

COMMENTARY:

Matters Concerning Citing in Academic Discourses

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Opinion Piece

There is a bone of disconcertion concerning citing in academia – a disconcertion that tends to denote that “old” citations and/or references do not generate significant and relevant credibility to an author’s academic discourse. This perception about old references then regularises what I view as an imprecise perception that “old” material makes a less consequential impact on the author’s discourse. Similarly, there is a defective assumption that “new” or “latest” citations or references warrant the author’s credibility in academic discourses. It is these conflicting, and yet competing presumptions that I view problematic. Therefore, my question is, should a particular citation be discredited on the basis that it is gauged “old”? However, I am aware that an “old” citation may suggest a researcher’s lack of extensive research or may be dependent on the researcher’s focus of study. However, what if, as old as it is, it remains applicable and contemporaneously significant? What if as old as it is, it can be figured as a point of departure for future scholarly discourses? Personally, this premise of “old” citation(s) leaves an outstanding gap between what is a credible and determinative citation, and how the philosophy of knowledge is generated from such citations. There may be newer materials in the arena of language and literature, for example, but the question is, can it be upheld that the so-called “new” material is “all and entirely” relevant? The view that I bring to the fore is that academic credibility must not be circumscribed to “whom” you cite and “how old” is/are your citations given that the primary objective of citing, among other determinants, is to form juxtaposition and/or triangulation in academic discourse - evidence. Whether the citation is “old” or “new” seems insignificant on the supposition that it warrants empirical and convincing scores in a bid to support the author’s argument. For instance, a 1960 citation may be discredited by the reviewers while a 2023 citation may be honoured. Moreover, what if the 1960 citation far outweighs the 2023 citation in terms of presenting a cogent and conclusive ideology? The line in credibility is, sometimes, measured on “your references are too old” – suggesting the very same problem that I contest here.

Perhaps, it is perceptive to underscore that the aim of citing in academia remains a crucial aspect of academic and scientific writing – and only that – and not on how old the reference is. It makes it permissible for readers to authenticate the accuracy and reliability of the information presented, and awards credit to the original author or researcher for their work (Ramoroka *et al.*, 2014). Citing “credible” and “authoritative” sources strengthens the argument and shows that the writer has conducted their research. I conclude that it is not a matter of old versus new as it has been contextualised herein. It is the extent to which such a cited scholar makes a causative impact on the author’s current debate. In my opinion, the old and the new remain relevant provided they prove coherence and validity in respect of the discourse at hand.

References

Ramoroka, B. T. 2014. Integration of Sources in Academic Writing: A Corpus-Based Study of Citation Practices in Essay Writing in Two Departments at the University of Botswana. *Reading & Writing – Journal of the Reading Association of South Africa*, 5(1): 1-7.

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Comments on “Matters Concerning Citing in Academic Discourses”

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We often receive suggestions to use sources published within a particular time in a scholarly paper. Many authors have the misconception about the “outdated sources” myth that sources must be from recently published work, such as in the last five to ten years. However, as a writer, you need to cite the work of individuals whose theories or research studies directly influenced your work. The reason to that is the articles cited provide critical background information, support, or dispute your idea, and sometimes provide important definitions and data (American Psychological Association, 2020: 253). The use of recent studies as references depends on the fields or disciplines. For example, citing the most recent articles is often required for a fast-developing field like medicine. On the contrary, seminal research articles or foundational books in social sciences can remain relevant for a long time and help establish the context for a given research article/paper in the field of social sciences. For example, several social and child psychology articles commonly cite Albert Bandura’s Bobo doll experiment (Bandura *et al.*, 1961). Although there are some advantages to citing recent articles in the research paper; it assures reviewers of the level of extensive literature review that was conducted while writing the paper and that the information in the paper is current. The use of recent referencing also influences peer review reports for most journals. My proposal is for journals to outline the date range for citations/references allowed for publication in the journals’ authors guidelines to avoid peer review rejection for using old citations.

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I support the notion that the ultimate criterion for including a citation in a report is the causal impact it has on the current debate. The relevance of the dates of the citations is also entrenched in the field (STEM versus Humanities) and focus (empirical versus conceptual) of the report. When writing a document on the medical treatment strategies for COVID-19, it would be essential to use the most up-to-date sources to compare treatments. However, when writing about the treatment of pandemics, it could be valuable to have a historic perspective, therefore also using older sources. In fields such as philosophy and history, older sources form the foundation of current research and analysis, thus necessitating the use of such sources. Before considering the date of publication, the reputability of the source should also be considered. It would be irresponsible to encourage researchers to pursue recent citations above trustworthy sources. As stated before, the key determinant of a citation should be the value and relevance to the topic at hand. Sources of a high standing should always be used. Draconian rules on the percentage of recent versus older sources tend to ignore the importance of context and cannot be defended. A mix of both old and new quality sources should be used to support the argument being made.

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The attached opinion piece argues against the notion that the age of a citation is the absolute determinant of its relevance or credibility in academic discourse. The writer accentuates the importance of acknowledging historical and foundational works that have contributed to the development of a particular field. While staying up to date with the latest research in a study area is important, older citations can also provide a more thorough and nuanced understanding of a topic, compared to insignificant treatments in newer works. The age of a citation is not a reliable

indicator of its accuracy or validity, and it is important to evaluate the content, coherence, claims and validity of a citation rather than its age when determining its relevance in academic discourse. The author also emphasizes the importance of coherence and validity in relation to the current discourse at hand, rather than simply using citations for evidence and supporting arguments, a notion that is well deserving in current academic discourse. This is the usual emphasis amongst current postgraduate research (research supervisor instructions!)

The writer acknowledgement, the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of academic discourse, and the importance of considering the context in which a citation was made, including cultural and societal influences that may change over a period and the purpose of the citation. This evaluates their relevance and validity, which aligns with the ideas presented in the original statements. Neglecting older citations and focusing on new ones could result in a loss of important insights and knowledge that may have contributed to the growth and development of academic discourse and important study areas. While it argues for the continued relevance of older sources and the value they can bring to contemporary academic debates, it also recognizes the importance of staying up to date with the latest research in one's field. Researchers should strike a balance between incorporating relevant historical research and staying up to date with the latest findings and perspectives in academic discourse. Ultimately, the quality and relevance of a citation should be evaluated on a case-by-case and merit basis, rather than solely based on how old the citation is. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the value of a citation is not limited to its relevance to the current discourse. Citations can also provide a foundation for future research and scholarship, serving as a starting point for new ideas and directions. By neglecting older citations and solely focusing on new ones, we risk losing important insights and knowledge that could contribute to the growth and development of the academic discourse.

In their study on citation practices in essay writing, Ramoroka *et al.* (2014) found that some students tended to rely heavily on old sources, while others preferred to use newer sources. In a blog post, academic writing coach Olga Degtyareva (2020) argued that while it's important to stay current with research in one's field, older sources can still be valuable and should not be dismissed simply because of their age. In an opinion piece for The Chronicle of Higher Education, historian Rachel Toor (2018) wrote about the pressure academics face to constantly produce new research and argued that older sources should be valued more highly for the perspective and context they provide. A study on citation patterns in computer science research, Ding *et al.* (2011) found that some researchers were more likely to cite recent work, while others tended to cite a mix of old and new sources.

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There is a debate surrounding the usefulness of older references. The appropriateness of using old references in academic writing has been a topic of debate for a significant period. Some people believe that these sources are still valuable, while others argue that relying on outdated information can result in inaccuracies and a loss of credibility (Ramoroka, 2014). One perspective is that utilising older references can be beneficial as they contain seminal works and historical context that can offer relevant information and foundational knowledge. The sources mentioned have the potential to offer valuable insights into the historical development of a specific field or concept, showcasing the evolution of ideas over time. In addition, certain academic disciplines like history or literature necessitate the use of older sources to establish context and achieve a comprehensive comprehension of the

subject matter. Opponents of outdated sources contend that it can result in inaccuracies and a lack of credibility, particularly in fields that are rapidly evolving (for instance the field of healthcare) (Rivkin, 2020). Relying on outdated sources may lead to a limited viewpoint that fails to consider contemporary advancements and breakthroughs. Old references may have outdated theories or misinformation that has been debunked, which could result in incorrect conclusions. Thus, the appropriateness of utilising outdated references is contingent upon the circumstances of the study. Referencing older works can be deemed appropriate and essential in certain situations to offer a wider comprehension and context of the subject matter. In certain situations, it may be advisable to prioritise current literature and research to guarantee precision and reliability. Researchers must assess the significance and dependability of every reference they utilise, irrespective of its age, to ensure accuracy and credibility.

References

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