



## Opinion Piece

## Impact factors: Influencing careers, creativity and academic freedom



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## ABSTRACT

This discussion piece was prompted by arguments in the original submission, 'If you can keep your head: The unintended consequences of the impact factor'. This short essay stresses that many academic institutions around the world rely too much on impact factors (IFs) as a sole indicator of research quality and impact. It argues that other indicators of quality and influence should also be used to measure an individual's academic success. Three primary outcomes may occur when impact factors are used as sole gauges of academic quality: stifling early-career researchers, constraining academic freedom, and curbing creativity and innovation.

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Impact factors—the fuel that drives today's academy! Impact factors (IFs), as noted in the other pieces in this discussion, are a measure of the utility and merit attached to a given journal. This often determines its position and value in the academy. IFs are rightfully utilized as indicators of research quality and help set the standard of academic success. However, the importance placed upon them by many universities throughout the world is inconsistent, unbalanced and frequently over-weighted. While IFs are important gauges of a journal's position among the multitudes of refereed periodicals published today, they are seen not only as important, but also too often as solitary measures of academic quality and success.

Despite their utility, as the original paper in this discussion, 'If you can keep your head: the unintended consequences of the impact factor', emphasizes, several concerns should be raised about the utilization of IFs and SSCI ranks as the only indicator of quality and, by implication, importance. Although I support the use of IFs as one of several measures of scholarly achievement, the comments below are based upon the concern that IFs are too frequently accepted as a sole gauge of impact. My comments reflect concerns regarding impact factors as inhibitors of younger-career academics, limiters of academic freedom, and suppressors of creativity and innovation.

The use of impact factors as a measure of success has the potential to encourage scholars to produce higher-quality research

output, strive for excellence, and advance their careers in meaningful ways. All of these are healthy goals for everyone. However, an all-too-common overreliance on IFs as an exclusive indicator of accomplishment, which is unfortunately becoming a normative policy in some parts of the world, can have a stifling effect rather than providing an avenue for success. At certain universities in Asia, for example, PhD students are no longer allowed to graduate with a doctorate degree without first publishing at least one paper in an SSCI journal with a sizable impact factor. There exist similar requirements for landing that first post-PhD faculty position. As well, salaries and bonuses sometimes hinge on one's ability to publish in high IF journals.

This requirement puts one's future career in the hands of blinded referees and can lead to burnout, unusually high levels of stress, and in some cases higher-than-normal dropout rates. Some graduate students are discouraged enough by this requirement after having their work rejected once or twice, that they fail to complete their PhDs and instead elect to work in the private sector or in a government office rather than remain in academia. While this might have its own benefits, the academy risks losing up-and-coming scholars with luminary potential in the field.

Lacking a substantial number of publications in high-impact journals can also affect a person's ability to acquire tenure or be promoted to a higher academic rank. Although we should all aim to publish in the top-ranked journals, personnel decisions ought to focus more holistically on the entire career and intellectual contribution of the individual. Unfortunately, however, oftentimes decisions are made, positively or negatively, solely on the basis of

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numbers of papers published in journals with high IFs. What about the merits of other publications or research forums? In the United States we are lucky in that a more common practice is to assess the person's entire career portfolio, including public and professional service, teaching quality and research output, including in non-SSCI journals, books and book chapters. Although in the field of tourism studies in the US, refereed articles, particularly in high-impact journals, are generally the weightiest evaluative criterion, we also consider other indicators of success and impact, such as invitations to speak, contribute to edited volumes, guest edit a theme issue of a journal, or serve on editorial boards. This holistic system can incentivize early-career academics to aim high but also remain realistic in understanding that not all of their publications will appear in the highest ranked journals. Sometimes and in some places other measures of visibility, quality and well-roundedness are regrettably ignored in favor of the almighty impact factor.

An overreliance on IFs may also limit academic freedom. Some institutions and individuals are so overly-obsessed with SSCI-listed journals and IFs that they give up opportunities to impact the field and disseminate knowledge in other ways as already noted. Unfortunately, many researchers, particularly those of the younger generation, regard book chapters, books, and articles in non-SSCI journals as a waste of time or an object *non-grata*. This is despite the fact that many theories, models, conceptual frameworks and useful empirical fodder are developed within these 'alternative' sorts of publications. Similarly, as an editor, author and reviewer, I have noticed that many of these same people do not reference or otherwise utilize works in non-IF media regardless of how relevant they might be.

While some of the disregard for these other publication types derives from certain disciplinary backgrounds, which will not be noted here, much of it is driven by institutional pressures or coercion by others. While queuing for their 'lucky break' in a high IF journal, researchers too often ignore or bypass other opportunities wherein they could be disseminating some of their work through other outlets which, even if it does not satisfy their institutional requirements, most certainly would help advance their careers outside the university.

Several years ago, I invited a young scholar to contribute a chapter to a book I was editing. Only a few weeks before the deadline, she pulled out of the project citing pressure from above that not only would the chapter not 'count', it would be held against her for 'wasting her time'. How unfortunate these parochial mindsets are for crushing creativity and limiting academic freedom, and how destructive they can be to the morale and career development of younger academics.

I disagree to some extent with the assertion that studies about unique phenomena will not be accepted for publication because they are less likely to be cited. In fact, it is more likely that open-minded and future-looking editors of top-tier journals are keen to publish papers that introduce new ideas, unique contexts, new methodologies, and innovative epistemological approaches. Perhaps the more myopic ones do not. Having said this, I agree with the author of 'If you can keep your head' that focusing solely on IFs can stymie creativity and innovation in tourism research, and that people's strides to publish only in top-tier journals is more conducive to repetitious work that is relatively easy to carry out but which does little to advance new knowledge. This is evident in a few top-tier journals and among certain researchers.

For example, even after decades of research on market segmentation and visitor satisfaction, we continue to see repetitious investigations that contribute relatively little conceptual knowledge to the field. Some researchers habitually change a simple variable and rerun routine statistical tests to see how the additional

or altered variable will ostensibly identify a new market segment or influence tourists' satisfaction. Similarly, a few leading journals are riddled with cookie-cutter studies that replicate the same methods, models, and findings over and over again in different destinations or at different attractions. These studies deliver diminutive amounts of new knowledge but are easy to publish in certain high-IF journals. In this sense, much tourism research lacks creativity or innovation.

Creativity in research can be as simple as understanding different tourism spaces that have heretofore been largely ignored. For example, nearly all tourism research focuses on the destination, despite the fact that there are clearly three spatial loci of the travel experience: the home/origin, transit space and time, and the destination. With very few exceptions, tourism scientists focus almost exclusively on phenomena in the destination. What about understanding the experiential elements of transit (Hobson, 2000; McKercher & Tang, 2004; Timothy, 2001) and pre-travel, home-based experiences, impacts and activities (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Piyaphanee et al., 2009)? This scarcity of attention is probably perpetuated, at least in part, by the ease of collecting and analyzing data in destinations versus the more elusive conditions at tourists' origins or in transit. At least some of this focus on the destination can be linked directly or indirectly to the desire for IF-based publications and the real or perceived notion that these types of studies are easier to publish.

In response to a manuscript I submitted in 2013 to a top-tier journal with a reasonable IF, the editor noted that the paper would be better suited for a journal more closely associated with a specific region. As a result, my paper was returned without review. I later learned that the journal is reluctant to consider papers "about China" because there are just too many of them and they are less likely to be cited! What that editor failed to recognize is that the paper was not about China; it was about an important and emerging worldwide issue. China was simply the laboratory for the study and the concepts it developed. The editor's short-sightedness was apparent, especially given that China is now one of the largest tourism-generating and tourist-receiving countries in the world and will likely continue to be far into the future. The myopia of that particular journal and editor precludes important work that might have scholarly implications far beyond the geographical context of a study, and likewise downplays the innovativeness of research that might take place in certain regions.

Lest any reader should believe that I am against the use of IFs in evaluating research success and quality, let it be clear that I am not. On the contrary, I applaud editors' efforts to build their impact factors and scholars' desires to publish their best work in the best outlets. However, I have significant reservations about IFs being used as sole, or in some cases even primary, measures of success and quality, for there are many indicators of these that are equally valid. The limits of IFs need to be recognized, and we should not allow them to thwart creativity in research, disadvantage early-career (or even well-established) scholars, or subdue academic freedom.

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