholarly inquiry, research efforts are expected to make a worthwhile contribution to knowledge, whether it is building and extending theory, advancing future research or informing policy and practice. It is through the collective effort of researchers, the body of knowledge pertaining to a particular topic or a discipline area is developed cumulatively. Journals serve as a mainstream medium through which this knowledge is co-created, validated and disseminated. Editors, reviewers and authors all have unique roles to play in ensuring that the knowledge created as above turns into a valued public good. As partners in this righteous endeavour they all have a collective responsibility to uphold the procedural fairness and integrity of the research efforts, as well.

It is customary that, in manuscripts submitted to peer-reviewed journals, authors must present a *convincing and cohesive narrative articulating the novelty and significance of the contribution made through a systematic inquiry (into a pertinent topic) addressing a substantive knowledge gap*.

To identify a substantive knowledge gap, one must first undertake a structured review of extant literature. As we are seeing a growing number of manuscripts submitted to an expanding assortment of journals, there is an increasingly important and rather evolving role to be played by the literature review of a manuscript. The key role of the literature review is to *establish the state-of-the-art on the topic concerned so that any gaps in the current knowledge and understanding could be identified* for subsequent treatment in the proposed study. It is important that authors recognise this requirement and accommodate it in their manuscripts. For instance, in searching and screening the literature to be included in the review, we should aim for a rather *balanced mix of seminal, well-cited and most recent publications*. In conducting the review, we should move from *summarising through integrating to synthesizing the current knowledge* so that the gaps emerge in the process. In presenting the findings of the review, we strive to *collate them in the form of common themes, conceptual schemas or a more comprehensive framework*, where possible. These are all considered good practices, which will not only demonstrate the methodological rigour of the research effort, but also lay a strong theoretical platform for anchoring the remainder of the study, including any empirical investigation.

Building knowledge through systematic inquiry involves following a credible, robust and tailored methodological approach in addressing the research questions. Editors, as well as reviewers, would like to see *a clear pathway linking the research questions and findings of a study*. This can be demonstrated in a manuscript by articulating the research journey with a clear and concise exposition of the protocols followed, in relation to the collection and analysis of data, as well as drawing inferences from the results. In this regard, it is important to *align the methodological approach with the current level of knowledge and understanding of the topic*, which was established through the literature review, as outlined earlier. Often qualitative or mix-methods approaches are preferred in exploratory or theory-building research, whereas quantitative approaches are more appropriate for confirmatory or theory-testing studies, although this dichotomy might not be adhered to as a universal rule. Another important aspect that is often overlooked by authors is *acknowledging the philosophical underpinnings of their inquiry*, which would help all parties involved to make sense of the data, findings and inferences presented. These are considered the main pillars of a sound methodological approach.

Contribution to knowledge is the ultimate goal of any scholarly endeavour. Therefore, the novelty and significance of contribution serve as the litmus test for determining the success of a research effort; hence a hallmark of a good manuscript, as well. Given the potential impact of research findings on small business policy and practice, there is a heightened significance of the contribution of empirical studies published in JSBE. However, such studies need to be theoretically well-grounded so that they are not rejected on that basis. Often, authors commit a substantial amount of time and effort to find a gap in current knowledge, design a study to address that gap through the collection and analysis of appropriate data and reporting the results, to then fall short of convincing the editors and reviewers of the potential value of the knowledge generated through their research. A powerful way of articulating the contribution to knowledge is *discussing the findings in the context of comparable studies drawn from the extant literature*, which many authors seem to overlook. Often they tend to include generic statements drawn from the literature or make blanket claims that the findings provide guidance for future research and current practice. Sometimes, reviewers wonder if the authors were so exhausted by the time of reporting the results of a study, that there is no time and energy left to spend on writing up a focused and impactful discussion. So, it is important to note that all the hard work gone into the research design, data collection and analysis and reporting of the results might be in vain if the significance and novelty of contribution are not well-articulated in the manuscript.

Overall, *anchoring the study on a strong theoretical platform, demonstrating the rigour of the research effort and highlighting the novelty and significance of the contribution to knowledge* are the three most significant aspects that the editors and reviewers alike will be looking for in a winning manuscript. ***Lack of a strong conceptual foundation, a rather mechanistic or ad-hoc methodological approach and a lackluster or tentative account of the contribution to knowledge*** are the most common and substantive reasons for rejecting a manuscript at any stage of the peer-review process.

The way journal editors and peer-reviewers evaluate manuscripts is not straightforward, either. There are multiple objectives involving potential trade-offs to deal with: promoting and achieving the aims of the journal; adhering to and supporting the principles and good practices of scholarly inquiry; and observing procedural justice and upholding research integrity, amongst the most prominent. For better or for worse, they also operate in an intense environment involving time pressure, resource constraints and highly competitive performance measurement regimes. After all, editors and reviewers are all human in that, despite the best intentions, they may suffer from biases, be susceptible to certain vulnerabilities and may not be able to consider each and every factor applicable to a situation when making decisions. This means, *the onus falls back on the authors to convince the editors and reviewers that their manuscript is worthy of consideration for publication*, notwithstanding that they might also be operating in a similar setting. Considering the array of factors that might play out in the editorial and peer-review decision-making context, most of which could be beyond the control of the authors, it is through strengthening the three key aspects (i.e. theoretical foundation, methodological rigour and contribution to knowledge) discussed above that the likelihood of an accept decision could be substantially enhanced. Understanding each other's perspective and working collaboratively is the most effective means of building knowledge through the collective effort of researchers.

6. Vanessa Ratten, La Trobe University, Australia

Writing is a skill that can be refined over time. Therefore, authors wanting to write a good small business and entrepreneurship article need to firstly acknowledge that it is a skill that takes time to develop. By doing so they can relieve the stress that can come with writing a good article that many often need to publish for professional reasons. Next, they need to set aside time over a number of weeks to format the article in terms of making it adheres to the journal guidelines. Often when Associate Editors first glance at an article they can tell if the article has been written specifically for the journal at hand or has been shopped around. Therefore, it is important to consult previous articles in the journal in terms of their format. This will enable a better fit for the journal you are submitting to.

As there are a number of journals in the entrepreneurship and small business field, authors need to make sure they understand the idiosyncrasies of each journal. Often journals will have Associate Editors or Editors affiliated with certain methodology practices with some preferring qualitative over quantitative or vice versa. Therefore, authors need to read previous issues of the journal to get a feeling of what kind of methodology is preferred. This will help them quicken the review process and obtain a better outcome. In general, North American and Canadian journals have had a better balance of quantitative and qualitative studies although some suggest there is a leaning to quantitative studies. In Europe there has been a tendency towards qualitative studies but this really depends on each journal and the preference of the Associate Editors and Editor.

Authors submitting to the Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship need to reference at least two published articles in their reference list in order to show that it has relevance to the journal. Often Associate Editors see no references to the journal in which they are members of and feel a sense of disappointment that this has not been done. Authors need to respect the journal they are submitting to and by referencing previous published articles they are doing this. It also helps with citations and impact factors which both authors and editors are very much interested in.

7. Ikpe Justice Akpan, Kent State University, Ohio, United States

7.1. Mismatch with journal's aims and scope

Some of the most common reasons for desk rejection of manuscripts by referred journals in the fields of entrepreneurship and small business and sources in other disciplines are two closely related factors: being out of scope and not aligning with the current interests or aims of the journal. However, while matching the general field of a source can satisfy the necessary condition for an article to be 'accepted for review,' it can still fall short of the current focus of a journal. In this case, the paper can still become a mismatch with the current interests or trends. Authors can overcome the frustration of desk rejection by studying the scope and the ongoing focus of specific journals of interest and identifying the current trending topics.

7.2. Considering the sources and themes' dynamics

The business world is not static, so are the topics and themes published by entrepreneurship and business sources. The reality in practice shows the dynamic nature of research topics. Today's relevant topic can become stale or dated if submitted in the future, especially on fastly evolving issues. This reality highlights the transformational nature of themes and readership's interests, the requirements closely related to the novelty expectations by almost any good publication outlet. It can be beneficial for authors to 'move with the flow' rather than study over-flogged topics, which can be challenging to demonstrate novelty. Further, potential authors need to identify the current interests and most recent directions of a journal by examining contemporary special issues, systematic reviews, bibliometric studies, and research directions as pointers to the current trending topics (Akpan, 2021).

To demonstrate the dynamic nature of sources and topics in this study, we highlight the research themes published by some dedicated journals that published most papers in the field in the past three years, from 2018 to 2021 (Figure 1). The results further demonstrate the multi-disciplinary nature of the sources. For example, while most of the sources publish articles on the core "entrepreneurship" and "small business" fields, these sources also publish the current themes as applicable to the core areas, such as COVID-19 (e.g., Ratten, 2020; Akpan, Soopramanien, and Kwak, 2021). Similarly, the "journal of small business and entrepreneurship" also shows dynamism by publishing applicable papers in diverse areas (Figure 1).

8. Conclusion

This article has summarised the main suggestions and advice of the Associate Editors of the Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship, which is one of the most prestigious journals in the field. We hope that the advice we have given will be helpful in future research and contribute to the general discussion of journal quality.

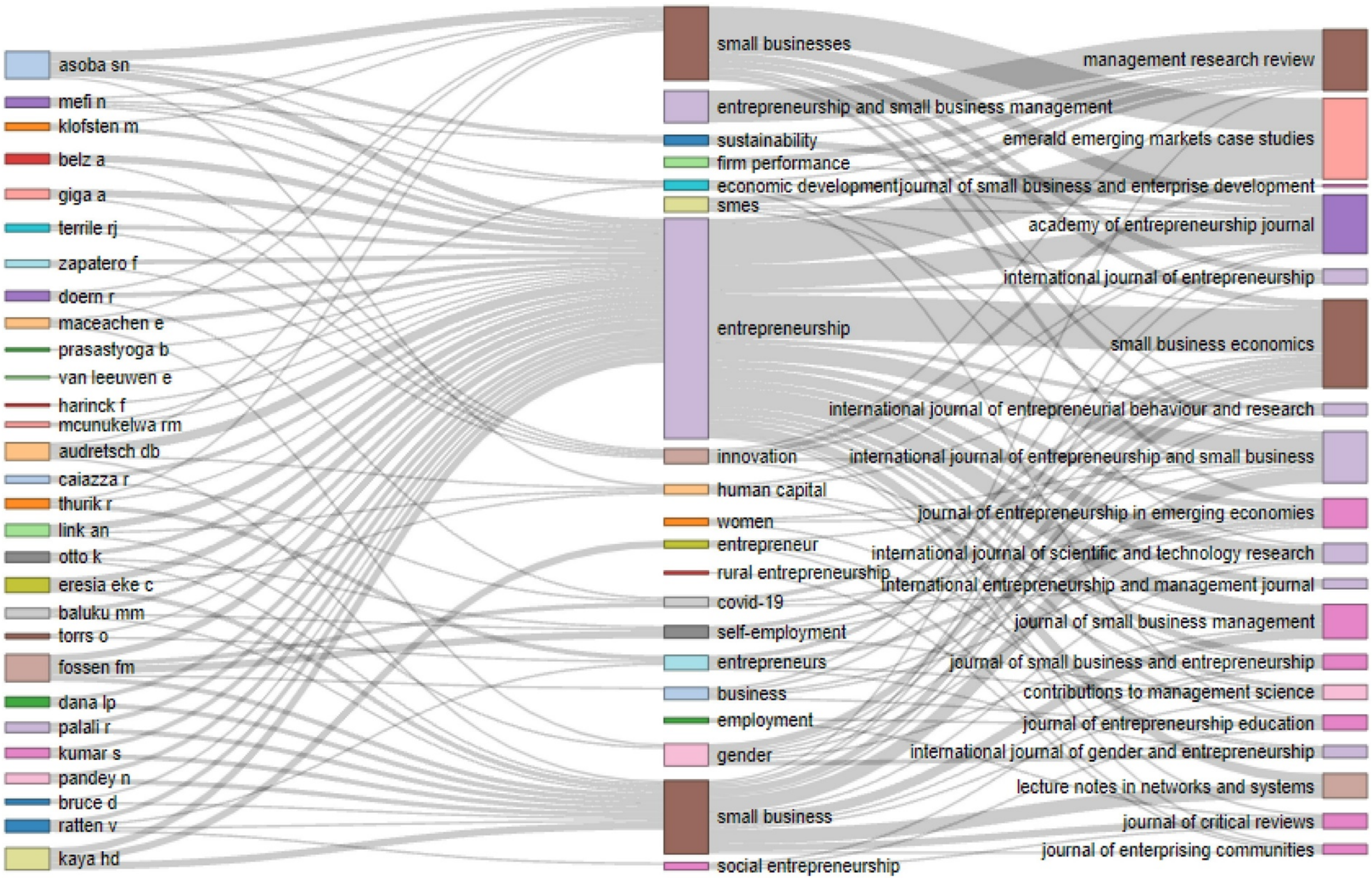

Figure 1. Recent topics and themes (based on authors' keywords) and the top 20 Entrepreneurship and Small Business Sources (2018–2021).

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