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Reference List Errors in Manuscripts Submitted to a Journal for Review for Publication

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Abstract

Style errors outlined in the *Publication Manual* of the American Psychological Association (APA) were examined among 131 manuscripts submitted to *Research in the Schools*, a nationally refereed journal, over a 6-year period. Specifically, a mixed research design was utilized to determine the frequency and characteristics of APA errors committed in the reference lists of these manuscripts. Findings revealed that authors committed more than 12 reference list errors per manuscript, on average (M = 12.83, SD = 7.25). Further, a total of 466 unique reference list errors were identified, which yielded the following 14 reference list error themes: general errors, reference heading, names of authors, publication year/date, title of work, publisher information, source of journal/periodical, source of authored book, source of edited book, source of website, source of paper presentation, source of dissertation/thesis, source of newspaper article, and source of government document. Implications of these and other findings are discussed.

Keywords: reference list errors; bibliographic errors

1. Introduction

Onwuegbuzie, Combs, Slate, and Frels (2010) discussed the findings of Onwuegbuzie and Combs (2009), who identified the 60 most common American Psychological Association (APA) errors among 110 sets of authors who submitted manuscripts to *Research in the Schools*, a nationally refereed journal, over a 6-year period. Of the 60 APA errors that were identified, the most prevalent error was the incorrect use of numbers, which occurred in 57.3% of the manuscripts, which, as concluded by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2010), represents an extremely large effect size. However, it should be noted that Combs et al. examined APA errors committed in the body of the manuscript and did not examine APA errors pertaining to reference lists.

Over the last four decades, several researchers have investigated the accuracy of reference lists in published articles across numerous fields (e.g., business, economics, medicine, social work, psychology, library information science) by comparing each reference contained in the reference list to the original work (e.g., Adhikari, & Bhandari, 2011; Faunce & Job, 2001; Gatten, 2010; Kristof, 1997; O'Connor & Kristof, 2001; Spivey & Wilks, 2004; White, 1987). Most of these researchers have reported unacceptably high rates of errors, despite the fact that, presumably, these articles had undergone a copyediting process. Thus, it is likely that manuscripts submitted to journals that have not yet been professionally copyedited in general and manuscripts that end up being rejected in particular would have even higher error rates in the reference lists. However, to date, no researcher has examined the accuracy of reference lists of manuscripts submitted to journals. Moreover, as yet, no researcher has examined the extent to which reference lists in works—whether published or unpublished—conform to the style guides of the respective journals. This was the goal of the present study. Specifically, the purpose of the study was to determine the frequency and characteristics of APA errors committed in the reference lists of manuscripts initially submitted to a nationally refereed journal, and to explore relationships between reference list errors and selected manuscript variables (e.g., number of authors, editor decision).

2. Method

We conducted a mixed research study wherein we examined 131 manuscripts submitted to *Research in the Schools* over a 6-year period. These manuscripts represented approximately 60% of all manuscripts submitted to this journal over this time frame, which made our findings generalizable to the population of manuscripts submitted to *Research in the Schools*. This 6-year period represented the years 2004 to 2010. We selected the year 2004 because it represented 3 years after the fifth edition of the *Publication Manual* was introduced—a sufficient time for users of the fourth edition to become familiar with the fifth edition of the *Publication Manual* of APA. Further, we selected 2010 as the end point because it represents the last year of the fifth edition and the introduction of the sixth edition.

We examined carefully the reference lists of all manuscripts and meticulously documented every reference list error committed by these 131 sets of authors. Also, we collected the

following information: the topic of the manuscript, genre of the manuscript, number of authors per manuscript, gender of the primary author, the geographical location of the primary author's affiliation, and the Carnegie Classification (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d.) that characterized each primary author's academic institution. Additionally, we documented every APA error appearing in these 131 manuscripts.

Because each manuscript contributed both qualitative and quantitative data at the same time point, the mixed research sampling design used was a *concurrent design using identical samples* (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2006; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007), which has been found to be the most common sampling design in mixed research studies conducted in the social and behavioral sciences (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2007). Further, in a concurrent design using identical samples, the qualitative and quantitative data are collected at approximately the same point in time (i.e., concurrently) such that the collection of one type of data (e.g., qualitative data) does not depend on the collection of the other type of data (e.g., quantitative data) (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007).

The qualitative and quantitative components of the study were given approximately equal weight. As such, an equal-status mixed research design was used (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). Using Leech and Onwuegbuzie's (2009) typology, the research represented a fully mixed concurrent equal-status design, wherein the qualitative and quantitative data were collected at approximately the same point in time, with the quantitative and qualitative components being given approximately equal weight and mixing occurring within or across the data collection, analysis, and interpretation stages. The rationale for combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, based on Greene, Caracelli, and Graham's (1989) framework, was that of complementarity (i.e., use of quantitative and qualitative methods "to measure overlapping but also different facets of a phenomenon" [p. 258]), initiation (i.e., use of quantitative and qualitative methods "to uncover paradox and contradiction" [p. 258]), and expansion (i.e., use of quantitative and qualitative methods to "extend the scope, breadth, and range of inquiry" [p. 269]). Also, being *dialectic pluralists* (i.e., believing in incorporating multiple epistemological perspectives within the same inquiry; Johnson, 2011, 2012; also see Onwuegbuzie, Johnson, & Collins, 2009), we utilized mixed analysis techniques—specifically, a sequential mixed analysis (Onwuegbuzie & Combs, 2010)—to investigate the prevalence and characteristics of reference list errors in the 131 manuscripts. Specifically, we used a four-stage sequential mixed analysis procedure.

3. Results

3.1 Stage 1 Findings

A classical content analysis (Berelson, 1952) revealed a total of 1,681 reference list errors across the 131 manuscripts, yielding more than 12 citation errors per manuscript, on average (M = 12.83, SD = 7.25). The number of reference list errors per manuscript ranged from 1 to 36, with 84.0% of manuscripts containing more than five reference list errors, 56.5% of

manuscripts containing more than 10 reference list errors, and 15.3% of manuscripts containing more than 20 reference list errors. The classical content analysis also led to the identification of a total of 466 unique reference list errors that were committed across these 131 manuscripts. Further, this analysis revealed that the prevalence of each of these reference list errors ranged from 1 (0.75%) to 102 (76.7%).

Because of the number of reference list errors identified (i.e., n = 466), a decision was made that an error was significantly common when it occurred a minimum of eight times. The cut-point of eight was used because it represented an endorsement rate of 6%, which translated to a moderate effect size, using Cohen's (1988, 180–183) non-linear arcsine transformation criteria. Interestingly, a total of 50 reference list errors yielded endorsement rates of eight or greater. Table 1 presents these 50 most prevalent reference list errors.

Table 1: Stage 1 Findings: The 50 Most Prevalent Reference List Errors

Reference List Error	Frequency[1]
Serial (issue) numbers presented when the page numbers in each volume are continuous	102
Comma not presented to separate two authors	56
Superscripts inappropriately used when providing edition number	53
Space not presented between initials of each author	49
Period not presented after the author's name (when the author does not represent a person but an organization) and before the publication year	37
Website inappropriately underlined	34
Month not given for a paper presentation	31
"Publications" or "Publications Inc" inappropriately presented when listing the publisher	30
Reference list not double spaced	28
Citations not presented in alphabetical order	27
Title of journal article inappropriately capitalized	27
Comma not presented after retrieval year of Internal source	25
Volume number not italicized	24
"Inc" inappropriately presented when listing the publisher	21
Title of book inappropriately capitalized	20
"&" not used to separate the last two authors	18
Reference heading is bolded	18
Retrieval date not provided for web-based citations	18
First letter of the second-part of the title not capitalized	18
Title of edited books inappropriately capitalized	17
Title of journal not italicized	16
Space not presented to separate initials of each editor of an edited book	15

Reference List Error	Frequency[1]
"And" instead of "&" to separate the last two authors	14
City, state, and/or publisher not always provided	14
Title of book not always italicized	14
Period inappropriately appears after the numbers of ERIC	14
Page number of book chapters not presented after the title of the book	12
Space not presented between "pp " and the page number	12
Page number of journal articles not presented	12
Initials of all authors not presented	11
State pertaining to the publisher not abbreviated	11
Reference heading represented by all uppercase text	11
Serial number not presented when discontinuous when the page numbers in each volume are not continuous	11
Volume number of journal article not provided	11
Comma not presented to separate the last two authors of a reference (when references have more than two authors)	10
Period not presented after an author's initial	10
Volume number of journal (periodicals) not italicized	10
Abbreviation (of authors) inappropriately included	9
Citations not presented in chronological order	9
Title of paper presentation not italicized	9
Period inappropriately presented at the end of the reference (e.g., when the reference ends with a website address)	9
Title of edited book not italicized	9
Title of journal article inappropriately italicized	9
Period not presented at the end of reference	8
Reference list does not begin on a separate page	8
Comma inappropriately appear between initials of some authors	8
State of publisher not provided	8
"And" instead of "&" used to separate the editors of edited books	8
Space inappropriately appear between six numbers of an ERIC	8
Space inappropriately appear between volume number and series number of a periodical	8

[1] Frequencies between 8 and 21 represent moderate effect sizes; frequencies greater than 22 represent large effect sizes, using Cohen's (1988, 180–3) non-linear arcsine transformation criteria.

3.2 Stage 2 Findings

A constant comparison analysis of these 466 reference list errors yielded the following 14 reference list error themes: (a) General errors; (b) Reference heading, (c) Names of authors, (d) Publication year/date, (e) Title of work, (f) Publisher information, (g) Source of journal/periodical, (h) Source of authored book, (i) Source of edited book, (j) Source of website, (k) Source of paper presentation, (l) Source of dissertation/thesis, (m) Source of newspaper article, and (n) Source of government document. Once these 14 themes had been identified, the 131 manuscripts then were quantitized (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) to determine the prevalence rates of these 14 themes.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics regarding the number of reference list errors for each of the 14 citation error themes. This table shows that reference list errors associated with the Source of journal/periodical was the most prevalent, followed by reference list errors associated with Names of authors.

Table 2: Stage 2 Findings: Prevalence Rates of Themes Emerging from Reference List Errors for Manuscripts Submitted to Research in the Schools

Reference List Error Theme	Total Number of Unique Reference List Errors Contained in Theme	Total Number of Reference List Errors Contained in Theme	Average incidence of reference list errors per manuscript (%)
Source of journal/periodical	91	335	92.4
Names of authors	53	333	88.5
Source of edited book	55	191	64.1
Publisher information	46	146	61.8
Title of work	35	108	52.7
Source of website	25	120	51.1
General errors	32	110	48.9
Source of authored book	31	94	48.1
Source of paper presentation	30	92	35.9
Source of government document	23	52	22.9
Publication year/date,	19	38	22.1
Reference heading	7	39	18.3
Source of dissertation/thesis	15	19	10.7
Source of newspaper article	4	4	3.1

3.3 Stage 3 Findings

A principal component analysis was used to determine the number of factors underlying the 14 reference list error themes. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was greater than .5 (i.e., KMO = .55) and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($X^2[91] = 133.09$, $p = .003$), which justified the principal component analysis. The eigenvalue-greater-than-one rule (i.e., K1; Kaiser, 1958) indicated that four factors (i.e., meta-themes) be retained, as did the *scree* test. In addition, a parallel analysis was conducted as a validity check to the K1 and scree test (Zwick & Velicer, 1982, 1986). For the current data of 131 manuscripts and 14 variables (i.e., reference list error themes), a series of (i.e., $n = 1{,}000$) random data matrices of size 131 x 14 was generated, and eigenvalues were computed for the correlation matrices for the original data and for each of the 1,000 random data sets. The eigenvalues derived from the actual data then were compared to the eigenvalues derived from the random data, in order to identify the number of components that accounted for more variance than did the components derived from random data. This parallel analysis also suggested retaining four factors.

This four-factor solution is presented in Table 3. Using a cutoff correlation of 0.3, recommended by Lambert and Durand (1975) as an acceptable lower bound for pattern/structure coefficients, Table 3 reveals that the following five reference list error themes had pattern/structure coefficients with large effect sizes on the first factor: Source of website, Source of journal/periodical, Publication year/date, names of authors, and title of work; the following three reference list error themes had pattern/structure coefficients with large effect sizes on the second factor: Source of edited book, Source of authored book, and Publisher information; the following four reference list error themes had pattern/structure coefficients with large effect sizes on the third factor: Source of newspaper article, Reference heading, Source of dissertation/thesis, and Source of paper presentation; and the following two reference list error themes had pattern/structure coefficients with large effect sizes on the fourth factor: Source of government document and General errors. The first meta-theme (i.e., Factor 1) was labeled *Author, Year, Journal, and Website*; the second meta-theme (i.e., Factor 2) was labeled *Book and Publisher*, the third meta-theme (i.e., Factor 3) was labeled *Heading and Non-Journal Sources*, and the fourth meta-theme (i.e., Factor 4) was labeled *Government and Miscellaneous Errors*.

Table 3: Stage 3 Findings: Summary of Themes and Factor Pattern/Structure Coefficients from Principal Component Analysis (Varimax): Four-Factor Solution

Factor Coefficients[1]					
Theme	1	2	3	4	Communality Coefficient
Source of website	**.65**	-.15	.11	**-.40**	.62
Source of journal/periodical	**.56**	.06	.05	.11	.33
Publication year/date	**.55**	-.02	-.01	.23	.36
Names of authors	**.48**	.24	-.16	-.05	.32
Title of work	**.40**	.20	.19	.25	.30
Source of edited book	-.03	**.80**	-.04	-.20	.68
Source of authored book	.04	**.88**	.01	.29	.86
Publisher information	.25	**.53**	.26	-.04	.41
Source of newspaper article	-.05	-.03	**.64**	.05	.42
Reference heading	-.11	-.02	**.64**	.13	.44
Source of dissertation/thesis	.16	.27	**.45**	-.05	.30
Source of paper presentation	.22	.11	**.42**	-.22	.29
Source of government document	.16	.04	-.13	**.72**	.56
General error	.06	-.05	**.36**	**.56**	.45
Trace	1.60	1.59	1.48	1.30	5.97
% variance explained	11.45	11.35	10.60	9.31	42.71

[1]Coefficients in bold represent pattern/structure coefficients with the largest effect size within each theme using a cut-off value of 0.3 recommended by Lambert and Durand (1975).

The *trace* (i.e., the proportion of variance explained, or eigenvalue, after rotation; Hetzel, 1996) revealed that the *Author, Year, Journal, and Website* meta-theme (i.e., Factor 1) explained 10.45% of the total variance; the *Book and Publisher* meta-theme (i.e., Factor 2) accounted for 11.35% of the variance; the *Heading and Non-Journal Sources* meta-theme (i.e., Factor 3) explained 10.60% of the total variance; and the *Government and Miscellaneous Errors* meta-theme (i.e., Factor 4) explained 9.31% of the total variance. These four meta-themes combined explained 42.70% of the total variance, yielding a large effect size (Henson, Capraro, & Capraro, 2004; Henson & Roberts, 2006).

The manifest effect size (i.e., actual reference list error rate per meta-theme) associated with the four meta-themes was as follows: *Author, Year, Journal, and Website* (97.7%), *Book and Publisher* (84.0%), *Heading and Non-Journal Sources* (54.2%), and *Government and Miscellaneous Errors* (57.3%). Figure 1 displays the thematic structure (i.e., relationships among the reference list error themes and the reference list error meta-themes), including the manifest effect sizes and latent effect sizes. This figure represents what Onwuegbuzie and Dickinson (2008) referred to as a crossover visual representation, which involves integrating both quantitative and qualitative findings within the same display.

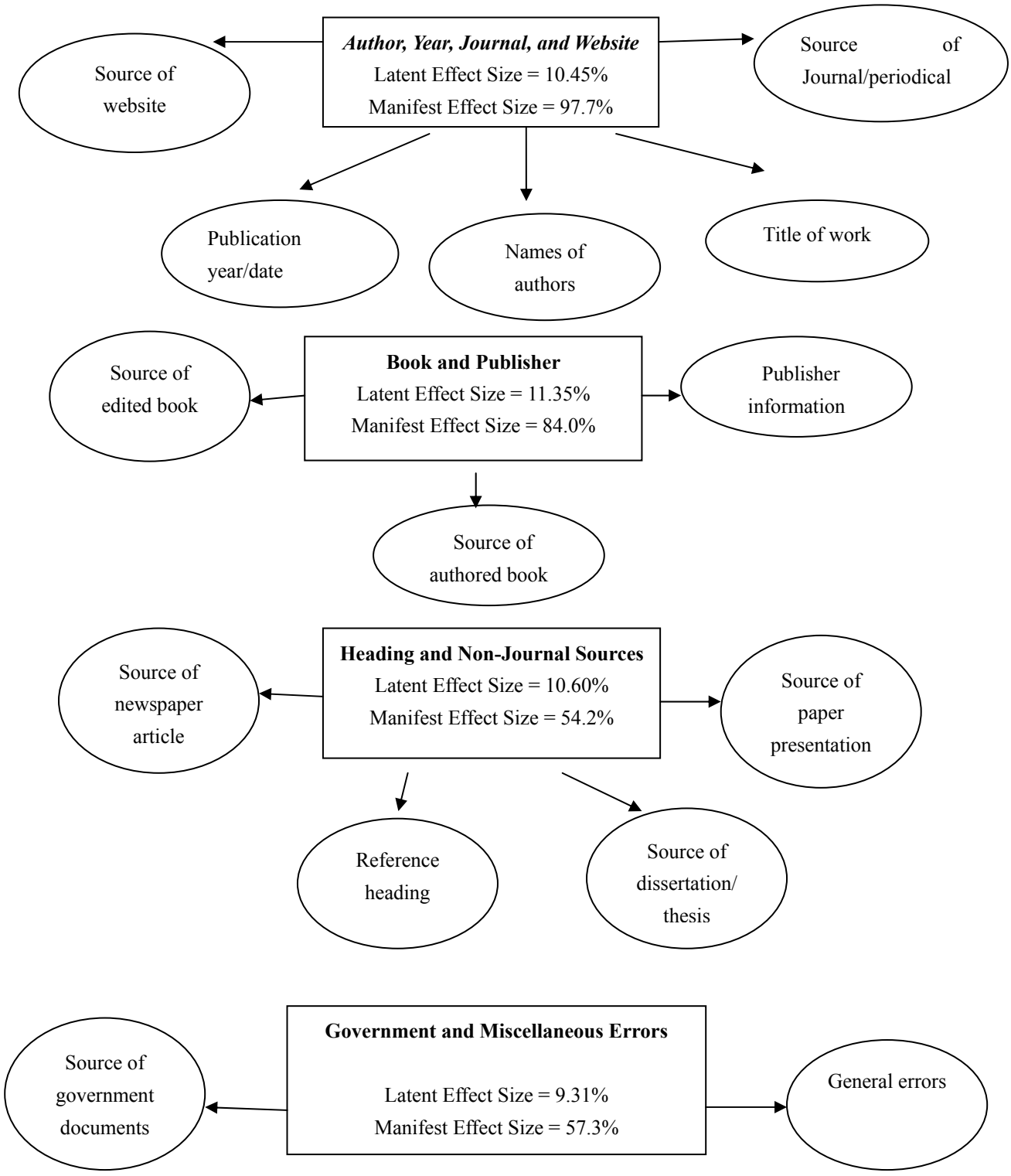

Figure 1: Stage 3 Findings: Thematic structure pertaining to reference list error themes and meta-themes

3.4 Stage 4 Findings

A latent class analysis was conducted to determine the smallest number of clusters (i.e., latent classes) that accounts for all the associations among select reference list error themes. The assumption behind this latent class analysis was that a certain number of unique reference list error themes existed, and that manuscripts could be classified into a small number of distinct clusters known as latent classes based on their profiles of citation errors, such that each manuscript belonged to only one cluster. This latent class analysis represented qualitizing of the data (i.e., converting numeric data into [qualitative] narrative profiles; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The latent class analysis was conducted on the six most common error themes because these were the themes that involved the majority of authors (i.e., > 50%; cf. Table 2), namely, Names of authors, Publisher information, Source of edited book, Source of journal/periodical, Source of website, and Title of work.

The latent class analysis of the six reference list error themes revealed a two-cluster solution (L^2 = 51.45, df = 50, p = .42, Bootstrap p = .11). Figure 2 displays these two distinct groups of manuscripts. Specifically, Cluster 1 (comprising 57.1% of manuscripts) was relatively high with respect to all six reference list error themes. In contrast, Cluster 2 (comprising 42.9% of manuscripts) was high on Names of authors and Source of journals/periodicals but relatively low on the remaining four reference list error themes. As can be seen from Figure 2, Publisher information (Wald = 8.69, p = .003, R^2 = 49.01%), Source of edited book (Wald = 8.58, p = .003, R^2 = 16.49%), and Title of work (Wald = 7.10, p = .008, R^2 = 12.38%) statistically significantly discriminated the two clusters, whereas Names of authors (Wald = 3.22, p = .07, R^2 = 8.67%), Source of journal/periodical (Wald = 1.23, p = .027, R^2 = 1.72%), and Source of website (Wald = 2.50, p = .11, R^2 = 4.47%) did not. Examining the R^2 values indicates that errors associated with Publisher information had the most variance explained by the two-cluster model.

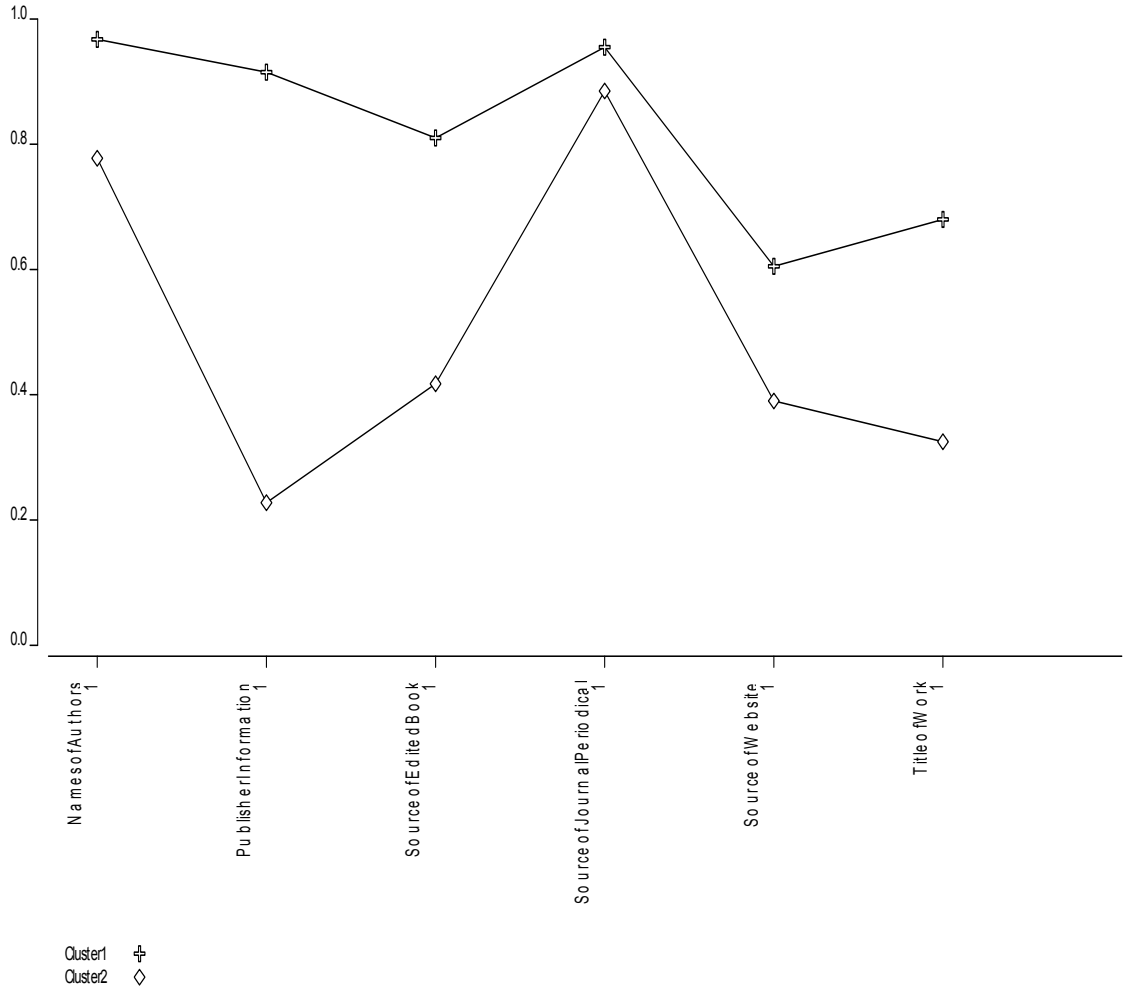

Figure 2: Stage 4 Findings: Profiles of the manuscripts with respect to the reference list error themes

4. Discussion

The present study is unique in at least three ways. First, it is the first formal attempt to examine the reference lists of manuscripts initially submitted to a journal. Second, it is the first attempt to investigate the extent to which reference lists in works conform to the style guides of a journal. Third, this study involved the use of mixed analysis techniques. Indubitably, reference list errors are among the most prevalent APA errors. Indeed, the prevalence of the reference list error stemming from serial (issue) numbers being presented when the page numbers in each volume are continuous (77.9%) was 1.35 times higher than was the prevalence rate of the most common APA error involving the body of manuscripts identified by Onwuegbuzie and Combs (2009)—namely, pertaining to the incorrect use of numbers (57.3%). Further, two of the reference list error themes, Sources of journal/periodical (92.4%) and Names of authors (88.5%), were significantly more prevalent than was the highest APA error theme labeled by Onwuegbuzie and Combs (2009) as

Grammar (i.e., 65.5%). Consequently, a unified effort is needed to end the cycle of reference list errors and to create a culture of reference lists that are minimally error free that involves college-level instructors, mentors, advisors, and thesis/dissertation committee members and chairs/supervisors, authors, journal editors, publishers, and writers of future editions of the *Publication Manual*.

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