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Bibliometric analysis of absorptive capacity

Indri Dwi Apriliyanti[a,b,*], Ilan Alon[a]

[a] University of Agder, School of Business and Law, Gimlemoen 25, 4630, Kristiansand, Norway
[b] Gadjah Mada University, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Jl Sosio Yustisia Bulaksumur, Yogyakarta, 55281, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to our understanding of absorptive capacity (AC) by reviewing AC articles systematically using two types of blibliometric co-citation analysis – bibliometric co-citation and bibliometric cartography – for the last 25 years. In total, we analyzed 336 articles (using *HistCite*) and 2088 articles (using *VOSviewer*), respectively, finding five research streams in AC: (1) intra-organizational learning; (2) inter-organizational learning; (3) knowledge transfer; (4) dynamic capability; and (5) micro-foundations. This integrative literature review of AC adds to the categorization of the literature, links the international business research to AC, and provides promising future research directions. Our study gives detailed information about the development of each research stream by measuring the number of publications in each stream over 25 years using bibliometric cartography analysis. Based on the literature, we propose 26 future research questions for these five research streams.

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1. Introduction

In 1990, Cohen and Levinthal wrote a seminal paper introducing the construct of absorptive capacity (AC), defined as "the ability of a firm to recognize the value of new, external information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends" (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990, p. 128). In the past 25 years, the number of articles applying, measuring, operationalizing, and re-conceptualizing AC has increased rapidly, reflecting the richness of this new construct in research fields, which led to the writing of bibliometric analysis of AC. He, Zhang, and Wang (2015), Minbaeva, Pedersen, Björkman, Fey, and Park (2014), Fagerberg and Srholec (2008) and Jansen, Volberda, and Van Den Bosch (2005) argued it is crucial to analyze the multifaceted dimensions of AC as a complex and strategic construct. As a construct, AC has been inserted in multiple and diverse theoretical frameworks (discussed briefly in the next section).

To capture the richness of the AC construct, we employ bibliometric co-citation analysis. Bibliometric co-citation analysis is a type of meta-analytical tool with analytical properties (Cote, Leong, & Cote, 1991; Kim & McMillan, 2008). Bibliometric co-citation analysis demonstrates interconnections amongst articles and research topics by analyzing how often an article is cited and co-cited by other articles, indicating a key research stream (Luukkonen, 1997; Nederhof, 2006).

Lane, Koka, and Pathak (2006) and Volberda, Foss, and Lyles (2010) conducted bibliometric analysis on AC. However, given the recent growth in the AC literature, these studies do not sufficiently cover the latest development of the AC literature and its impact on international business (IB). We contribute to the literature of AC by performing two types of bibliometic analysis applied on a much expanded literature base. Lane et al. (2006) rely for their analysis on AC articles from 1990 to 2002, and Volberda et al. (2010) use AC articles from 1992 to 2005, while much of the growth of this literature happened since (see Fig. 1).

Our meta literature review is also methodologically different than the previous ones on the topic. Lane et al. (2006) developed research streams by summarizing 64 AC articles with two-to-three sentences and identifying their similarities in terms of topic, AC operationalization, and empirical and theoretical contributions. Volberda et al. (2010), in contrast, applied a keywords analysis to examine co-occurrences between words in 1213 AC articles, resulting in the selection of 83 keywords that form the basis for AC research stream construction. In our study, we use *HistCite* software to conduct a bibliometric analysis by assessing the networks amongst highly cited articles. *HistCite* provides timeline visualization of citations, pinpoints the most-cited articles, and indicates the subsequent impact of those citations (Garfield, 2009; Thelwall, 2008). *HistCite* has been widely used in various studies (Christensen & Gazley, 2008; Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015). To our knowledge, *HistCite* bibliometric analysis has not been used on the

* Corresponding author at: University of Agder, School of Business and Law, Gimlemoen 25, 4630, Kristiansand, Norway.
E-mail addresses: indri.apriliyanti@uia.no (I.D. Apriliyanti), ilan.alon@uia.no (I. Alon).

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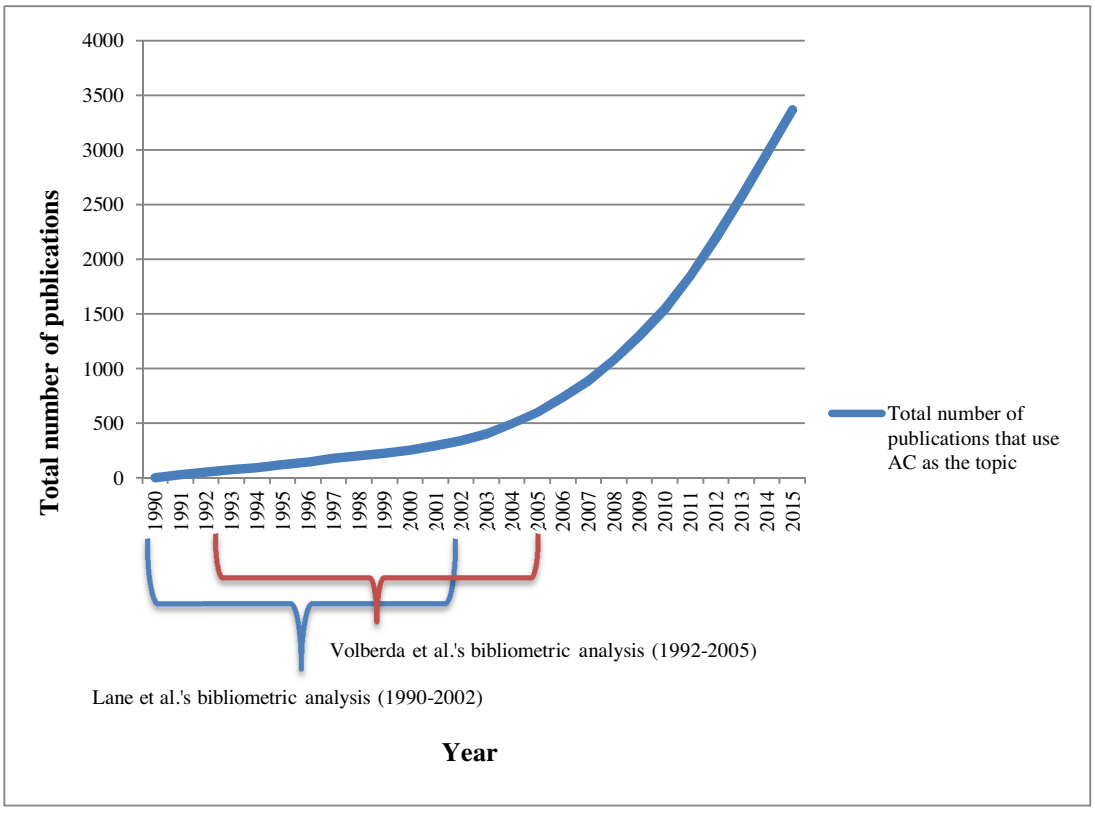

Fig. 1. Total Number of Absorptive Capacity (AC) Publications.
Source: *ISI Web of Science*.

AC construct previously. *HistCite* can analyze and demonstrate the citation amongst articles retrieved from the Web of Science. Genealogic antecedents of a research field are discovered through citation behavior, and publications that are heavily cited will be highlighted (Fetscherin, Voss, & Gugler, 2010, p. 6).

In addition, unlike the previous bibliometric analyses, our article gives information on which articles, journals, and countries contribute most to AC research. We supplement the *HistCite* bibliometric analysis with cartographic analysis. These help to examine key words in various AC research streams. Beyond this, the analyses in this article measure the popularity of AC articles and identify different research streams of AC publications in the IB context. We narrowly focus on the impact that AC has had on the IB research and offer future research directions to the field.

AC contributes to IB as a major determinant of knowledge processes in the multinational context (Björkman, Stahl, & Vaara, 2007; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Minbaeva, Pedersen, Björkman, Fey, & Park, 2003). AC analyses organizational change and the

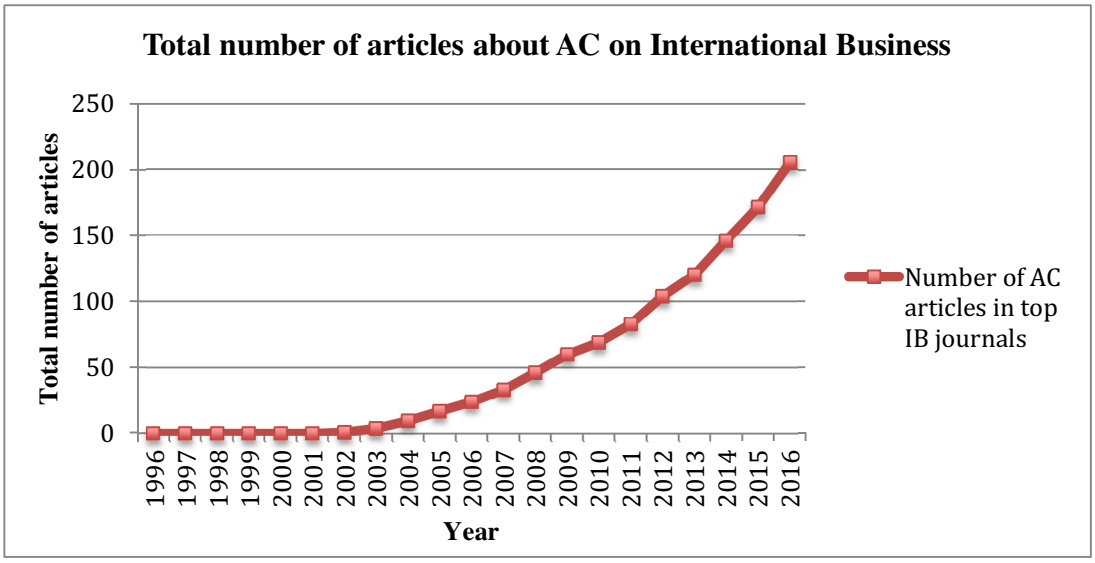

Fig. 2. Total Number of Absorptive Capacity (AC) Articles on International Business (IB) Top Journals.
Source: *ISI Web of Science*.

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