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# Playing the citations game: From publish or perish to be cited or sidelined

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## ABSTRACT

The availability of automated citation counting software has made it easy for citation metrics to be used in the performance appraisal of many academics. This is most evident in decisions about promotion, research funding and salary supplementation. At present, many marketing academics seem to have only a passing interest in how their citations may impact on these decisions. Notwithstanding their limitations, citations can play an important role in building a case for the career advancement of most academics. The questions addressed in this paper are twofold. First, is seeking more citations a somewhat distracting game to be played across one's career or do they provide a reasonably valid measure of research recognition? Second, given that their use is becoming more widespread, how can a scholar's citation profile be linked to their research strategy so that it enhances rather than obscures their contribution? In the language of branding the task is how best to use citations as a point-of-proof of research contribution. Data from the Australian marketing community is used to illustrate how this can be achieved.

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## CHINESE ABSTRACT

自动引用计数软件的问世，更便于在学术绩效评估中使用引用率指标。在制定有关晋升、科研经费和工资补贴等决策时，其重要性尤其明显。目前，许多营销学者似乎都不太关注自己论著的引用率对上述决策的影响。尽管有其局限性，学术论著引用率仍然在大多数学者的职业发展中起到重要作用。本文提出了两大问题。首先，在整个职业生涯中，蓄意寻求更高的引用率，某种程度上是否算是偏失了论著的初衷？引用频次是否能合理有效地评估学术地位？其次，鉴于论著引用率的应用已经越来越广泛，学者的论著引用频次该如何与其科研战略链接起来，从而加以正面利用，提高学者的学术贡献？从品牌推广的角度看，那就是，如何最佳利用论著引用率，让其成为学术研究贡献的证据。本文采用澳大利亚营销界的数据，来说明如何实现这一目标。

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## 1. Introduction

The research productivity and impact of scholars has long been of academic interest – to the individuals involved, their peers, and members of funding, hiring, promotion and tenure committees (e.g., Adler and Harzing, 2009; Merton, 1968; Webber, 2012). In recent years the institutions to which scholars belong have also become interested because citations are being used to help calibrate the reputation of the university and the various research contributions of

their faculties. For example, in the Times Higher Education World University Reputation Rankings citations over the previous six years contribute 30% of the university's overall score. In the 2012 Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) evaluation article citations were used to help assess research status in the physical and life sciences. While a peer-review approach was used in the social sciences and humanities, there is growing recognition that article citations can also provide a valuable insight into research impact in these fields.

The use of citations has a long history in most areas of science (Alder et al., 2009), and as far back as 1927 Gross and Gross (1927) suggested using them (they called them references) to evaluate a journal's desirability and quality. More fundamentally however, citations allow a researcher to trace how a piece of work evolves and

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changes as other scholars use it in their research. They have also been used to predict Nobel Prize winners (Garfield and Malin, 1968; Thompson Reuters, 2013). In marketing recent interest in citations has surged (Shugan, 2014). Here their primary role has been to rank the quality of journals, and indirectly the quality of the scholarship published in these journals, and thus the quality of the scholars who publish and who do not publish in the top-ranked journals. While this simple approach to performance appraisal has generated some criticism, it seems to be used by many universities, funding bodies and research assessment authorities (Butler, 2008). Because of this some academics see the pursuit of citations as a game they must play to compete with their peers for resources, reputation and status.

The current situation has been precipitated by three main factors. The first is that a culture of measuring performance with numbers is pervading universities and citation counts are a simple and transparent number that fits this culture. The second factor is that a mini industry of vendors has introduced citation research and analysis tools. Google Scholar is a major vendor and Anne-Wil Harzing's free, downloadable Publish or Perish software (that uses Google Scholar data) is a helpful tool. In just minutes one can use Publish or Perish to get a rough snapshot of another person's publication profile and citation count. The third factor emanates from the natural tendency of people to promote what they do well. Here many highly cited academics want to promote the use of citations. It helps to confirm their status and enhance their marketability. And because it is important to this group it becomes a metric they use to evaluate others.

Because of these factors and the criticism of the information value of citation counts noted later many academics report that they are uncomfortable with being assessed by such a bibliometric index. Sometimes even Albert Einstein is recruited to support their case. A sign hanging in his Princeton office said that "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts". This aphorism is often used to cloud the validity of using simple numbers like citation counts to measure complex phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding this concern the thesis of this paper is that citations of an individual's research works are here to stay and that the best way for a scholar to 'play the citations game' is to calibrate the contribution of his or her work by organising and reporting these metrics to fit their research strategy. If the scholar does not take prime responsibility for this endeavour then others might well do so in a way that does not present their oeuvre of publications in its best light. To illustrate this approach I start by briefly reviewing the nature of citations and why papers seem to be cited. Then I focus on the current use of citations in marketing and other disciplines of business scholarship. Finally I illustrate how different patterns of citations fit different interpretations of research performance.

Three groups of academics may benefit from this discussion because each group is faced with the problem of allocating their research time among alternatives that have high opportunity costs. Early career academics will be alerted to the role of citations in assessing their research performance. In my past role as an Associate Dean for Research at the Australian Graduate School of Management I seldom encountered an early career researcher who had even a passing interest in citations. Given my prediction that the use of citation counts is becoming more prevalent in the performance management system of universities then such a lack of interest may handicap their promotion prospects. For mid career academics the benefit is that the following discussion may help to shape their future portfolio of research topics. Because some of the most cited papers in marketing are methodological or review in nature, adding one

or more of these to one's portfolio may well help to advance the discipline and generate citations. For senior academics the benefits are twofold. First, in marketing and many others areas of business scholarship academics are being paid substantial salary supplements that reflect the scarcity and performance of the individual. Citations play a key role in helping to justify these supplements. For example, it would seem odd to reward a senior scholar whose research was seldom cited in his or her discipline. Second, as a mark of career achievement some senior academics strive to be invited to join learned societies such as the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. Citations can help one's selection by the fellows of these societies.

## 2. Citations

Citations are acknowledgments of a scholar's published work by another scholar in his or her publication. From a marketing perspective they measure the recognition of a piece of research. From a bibliometric perspective citations are touted as a proxy for interest, impact and influence. Often there is a positive relationship between recognition and these other measures, but sometimes there is not. For example, a rather petulant paper by Wright and Armstrong (2008) suggests that many of the papers cited in the discipline of marketing are not read and many of those that are read are not fully understood. Notwithstanding this bold claim, many pieces of research are carefully read and clearly build on the works of others. Also, sometimes a citation acts as an acknowledgement of allegiance to the work. However, sometimes a citation challenges the work. Sometimes it cites a work as an example of poor science. And sometimes it merely notes a work in order to satisfy the reviewers and the readers that the author is aware of the work of significant others in the field of scholarship. Pushed to extremes, this latter reason for citation has been labelled 'justification by citation' or 'token referencing' (Uncles, 2008). While all these reasons represent some type of intellectual influence, their strength and direction varies.

There are also three primary forms of distortion in citation numbers. One is that citation rates differ across scientific disciplines (e.g., Lillquist and Green, 2010). This occurs because different disciplines produce different amounts of scholarship and thus the opportunities for citation vary. They also have different incentives and institutional norms regarding what is appropriate referencing (Lilien, 2008). This makes it difficult to compare raw citation counts across disciplines and to state the importance of a single paper relative to others in different disciplines. A second distortion involves authors citing their own work or that of their closest colleagues. This has been labelled as citation circles or citation cabals (Pendlebury, 2008). The severity of this bias can only be determined with regard to whether self-citation is necessary to acknowledge or build on a program of research or whether it is done to 'keep one's numbers up'. The third is the natural influence of age. Older researchers and older papers have a greater chance to get cited, especially as more researchers and journals enter the field.

These criticisms of citations may prompt some academics to see the pursuit of an ever increasing number of citations as a distraction – a game that universities seem to uncritically reward (Adler and Harzing, 2009). However, the limitations of citations are just that, limitations. While they may limit the information value of this metric they are not invalid as a concise measure of a publication's recognition and critical acclaim. For example, one criticism is that a citation count is a simplistic index that ignores peer review. This is incorrect because most of the papers cited have been peer reviewed before publication and then reviewed again by the author of the publication in which reference is made to the work. Also,

<sup>1</sup> In contrast to this he also said "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."

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