



Researching SME/entrepreneurial research

A study of *Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship (JRME)* 2000-2011

Researching
SME

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to focus on how SMEs have been researched in the first 12 years of the new millennium and published in *JRME* between 2000 and 2011. There have been many studies on how SME owner/managers do business, their decision-making processes and ways of delivering marketing activities, and many different methodologies have been used.

Design/methodology/approach – All of the papers published in *JRME* from 2000 to 2011 were analysed using content analysis with Nvivo 9 in relation to the SME definitions used, methodology employed, geographical coverage and the business sectors covered.

Findings – Within the context of a wider study of 14 international journals on small business and entrepreneurship, this paper presents the findings that have emerged from the *JRME* journal according to the SME definitions used, methodology employed, geographical coverage and the business sectors' covered.

Originality/value – This study provides some findings in relation to the variety of studies carried out and the research presented in the *JRME* over a 12-year period.

Keywords Entrepreneurship, Research, Small to medium sized enterprises

Paper type General review



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Introduction

Globally SMEs account for up to 99 per cent of all businesses depending on what definition is used to describe an SME. There is also a category of business variously described as micro or very small business which sometimes are subsumed within the SME categories or separated out as being one to two people in the business or perhaps up to ten people – depending on the version of the definition. In terms of number of businesses this translates into a significant contribution to national economies. For example, in Australia in 2009 there were a total of 2,051,085 businesses, SMEs (<200 employees) accounted for 47.2 per cent of total industry employment at 4.8 million jobs[1]; in the UK in 2011 there were a total of 4.5 million SMEs (<250 employees) accounting for 58.8 per cent of private sector employment at 13.8 million jobs[2]; whilst in the USA in 2009 there were a total of 27.5 million SMEs (<500 employees) accounting for half of all private sector employees at 59.9 million jobs[3].

Generally SMEs are acknowledged to be a vibrant and innovative source of new ideas in economies and, for some time, have been the main source of new employment growth in many advanced economies, as pressures on multi-national enterprises (MNEs) have increased. It is ironic that 40 years ago the rise of the MNE would have seemed unstoppable to many observers as it appeared to be attaining a position as the dominant mode of business organisation. However, while the MNE overshadowed the SME for a significant period rumours of the demise of the SME were much exaggerated. Looking back we now see that its evolutionary capabilities were far more attuned to survival in a dynamic global economy subject to many significant economic shocks over the last 40 years.

SMEs are often defined by what they lack, namely, resources (capital or human), a many layered management structure, access to international or complex markets. Often the focus is on the apparent negative limitations inherent in their smallness and lack of resources compared to larger companies (Carson and Gilmore, 2000; Stokes and Wilson, 2006). Both practitioners and academic researchers recognise that SMEs operate and do business in a different way from large organisations (Hansen and Eggers, 2010; Gilmore and Carson, 2007; Carson and Gilmore, 2000). It is a generally held belief among SME researchers that the basic marketing textbook approach to describing marketing in organisations of different sizes has for many years been poor and failed to capture or reflect the true complexity of SMEs compared to larger organisations. In pedalling “one size fits all” marketing, the richness of the SME approach to marketing has been undersold. In sharp contrast to the traditional text book view many SMEs are started up by entrepreneurially minded people and may develop in an unconventional and/or sporadic manner unlike larger firms operating within a hierarchical structure of key functional managers (Gilmore, 2011).

While it is possible to make a strong case for the importance of the SME in many global economies; when it comes to defining an SME there is far less agreement (McAuley and Gilmore, 2010). Around the globe there are many definitions available and a simple search, for example, on Google, lists many alternative definitions for SMEs. While occasionally issues of ownership and control (family owned, access to external capital) are used to define them, other approaches use turnover figures, but most official government statistics focus on numbers of people employed. In 2004, the Organisation for Economic and Overseas Development (OECD), established to promote policies that improve economic and social well-being of people around the world, began a process of discussing

SME statistics with a view to finding a more systematic approach to measurement[4]. It was recognised that the demand for reliable and internationally comparable data was increasing to enable useful policy analysis. To date progress has been slow.

It is possible to look at a range of international statistics that illustrate a large variation in how an SME is defined. This may be the major variation that researchers use when attempting to define their sample populations in dealing with SMEs but there is diversity in other parameters too. This can include the sectors studied, geographical locations, sample sizes and the methodological approaches used by researchers to study SMEs. It is strongly argued that having an overview of how such fundamental parameters are utilised in research projects will enhance our understanding of what has been achieved in research terms; and also pave the way for creating a future research agenda (McAuley and Gilmore, 2010). If a baseline can be established in our research thinking then we have a common benchmark on which to build future research which should enable researchers around the globe to calibrate their findings in a way that largely has not been possible before. The standing of any future research conducted should be greatly enhanced by having this capacity with the genuine possibility that the impact of findings will be greatly improved.

Research in SME marketing

Although researchers have been studying SMEs and how they are different from large businesses for many years, there is no universal approach to defining and researching these firms nor their owners and managers. Research has focused on many aspects of SMEs, for example, how SMEs are created, grow, become successful or fail, and how entrepreneurially they behave. It is possible to applaud a rich and diverse research agenda but arguably we have as researchers been too keen to pursue individual rather than an agreed collective agenda; been too content to research SMEs in silos rather than making strategic lateral connections in our research and in our thinking.

Perhaps this is being too harsh, as defining SMEs is not simple and it is undoubtedly easier to adopt a “laissez faire” approach; but in letting a thousand flowers bloom we have unwittingly weakened the impact of our work. Historically the measurements used often relied on such factors as number of employees, sales turnover, profitability and net worth (Storey, 1994; Deakins and Freel, 2006). In the UK, the most widely accepted definition is that based on the findings of the Bolton Committee Report (1971) which defines a small firm as an independent business, managed by its owner or part-owners and having a small market share. However, the difficulty with using these terms as a basis for definition is that they are not always appropriate as they can be affected by regional variations (Hill, 2001). In the USA a small business is defined as being an independent business having fewer than 500 employees. However, firms wishing to be designated a small business for government programs such as contracting must meet size standards which vary by industry sector. So there is no uniform definition of an SME that is internationally used.

The most recent definition of an SME in the UK can be found in the Companies Act 2006. This government definition specifies that an SME is either a “company and is not a member of a large group” or a business that although not an actual company “would be a SME company” if it were to be a company. It elaborates by noting that a small company is one with no more than 50 employees, turnover of \leq £5.6m and a balance sheet total of \leq £2.8m; whereas, a medium company is one with no more than 250 employees, turnover of \leq £22.8m and a balance sheet total of \leq £11.4m.

Similarly, recent EU definitions specify that a small company is one with no more than 50 employees, turnover of $\leq \text{€}10\text{m}$ and/or a balance sheet total of $\leq \text{€}10\text{m}$; a medium company is one with no more than 250 employees, turnover of $\leq \text{€}50\text{m}$ and/or a balance sheet total of $\leq \text{€}43\text{m}$; it further specifies a micro company as one with no more than ten employees, turnover of $\leq \text{€}2\text{m}$ and/or a balance sheet of $\leq \text{€}2\text{m}$.

It is worth noting some of the international variations in the definition of SMEs. For example, in Australia the two most common ways of defining a small business are based on annual turnover, number of employees or some combination of both of these measures. Thus, for statistical purposes the Australian Bureau of Statistics (DIISR, 2011) defines a small business as employing 0-19 employees. Micro businesses are small business employing zero to four employees. Medium is defined as 20-199 and large as 200 or more employees. It is worth noting that these definitions as are based on headcount and not on a full-time equivalent measure.

The picture is more confusing in a newly industrializing country such as Brazil where 98 per cent of businesses are defined as small. However, the method of definition has a degree of complexity about it as there are definitions based on annual gross income, as well as ones based on number of employees where the categories are different depending on which part of the economy the business is in, so if "industrial" the SME is 20-499 employees or if "service/commerce" the SME is ten to 99 according to the Brazilian bureau of small and medium sized enterprises.

For further variation take a developing country like Vietnam where SMEs represent 97-99 per cent of all business and the SME definition varies by sector. So for agriculture, forestry and fisheries and in the industry and construction sectors SME is ten to 300 employees, while in the trade and service sector it is ten to 100 employees. In addition to the employee measure there is also a categorisation based on total capital.

It is clear from this overview that while there is no consistency in how SMEs have been defined in academic studies, the reason why SMEs are the focus of academic attention is more straightforward. Economically SMEs contribute to job creation, value creation, innovation, investment and exporting across many countries at different stages of development. Academically, research focusing on SMEs has attracted growing interest over the last 30 years. This is illustrated in the growth in academic journals focusing on research in SMEs since the early 1980s (Torres, 1997).

The investigation and review of the scope and nature of research in any field is useful at many different levels. It illustrates the distinctiveness of the field in relation to the wider more generic area of business research. It helps to identify the fragmentation and range of theoretical approaches and methodologies used to investigate the field (Torres, 1997). It can also be useful in illustrating the diversity of research topics within the research area (Lesage and Wechtler, 2012). The wealth of material available to us now after so many years presents an unparalleled opportunity to review and reflect on what has been conducted and achieved.

Understanding how, when and why past research has been conducted will be crucial to the improvement of the overall quality of the research process and progression in any given field (Boissin *et al.*, 2000). A review of past studies allows missing information to be highlighted, such as the nature of respondents or the precise mention of the time frame of the research. Investigating the range of methodologies used to study SMEs over time, in different situations, the respondents used and contexts used for past research will also shed light on the overall contribution to the field.

A review of the early papers in *Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship (JRME)* from 1987 to 1999 revealed that although research using qualitative, descriptive studies were widely used (39 per cent of papers between 1987 and 1999), there were also studies that used causal empirical research (22 per cent) and 9 per cent papers using anecdotal examples (Gilmore and Coviello, 1999).

Given the very individual nature of many SMEs, it is important to take account of the context of how and what has been researched. For example, the theoretical framework that underpins a research project, the overall conclusions drawn from a study, the geographical and business sector in which the SME operate are clearly important. It can illustrate extremes by looking at unique situations in case studies, and by carrying out comparisons of different situations (for example, in different market sectors or geographical locations). These will all set the context for a study of how SMEs are defined in different studies throughout the world and the methodologies chosen to study them.

Methodology

Stage 1 of this research was to select leading SME and entrepreneurship journals from Europe, North America and Australasia and conduct a systematic content review of the parameters of the empirical studies reported in each journal. The journals represent a significant body of output where researchers working at the marketing-entrepreneurship interface place their work. 14 journals were selected and these are being investigated as part of a larger longitudinal study. The selection of journals is shown in the Appendix.

The long-term research project aims to analyse all empirical papers included in the journals between 2000 and 2011 and to create a comprehensive review of what academics in the area have been studying and how they have been approaching such studies conceptually and empirically.

This paper reports on the findings derived from the analysis of the journal closely associated with the AM Entrepreneurial and Small Business SIG and the UIC Marketing Entrepreneurship Interface SIG Group, the *JRME*. These findings will summarise the different definitions and methodologies used to investigate SMEs between 2000 and 2011.

Content analysis with QSR Nvivo 9

There were 94 papers published in the *JRME* between 2000 and 2011. In order to objectively study and measure the nature of this work a content analysis using QSR Nvivo 9 was conducted in order to explore, compare, understand and describe the main areas with which the study was concerned (Stemler, 2001; Sprott and Miyazaki, 2002).

The use of content analysis presented the authors with many advantages including the opportunity to carefully and systematically examine and condense a vast amount of information presented over a long period of time into manageable categories that would have otherwise been impossible to analyse. It also allowed for a visual and descriptive presentation of the findings of the research. The use of Nvivo 9 also ensured that the authors had a more complete and accurate set of data that could be more rigorously analysed, in terms of conducting complex cross category analyses in comparison to a traditional paper-based manual analysis; whilst ensuring that this study's methodology was replicable to the other journal analyses that form the other

Data coding and analysis

The initial starting point for this research was not to build or develop a theory but rather as with the nature of qualitative research to simply address the broad question as to how SMEs are defined in the marketing/entrepreneurship literature. The prior knowledge, assumptions and observations of the authors, as well as those of other experts in the area, allowed for the subsequent development of the research area and an initial “broad-brush” or “bucket” list of coding categories that formed the basis of an excel spreadsheet. All 94 articles were then carefully read and the relevant “chunks of data” cut and paste onto the spreadsheet under the relevant category – SME definition, geographic area of study, sector and methodology. Once the spreadsheet was complete, it was then uploaded onto Nvivo 9 for further analysis where it was possible to further “split” each category (node) into specific codes. For example, the broad methodology category or node was further split into quantitative, qualitative and sample size codes and consequently each of these was split into further sub-codes such as qualitative methods (focus group, in-depth interview, observation, etc.). This allowed for an in-depth analysis of all the data and facilitated the capture and exploration of the finer nuances of all 94 articles (Richards, 1999; Bazeley, 2011).

The main disadvantage noted by the authors in the use of content analysis was the concerns raised regarding the general reliability of qualitative data analysis and specifically the reliability of data generated by more than one researcher on a project. In order to guard against this a systematic procedure was rigorously followed that ensured all articles were initially read and then processed by a researcher onto the excel spreadsheet. Each article was read by a second researcher and the spreadsheet checked. As a final check, a third researcher also conducted random spot checks of the dataset in order to corroborate the data and ensure complete accuracy in the representation of all 94 articles (Weber, 1985; Carson *et al.*, 2001; Neuendorf, 2002; Bazeley, 2011).

Findings

This research sought to provide an overview of the nature of the research carried out and published in *JRME* between 2000 and 2011. The findings are presented in relation to: SME definitions used, methodology employed, geographical coverage and business sectors covered.

SME definitions

The vast majority of the 94 papers published in the *JRME* between 2000 and 2011 did not include a definition of an SME or precisely define the size of the companies they studied (Figure 1); they were simply referred to generically as SMEs. 60 of these papers were specifically focused upon either studies of SMEs (28) or on studies of the SME-entrepreneurship interface (32). There were 34 papers that reported on studies that specifically examined the area of entrepreneurship (30 papers), social entrepreneurship (one paper) or an area beyond SME-entrepreneurship (three papers) such as the statistical theory and reporting of data and therefore did not need to include a definition as the specific focus was not upon SMEs.

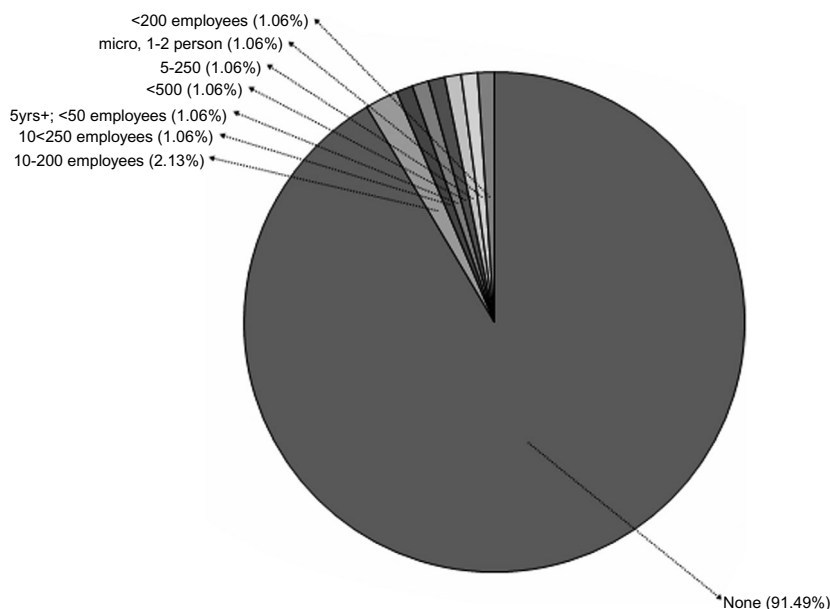


Figure 1.
SME definitions in *JRME*
papers 2000-2011

Only eight papers included any kind of definition of the SMEs they studied. These included five papers where the definition referred only to the number of employees. One study considered SMEs as companies with between ten and 200 employees. The second study was conducted in China and defined SME companies as those with 500 or fewer employees. The third study was carried out in the UK and defined SMEs as companies with ten to 250 employees. The fourth paper considered companies with ten to 200 employees as SMEs and the fifth paper was a cross or multi-country study (across England-Wales-Northern Ireland-Scotland, Canada) which examined micro SMEs as those being one- to two-person businesses and small firms under 50 employees.

The definition in the other three papers also referred to the number of employees but included ownership and income as part of their SME definition. These included a study in the USA that loosely defined an SME as being a 75 + employee subsidiary corporation of a large 400,000 + employee based parent company and a micro-SME as having one to ten employees; an Australian study of companies with less than 200 employees and turnover of more than AUD\$250,000 but with no single customer accounting for more than 50 per cent of a total turnover; and a Canadian study as those being greater than five and less than 250 employees but regarded as being stand-alone enterprises.

Research methodologies employed

A review of the methodologies employed in the 94 papers published in the *JRME* between 2000 and 2011 identified that 45 papers were either conceptual in nature or were case studies using published data (Figure 2). 37 of these papers were based solely upon personal comment or opinion of the author(s). However, there were seven papers that were based on compiling published data in a range of industry contexts, for example a study of the clock industry in the USA (Grinder *et al.*, 2001),

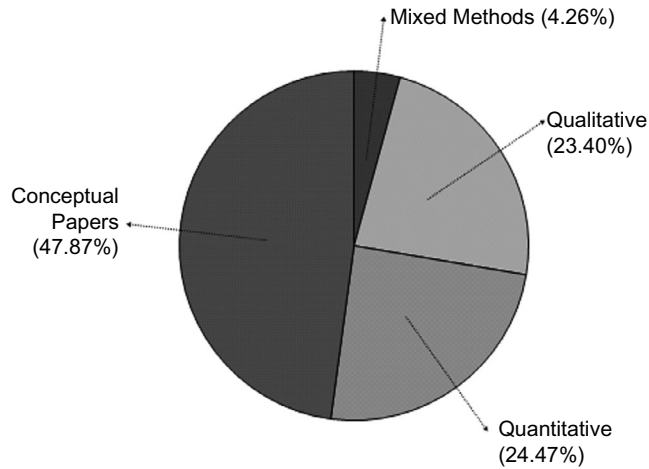


Figure 2.
Research methodologies of
JRME papers 2000-2011

and a study of veterinary services and a product supply firm in Australia (Fisher and Stanton, 2001).

The empirical methodology employed by the remaining 49 papers published during this time period was split between the use of a quantitative (23 papers) and qualitative methodologies (22 papers); a mixed method methodology was employed in the remaining four papers.

Quantitative studies. The 23 papers that employed a quantitative methodology between 2000 and 2011, concerned studies that were conducted across a range of countries; with the USA (eight) and UK (four) accounting for just over half of them (Figure 3).

22 studies used data collected across a range of questionnaire surveys; one study used a regression analysis of published data as its basis. Not unexpectedly, it was found that the use of postal surveys (six) was the predominant survey method between

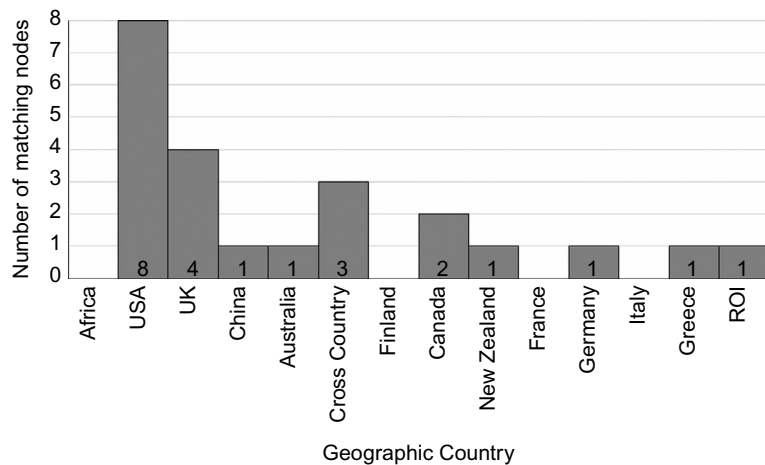


Figure 3.
Geographic country
versus quantitative
methodology

2000 and 2006 and more recently this has been superseded by the use of online surveys (five) from 2007 to 2011. While in four of the studies it was not possible to identify the actual survey method used, the remaining studies used the full range of survey methods available. There were three self-completion and one face-to-face, one telephone/fax and one panel survey. One further study used analysis of a range of published secondary data surveys (multi-study) to generate its own primary data findings (Figure 4). The sample sizes of these quantitative studies ranged from as low as 24 to as high as 794; with the average sample size of 175.

Qualitative studies. The 22 papers in the *JRME* between 2000 and 2011 that employed a qualitative methodology included studies across a range of other countries and again the UK (nine) and the USA (three) accounted for just over half of them (Figure 5).

In-depth interviewing (11) was the most predominant qualitative method used; accounting for half of these studies (Figure 6). The sizes of these in-depth interviews ranged from as low as five to as high as 60. With the exception of the focus group method (which was only used in conjunction with other methodologies and methods), the remaining studies used a range of qualitative methods including case studies (four) in the health, real estate, music and technology sectors; various types of content analyses (five); as well as one observation study to identify management beliefs and practices, skills, education, and patterns of behaviour that appears to be associated with entrepreneurial success in the USA (Payne and Bell, 2006) and one study that combined both in-depth interviewing and a series of focus groups with a content analysis to develop a conceptual model of the processes of marketing as undertaken by entrepreneurs (Stokes, 2000).

Mixed method studies. The four empirical papers that employed a mixed-method methodology all used survey questionnaires; two studies, based in the UK and the USA, used sample sizes of 320 and 142 survey questionnaires in addition to small focus groups and the other two studies, based in Australia and the UK, used sample sizes

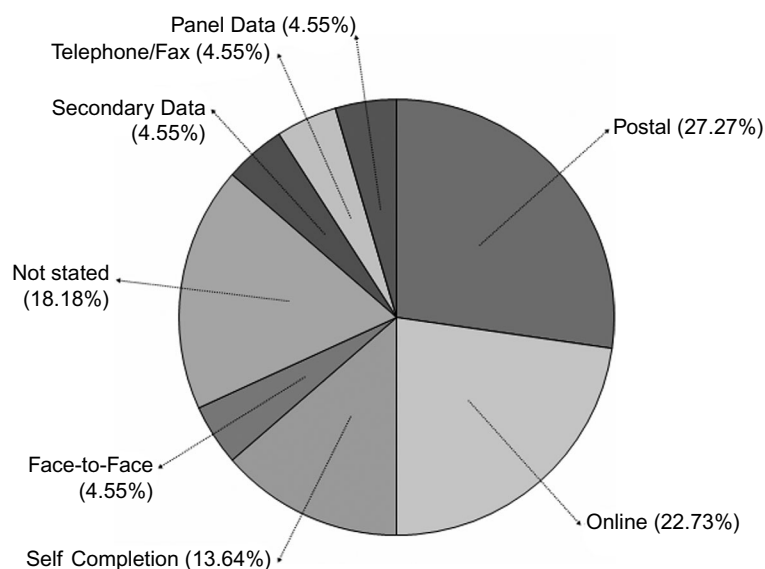


Figure 4.
Survey method of *JRME*
papers 2000-2011

Figure 5.
Geographic country
versus qualitative
methodology

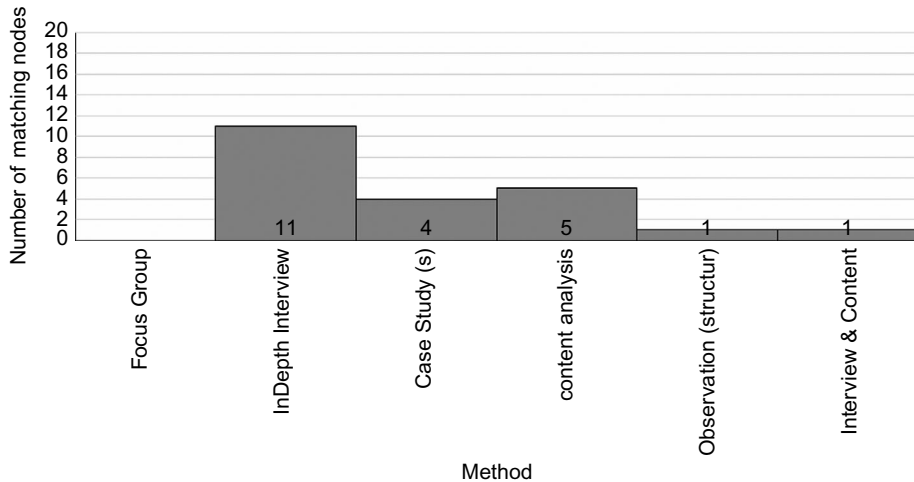
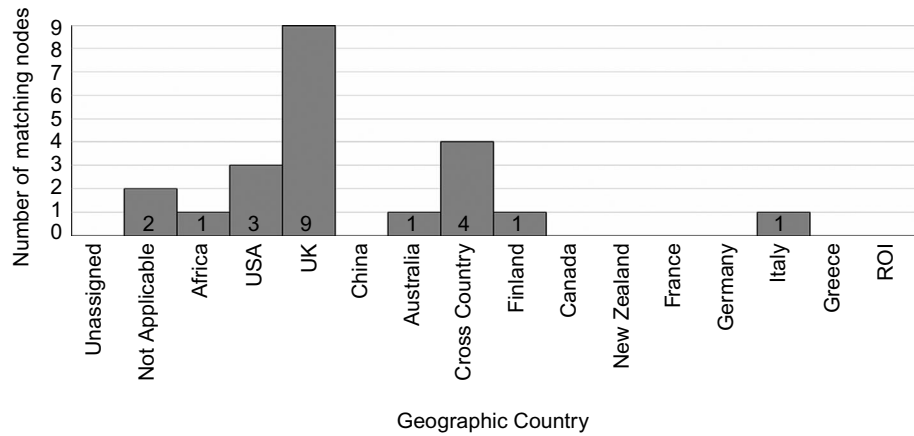


Figure 6.
Qualitative methodologies
of *JRME* papers 2000-2011

of 21 and 100 survey questionnaires along with in-depth interviews. Not only was the use of mixed-methods the least used methodology in the *JRME* 2000-2011, it was also the only methodology that has not been used since 2007; rather than seeing any increase in its use it appears that researchers publishing in this journal are increasingly using either qualitative or quantitative methodologies in their work.

Geographical coverage

An initial assessment of the geographic coverage of the 94 papers published in the *JRME* between 2000 and 2011 identified that in 36 studies the issue of their geographic area was not relevant (as they were based on individual opinions on a range of issues). The remaining 58 papers were predominantly concerned with studies either in the UK or the USA, 19 papers were based in the UK and 14 were based in the USA.

The remaining 25 papers covered a wide range of geographic areas (Figure 7). Seven papers were based in Europe; two were based in the Republic of Ireland and one each in

Greece, Italy, Germany, France and Finland. Six papers were based in Australasia; four in Australia and two in New Zealand. Two papers reported on studies in Canada and one each in Africa and China.

A further eight papers focussed upon cross or multi-country analyses. Some reported on studies carried out within or across the UK (England-Wales-Northern Ireland-Scotland); one had a UK-USA focus, one had a UK-Caribbean focus and one had a UK-Canada-global focus. Of the remaining papers, one had a US-Turkey-Spain focus; one had a Norway-France-Portugal focus; and the other two were classed as inherently having a global focus as they were concerned with global conceptual studies and based upon an online community and virtual meeting place for respondents across range of countries.

An overall analysis of the geographic coverage of the *JRME* between 2000 and 2011 shows that the majority of papers were concerned with studies in the USA or the UK, i.e. 38 of the relevant 58 papers (33 individual studies and five cross or multi-country analyses).

Business sectors researched

The majority of studies focused on the nature of entrepreneurial and small business phenomenon in different sectors (Figure 8). Papers were either focused on non-sector specific issues (22 papers) or were based on cross-sector criteria (25 papers). 20 papers focused on one sector only and these papers were often written as case studies and/or focused on the entrepreneurial nature of how business was carried out. The remaining papers were predominantly commentary type papers.

Conclusion

Based on this initial part of a much larger longitudinal study, it is evident that SME/entrepreneurial marketing researchers are interested in a very wide range of

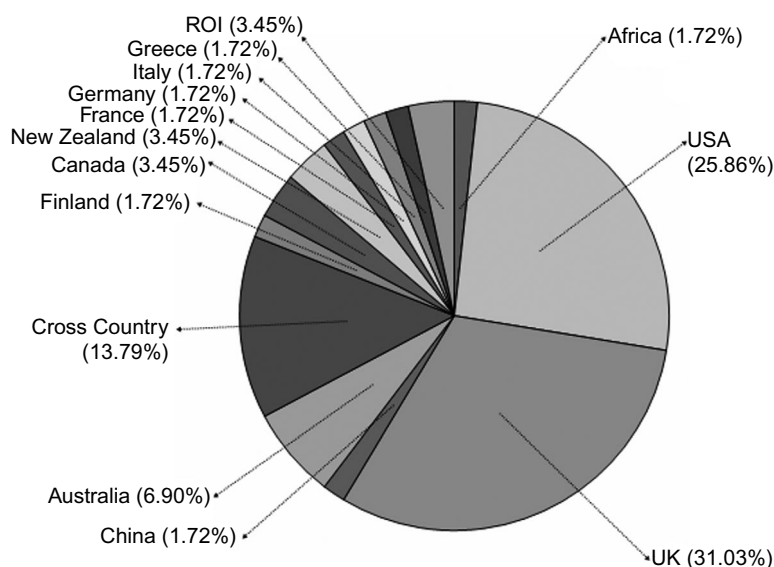


Figure 7.
Geographic converge of
JRME papers 2000-2011

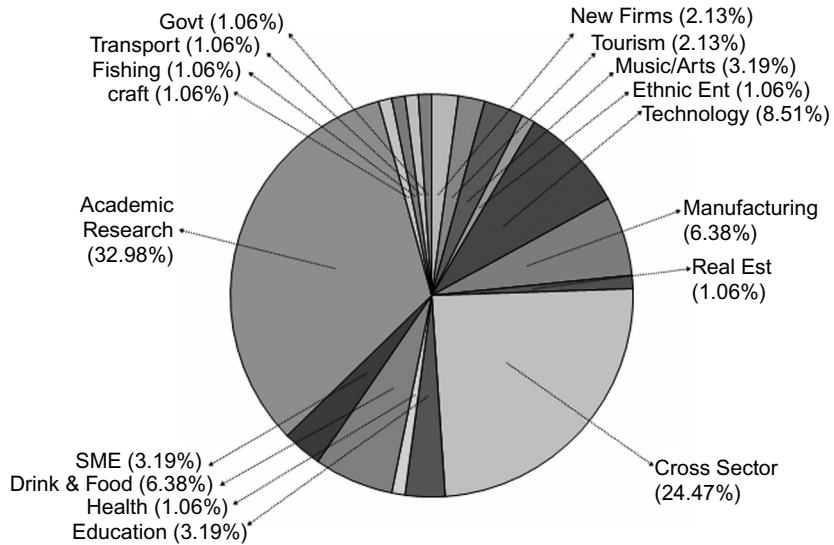


Figure 8.
Sectors researched in
JRME papers 2000-2011

issues, with many different aspects in a very complex arena of national and international business. Regarding the brief overview of the 94 papers published in *JRME* over the past 12 years, it is evident that researchers in this field are much more focused on the phenomenon they are studying and less so on the need to define them.

The vast majority of the 94 papers did not include a definition of a SME or precisely define the size of the companies they studied; only eight papers included any kind of definition of the SMEs they studied. The 49 papers that employed an empirical methodology used a split of a quantitative and qualitative methodologies; a mixed method methodology was employed in only four papers. The majority of papers were concerned with studies in the geographic areas of the USA or the UK and the remaining covering a wide range of geographic areas. A wide range of business sectors were also examined including music, arts, craft, technology, fishing, health and manufacturing; as well as papers focusing on non-sector specific issues or on cross-sector criteria.

However, we are at a very early stage of research analysis and further work will allow us to point to the implications for SME research. This will enable us to highlight what research areas and topics researchers have focussed on so far, how they have gone about it and to point to opportunities for a future research agenda in this area.

The main contribution of this paper is to highlight the research carried out within a 12 year period in the early life of the *JRME*. It is hoped that this first stage of analysis from the empirical data regarding *JRME* will be useful for researchers interested in this domain and to generate input which can be used to make the study more robust and useful to the growing body of SME researchers'.

Notes

1. www.innovation.gov.au/SmallBusiness/KeyFacts/Documents/SmallBusinessPublication.pdf
2. www.fsb.org.uk/stats

3. <http://web.sba.gov/faqs/faqindex.cfm?areaID=24>
4. www.oecd.org/industry/smesandentrepreneurship/31919286.pdf

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Appendix

The journals selected for study are:

Europe

Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development (UK).

International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research (UK).

International Small Business Journal (UK).

International Journal of Globalisation and Small Business (Ed in Germany).

Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship (UK).

North America

Journal of Small Business Management (USA).

Journal of Business Venturing (USA).

Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice (USA).

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business (USA).

Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship (Canada).

Journal of Small Business Strategy (USA).

Small Business Economics.

Australasian

Australasian Marketing Journal (Aus.).

Journal of Entrepreneurship (India).

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