Dancing with the devil: the use and perceptions of academic journal ranking lists in the management field

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the use and perceptions of scholarly journal ranking lists in the management field based on stakeholders' lived experience.

Design/methodology/approach – The results are based on a survey of 463 active knowledge management and intellectual capital researchers.

Findings – Journal ranking lists have become an integral part of contemporary management academia: 33% and 37% of institutions and individual scholars employ journal ranking lists, respectively. The Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) Journal Quality List and the UK Academic Journal Guide (AJG) by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) are the most frequently used national lists, and their influence has spread far beyond the national borders. Some institutions and individuals create their own journal rankings.

Practical implications – Management researchers employ journal ranking lists under two conditions: mandatory and voluntary. The forced mode of use is necessary to comply with institutional pressure that restrains the choice of target outlets. At the same time, researchers willingly consult ranking lists to advance their personal career, maximize their research exposure, learn about the relative standing of unfamiliar journals, and direct their students. Scholars, academic administrators, and policymakers should realize that journal ranking lists may serve as a useful tool when used appropriately, in particular when individuals themselves decide how and for what purpose to employ them to inform their research practices.

Originality/value – The findings reveal a journal ranking lists paradox: management researchers are aware of the limitations of ranking lists and their deleterious impact on scientific progress; however, they generally find journal ranking lists to be useful and employ them.

Keywords Journal ranking, List, Scholarly publishing, Survey, Scholarly communication, Active scholars, Management

Paper type Article

Introduction and theoretical background

> Much has been written about the [journal ranking] lists: how the lists are constructed, how the lists are compared, how accurate, how authoritative, how current, etc. What is less prevalent in the discussions is how we actually use these lists. (Baskerville, 2008, p. 156)

In 1665, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, the world's oldest peer-reviewed English-language journal, published its inaugural issue with the objective to improve philosophical matters, advance learning, document discoveries, and disseminate scientific ideas on a global scale (Oldenburg, 1665; da Costa Andrade, 1965). Fast-forward three and a half centuries, and the contemporary scientific community still relies on the same knowledge endorsement, preservation, and communication model.

Scholarly journals have played several critical functions in the advancement of science (Merton and Sztompka, 1996; Greco *et al.*, 2006; Davis, 2014; Pope and Marincola, 2017). First

and foremost, they represent the best channel for effective and efficient knowledge dissemination. Journal articles appear faster than books, and they generally undergo a more rigorous review process than conference papers and book chapters. Second, the peer-reviewed process endorses a certain level of scientific quality, impact, and rigor of published works. Manuscripts that are conceptually incomplete or methodologically deficient are supposed to be identified and either improved or excluded from the body of knowledge. Third, scholarly journals directly and indirectly contribute to practice. Industry practitioners and public policymakers may directly access academic research, especially in the form of systematic reviews and meta-analyses (i.e. the direct knowledge dissemination channel). Journals also accumulate important content that later becomes accessible to non-academic audiences presented in the form of books, magazines, best practices, etc. (i.e. the indirect knowledge dissemination channel). Fourth, journals allow authors to claim credit for their intellectual contributions and chronologize publications to determine the precedence of ideas. Fifth, the content of journals is easy to distribute to prospective readers, especially with the advent of the Internet. Sixth, journal gatekeepers such as editors and reviewers control the progress and direction of science by determining which content is worth publishing. Seventh, a collection of reputable scientific journals signifies the very existence, legitimacy, and identity of an academic discipline. Last, journals create a perpetual archival record that remains unchanged notwithstanding subsequent research findings. As a result, researchers have always tried to understand the various facets of their peer-reviewed publication venues (Wakeling *et al.*, 2019).

Investigations of peer-reviewed journals have progressed in four general directions. The purpose of the *first line of research* is to develop ranking lists of peer-reviewed journals. In 1927, Gross and Gross, researchers at the Department of Chemistry at Pomona College, California, published the first citation-based ranking list of 28 scientific publication forums (Gross and Gross, 1927). After this, similar ranking lists appeared in other disciplines—for example, in engineering (McNeely and Crosno, 1930), geology (Gross and Woodford, 1931), physics (Hooker, 1935), and biochemistry (Henkle, 1938). In these studies, the authors clearly emphasized the notion of "ranking" in order to identify the discipline's "leading," "most important," "indispensable," and "significant" journals. Contemporary scholars, institutions, and national bodies have invented, validated, and applied a variety of journal ranking techniques to distinguish among the outlets based on a pre-established set of criteria. Examples of ranking methods include surveys of active field researchers (Lowry *et al.*, 2007), the use of various bibliometric indicators (e.g. number of citations, the *h*-index, Journal Impact Factor) (Stegmann, 1999), machine learning techniques (Tüselmann *et al.*, 2015), analysis of authors' outlet selection preferences (Chen *et al.*, 2017) and their affiliations (Cronin and Meho, 2008), and co-authorship networks (Yu *et al.*, 2017).

The goal of the *second research direction* is to critically evaluate the journal ranking techniques by identifying their strengths and weaknesses. As a result, researchers have developed a sound understanding of various ranking methods and proposed numerous improvements. For instance, experts who rate academic journals assign higher scores to the outlets that match their personal research interests and concerns (Peters *et al.*, 2014; Serenko and Bontis, 2018). To minimize this familiarity effect, journal ranking developers are advised to select raters from a diverse pool of prospective experts. Journal lists should be randomized among raters to avoid order-effect bias because experts tend to rate journals appearing at the beginning of the list higher than those at the end (Serenko and Bontis, 2013). Ranking list developers should also avoid the "path dependency" effect by conducting a comprehensive search and including new and recently launched journals (Truex *et al.*, 2009). Intra-institutional politics and the opinion of leading scholars further undermine the validity of expert ratings (Rogers *et al.*, 2007; Adler and Harzing, 2009). Citation-based journal rankings are also far from perfect. For instance, self-citations, mis-citations, plagiarized citations, forced citations, and

negative citations confound the findings (e.g. see Monastersky, 2005; Serenko *et al.*, 2021). All citation databases contain mistakes (Elkins *et al.*, 2010), and niche journals are disadvantaged because they have a smaller readership and are cited less often than journals appealing to wider audiences (Rahal and Zainuba, 2019). The arbitrary choice of ranking indicators may also lead to different conclusions. Thus, due to the limitations of all available ranking methods, researchers often advocate for the use of multiple approaches simultaneously and continue to develop novel, innovative ranking techniques.

The *third research area* focuses on the positive and negative consequences of journal ranking lists by analyzing the issue from the perspective of various stakeholders (Rafols *et al.*, 2012; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Hussain, 2015; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). On a positive note, journal lists facilitate the development of clear standards to objectively assess one's academic achievement which reduces the uncertainty associated with promotion, tenure, and hiring decisions (Bartunek, 2020). Journal lists signify the very existence of a particular academic discipline and convey its legitimacy to outside scholars (Aguinis *et al.*, 2020; Serenko, 2021). They help practitioners, doctoral students, and scholars from different disciplines identify sets of journals containing articles whose quality has been endorsed by an independent panel of experts which reduces search costs (Rasheed and Priem, 2020). Libraries may use ranking lists to justify the allocation of scarce resources in their subscription decisions.

At the same time, the literature is rife with the cons of journal rankings lists. Recently, *Academy of Management Perspectives* (Aguinis *et al.*, 2020) and *Communications of the Association for Information Systems* (Cuellar *et al.*, 2019; Serenko, 2019) devoted entire issues to this sensitive topic. Scientists engage in questionable research practices to secure a spot in an "A journal," and journal editors and publishers "game rank" metrics (Siler and Larivière, 2022). Because "A journals" favor the use of quantitative methods applied to large datasets and frown upon qualitative works (Thelwall *et al.*, 2023), scholars who wish to increase their chances of placing their works in such outlets have to give up their academic freedom of method selection (Vogel *et al.*, 2017). Doctoral students and tenure-track faculty experience tremendous stress because of the expectation to secure a certain number of "A journal hits" as part of graduation and promotion (Rasheed and Priem, 2020). As a result of borderline realistic expectations, they experience anxiety that affects various aspects of their professional and personal lives (Coulthard and Keller, 2016). Researchers draw a line between true altruistic scholarship to advance the body of knowledge and merely scoring a hit in a particular publication venue and adjust publication behavior to maximize their productivity scores (Sasvári *et al.*, 2019; Śpiewanowski and Talavera, 2021). As a result, they often ignore the needs of practitioners and focus on topics favored by "A journals" editorial and review teams (Harley, 2019). Academics employed at top-ranked institutions are ready to sacrifice the future scholarly impact of their publications for the sake of placing their papers in highly-rated journals (Salandra *et al.*, 2022). By over-relying on journal ranking lists developed by third parties, researchers gradually lose their ability to critically evaluate academic research (Picard *et al.*, 2019).

The *fourth line of inquiry* pertains to the investigation of the use and perceptions of journal ranking lists. While the research directions discussed above have received substantial coverage in the academic literature, empirical evidence on the actual use and perceptions of ranking lists has been sparse (Aguinis *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, it has been reported that faculty members' journal ranking lists perceptions differ based on their individual, institutional, and national differences. Evidence suggests that journal perceptions depend on researchers' previous interactions with the journal (Bryce *et al.*, 2020). Faculty members from different departments diverge in their journal ranking lists perceptions. For example, finance and economics faculty view ranking lists less negatively than their colleagues from organizational studies (Brooks *et al.*, 2023). Researchers perceive journal rankings more

positively if they personally benefit from them (Walker *et al.*, 2019b). The use of journal ranking lists differs among faculties: 68% of business and management faculties use them (Bales *et al.*, 2019) while only 13% of accounting faculties do so, mostly for promotion, tenure, merit raise, summer support, course release, and award decisions (Reinstein and Calderon, 2006). Journal ranking lists are more likely to be adopted by large academic departments (van Fleet *et al.*, 2000) and individual scholars who exhibit lower academic influence (Walker *et al.*, 2019a). There are even intra-departmental differences in journal list perceptions (Adams and Johnson, 2008). National differences further affect journal perceptions: for example, Chinese management scholars underrate top-level journals and overrate mid-level ones, in contrast to their Western counterparts (Li *et al.*, 2019). Practitioners and academics also differ in their journal ranking lists perceptions (Schlögl and Stock, 2008).

While the literature discussed above is valuable and encouraging, more empirical studies that directly survey journal ranking list users are needed (Baskerville, 2008; Aguinis *et al.*, 2020). Obtaining more empirical evidence on the use and perceptions of journal ranking lists is important because these have created an impact of Brobdingnagian proportions that affects multiple stakeholders at the individual, institutional, and national levels. For instance, public research agencies often employ journal ranking lists in their resource allocation decisions. However, if researchers hold very negative attitude towards ranking lists, they may also mistrust corresponding government decisions. A better understanding of this issue may help journal ranking developers and users propose various strategies to minimize their harmful effects and promote positive ones. In addition, despite the criticism of journal ranking development methods and their applications, it seems that rankings lists are going to stay and individuals, their institutions, and national research assessment agencies will continue to include journal rankings in their decision-making processes, at least in the foreseeable future. Thus, it behooves us to further understand this vital issue.

Science is represented by various disciplines, and each academic domain has its own idiosyncratic research traditions, publication forums for scientific communication, and journal ranking lists. While the discussion of journal rankings above generally pertains to the issues experienced by all fields, it is impossible to empirically investigate all scientific domains in a single study. This investigation, therefore, limits its empirical inquiry to the management discipline, one of the most recent scientific domains, which is concerned with the various practices and principles of basic administration.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The next (second) section describes this study's methods, followed by the third section which presents the results. The fourth section discusses the findings, proposes recommendations, and concludes the paper.

Methods

Data collection was done as part of a larger study (Serenko and Bontis, 2022). In this study, the authors invited 2,860 active researchers who had published at least one article in the set of 28 peer-reviewed knowledge management and intellectual capital (KM/IC) journals to complete an online survey. KM/IC is an interdisciplinary field (Zavaraqi, 2016) that attracts scholars who are mostly housed within management faculties—including strategy, information systems, accounting, finance, human resources, organizational behavior, etc.—and whose research interests pertain to various management topics (Serenko, 2021). Thus, selecting authors from KM/IC journals is expected to produce a sample generalizable to the management discipline. One hundred and ten unique respondents' names were randomly selected from the latest issues of each of these journals, except five recently launched outlets that had fewer than 110 authors in total. No discrimination criteria (e.g. gender, seniority level, authorship order) were applied. It was assumed that those who recently contributed to the academic body of knowledge represent an important group of stakeholders because they are

actively engaged in management scholarly research and are current or prospective users of journal ranking lists in the management domain. Questions pertained to two main themes: (1) the institutional and personal use of journal ranking lists and (2) the respondents' perceptions of accuracy, usefulness and quality of journal ranking lists (see Appendix). The prospective respondents were invited over email, followed by a reminder. Two hundred and two invitations bounced back, and 463 useable responses were obtained (18% response rate).

All responses were subjected to content analysis by two independent coders (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Both coders had strong expertise in qualitative data analysis techniques and in the journal ranking research domain. Categories were formed and refined as data analysis progressed. All coding discrepancies were discussed and reconciled during in-person meetings.

The respondents resided in 71 countries. Thirty-four percent of them were women. In terms of their current occupation, 87% were academics; 10% practitioners; 1% students; and 2% retired. Almost all had a doctoral or a master's degree. On average, they had 8 and 15 years of industry and academic work experience, respectively. The following section describes the findings in detail.

Results

Ranking lists and systems

33% of researchers indicated that their home institutions employ formal journal ranking lists, and 37% reported that they personally use them. Overall, 39 unique ranking lists and ranking approaches employed by both institutions and individuals were identified. They pertain to five general categories: (1) national rankings and national lists, (2) indices and bibliometric journal listing systems, (3) journal ranking tools, (4) global journal ranking lists, and (5) proprietary/personal ranking lists. Figures 1 and 2 present the breakdown of these categories for institutional and personal use, respectively.

National journal rankings and national lists represent the most frequently employed source for both institutions and individuals. They are created by formal national bodies or associations (usually, upon the request of the government) to be used specifically within one country or region. Almost all of them classify journals into several groups based on select criteria, including expert opinion and citation indices. For example, The Norwegian Register
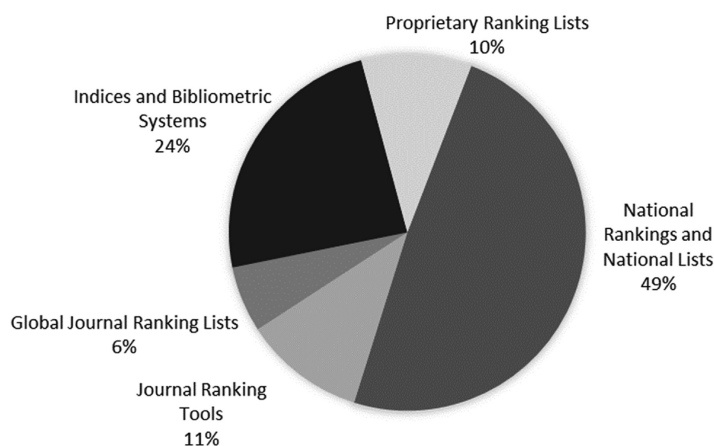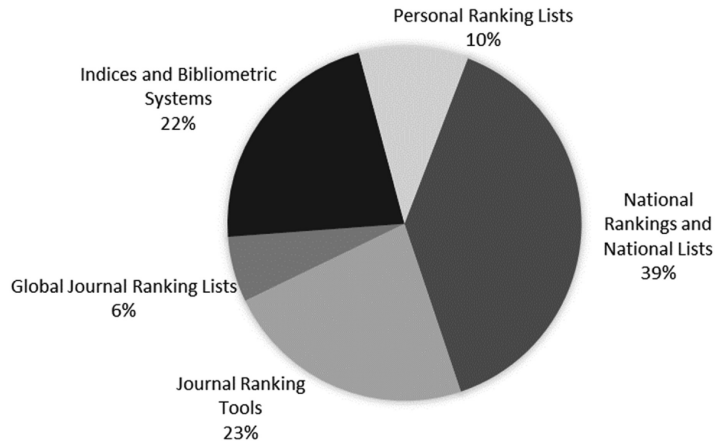

Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 2.
Individual-use journal
ranking lists

Source(s): Authors' own work

for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers calculates "Publication Points" for each journal and assigns it a "Scientific Level," which represents some sort of ranking. National lists—for instance, the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Journal List—are based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria. These are used less often. The most popular national ranking lists are the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) Journal Quality List and the UK Academic Journal Guide (AJG) by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) (Table 1). It was found that ABDC was very frequently used outside Australia, mostly in Asia, New Zealand, Ghana, Canada, the United States, and Russia. Surprisingly, more than half of Australian institutions and researchers did not use ABDC and relied on other ranking systems. AJG was also very popular outside the UK, mostly in European countries and the United States. At the same time, all UK-based institutions and scholars employed AJG. By contrast, the other national journal ranking lists—for example, ANVUR (Italy), DHET (South Africa), and the Publication Forum (Finland)—were used predominantly in their home countries. These lists were frequently used in combination with other rankings.

Indices and bibliometric journal listing systems include journals based on select criteria, but they do not rank them. As such, they represent a listing or an inclusion/exclusion tool (i.e. a binary system: listed/not listed). These are popular among both institutions and individuals (see Table 2) because some institutions and researchers value the fact that a target journal is simply listed in a particular index or a bibliometric database. Of them, the most popular are Scopus (Elsevier) and Web of Science (Clarivate Analytics). Further analysis showed that these indices and bibliometric systems were mostly employed by institutions and individuals from developing countries. For example, no UK-based institutions or individuals relied on them. It was also found that South Africa (which is classified as a developing country) relied heavily on both Scopus and Web of Science.

Table 3 summarizes the global tools that institutions and individuals employed to determine journal rankings. These tools include journals from multiple countries and various subject areas. They differ from indices and bibliometric journal listing systems because each journal is assigned a periodically updated score that may be used to create some sort of ranking while the latter represent a binary listed/not listed system. The most popular are SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) and Clarivate's Journal Citation Reports (JCR) which calculates the Journal Impact Factor (JIF). SJR represents a publicly accessible portal that uses the

Title	Institutional use (%)	Personal use (%)
The Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) Journal Quality List	17.47	16.79
The UK Academic Journal Guide (AJG) by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS)	10.24	11.83
The Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR) Rating of Scientific Journals	4.22	2.67
The South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) Accredited Journals List	3.61	1.15
The Finnish Publication Forum	2.41	1.15
The Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers	1.81	0.76
The Computing Research and Education Association of Australasia (CORE) Journal Ranking List	1.20	1.15
Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Journal List	1.20	0.76
Qualis List of Indexed Journals of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), Brazil	1.20	0.76
The Journal Ranking List of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MNiSW), Poland	1.20	0.38
The Bibliometric Research Indicator (BFI) of the Ministry of Higher Education and Science, Denmark	1.20	0.00
The University Grants Commission, Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics (UGC-CARE) Journal List, India	1.20	0.00
The Journal Ranking List of the German Academic Association of Business Research (VHB)	0.60	0.38
The Journal List of the Turkish Academic Network and Information Center (ULAKBIM)	0.60	0.00
The Slovenian National List of Journals	0.60	0.00
The National Romanian Journal Ranking System	0.00	0.38
The Journal Ranking of the Italian Association of Accounting and Business Administration (SIDREA)	0.00	1.15
Source(s): Authors' own work		

Table 1.
National rankings and lists

Title	Institutional use (%)	Personal use (%)
Scopus (Elsevier)	10.24	11.45
Web of Science (Clarivate)	6.02	6.49
International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), France	3.01	1.15
Cabell	1.20	0.76
Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), South Africa	1.20	0.00
EBSCO Information Services	0.60	0.00
Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)	0.60	0.00
JSTOR Digital Library	0.60	0.00
Project Muse	0.60	0.00
European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH) PLUS	0.00	0.38
Russian Science Citation Index (RSCI) (Clarivate)	0.00	0.38
French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS)	0.00	1.15
Source(s): Authors' own work		

Table 2.
Indices and bibliometric journal listing systems

Scopus database (owned by Elsevier) to measure several indicators reflecting the scholarly influence of academic journals and to create journal lists in 27 (as of 2023) major thematic areas. Clarivate's JIF, which is still occasionally referred to as ISI JIF (ISI—the Institute for

Scientific Information, which became part of Thomson Reuters in 1992 but was re-established by Clarivate in 2018), is also popular, particularly for personal use.

Global journal lists are constructed by independent bodies or researchers and are designed to be applied internationally. Some of these lists are based solely on the inclusion/exclusion criteria (i.e. a mere inclusion in the list certifies journal quality—for example, the Information Systems Senior Scholars' Basket of Eleven Journals), and other lists rank the included outlets, for instance, the ranking list of Knowledge Management and Intellectual Capital journals by Serenko and Bontis. Of these, the Financial Times (FT) 50 Journal List was the most popular (see Table 4). It was found that the FT list and the ShanghaiRanking Academic Excellence Survey were used only in developed countries, such as the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, and Slovenia. In addition to the lists, tools, and indices above, 10% of institutions and individuals developed their own proprietary and personal journal ranking lists.

Several differences were observed between the ranking lists for institutional and personal use. First, while 49% of individual researchers employed multiple ranking lists, only 6% of institutions did so. Second, more institutions than individuals relied on national ranking lists (48% vs. 39%, respectively). Third, journal ranking tools were more popular among individuals. Fourth, for their personal purposes, a vast majority of individuals ignored their institutional ranking lists and preferred other sources: only 28% of the institutional and personal ranking lists perfectly overlapped, 29% of respondents employed completely different ranking lists, and 43% made some changes by adding or removing ranking lists (see Figure 3).
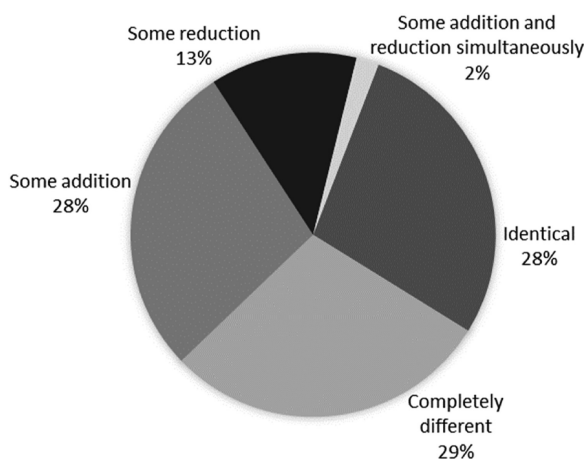
Ranking lists purposes
Respondents identified twelve distinct purposes for which they employ journal ranking lists, which pertain to four general categories: career maintenance and advancement, routine research activities, benchmarking, and teaching (Figure 4).

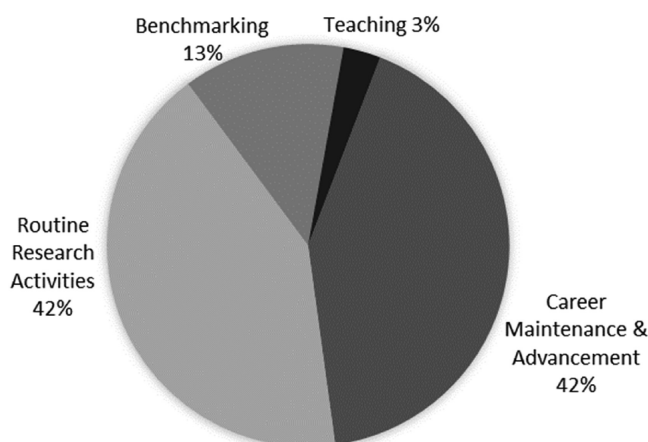| Title	Institutional use (%)	Personal use (%)
SCImago Journal Rank (SJR)	7.23	12.95
Journal Citation Reports (JCR) (Clarivate)	3.61	8.79
The JournalsRanking (JRank) Digital Portal of iMaQ Technologies	0.00	0.38
The h-5 Index	0.00	0.38
Source(s): Authors' own work		

Table 3.
Global journal ranking tools

Title	Institutional use (%)	Personal use (%)
Financial Times (FT) 50 Journal List	4.82	3.05
Shanghai Ranking Academic Excellence Survey	1.20	0.00
Ranking List of Knowledge Management and Intellectual Capital Journals by Serenko and Bontis	0.00	1.53
University of Texas at Dallas, Jindal School of Management Journal List	0.00	0.38
Information Systems Senior Scholars' Basket of Eleven Journals	0.00	1.15
Source(s): Authors' own work		

Table 4.
Global journal lists

Source(s): Authors' own work

Source(s): Authors' own work

The first category of reasons pertains to *career maintenance and advancement.* The respondents' research performance evaluation—including promotion, merit pay, awards, stipends, and bonuses—was assessed against a particular journal list. For instance, one participant noted that he uses the Publication Forum (Finland) and the FT 50 List to "collect publication points that affect my salary and performance feedback" (P262), and another indicated that it is the "national competition to advance an academic career" (P341) that forces her to use the ANVUR Rating of Scientific Journals. Researchers employ journal rankings to gain prestige, recognition, and reputation within their scientific community because publishing in highly ranked journals maximizes the exposure and impact of their works. As one participant indicated, placing articles in Web of Science-indexed journals facilitates "achieving professional acknowledgement, increasing personal reputation in the field, [and] ensuring visibility of the research" (P417). Another confirmed that selecting highly ranked

AJG outlets helps to "get my articles read by other academics [to] keep/improve my academic reputation" (P292). Publishing in a specific set of journals increases scholars' chances of attracting research funding from their schools and national bodies. For instance, an academic from South Africa indicated that her research "only gets fundings if publications appear in one of these lists—larger proportional funding in ISI, followed by IBSS then South Africa DHET" (P415).

Academics have to use ranking lists to comply with their home institutions' requirements for selecting publication outlets, which is somewhat considered a necessity, burden, and nuisance rather than an incentive. As one doctoral student indicated, "the graduation criterion in our institute for a Ph.D. is an A category publication as per the ABDC list" (P270). In a similar vein, a faculty member reiterated, "our performance management require[s] us to submit to high-ranking journals and to at least submit 1 research paper annually to one of the top 10 journals (based on ranking) in your research field" (P408). These requirements are based on the national frameworks that assess universities' intellectual contribution based on select journal lists. For example, one participant emphasized the "management pressure— emanating from [the] REF [research excellence] framework that determines research funding to UK Universities—to publish in the higher CABS ranking journals" (P309). Another added that "my university evaluates our research yearly and JCR and Scimago are the rankings used to do it. [The] National Offices which evaluate our individual research and academic work use these two rankings" (P352). Others mentioned the "AACSB compliance" (P274), "KPI requirements" (P339), and "ministry requirements [and] accreditation" (P395). Thus, scholars had to conform to the requirement to rely on ranking lists solely for career-related purposes.

The second category of reasons refers to *engaging in and maintaining routine research activities*. It differs from the career maintenance and advancement category above because it was up to the researchers to decide which ranking to employ: they were not forced into the use of a particular ranking by their institution or the third party. As theoretically expected, the major purpose of journal ranking lists was to select a target outlet for paper submission and potential publication. The overall objective was to identify the highest ranked outlet that is suitable for a specific manuscript. For example, one participant stated that he uses AJG "to choose the best journal for a particular publication" (P294), and another added that Scopus helps him "to know which journals . . . would be better for publication of a ready manuscript" (P392). An implicit assumption is that papers in highly ranked venues are read more frequently and receive more citations. For instance, a respondent who relies on the University of Texas at Dallas Journal List and the Information Systems Senior Scholars' Basket of Journals which include 24 and 11 highly prestigious journals, respectively, stated that these lists help him "assess the number of people who will read the journal so that I can gauge the exposure my article will have if it gets accepted" and "determine the difficulty of getting accepted by the journal" (P263). Respondents also employ journal ranking lists to "search for modern research in the scientific field of knowledge" that interests them (P378) because they consider articles published in highly ranked journals "quality . . . papers to read and build on" (P324). Journal ranking lists are particularly useful "in conducting [a] systematic literature review" (P257). In addition, scholars consider the bibliography sections of papers in highly ranked journals to be of high quality and they use these references for their own research. As one respondent indicated, major journals are a place "where to get good reading and good citations" (P311).

The third group of reasons is related to benchmarking purposes. Researchers use journal lists to identify a journal's standing relative to the other outlets. As two scholars simply put it, "I use them to know the position of the journal in those rankings" (P412) and "I use the lists to find out about journals that I am not very familiar with" (P313). Prospective reviewers consulted journal lists "to decide whether or not to review articles for journals when invited to

do so" (P328). Referees employed journal lists to evaluate the quality of someone else's publications, for example, to "evaluate applicants for positions or promotions" (P260), for the "assessment of my colleagues' academic performance" (P269), and when "writing references for, and reviewing the work of, others" (P331).

The fourth reason pertains to teaching when professors consulted journal lists to identify "journals to suggest to students for publishing their research" (P421), for "recommending literature for students" (P399), and for "guiding doctoral students' literature reviews" (P363).

Ranking lists accuracy
22% of respondents believed that journal ranking lists are accurate, 46% reported that they are not, and 32% held an ambiguous opinion. Those who reported that the ranking position of a journal correctly reflects its overall quality and/or contribution generally assumed that "in general, the quality and contribution of the journals are reflected in the ranking lists" (P343). By sharp contrast, respondents who did not believe in the validity of journal ranking lists adamantly stated that "journal ranking lists do not effectively reflect the overall journal's quality" (P293). Their negative sentiment was based on four factors. First, journal ranking lists are subject to politics and unethical practices. For instance, some indicated that "most of the ranking lists are the result of a mere political process" (P386), "are influenced by those that publish them" (P116), and are "subject to favouritism" (P348) where "old boy networks play a role" (P281). As a result, "higher ranking journals often reflect the politics of the discipline . . . rather than the quality of the academic work in the discipline" (P309). Due to a growing for-profit orientation of many publishers, "journals have become a business[,] and ranking lists sometimes can reflect political and economic issues instead of pure quality and contribution" (P329). As one respondent concluded, "I don't use journal ranking lists because of all of the abuses that have led to rankings being irrelevant" (P136).

Second, several methodological flaws undermine the accuracy of journal ranking lists. The problem is that lists often exhibit the "path dependency" effect when a set of journals remains the same over time while recently launched outlets are excluded. This not only disadvantages new journals but also propagates previous ranking mistakes. As one respondent shared, "the CABS list is extremely anchored to the ratings from its very ad hoc first incarnation. I know of two journals that were wrongly ranked then because of transcription errors in one of the university lists they were compiled from. Those journals are still in the same categories now" (P313). Citation-based measures have inherent flaws— "several issues such as self-citation and others have been raised against journal rankings" (P409) and the source from which citation data is selected may have a dramatic effect on the outcome of the ranking. As one scholar observed, the "QUALIS system is not as good as it should be as they rank journals by the number of citations from Brazilian researchers, kind of one-sided" (P329). In addition, "some papers with 6, 7 authors ha[ve] more probability to be cited by each other increasing the factor without being necessarily good" (P353). As a result, the ranking lists are "often too biased towards particular research methodologies" (P416). Personal biases of those who compile ranking lists often confound the outcome "which demonstrates the subjectivity of these lists" (P197).

Third, ranking lists tend to be inconsistent with one another. As several respondents shared, "there are too many list[s] which are not in accordance" (P300), "I have noticed/ experienced irregularities [between the ranking lists]" (P332), and "different rankings use different criteria" which leads to contradictory outcomes (P167). For example, "a particular journal is ranked higher in Impact factor, but the same [journal] is lying C in ABDC" (P384). Fourth, ranking lists are subject to obsolescence. The problem is that "each ranking is anchored in one point in time, even though publication and citation are dynamic . . . [and] the

effort needed to keep them up to date has left several national and other non-commercial rankings far too old to be useful" (P325). Thus, to be valid, journal ranking lists "should be updated periodically" (P391) which seems to be an issue with some of them.

Respondents who were ambiguous about the accuracy of ranking lists also reported the issues that were identified by those who held a negative view, but they were somewhat moderate in their interpretation of problems underlying journal rankings. In other words, they tended to see the glass as half-full rather than half-empty. For instance, one scholar reported, "even if they do not reflect the quality and contribution accurately, they give some insight and can help in choosing the proper journal for research results dissemination" (P305). Moreover, they tried to focus on the benefits that they may obtain by applying (somewhat imperfect) journal ranking lists: "even though they may lack some accuracy, they offer important guidance" (P402).

Ranking lists usefulness

71% of respondents found journal ranking lists to be useful, 11% believed that these were harmful, and 18% expressed ambiguity. Researchers found journal ranking lists to be useful for the same reasons as they employed them in their work. A consensus was that journal ranking lists "provide good reference ground for scholars, researchers and the like, to look for relevant and important sources of respective fields and disciplines" (P69). They help to "identify journals which are . . . credible" (P147) by endorsing the quality of their articles, which "gives you a fair idea about the strength and weakness and contributions of a journal from the academic worldview" (P374). In particular, "in case somebody is not familiar with a journal, the ranking list can serve as an indicator for quality issues" (P164), and "for someone seeking to break through or into the field[,] this data may be useful" (P411).

At the same time, the opinion of a small group of researchers was extremely negative. In their blistering comments, they referred to journal ranking lists as "useless" (P302), "horrible" (P289), "a joke, a ridiculous idea" (P100), "nonsense" (P262), "counter-productive" (P313), and "constraining" (P383) because they "contribute to fake and dishonest research" (P222), "distort research output" (P289), and are "doing damage to universities, researchers and research" (P281). Two factors contributed to the respondents' highly negative view: (1) the use of journal rankings as a proxy for article quality and (2) the shift in researchers' motivation from true scientific contribution to merely scoring a hit in select publication venues.

First, some respondents criticized a misconception that highly ranked journals publish only high-quality articles while their middle- and lower-level counterparts do not. As one respondent stated, "you may find excellent articles in so-called 'mediocre' journals and complete dreck in highly ranked journals" (P46). Second, the proliferation of journal ranking lists has shifted the motivation of researchers from an altruistic desire to extend the body of knowledge to a self-centric objective to secure a publication in a particular outlet for the sake of extrinsic rewards. As a result, "too much effort is wasted on gaming the system instead of writing and publishing research" (P313). As one respondent summarized, journal ranking lists are "not useful—in combination with the point system in the Nordic countries[,] it lowers the quality of articles as the main focus in the present research community . . . is the number of published articles to honor the system demands and not quality" (P241). Instead of producing manuscripts for a specific, highly-ranked outlet, some respondents believed that "articles should ideally be written for the most appropriate journal but inevitably the overreliance of ranking lists for managerial purposes results in articles being targeted at higher ranked journals that might not be the best fit for the article" (P309), and "we should be encouraged to publish also elsewhere than in the US-based conservative general management journals" (P262).

Those who expressed ambiguity about the usefulness of journal ranking lists believed that a journal ranking list "is not perfect, but it is better than nothing" (P260), "is good as a rough guide" (P263), is "a useful tool but not the last word on the issue" (P49), and is "useful but not definitive" (P312). Despite the ranking lists' potential value, their applicability may be limited, and results must be interpreted with caution. As some researchers mentioned, "they [journal ranking lists] work in some areas, such as finance and theoretical economics. They do not work in all areas" (P331), and "one has to be careful with interpreting the results" (P369). Similar to those who expressed a highly negative view about the usefulness of journal ranking lists, those who held an ambiguous opinion emphasized various problems associated with journal ranking lists. However, they did not consider these issues fatal flaws and saw some value in the use of journal ranking lists. As two respondents indicated, "they are sometimes harmful . . ..On the positive side, they sometimes help identify journals with lower standards" (P317), and "they are useful guides but, being inconsistent in their classifications, can be misleading" (P322).

Interestingly, the accuracy of journal ranking lists was not a key factor affecting the respondents' perceptions of these lists' usefulness: of those who believed that journal ranking lists are inaccurate, 61% still referred to these lists as useful; 18%, as ambiguous; and only 21%, as harmful. This happens because ranking lists are the only tool available at researchers' disposal to differentiate among academic publication forums. Presently, there is no alternative to journal ranking lists and "they are a necessary evil. But they do a lot of harm overall" (P272). Despite that, "they are here to stay, unfortunately" (P373). Regardless of their accuracy, researchers have to learn how to use them while minimizing their negative impact: "When used loosely and not as an absolute guide to quality of individual published studies, they are a useful device for screening out the lowest quality journals/publishers" (P307). It seems that, despite their imperfection, journal ranking lists may be useful—assuming that they are constructed and applied appropriately.

At the same time, perceptions of journal lists' usefulness depend on the country of residence—those who expressed negative news resided in developed countries, such as the United States, Australia, the UK, New Zealand, Finland, and Denmark. Those who expressed ambiguity were also predominantly from developed countries. By contrast, most who favored journal ranking lists represented developing countries.

Next, the respondents were separated into two groups: those whose home institutions employed journal ranking lists and those whose did not. It was found that those whose home institutions employed ranking lists perceived ranking lists as less useful but more ambiguous and more harmful (see Table 5). This suggests that the mere presence of institutional ranking lists negatively affects the researchers' perceptions of ranking lists.

Institutional ranking lists have a detrimental effect on researchers' perceptions of lists' usefulness because they limit authors to a select set of journals that may not be aligned with their research topics and research methods. Thus, scholars have to either change their research focus and target specific institution-approved journals or ignore their institutional journal lists at the expense of promotions, benefits, grants, and other extrinsic rewards. As

| Perceptions | Journal ranking lists are | | |
	Useful	Ambiguous	Harmful
List use			
Home Institution Employed Journal Lists	42%	54%	63%
Home Institution did not Employ Journal Lists	58%	46%	37%
Source(s): Authors' own work			

Table 5.
The impact of institutional ranking lists on respondents' perceptions of ranking lists' usefulness

the researcher whose institution relies on an internal journal list indicated, "in Italy the top journals in the List for research assessment (Anvur) may not be included in the [institutional] list for promotion . . .. journal ranking lists may also reduce individual freedom to research in search for publishable research rather than innovative one" (P290).

Discussion

Contribution to theory

The findings indicate that journal ranking lists have become an integral part of the contemporary management academic environment at both institutional and individual levels. At the same time, the omnipresence and widespread use of journal ranking lists in the management discipline, which is often emphasized in scientometric studies, is somewhat overstated because only 33% and 37% of institutions and individual scholars employed journal ranking lists, respectively. Earlier, Bales *et al.* (2019) reported that 68% of management faculties employ journal ranking lists.

National rankings and national lists represent the most frequent category. While these rankings and lists have been designed to be used domestically, the influence of two national ranking lists—the ABDC Journal Quality List and the UK AJG by CABS—has spread far beyond the national borders. The former is well known for its comprehensiveness which, as of 2022, included 2,680 journals, and AJG is often associated (rightly or not) with rigor and compulsory use in the UK. As anecdotal evidence, the faculty of one of the authors of this paper also informally relies on ABDC given the absence of formal journal ranking systems in Canada or better alternatives. The finding that half of Australian institutions frowned upon ABDC and almost none use the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Journal List is somewhat counterintuitive. It is possible that many Australian institutions and scientists developed an aversion towards national journal rankings after a controversial journal ranking exercise undertaken by the Australian Research Council during the ERA initiative. At the initial stage of the project, ERA developed a national journal ranking list, but it was quickly abandoned after many independent observers questioned its credibility (Vanclay, 2011). Nevertheless, it seems that that damage had already been done. Some countries—for instance, South Africa, Italy, and Norway—employ their own national journal rankings, but the use of these lists is confined by their national borders.

Developing countries tend to rely on indices and bibliometric journal listing systems rather than rankings. Recent research reports indicate that scholars from developing countries tend to publish a large number of papers in predatory journals (Balehegn, 2017) and engage in research misconduct (Kamali *et al.*, 2020). While most journal ranking lists comprise a short list of outlets with low acceptance rates, indices and bibliometric listings are highly inclusive and comprehensive, yet their journals undergo constant scrutiny to ensure a certain standard of rigor and are generally accepted within a broader scientific community. Thus, the use of indices and bibliometric journal listing systems allows many management researchers residing in developing countries to publish in journals of reasonable quality yet avoid the constraints imposed by ranking lists of prestigious "A journals." While some individual researchers rely on global journal ranking tools such as SJR and JIF, the use of global journal ranking lists is limited to a very small group of institutions and scholars from developed countries. For instance, the prestigious Financial Times (FT) 50 Journal List and the University of Texas at Dallas, Jindal School of Management Journal List are rarely consulted, perhaps due to the small number of journals included.

The development of proprietary or personal journal ranking lists is another viable approach employed by some institutions and individuals. Institutions construct these lists to direct their faculty research, promote inter-disciplinarity and minimize internal politicizing of publication venues (Adams and Johnson, 2008), and individual researchers create such lists to

identify which journals to read and target for publications. This study shows that proprietary and personal lists have been well-established in management academia.

The fact that many individual management researchers rely on multiple ranking lists and tools is not surprising. It is well-established that all journal ranking development methods have numerous weaknesses, and no individual list may be truly inclusive and bias free. Thus, to analyze a particular publication venue of interest from multiple perspectives, management scholars employ several lists to form a more comprehensive picture. By contrast, institutions generally refrain from this practice because doing so would produce controversy and disagreement, for example, when the same outlet receives different rankings. Interestingly, a huge gap exists between institutional and individual ranking lists: a majority of researchers tend to disregard their institutional ranking lists or extend them by using other means available—in particular, by consulting national ranking lists and using journal ranking tools—to add and exclude outlets as they deem necessary.

Generally, researchers employ journal ranking lists under two conditions: mandatory and voluntary. The forced mode of use is necessary to comply with institutional pressure that restrains the choice of target outlets. At the same time, scholars also willingly consult journal ranking lists to advance their personal career, maximize their research exposure, learn about the relative standing of unfamiliar journals, and direct their students. While the former category of use is generally considered negative, the latter may have positive implications because journal rankings serve as a useful, optional tool that may actually assist management scholars in their academic endeavors.

The results of this study reveal a journal ranking lists paradox. Researchers are fully aware of the limitations of such lists and their deleterious impact on overall scientific progress. As discussed in the first section of this paper, the literature is rife with examples of problems associated with ranking list development, and it seems that the negative perceptions of ranking lists are generally universal. The presence of institutional ranking lists further contributes to researchers' negative perceptions of journal ranking lists because these constrain academic freedom and replace intrinsic satisfaction from research achievements with extrinsic motivation associated with satisfying their employer's publication requirements. Regardless of that, management researchers mostly find journal ranking lists to be useful and continue employing them for career advancement, routine research, benchmarking, and teaching. In other words, they know that journal ranking lists are problematic at best, but they still rely on them.

The finding that researchers from developed countries hold more negative perceptions of journal ranking lists than their counterparts from developing countries is not surprising. Many developed countries have formal research assessment initiatives that employ approved journal ranking lists. However, constraining publication outlets contradicts management researchers' academic freedom and goes against their government's attempts to protect it with tenure and lifetime employment. As a result, academics in developed countries form negative perceptions of journal ranking lists.

The development process of national and institutional journal ranking lists is highly political in nature and reflects the desire of public policymakers and institutional administrators to create a competitive environment with a quantitatively measurable research output. The top-down, forced proliferation of journal ranking lists reflects the ideological underpinning of new managerialism in higher education which institutionalizes market principles to govern public institutions (Lynch, 2015). To fully embrace new managerialism, universities and colleges must compete with one another domestically and internationally. For this, they need to measure their research output based on some "objective" criteria and key performance indicators. For example, the State Council of the People's Republic of China has recently crafted a strategy to put China on par with foreign world-class research universities and allocated resources to ensure the achievement of such

ambitious goals (Xu and Poole, 2024). This, however, requires the establishment of measurement approaches to quantify scientific outcomes and endorse their quality, which, as the reader may guess, has led to the incentive system rewarding publishing in journals included in certain rankings and indices. The policymakers' new managerialism views trickle down to the institutional levels when Deans and Department Chairs engage in political games and even outright manipulations to create or adopt particular ranking approaches catering to their personal ambitions and career priorities (e.g. see Tadajewski, 2016). While the politics-driven obsession with the quantification of science may show good results on paper and satisfy some egos, it will not serve the scientific community well in the long run.

Recommendations
Scholars, academic administrators, and public policymakers should realize that journal ranking lists may serve as a useful tool when used appropriately, in particular when individuals themselves decide how and for what purpose to employ them to inform their research practices. However, problems start when journal ranking lists become rigidly incorporated into performance management systems. Journal rankings merely reflect the relative standing of each journal based on a cumulative opinion or behavior of active researchers, but a ranking position does not directly correspond to the quality of its articles. Thus, scholars and faculty associations should lobby their academic administration to ban the mandatory use of journal ranking lists in performance appraisal decisions. As such, despite their inherent limitations and discrepancies, there is much value in having various forms of journal ranking lists, but the problems start when the use of such lists is prescribed by institutional and/or national bodies. Institutions, administrators, and public policymakers should accept the fact that it is impossible to quantify one's scientific achievements in the form of rigid key performance indicators. So far, there has been no single well-documented case when the prescribed use of journal ranking lists has accelerated scientific progress, and this study is no exception.

Conclusion
Almost one century has passed since Gross and Gross (1927) compiled the first documented ranking list of academic journals. Several critical points stand out in their pioneering work. First, the purpose of their ranking list was to identify the most frequently referenced outlets that are "necessary for the stimulation and intellectual development of the faculty" (p. 386) and students. Second, the authors acknowledged that their ranking method had limitations by referring to it as "an arbitrary standard of some kind" and warned that the conclusions should be "used with certain preservations" (p. 386). Third, Gross and Gross indicated that "[t]he use of these [journal ranking] tables is left to the individual reader who will know best how to adapt them to a local need" (p. 387). Fast forward one hundred years, and our institutions are doing exactly the opposite of what these pioneers of journal ranking studies envisioned: our institutions have substituted performance management for intellectual stimulation and development, insist that the rankings they rely on are comprehensive and bias-free, and enforce the institution-wide use of such lists by eliminating user choice. This study reveals that journal ranking lists may serve as helpful and effective tools as long as both the scientific community and their institutions return to the very inception of journal ranking studies and follow their underlying assumptions.

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Appendix

The Questionnaire

Does your institution have a formal journal ranking list? If yes, which one(s)?

List, in order of importance, the journal ranking lists that you personally use.

List, in order of importance, the purposes for which you use journal ranking lists.

All things considered, what do you think about the usefulness of journal ranking lists?

In your opinion, how accurate are journal ranking lists?

Does the ranking position accurately reflect the overall journal's quality and/or contribution?

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