



## Nordic strategy research—Topics, theories, and trends



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### ABSTRACT

Strategy research occupies a central position in business studies, but despite its global reach mainly has been considered as geographically homogenous. This paper aims to contribute to a better and more nuanced understanding of the strategy field by assessing Nordic contributions to the international strategy field. Using a bibliometric approach it shows that the Nordics holds an increasingly strong position in international strategy research but also identifies differences. Denmark is the single most successful Nordic nation across all measures, and even matches the international forefront in citation per publication. The success appears related the degree of co-authorship with international strategy scholars. Together, findings establish that Nordic strategy research contributes strongly to the core of international strategy research. Implications for several stakeholder groups are provided.

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### 1. Introduction

Much of what is claimed about important research fields is based on an assumption of research as evenly spread across nations. As one of the most prominent fields in business research, strategy is often described as global, and with an impressive theoretical variation and richness (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2005). Further, some studies have distinguished the varied contributions of strategy research in (Cummings & Daellenbach, 2009) and between different journals (Azar & Brock, 2008). However, little heed has been given potential differences in the contributions of different regions or nations to strategy research. Instead, dominatingly, assessments of the field are dominated by geographically homogenous accounts (Bowman, Singh, & Thomas, 2006; Furrer, Thomas, & Goussevskaia, 2008; Herrmann, 2005; Hoskisson, Hitt, Wan, & Yiu, 1999; Phelan, Ferreira, & Salvador, 2002; Ramos-Rodríguez & Ruiz-Navarro, 2004), disregarding such potential differences between regions and countries.

The Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – constitute one such region. While there are several influential researchers tied to Nordic universities publishing in avowedly international strategic management journals (e.g. Foss & Hallberg, 2014; Regnér, 2008; Vaara, Junni, Sarala, Ehrnrooth, & Koveshnikov, 2014) this reveals little about the Nordic contributions to the international strategy field. For instance, studying business publications in general, Engwall (1996) found that Nordic

scholars differed both in publication frequency and theoretical starting points compared to non-Nordics, such as an early and strong influence by Cyert and March (1963). Nordic business research also has been found to emphasize network relations rather than economics-based views, and draws on a strong case study tradition compared to international research (Stentoft Arlbjørn, Jonsson, & Johansen, 2008), suggesting not only that contributions also to international strategy research can differ between regions and countries, and that the Nordics might stand out in different ways.

Given the centrality of strategy research and the tendency to describe this field as conceptually diverse but geographically homogenous, the overarching question remains whether there are differences in strategy publication between and within regions. Recent studies have pointed to both similarities and differences in publication patterns between Nordic institutions, and between these and institutions in non-Nordic countries (Sihvonen & Vähämaa, 2015), however not explicitly addressed the strategy field. The condition of Nordic strategy research likely is of interest also beyond scholars in the field, since if left unstudied, universities, funding agencies, and policy makers risk investing scarce resources for research less than optimally. The above arguments give rise to a number of important questions: are there any trends to the extent to which Nordic scholars publish in leading strategy journals, and are there differences between the Nordic countries? Do Nordic research favor certain strategy topics or theories over others? What is the impact of this research, and are there any patterns with regards to the author constellations producing it?

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This paper aims to contribute to a better and more nuanced understanding of the strategy field by assessing Nordic contributions to the international strategy field. Guided by a view of strategy research as recognizable by being channeled through certain outlets, rather than dealing with unique topics (Furrer et al., 2008), this paper is inspired by a bibliometric approach of quantitative data to conduct a multi-level analysis of research published in leading strategy journals. The study contributes to a more nuanced picture of the strategy field. Findings increase granularity of the field through analyzing research contributions in a regional and national context. Concretely, it identifies and discusses factors that can contribute to explain patterns of publication success and impact of the Nordic countries. It thus highlights the importance of a geographical dimension to analyses of research fields.

This rest of the paper is structured as follows. The background of the study is presented first, placing strategy and Nordic research in a broader context before specifying the methods applied in this study, drawing on quantitative comparisons between strategy research from different regions and countries. Findings based on data from a decade of strategy publishing are presented, before these are discussed in a broader theoretical context. Lastly, contributions of the study are presented together with suggestions for future research.

## 2. Background

Strategy research takes an overarching perspective on firms to explain performance differences in competitive markets and thereby deals with one of the oldest questions in business studies (Ansoff, 1965; Porter, 1980; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). The term itself originates from the Greek *strategos* for general, and *stratego*, a verb denoting the leading of armies to destroy the enemy (Bracker, 1980), and still military connotations of winning and losing dominate connotations in how the term is used in business studies (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000). Even if a wide array of definitions exist (Bracker, 1980; Nag, Hambrick, & Chen, 2007), this research stream can be described as dealing with “that which relates to the long-term prospects of the company and has a critical influence on its success or failure” (Agarwal & Helfat, 2009, p. 281).

This definition reveals that while the dependent variable in strategy research explicitly or implicitly relates to the financial performance of firms (e.g. Jensen, 2000), independent variables can span almost any phenomenon in the organization or the wider business environment. This includes early emphases on planning (Chandler, 1962) and industry position (Porter, 1980), as well as more recent interests in performance impacts from arguably more behavioral aspects including human resources (Tzabbar, Aharonson, Amburgey, & Al-Laham, 2008), environmental enactment (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985), practice (Whittington, 1996), managerial cognition (Mezias, Grinyer, & Guth, 2001), routines (Felin & Foss, 2009), organizational identity (Livengood & Reger, 2010), gender equality (Cook & Glass, 2014), networks (Håkansson & Snehota, 1989), or materiality (Schriber & Löwstedt, 2015). Strategy research thus has embraced a range of perspectives, theories, and concepts from adjacent fields and includes different schools of thought, each with its own form and focus (Bracker, 1980; Mintzberg et al., 2005). In the same manner, strategy thinking is applied in a variety of contexts, not least in sports, but also in health care (King, 2001), policing (Skogan & Hartnett, 1997), universities, and even municipalities (cf. Kornberger & Clegg, 2011).

In consequence of this width it is difficult or even impossible to unambiguously delineate the strategy field based on particular approaches or topics (Nag et al., 2007), since such efforts would run the risk of simultaneously excluding important contributions

and including scholars not considering themselves as belonging to, or even openly distancing themselves from strategy research. An alternative to historic methods (Summer et al., 1990) or citation analyses (Ramos-Rodríguez & Ruíz-Navarro, 2004), one way to delineate the strategy field is to think of it as sharing the common denominator of being accepted by peers as contributing to developing theory in strategy publishing outlets (e.g. Furrer et al., 2008). A notion of the strategy field useful for the present study therefore is that consists of research that partakes in, is aimed at, and considered fulfilling the necessary conditions of relevance and quality set by international peers.

But describing strategy as one research field; be it with different facets and foci (e.g. Bowman et al., 2006; Hoskisson et al., 1999), risks downplaying potentially important differences. Among the claims that strategy research is global, reviews and assessments are dominated by homogenous accounts disregarding any variation in how regions or nations contribute to this field. However, there are reasons to believe that this reflects rather an ideal than a fact. For instance, Boyd, Finkelstein and Gove (2005: 841) noted that “[b]usiness Policy and Strategy is the second largest division of the Academy of Management, and counts 25 percent of its membership from outside the United States. Furthermore, half the membership of the Strategic Management Society lies outside North America”. While compelling, such statistics might hide important geographical differences.

Indeed, participation in the perhaps leading strategy conference, the Strategic Management Society conference reveals geographical differences. At the 2014 convention in Madrid, US and Europe represented 87 percent of participants. Asia including China represented 8 percent, while participants from Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East represented only about one percent each. Figures for 2015 show little improvement, suggesting that participation in the strategic management arena is less equally geographically distributed than typical accounts of the field indicate. The origin of theoretical contributions reveals a similar pattern. Geographical imbalances prevail, in particular a bias toward data from Western economies (Wright, Filatotchev, Hoskisson, & Peng, 2005). In contrast, empirical contexts such as Africa remain scarce (for a recent exception see e.g. Julian & Ofori-dankwa, 2013).

There are reasons to assume that Nordic researchers share beneficial starting points for contributing to the ongoing strategy debate. The traditionally welfare oriented, export-intense Nordic countries have offered generations free access to higher education and proximity to successful firms. Business education in the Nordics were inspired by the elite ideal of Wharton School of Finance and Commerce and the London School of Economics, and early Nordic business schools copied the German “Handelshochschulen” (literally “colleges of trade”) and retained a larger distance to universities (Engwall, 2007), setting these countries apart from e.g. the United Kingdom (Engwall & Danell, 2011). The shared history of Nordic business research was also institutionalized in the Nordic Academy of Management. Recent rankings of Master’s and MBA place business schools in Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Norway in the top 100 globally (Financial Times, 2014), suggesting fertile conditions for producing business research.

Indeed, many Nordic scholars have succeeded in making significant contributions to the strategy field. In strategy terms: scholars in the Nordics have been early movers in currently much-debated topics such as responsiveness to dynamic environments (cf. Hedberg, Bystrom, & Starbuck, 1976), the strategic value of services (Normann, 1991), and strategy practices (Pettigrew et al., 2003). More recently, Nordic researchers also have been prominent in conceptual cross-fertilization, e.g. combining critical discourse

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