

Ranking, rating and scoring of tourism journals: Interdisciplinary challenges and innovations

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical analysis of journal ranking and citation analysis in tourism studies. Authors and institutions using journal impact factors, citation frequency and hits as measures of academic productivity or importance should exercise great care in their use. A close look at Journal Citation Reports produced by Social Science Citation Index, ‘hits’ on CAB International, and citation analyses from several databases shows that the desire for a universal ranking system has so far only generated some imperfect systems and inconsistent applications to suit different needs. One size simply does not fit all. Drawing upon insights from other fields that have been addressing similar ranking and citation issues, concrete suggestions are offered for developing alternative evaluation parameters and processes for managing the diverse range of interdisciplinary journals in tourism and hospitality. Specifically, the analysis argues for differentiating journals by *scope*, *influence*, *relevance* and *quality*, and a scoring system that involves participation from the community of social scientists. Innovations for timely, effective dissemination of tourism knowledge are also forwarded.

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1. Introduction

First, rankings create incentives for journal editors to select certain types of manuscripts. Second, the journal editors’ desires to select certain types of manuscripts can create incentives for authors seeking publication in those journals to produce those types of manuscripts. (Korobkin (1999, p. 853). Florida State University Law Review)

Referring to the endeavor of ranking law journals (above), Korobkin (1999) says the important issue is “how rankings can be devised to encourage the future production of valuable scholarship.” We address the same problem here. Time and time again, those working and

studying in post-graduate academic programs engaged in tourism studies are faced with perplexing decisions related to manuscript publishing and journal acquisition. The proliferation of new tourism journals with diverse orientations, the recognition and hiring of disciplinary scholars within interdisciplinary concentrations, plus growing concern and debate over journal ranking, rating and relevance, all point to a field that is struggling with epistemological and legitimation issues.¹ A number of challenges revolve around tenure and promotion decisions, library acquisitions and securing academic positions. For Ph.D. students and new scholars seeking to disseminate their research in legitimate, widely read outlets, the long wait from manuscript

¹One of the article’s authors is based in an academic department that has recreation and leisure researchers, rural sociologists, geographers, anthropologists, management and marketing researchers, and sociologists working in ‘tourism studies’.

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submission to publication in the top three tourism journals, *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Tourism Management* and *Journal of Travel Research*, is a worry.² Selecting journals for publication and acquisition raises some common issues for those impacted by this activity: Which journal to select in the burgeoning new journal domain? How is it viewed relative to the top three tourism journals? What exactly makes these three ‘top tier’ journals in tourism studies? What about new online journals? How do the ranking/rating schemes we use deal with the interdisciplinary nature of tourism research? What constitutes scholarship or academic leadership in tourism studies and how is this evaluated?

A number of recent articles have offered research and recommendations to address some of the challenges mentioned above. Since Sheldon (1990, 1991), discussions have emerged that target ranking and rating (McKercher, 2005; Pechlaner, Zehrer, & Abfalter, 2002; Pechlaner, Zehrer, Matzler, & Abfalter, 2004), dissemination to practitioners (Frechtling, 2004), geographic distribution, author and institutional considerations (Jogarathnam, Chon, McCleary, Mena, & Yoo, 2005; Pearce, 1992; Ryan, 2005a,b). Our intention is not to repeat what has been accomplished in these works. Rather, the purpose here is to provide a critical analysis of where we are today, identify some recurring misunderstandings and confusions, and propose new innovations in ranking, rating, and disseminating tourism knowledge. Korobkin’s quote above indicates, as we discovered, that lively debates over ranking methods and citation analysis have been going on in other disciplinary concentrations. Useful insights and directions may be gained by drawing on these to inform the interdisciplinarity of tourism studies.

2. Impact factors and citation analysis

The limitations and benefits of the quantitative and qualitative methods used in the tourism journal studies are well described in the studies mentioned above. However, some persistent problems related to journal impact factors and citation analysis impede the development of effective ranking/rating systems in tourism studies. In part, these barriers are related to confusion over the definition and application of common ranking and citation methods. Some key ones are noted below along with other issues germane to journal and article impacts in tourism. Alternative possibilities are then proposed for effective ranking, rating and dissemination of tourism research and knowledge.

²Admittedly, recognition of this problem has resulted in improvements in journal review policies to speed up the refereeing process. See Pechlaner et al. (2004) and Ryan (2005b) for tourism journal rankings that establish these three as the primary journals for tourism research.

2.1. Journal impact factors: limitations

Objective measures of a journal’s impact factor include information obtained from citation indices, the common ones (i.e., the ones perceived to be most legitimate as well) being the Science Citation Index (SCI), the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) and the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI) devised by The Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) (Thomson ISI, 1994). Journal impact factors are not the same as article impact factors, but it is possible to confuse these two since citation analysis is referred to in both factors. However, citation analysis in the context of journal rating is related to the following: a journal is important to the extent that *other journals* cite it. A major impetus to citation-based journal ranking came from ISI’s SSCI *Journal Citation Report* (JCR), commenced in 1979. The JCR provides quantitative tools for ranking, evaluating, categorizing and comparing journals. The impact factor is one such tool. The annual JCR impact factor is a ratio between citations and recent citable items published. Specifically, a journal’s impact factor is determined by dividing the number of current year citations to the source items published in that journal during the previous 2 years (Thomson ISI, 1994; also see <http://reports.isiknowledge.com>. Accessed 17/5/07).

Increasing awareness by educational institutions and scholars of journal impact factors and of tools such as the JCR have created a political playing field where authors orient their publishing behavior towards journals with maximum impact. This is despite the known limitations of journal impact factors, and often at the expense of specialist journals that might be more appropriate for that particular research (Seglen, 1997). Criticism of journal impact factors has grown alongside its increasing influence and use. The following are commonly noted in different disciplines and study areas (e.g., Jones, 2002; Neuberger & Counsell, 2002; Nisonger, 1999; Pechlaner et al., 2004; Seglen, 1997). As summarized by Weale, Bailey, and Lear (2004):

- Articles such as editorials, letters and news items are classified as “non-source” items and do not count towards the total number of articles used to calculate the impact factor. However, such items may attract numerous citations that are counted towards a journal’s impact factor.³
- Journals may increase the number of non-source items to artificially increase impact factors. It has been suggested that the calculation provides a method for comparing journals regardless of their size. However, journal size may be a confounding factor—journals

³Journal citation counts in JCR do not distinguish between letters, reviews, or original research.

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