



Journal rankings in management and business studies: What rules do we play by?



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ABSTRACT

Given the growing importance of journal rankings in academic performance management, it is relevant to researchers and managers alike whether there are certain characteristics of publications that are more prevalent the higher a journal is ranked. This paper examines how tangible and adaptable characteristics of papers vary between different rating categories of journals and what the drivers of publication in journals at the top of rankings are. We build on a bibliometric analysis of more than 85,000 papers published in 168 management and business journals as rated in 18 popular journal rankings. Results refute some often repeated but rarely substantiated criticisms of journal rankings. Contrary to many voices, we find that interdisciplinarity and innovativeness are positively associated with publication in highly ranked journals. In other respects, our results support more critical assumptions, such as a widespread preference for quantitative methods. By providing more evidence on the implicit standards of journal rankings, this study expands on the understanding of what intended or unintended incentives they provide and how to use them responsibly.

1. Introduction

In many academic systems and scientific disciplines, publication-based performance indicators inform academic management and science policy across various levels of decision-making. Publication counts are often weighted by information from journal rankings in order to account not only for the quantity of publications, but also to infer their quality from the ratings of journals. Journal rankings have become ever more widespread (Harzing, 2015) and increasingly determine which publication outlets can be considered as more instrumental for the pursuit of career goals and research funding than others (Hudson and Laband, 2013; Mingers and Willmott, 2012). Therefore, it is relevant to researchers and managers alike whether certain characteristics of publications (such as applied theories and methods, the degree of interdisciplinarity and novelty, or the origin of authors) vary with journal ratings and which of these features are particularly prevalent in journals at the top of popular rankings. If the probability of publication in differently rated journals is conditional on certain characteristics of research, implications for successful publication strategies can be drawn, although such conclusions should be considered very carefully.

The strong incentives to publish in top rated journals, provided by widely adopted practices of performance management in academia,

foster the motivation of researchers to adjust their research and writing styles to the editorial policies and criteria of these journals. Performance managers in academia often infer the quality of publications from the quality of the journals in which they are published and link contingent rewards to it, such as funding, promotion and pay. This directs attention to the performative effects that rankings may have (Mingers and Willmott, 2012). In particular, journal rankings are criticized for favoring certain paradigms, theories and methods while discriminating against others (Van Fleet et al., 2000). According to the critics, this perpetuates a ‘one best way’ of research and reduces the diversity and experimentation that is considered vital to novelty and innovation (Mingers and Willmott, 2012). This discussion, however, is frequently put forward in commentaries and editorials and often builds on anecdotal evidence and essayistic reasoning. With some exceptions (e.g., Grey, 2010; Rafols et al., 2012; Rinia et al., 2001), there is little robust evidence on the criteria that are implicit to journal rankings.

The present paper adds empirical substance to the discussion on journal rankings and helps to examine the preferences that are aggregated in these rankings. Do tangible and adaptable characteristics of published papers vary between different rating categories of journals and if so, what are the drivers of publication in journals at the top of rankings? We address these research questions in a large-scale

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bibliometric study on paper-level predictors of publication in journals as rated in different rankings in the field of business and management studies. Our analysis builds on the literature on ‘success factors’ in academic publishing, on the one hand, and on the other hand on the controversy about journal rankings. Results refute some often repeated but rarely substantiated criticisms of journal rankings. For example, contrary to many voices, we find that interdisciplinarity and innovativeness are positively associated with publication in highly ranked journals. In other respects, our results support more critical assumptions, such as a widespread preference for quantitative methods and the predominance of Anglo-Saxon scholarship. With these findings, we draw a more balanced and nuanced picture as compared to the selective and scattered findings and opinions in the previous literature.

Beyond the current debate on journal rankings, our results make various further contributions in more practical terms. A deeper exploration into the distribution of research characteristics across papers in differently rated journals can provide authors with some guidance in their decisions where to submit a manuscript and what publishing standards to comply with. This provides a large-scale empirical supplement to recently edited books in which experienced scholars give advice on how to get published in the best management journals (e.g., Clark et al., 2016). Such insights have also implications for higher education managers, journal editors, and publishers. Higher education managers are able to conduct research evaluations more responsibly if they are informed about what exactly is measured by which journal ranking and, consequently, what incentives they provide by choosing a ranking for performance appraisals. Journal editors and publishers who strive for a favorable quality rating of their journal have an interest in what makes editorial policies successful in this respect.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: In the following section, we provide a review of the literature with a summary of some key findings, assumptions and implications on how characteristics of published research vary with the rating category of journals. We then introduce our data and methods. Essentially, we conducted a large-scale analysis by means of bibliometric and related methods. Our database includes 168 management and business journals in which more than 85,000 papers with more than 4.5 million references appeared in the period from 2000 to 2013. We recorded these data completely and considered how the journals are rated in 18 rankings that are built on different methods. The empirical results of multiple regression analyses are presented in the fourth section. We subsequently discuss the findings and derive some implications for scholars in management and business studies and practitioners in higher education.

2. Literature review

In management and business studies, there is a large but dispersed literature which allows for conclusions on the criteria and standards of research that are implicit to journal rankings and thus affect the probability of publication in differently rated journals. Subsequently, we integrate two streams of research: On the one hand, there is an often normatively charged debate on the discriminatory impact of rankings and their detrimental effects on innovation and academic freedom (e.g., Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013; Goodall, 2008; McKinnon, 2013; Mingers and Willmott, 2012; Özbilgin, 2009). On the other hand, some previous works have directly (and often empirically) examined the association between characteristics of journal papers and their success in terms of publication in recognized journals or citations by the community (e.g., Antonakis et al., 2014; Judge et al., 2007; Mingers and Xu, 2010; Stremersch et al., 2015). As journal rankings result from complex processes of preference aggregation, we consider both scientific and non-scientific factors (Tahamtan et al., 2016) that are associated with scientific recognition, reflecting normative (Merton, 1973) as well as social constructivist processes (Gilbert, 1977). Whereas the former are directly related to the appreciation of intellectual content, the latter aim at the persuasion of the audience (Bornmann and Daniel, 2008). Our

review includes nineteen conceptual articles that theorize about possible ranking criteria and mostly provide anecdotal evidence, while thirty studies are based on large datasets and quantitative analyses (Table 1). These contributions cluster around six topics: characteristics of authors, the practical relevance of research, applied methods and paradigms, innovativeness, interdisciplinarity, and theoretical diversity.

2.1. Author collaborations and affiliations

A first body of literature suggests that the number of authors as well as their institutional affiliations and geographical origins are related to the quality of journals in which their work is published (e.g., Macdonald and Kam, 2007; Mingers and Xu, 2010). A team of authors can build on a broader stock of human capital in terms of expert knowledge, intellectual abilities, writing skills, and overall publishing experience as compared to single authors, and is thus more likely to make a significant contribution to scholarly discourses (Beaver, 2004). Furthermore, authors may engage in co-authorships because they enjoy social interaction and strive for visibility and status (Van Rijnsvoever and Hessels, 2011). This should have social facilitation effects among co-authors and improve their motivation to make valuable contributions to the teamwork. Taken together, author collaborations are likely to be positively related to the quality of manuscripts which, in turn, increases the probability of acceptance in journals with high ratings (Puuska et al., 2014; Tahamtan et al., 2016).

Teams of authors also tend to have a broader stock of social capital as compared to single authors. Co-authorships enlarge the network of scholars who know at least one of the authors and may cite his or her paper (Leimu and Koricheva, 2005). In addition, the more authors a paper has, the more self-citations can be expected. Co-authors may present their papers in several different settings and scientific networks, such as conferences and workshops, which enhances the diffusion of knowledge and the attention gained (Bosquet and Combes, 2013). This may lead to more favorable decisions of editors because multiple authorships enhance the visibility of a journal and push its impact factor (Van Rijnsvoever and Hessels, 2011). The positive impact of co-authorships on the ratings of journals can also be concluded from a bibliometric study by Aksnes (2003) who found that highly cited papers are more often the result of collaborative research than papers with lower citation frequencies. Accordingly, “[m]ultiple authorship is highly recommended for those wishing to publish in quality journals” (Macdonald and Kam, 2007, p. 645).

Beyond the number of co-authors, there is some evidence that publication success in top journals is not equally distributed across all geographical origins and institutional affiliations of authors. For example, Hodgson and Rothman (1999) compiled a list of the 30 most renowned journals in economics and found that most authors published in these journals stem from a few institutions that are mainly US-based—a phenomenon which they refer to as “institutional oligopoly.” The predominance of scholars affiliated with institutions in the UK or USA has been explained, among other factors, with the fact that English has become the main language of publication, which makes it easier for native speakers to publish at high levels (Tsoukas, 2008). Cultural barriers may play a further role (Bornmann and Daniel, 2008). Authorships in top journals additionally show a high concentration in terms of institutional affiliations to prestigious universities and departments. World-leading institutions with high reputation, most of which are located in the UK and USA, are likely to attract highly productive researchers and to offer supportive conditions for research.

Affiliations to prestigious institutions may also serve as a heuristic in the editorial decision-making process because they send signals to the editors about the authors’ social status (Judge et al., 2007) and “provide clues, albeit imperfect ones, as to the competency of a manuscript’s author(s)” (Miller, 2006, p. 425). Likewise, Fogarty and Liao (2009) argue that the actual merit of a manuscript may be

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