

Co-authorship in Management Journals: Ethical Rules for Scientific Research

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of research collaborations and the production of scientific articles. To date, few studies have analysed this phenomenon in the field of management sciences. This paper presents an exploratory analysis of the phenomenon, with a focus on the production of articles in 12 leading journals in the field of management.

Data reveals a twofold phenomenon: firstly, the exponential multiplication of articles in some top journals, and secondly, the near disappearance of articles with a single author and the concomitant growth of articles attributed to five or more authors. This trend gives rise to the necessity of addressing ethical and practical aspects in order to cope with the phenomenon, which could otherwise undermine the reputation and quality of scientific production in management.

Keywords: Management Science; Authorship; Multi-Authored Articles; Gift-Authorship; Proliferation of Articles; Academic Journals; Ethical Criteria; Global Competition; Global Markets

1. Collaboration in Research: Some Benefits and Critical Issues

Collaborations in the scientific field have become a fundamental aspect of research, and thus of the academic life of every scholar. This has effectively superseded the now rather rare image of the solitary researcher. In scientific fields such as physics and medicine, collaboration has been a well-established and extensively documented phenomenon for some time (Cronin, 2004). In contrast, it has been a relatively under-researched aspect in the humanities, economics, business and social sciences until recently. Nevertheless, even in these disciplines, collaboration is becoming increasingly prevalent, as evidenced by the rise in the number of authors contributing to each research project (Ossenblok et al., 2014). In light of this evidence, it is imperative to reflect on the distinctive features of the disciplines in question, as well as the intrinsic characteristics of collaboration.

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The term "scientific collaboration" is typically defined as the social and factual interaction between two or more researchers, with the objective of sharing ideas and completing tasks in order to achieve a common goal (Sonnenwald, 2007). Newman (2004) emphasises the significance of co-authorship as a key indicator of this type of collaboration. It is a vital tool for identifying networks of co-authors and related cooperation models, which enables the observation of the evolution of cooperation networks over time.

The formation of these networks may be contingent upon a range of economic, political, social, or strategic factors. For instance, collaboration can be viewed as a strategy employed by researchers to address the growing complexity and specialisation of scientific research, given that the majority of projects are becoming too large to be managed by a single researcher (Wuchty, Jones, & Uzzi, 2007). However, the necessity to collaborate may also emerge from the constraints of available resources (Bozeman & Corley, 2004), the requirement for multidisciplinary or multi-method approaches (Wagner & Leydesdorff, 2005), or from the fact of sharing the same work environment and the same research interests (Katz & Martin, 1997). In any case, the average number of authors per article in the social sciences has increased significantly from the 1950s to the present day. This increase can be attributed to a number of factors, which are not exclusively limited to the growing complexity of research and the need for interdisciplinary skills. They also include the growing academic pressure to publish. Some authors seek to expand the number of their publications by forming collaborative relationships with other authors on articles for which they have not made a significant contribution (Jakab et al., 2024). This practice is driven by the desire to gain advantages in the peer-review process and increase the likelihood of publication (Baethge, 2008; Jakab et al., 2024). Uzzi (2007) also notes the increasing competition among scholars in the academic world (Xu et al., 2017; Lojanica, 2017) and in universities (Block & Khvatova, 2017; Ubogu & Heever, 2017).

In practical terms, collaboration can be seen as a rational action to increase scientific productivity. The sharing of work allows for a more effective division and management of activities, which in turn reduces implementation times and improves overall quality (Santos and Santos, 2016; Koseoglu et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, collaborative action also gives rise to intrinsic ethical issues. One of the primary concerns is the need to clearly establish the contributions of each author and to correctly assign scientific responsibility. This issue becomes increasingly pertinent with the rise in the number of authors. One illustrative case is that of the ATLAS group at CERN in Geneva, which typically signs its articles with over a thousand authors (Teixeira da Silva & Dobránszki, 2016).

Furthermore, the phenomenon gives rise to a further distortion, namely the progressive emergence of incorrect or fraudulent behaviour. Indeed, cases of honorary co-authorship or ghost authorship have been reported, whereby individuals are included among the authors without having actively participated in the research (Katz & Martin, 1997).

In conclusion, an analysis of the most well-known scientific literature on the subject reveals the emergence of three macro areas of criticality, which are indirectly linked to as many ethical issues. The initial category encompasses elements pertaining to:

- *The intrinsic quality of the research is a key consideration. The collaboration of multiple authors can effectively enhance the methodological approach and enrich studies, as a result of the combination of diverse skills, training, experiences and perspectives. It is also important to consider that the increase in the number of authors involved in a single study may raise questions about the quality and integrity of the research. Some studies have indicated that an increase in the number of authors does not necessarily correlate with an improvement in quality. Conversely, the division of responsibilities may, in some cases, result in a less rigorous supervision of data and methodologies (Katz & Martin, 1997).*

- *The apportionment of credit. The accurate apportionment of credit among co-authors represents a further significant challenge, given that individual contributions often vary considerably. It is not always feasible to ascertain how the merits have been specifically distributed and acknowledged. This uncertainty can have a significant impact on academic careers, as promotion and access evaluations are often based on the number of publications and the role played by the first author (Biagioli & Galison, 2003).*

- *Diffused responsibility and personal accountability. The distribution of responsibility among multiple authors can result in a lack of clear accountability. In the event of errors or inappropriate conduct, it can be challenging to determine who is truly responsible. Some studies have highlighted the necessity for more transparent policies to better identify individual contributions and the specific responsibilities of each author (Shapiro, Wenger & Shapiro, 1994).*

In considering more strictly ethical issues, it is first necessary to address the practice of including as authors subjects who have not contributed significantly to the research (or indeed at all). This is known as honorary authorship, a practice that is becoming increasingly widespread and relevant. While there is a case to be made for including the name of an "illustrious colleague" in a research project, doing so raises concerns about the transparency and integrity of the research, as well as the contributions of the actual authors (Salas, 2023).

Another practice that raises ethical concerns is ghostwriting, whereby the actual authors are not acknowledged in the references and are therefore not recognised as authors. The practice in question can be particularly problematic in the academic field, where transparency and correctness in the attribution of merit are fundamental (Matheson, 2011) for all the reasons previously stated.

2. A Focus on Management Science

A review of the literature reveals a limited number of studies and research projects in the fields of managerial and organisational science, despite the exponential growth trend and the characteristics of the phenomenon undoubtedly affecting this specific research sector (Acedo et al., 2006; Akdeve, 2018; Koseoglu, 2016; Wieczorek et al., 2021).

Koseoglu (2016) employs a bibliometric approach to identify the transformation and growth of the network structure regarding authorship and co-authorship of publications in the strategic management field. The principal objective of this study was to enhance understanding of the intellectual structure and evolution of collaboration between authors in the field under consideration through the analysis of data pertaining to articles published in the Strategic Management Journal between 1980 and 2014. The results of the study provided insights into authorship, its model, the productivity of authors, and co-authorship networks. Other studies (Akdave, 2018) similarly demonstrate that the findings indicate a tendency towards the expansion of co-authored articles (and the attributes of network structures) analogous to that observed in other disciplines, with the data collection also extending to numerous and esteemed sector journals (Acedo et al., 2006). Other research (Wieczorek et al., 2021) has also documented a qualitative and quantitative enhancement in the publication output, coinciding with an acceleration in the rate of production.

Nevertheless, despite the aforementioned evidence, critical investigations appear to be conspicuous by their absence, as are the specific ethical implications mentioned. Furthermore, gaps are evident with regard to the general evolution and the most recent details of this phenomenon. However, aspects of primary interest emerge. In a field where the connections between research and conflicts of interest, between the academic world and the productive world, between the rush to publication and the transparency and integrity of the result, but above all between recognition of merit and academic progression are particularly strong, further investigation is required.

The objective of this study is therefore to address these gaps and to propose further avenues for investigation. In particular, a preliminary quantitative analysis was conducted on the number of authors per publication, sourced directly from the main scientific journals in the sector. The results were presented at a five-year interval (starting from 1992) and the most recent calendar year.

2.1 Methodology

The selection of journals (Table 1) was carried out in accordance with specific criteria, beginning with the indications provided by Adler and Harzing (2009), with the objective of prioritising the journals with the highest impact and relevance within the disciplinary fields of management at an international level. In order to achieve this result, the selection was made on the basis of relevant classification methods, namely the Scimago H-Index and the Impact Factor developed by ISI Web of Knowledge. The selected journals are indexed in the SSCI database (Kumar & Mohd, 2013) and included in the ABS Journal Quality Guide ranking, which is

widely accepted as a reliable and objective means to classify journals within the academic community in Business and Management (Morris et al., 2009).

The selection process resulted in the identification of 11 journals that met the established criteria. These include the Harvard Business Review, Management Science, Tourism Management, Research-Technology Management, Industrial Marketing Management, the International Journal of Management Reviews, the Journal of Management, the Journal of Business Research, the Journal of Business Ethics, the Strategic Management Journal, and the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services.

Table 1: *Parameters of the Scientific Journals Examined*

Journals	Foundation	Issues per year	Publisher	Shimago H-Rank Index	Impact Factor (2023)
Harvard Business Review	1922	6	HBS	206	9,1
Management science	1969	12	Informs	290	4,6
Tourism Management	1982	12	Elsevier	255	10,9
Research-Technology Management	1988	6	Taylor and Francis	79	1,7
Industrial Marketing Management	1971	8	Elsevier	177	7,8
Journal of Management	1975	6	SAGE	280	9,3
Journal of Business Research	1973	12-18	Elsevier	265	10,5
Journal of Business Ethics	1982	7	Springer	253	5,9
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	1994	6	Elsevier	143	10,4
Strategic Management Journal	1980	6-10	John Wiley & Sons	333	6,5
International Journal of Management Reviews	1999	4	John Wiley & Sons	136	7,5

The analysis focused exclusively on research articles, encompassing a total of 11,223 titles. This figure represents the total number of publications from the aforementioned journals at five-year intervals (1992, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2012, 2017, 2021), with the addition of those from 2023 (Table 2).

Prior to data analysis, the number of authors for each article was manually collected using a spreadsheet and divided into the following categories: 1 author, 2 authors, 3 or 4 authors, and 5 or more authors. The relative percentages of the total were calculated, allowing for the identification of linear trends over the period under consideration (see attachments).

Table 2: *Articles Published per Year in Top Journal*

Journals	Number of articles published per year								
	1992	1997	2002	2007	2012	2017	2021	2023	
Harvard Business Review	59	72	163	149	198	111	98	60	
Management science	115	124	100	133	139	240	382	330	
Tourism Managemnet	44	46	49	110	137	216	149	103	
Research-Technology Management	49	55	50	48	45	42	37	32	
Industrial Marketing Management	47	46	53	93	125	93	176	172	
Journal of Management	41	29	43	37	57	89	77	105	
Journal of Business Research	44	68	65	146	226	290	889	719	
Journal of Business Ethics	92	152	195	208	263	348	319	344	
Strategic Management Journal	42	56	67	73	80	141	92	108	
J. of Retailing and Consumer Services	n.d.	23	27	40	72	159	416	361	
Int. Journal of Management Reviews	n.d.	n.d.	15	16	20	24	22	33	
Total	533	671	827	1053	1362	1753	2657	2367	11223

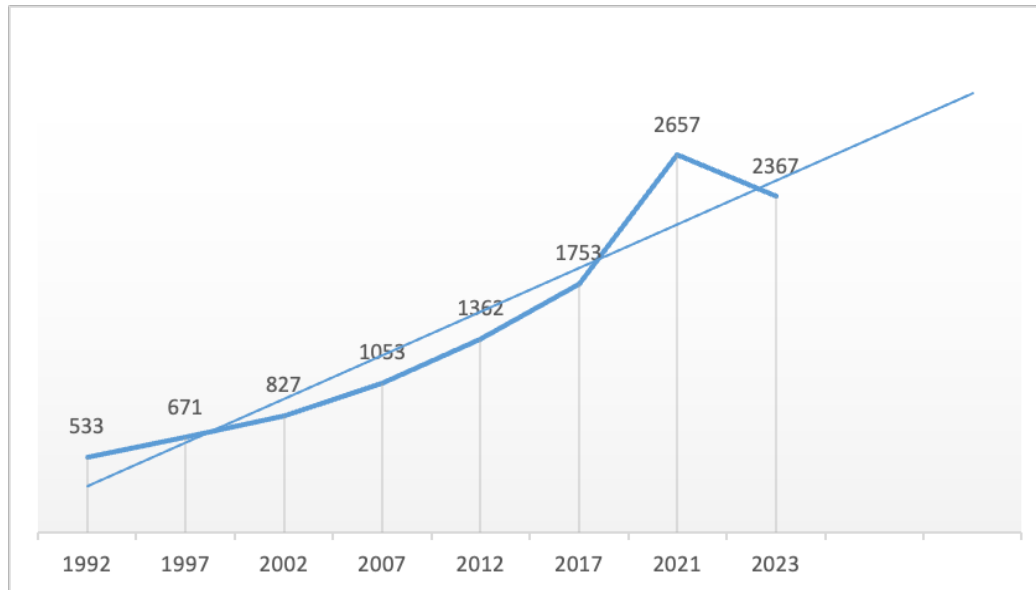
2.2 Results

In consideration of the data presented in Table 2, the initial evidence is provided by the exponential growth of the total number of articles published in the reference journals, which has increased from 533 in 1992 (although it should be noted that two journals were not included in this figure). The number of articles published in the Management Science and Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services has increased exponentially, from 533 in 1992 to 2657 in 2021. The positive progression appears to be linear in every five-year period, with the exception of 2002 and 2023, where a slight reversal of the trend is observed (Figure 1).

A closer examination of the performance of each individual journal (Figure 2) reveals significant variations. Some journals have maintained a relatively consistent number of published articles, while others have experienced a gradual but steady growth. However, there are also instances where the number of published articles has declined or remained stagnant.

It is noteworthy that the Journal of Business Ethics has published a considerable number of articles, increasing from 290 in 2017 to 889 in 2021. This substantial growth has undoubtedly influenced the overall trend in journal performance.

Figure 1: *Trend of the Number of Publications per Year with Linear Forecast*



A detailed examination of the tendencies of co-authorship for each article, which is the focus of this research, reveals similarly clear evidence, although significant differences are observed between journals. The general trend indicates a notable increase in multi-author collaborations, particularly for those involving three or four authors and those involving five or more authors (Table 3, Figure 3, Figure 4).

The Figure 4 illustrate a progressive and constant decline in the number of articles written by one or two authors, which collectively constituted 84% of all publications in 1992. The single-author article was the norm, representing over half of the cases examined. However, in 2023, it constituted a rarity, the least prevalent case overall (8%), following a consistent decline throughout the period under review. In contrast, publications with two authors demonstrated a slight increase in the initial five-year period (+10%), followed by a gradual decline until 2007, when their representation reached a nadir of 23% of the total.

In contrast, the remaining two groups demonstrate almost perfectly contrasting results. The most notable growth was observed in articles that involved the collaboration of three or four authors. This trend remained consistent throughout the five-year periods under consideration, reaching 56% of the total publications in 2023. In comparison, in 1992, these articles constituted only 15% of the total publications. Finally, the last group, comprising five or more authors, exhibited a relatively modest trajectory until at least 2007 (approximately 1%), but subsequently demonstrated a notable increase, reaching 13% in 2023.

Figure 2: Articles Published per Year and Journal

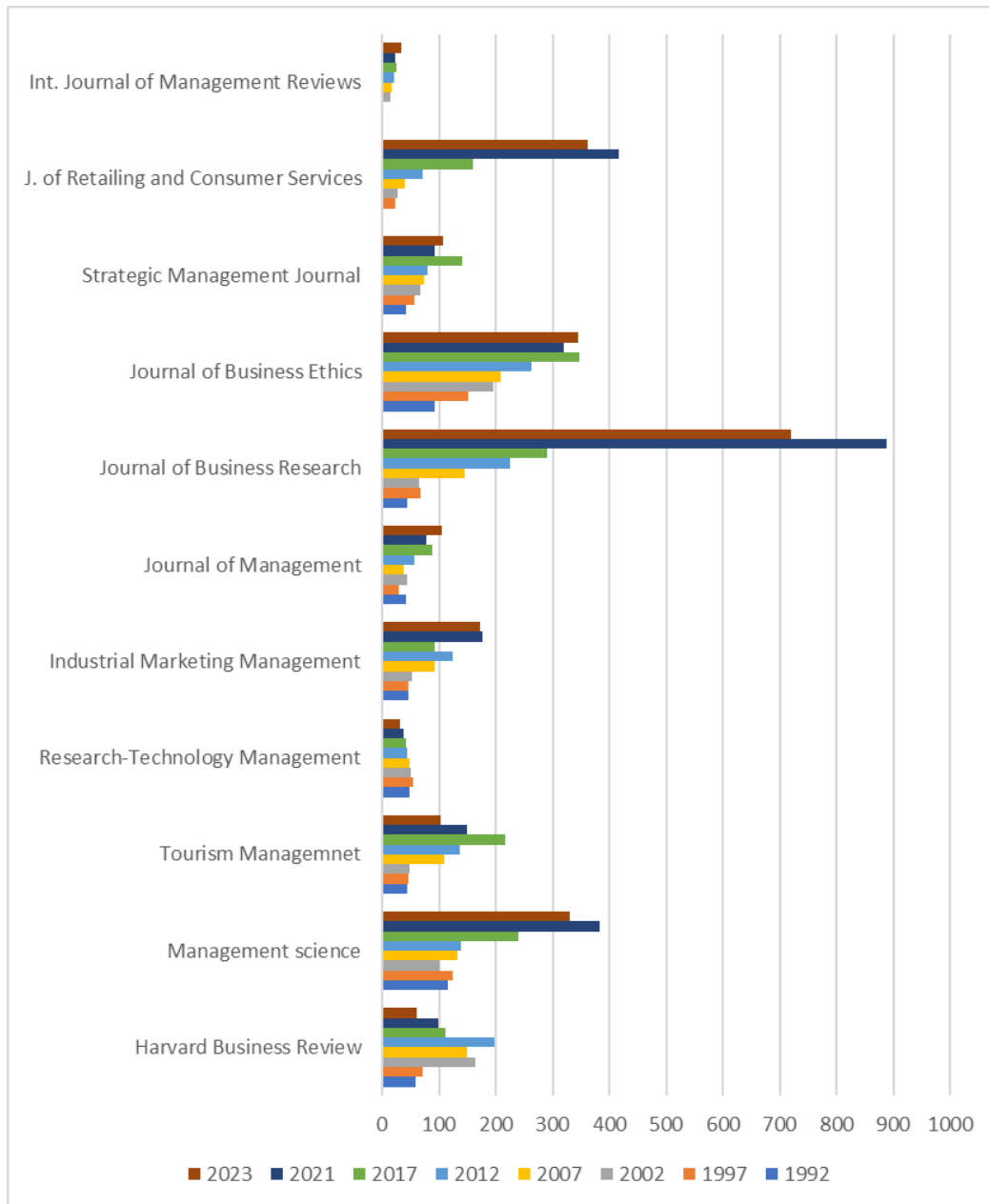


Table 3: *Articles and Co-authorships Published per Years*

Year	1 Author		2 Authors		3/4 Authors		5 or more authors	
	n°	%	n°	%	n°	%	n°	%
1992	283	53	166	31	82	15	2	0
1997	243	36	275	41	146	22	7	1
2002	349	42	286	35	182	22	10	1
2007	269	26	436	41	337	32	11	1
2012	316	23	452	33	543	40	51	4
2017	286	16	544	31	834	48	89	5
2021	266	10	681	26	1442	54	268	10
2023	195	8	541	23	1323	56	308	13
Total	2207		3381		4889		746	

Figure 3: *Co-authorships per Year (number of articles)*

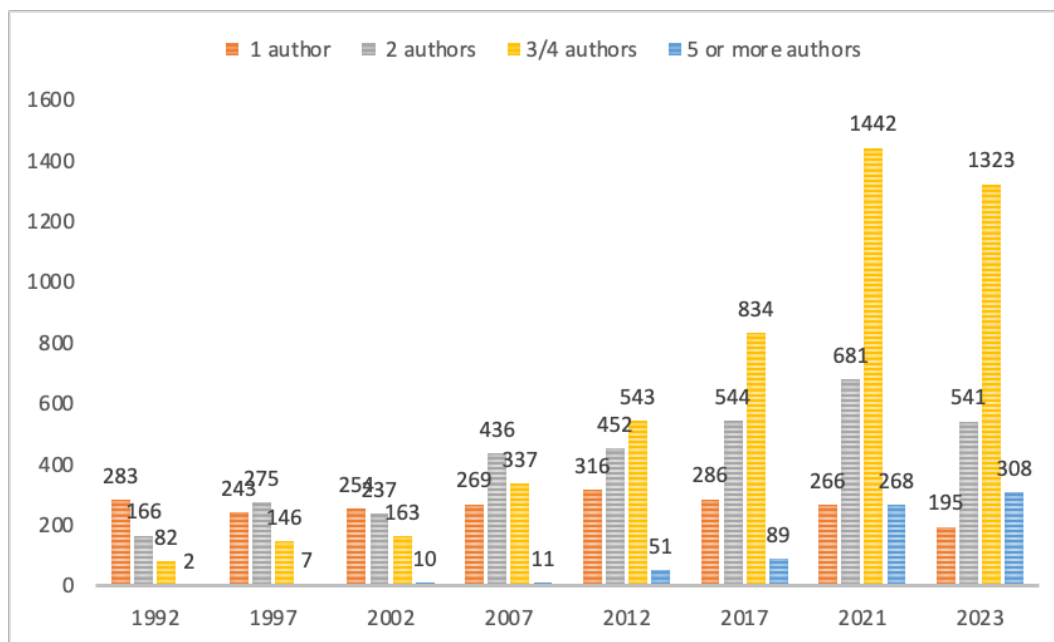
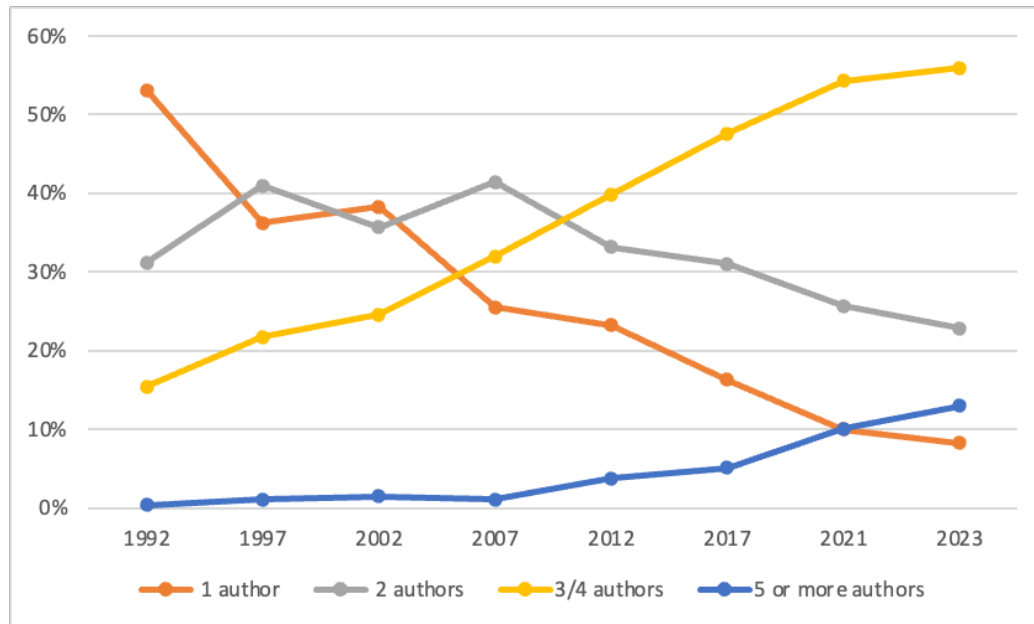


Figure 4: Co-authorships per Year (value in %)



A further observation made from the graph in Figure 4 is that there are notable differences in the trends between the three groups: the three-to-four authors, the two authors, and the one author with five or more authors. The former in particular present truly surprising trends by inverse analogy, whereby a decrease in one is accompanied by an increase in the other. This phenomenon is particularly evident from 2007 onwards. The other pair also reaches the same result, albeit with slightly different timing, with both reaching the same diffusion in 2021 (10%) and exchanging positions definitively in 2023, with the respective figures settling at 8 and 13% of the total.

3. Discussion of Results and Pathfinder Experiences

The findings of this research corroborate the general tendency observed in other research sectors, namely an exponential increase in the number of publications in the field of management. This observation has been made by other researchers in this field. As in other sectors, the process has likely been driven and encouraged by multiple reasons, as hypothesised in many previous studies. It is clear that the growing academic pressure to publish (Wuchty, Jones, & Uzzi, 2007) is a significant factor in this tendency. This is particularly evident in the context of increased competition between researchers (Xu et al., 2017; Lojanica, 2017) and between universities and research institutes (Block & Khvatova, 2017; Ubogu & Heever, 2017).

Similarly, this study corroborates the progressive tendency towards co-authoring in the field of management, and there is no evidence to suggest that the underlying reasons for this phenomenon are any different. The formation and development of these complex and flexible collaboration networks are driven by a need for

objective cooperation and adaptation strategies aimed at addressing the growing complexity and specialisation of scientific research (Wuchty, Jones, & Uzzi, 2007). Additionally, they serve to counteract the scarcity of available resources. Bozeman and Corley (2004) posit that this phenomenon may be driven by a desire to leverage the expertise of multiple disciplines, a need for multidisciplinary or multi-method approaches (Wagner and Leydesdorff, 2005), or the desire to share a common research environment and align research interests (Katz and Martin, 1997).

It can therefore be asserted that collaboration represents a rational choice for increasing the quantity scientific production in the field of management research. Greater cooperation is generally associated with enhanced output (Santos and Santos, 2016), including a reduction in time requirements (Koseoglu et al., 2018).

In light of the increasing prevalence of co-authored publications, particularly those with three to four authors and five or more authors, the same critical issues remain unresolved, particularly those of an ethical nature. In other words, management research is also confronted with, and potentially tasked with resolving, issues such as the appropriate attribution of credit (Biagioli & Galison, 2003) or the de-responsibilisation of the results (Shapiro, Wenger & Shapiro, 1994). Furthermore, the probability of honorary authorship (Salas, 2023) and the phenomenon of ghostwriting (Matheson, 2011) also increases, as does the risk of frequent conflicts of interest (Smith, 1998). The rise in authorship, coupled with the fraudulent authorship practices, challenges the efficacy of traditional academic and scientific reward structures, which rely solely on publication and citation metrics. This has led to a situation where scientists are motivated to exploit the system by inflating the number of authors on a given paper (Greene, 2007).

The collective impact of these critical and ethical considerations necessitates a heightened level of vigilance and scrutiny to ensure the maintenance of scientific research integrity, transparency, and fairness. Indeed, in recent times, there has been many proposals and ethical criteria put forth to address this complex issue.

It is recommended that academic institutions and scientific journals implement more transparent and consistent criteria for attributing authorship to articles. Such criteria should be based on significant contributions to the conception, design, execution, or interpretation of the research in question. A practical example is the solution proposed by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), which establishes that each author, in order to be included, must contribute significantly and simultaneously approve the final version of the article (ICMJE, 2019). This would ensure that only those who have made a genuine contribution are included, thereby reducing the practice of honorary authorship (Katz & Martin, 1997). In order to enhance transparency and facilitate the differentiation of individual roles and associated responsibilities (Cronin, 2004), it would be prudent for each scientific article to include a comprehensive account of the specific contributions of each author, as stipulated by Nature, one of the most esteemed scientific journals, which requires such details to be delineated in a dedicated section (Nature, 2020).

The Academy of Management (AOM) is a prominent entity within the field of management sciences. It has a long-standing history of publishing several academic journals and has established a set of guidelines.

□ *The AOM places great emphasis on the importance of accurate and transparent attribution of authorship in scholarly publications, considering it a fundamental principle of scientific integrity and honesty. The principle states that all those who have made a significant contribution to the conception, design, execution, or interpretation of the research should be included as authors of the article. In the case of a thesis or research project carried out by a student, the latter should be acknowledged as the primary author, unless there is a prior agreement to the contrary, which should be clearly documented. The AOM encourages the clear delineation of individual contributions, suggesting that authors specify with precision the parts of the work contributed by each co-author. Such practices not only promote transparency but also help to prevent potential disputes about authorship, especially in the context of collaborations between multiple institutions or departments. The correct attribution of authorship is not merely a matter of recognition; it is also a matter of ethical responsibility. It is incumbent upon each author to take responsibility for their own contribution to the work and to be aware of the contributions of their colleagues. It is unethical to add an author to a work without having a reasonable expectation that they will make a significant contribution. Furthermore, authors are responsible for ensuring that their work has not been previously published without explicit consent and is not currently under consideration by other academic journals. In order to ensure ethical authorship attribution, it is recommended that the roles of each participant in the project be discussed and agreed upon from the outset, that this agreement be documented, and that it be reviewed periodically throughout the project. Furthermore, the utilisation of contribution statements, which are often required by academic journals, is advised. These statements detail the role of each author in the work, thereby ensuring appropriate and transparent recognition of contributions. Furthermore, AOM recognises a student as the principal author of multiple-authored publications that are substantially derived from the student's dissertation or thesis (AOM, 2023).*

The introduction of policies against ghostwriting and honorary authorship should be designed with the objective of preventing such practices. The implementation of rigorous guidelines could facilitate greater transparency and accountability in the authorship of academic articles. This could be achieved through the establishment of a system of checks and sanctions for those who fail to comply with the established guidelines (Sonnenwald, 2007). Such a system would not only promote scientific integrity but also ensure that credit is attributed correctly (Newman, 2004).

The issue of declaring any conflicts of interest appears to have been resolved in many instances, both as a voluntary act and through the explicit request of numerous esteemed journals (ICMJE, 2019). This has resulted in enhanced transparency and impartiality with regard to the methodology and results of the research in question.

Despite the fact that the majority of research institutions have already established guidelines on research ethics, there is nevertheless a pressing need to integrate ethical considerations of authorship into the educational curricula (Jakab et al., 2024). In addition, academic institutions should provide training on the ethics of research and scientific collaboration. This training could take the form of workshops, seminars, or mandatory training modules for researchers and students, as suggested by Santos and Santos (2016).

Furthermore, more efficient "peer" evaluation and verification systems should be introduced into the review mechanisms (Cronin et al., 2003), including anonymous review of contributions by external subjects (Moody, 2004). It is recommended that evaluation systems should first of all reward collaborations and at the same time not penalise co-authorship. This can be achieved through the implementation of solutions that take into account both the individual contribution and the value of interdisciplinary collaboration (Hicks, 1999; Nederhof, 2006). Such an approach would facilitate the encouragement of collaboration while ensuring that individual contributions are duly recognised (Sivertsen, 2009).

In light of the current state of scientific research practices, the role of informal collaboration and indirect contributions in these processes appears to be indispensable. It would therefore be appropriate to standardise the system of "acknowledgements" by detailing the contribution of all those who do not fall within the category of co-author (Tang et al., 2016). Such a system would recognise all contributions to research, thereby fostering a collaborative and inclusive environment (Costas & Leeuwen, 2012). Furthermore, it would ensure a more equitable distribution of merit, thus leading to a more coherent and fairer academic recognition process.

4. Conclusion

This study, which forms part of the analysis of scientific production, has therefore concentrated on the phenomenon of academic collaboration and, in particular, on its practical formalisation, namely co-authorship. This refers to collaborations that are discernible and manifest in the drafting of a contribution by two or more authors. This phenomenon is becoming increasingly evident even in the principal management journals, where articles with numerous co-authors have become the norm rather than the exception.

The results largely corroborate the trends observed in management research, exhibiting clear parallels with other domains, particularly with regard to the surge in the number of articles published in leading scientific journals and, most notably, the rising prevalence of multi-author contributions to their production. This would indicate the existence and development of cooperation networks comparable to

those observed in other research fields. However, this latter aspect requires further investigation through more precise studies, starting from more recent findings.

A review of the data reveals a notable decline in the number of articles authored by a single or two individuals over the 30-year period between 1993 and 2023. This trend is accompanied by a corresponding increase in the number of articles written by "3/4 authors" and "5 or more authors."

A further analysis of the data reveals a notable divergence in the tendencies observed between the 3/4 authors – 2 authors groups and the 1 author-5 or more authors groups. The former in particular present truly surprising tendencies by inverse analogy, whereby a decrease in one is accompanied by an increase in the other. This aspect is particularly evident when considering the period from 2007 onwards. The second pair also reaches the same result, albeit with slightly different timing. They reach the same diffusion in 2021 (10%) and definitively exchange positions in 2023, settling at 8 and 13% of the total, respectively. In summary and in percentage terms, the scientific output of the principal management journals in 1993 was distributed as follows: In 1993, the distribution of authorship was as follows: 1 author 53%, 2 authors 31%, 3/4 authors 15%, 5 or more authors 0%. In 2023, the corresponding figures were: 1 author 8%, 2 authors 23%, 3/4 authors 56%, 5 or more authors 13%.

These results must also be considered in the context of the critical and ethical issues inherent to the co-author approach, which have a significant impact on the ethical conduct of research, the quality of the work produced, the responsibility of the authors, the principles of meritocracy, and the dynamics of academic discourse.

It thus follows that the implementation of transparent and rigorous ethical criteria is imperative and immediate. A plethora of proposals exists with the aim of ensuring transparency, integrity and fairness in academic research. These proposals seek to guarantee that contributions are duly acknowledged and that individual responsibility is unambiguously attributed. The implementation of these measures would provide journals and academic institutions with additional useful tools to promote an ethical and collaborative research environment, while simultaneously reinforcing the integrity of scientific production.

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