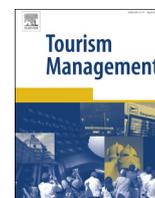


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Opinion Piece

IF you can keep your head: The unintended consequences of the Impact Factor on tourism research

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The growing importance of academic journals' Impact Factor (IF) is reshaping the research arena.
- The possible consequences of the IF on tourism research and key players is discussed.
- By targeting only journals with a high IF, research may come to a standstill.
- The reliance on the IF as an indicator of research quality and researchers' performance is challenged.

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ABSTRACT

The growing importance of academic journals' Impact Factor (IF) is reshaping the research arena. In this paper we discuss the possible impact of the IF on tourism research and on key players such as editors of top-tier tourism journals, students, researchers as well as directors of tourism academic units. It also examines the impact on the public whose funds make up part of scholars' salaries and, to some extent, research grants. It is argued here that by encouraging researchers to target only journals with a high IF, research may come to a standstill, as exploratory, industry-related or critical studies may cease being conducted and published. This is a call to minimize the reliance on the IF and its glorification as an indicator of research quality and researchers' performance.

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1. Introduction

The intensifying role of journals' Impact Factor (IF) in today's academic life (e.g., Moustafa, 2014; Seglen, 1997) underscores the need to assess its likely effects. The IF is a numerical representation of the average number of citations of a journal's articles within a pre-specified period (often two years). This representation is increasingly recognized as the de-facto measure of a journal's importance and quality, and is taken to reflect the review process and consequently the quality of a paper published in that journal (Korobkin, 1999). Accordingly, researchers are strongly encouraged to target journals with a high IF as a means of securing tenure, being promoted, and recently even reaping direct financial incentives

offered by some academic institutions and research centers. Previous studies have challenged the credibility of the IF as a yardstick to evaluate and assess research quality (Agrawal, 2005; Moustafa, 2014; Seglen, 1997). This paper focuses specifically on the possible impact of the IF on tourism research and the conceptualization of the tourism experience as a social phenomenon.

2. Objective

The impact of the IF, as well as other bibliometric measures, has received attention in various disciplines including tourism (Hall, 2011; Moustafa, 2014; Urquhart, 2006). This study aims to highlight and critique the possible impact of scholars' inclination and preferences to publish in high-IF tourism journals. In addition, we refer to the public's perspective as well as to that of tourism students, as scholars' salaries and research grants are often subsidized by public funds and tuition fees.

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3. Unintended consequences

As a journal's IF signals its perceived quality, the IF is likely to shape the decisions and behavior of editors who aim to improve the ranking of their journal (Agrawal, 2005; Hall, 2011; Moustafa, 2014), often to the detriment of tourism research in general and specifically of research of unique sub-groups of tourism knowledge domains (e.g. heritage tourism) as well as research topics within tourism. Examples of such research topics are children's travel experience (Poria & Timothy, 2014) or taxation policy in tourism, topics that are rarely subject to academic investigation. To increase the journal's IF, editors may favor review articles (which are likely to generate more citations) at the expense of innovative and exploratory studies that would make a greater contribution to the current body of knowledge. Similarly, editors are likely to invite well-known scholars to write theoretical and conceptual work on tourism, with the expectations that such work would be cited in the short term, again at the expense of other studies. We argue that editors' inclination to publish "citable," main-stream papers while studies of unique social phenomena are more likely to be denied publication, because they are less likely to be cited shortly following their publication is having a dramatic effect on tourism research. Moreover, some journals now encourage their reviewers to consider the prospects of future citations when making their recommendation on whether to accept a paper for publication. Obviously, researchers are impacted by and react to these environmental changes in the academic arena.

Various forces and agencies encourage, and increasingly mandate scholars, the most vital knowledge-creating factor, to publish in high-IF journals only. Institutional reliance only on high-IF journal publications for promotion and tenure can undermine other considerations such as the quality of a scholar's work and its impact on society. Researchers are required to report the IF of their publications, the number of citations of each paper they published as well as their cumulative H index. Scholars seek to publish in high-IF journals, assuming (not always correctly) that such articles will have greater exposure and consequently more citations. Some academic institutions even offer financial rewards to those who publish in a small, select group of high-IF journals. Furthermore, the rising popularity of studies that rank and assess researchers and academic units based on their number of publications in high-IF journals (e.g. Park, Phillips, Canter, & Abbott, 2011) steers scholars toward conducting research in areas and topics which they believe will be favored by editors and the reviewers of high-tier journals. Moreover, comparative studies ranking researchers' performance based on their publications in journals with high IFs are perceived to reflect the researcher's academic abilities and professionalism (e.g. Park et al. 2011) and thus motivate scholars to target solely high IF journals. At the same time, publishing in journals with a lower IF, is being discouraged. This means fewer scholars seeking to publish in domain-specific journals (e.g. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, *Tourism Economics*) where the editor, the editorial board, the reviewers and the audience are the experts in that field. Targeting such journals is perceived as a misdirected effort, misuse of resources, and most of all – as a sign that the author was not able to publish in tourism's top-tier journals.

The aspiration, and increasingly the necessity, to publish in high-IF journals will cause researchers to focus almost solely on research topics of relevance to main stream tourism, rather than on niches or topics which are more difficult to link to mainstream tourism studies. Most likely, scholars will shy away from exploratory studies and simply rehash those topics that have already been heavily researched. Thus, we anticipate that scholars will be less inclined to pursue novel research questions, conduct studies that will take a long time to replicate, and get involved in studies on very

specific and unique aspects of the tourism experience if these are less likely to be accepted in high-IFs tourism journals. On a more general level, the considerations surrounding IF, and its dominant role in decisions on academic promotion, could discourage scholars from cultivating their contact and interaction with certain elements of the tourism industry/experience which are not at the core of tourism studies. This may widen the gap between industry and academia, impacting tourism teaching and knowledge about the visitor experience. In line with the above it is predicted that future research will be less relevant and thus less influential for industry and public policy, a state of affairs that will only make the ivy tower taller. In addition, scholars will prefer research methodologies and modeling approaches that are easy to replicate with relatively minor changes and hence are more likely to quickly generate more publications by fellow scholars while citing the original articles.

McKercher (2005) argued that "Good papers are published because they are good." One can argue that in the context of sub areas of tourism "good papers" should be submitted to area-specific journals. If scholars want their work to be judged, evaluated, and improved by expert and updated researchers, they should submit their work to area-specific journals. Unfortunately, as outlined above, this is less and less likely because it will not substantially contribute to their promotion and academic prestige as well as the academic unit they employed in.

4. Conclusions

This paper questions the extensive use of the IF criterion, and cautions against the possible devastating and unintended impact it may have on tourism research. It is claimed here that the evolving importance of the IF will hinder raising fundamental questions that are crucial to tourism research. To conclude, it is speculated here that scholars will prefer to focus primarily on research topics which are of relevance to mainstream tourism, expecting institutional and or personal gains. Clearly, from the perspectives of university administration and heads of academic units, IFs facilitate, streamline, and simplify performance evaluations and academic-related decisions. However, while the IF enhances administrative productivity, it does not necessarily contribute to the growing body of knowledge. The knowledge generated by tourism scholars will not reflect their genuine curiosity and interest, or what they perceived to be in the public and industry's best interest. Instead, the nature and scope of knowledge will cover commonly investigated main stream tourism topics with less chance of pushing forward and advancing tourism body of knowledge. The burden is mostly on us, academicians and administrators, to recognize this issue fully and to seek out a balance between what the publishing industry is initiating with profit in mind and what we, i.e. scholars and lecturers, value as contribution to the advancement of knowledge.

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