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Killing the Discipline: Problems and limitations on impact factor, prestige, and bibliometric studies in tourism research

Matando la disciplina: Problemas y limitaciones del factor de impacto, el prestigio y los estudios bibliométricos en la investigación turística¹

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Abstract

Over the decades, epistemologists and theorists of tourism have devoted considerable efforts in laying the foundations towards the discipline maturation. This so-called maturation would take the lead when tourism situated not only as a solid object of study, but also professional publications reach a the scientific rigorism. The number of publications in the tourism fields has certainly been triplicated in the recent years, but today tourism has many barriers to become in a consolidated option. This happens because of many reasons. One of them associated to the problem of impact factor, the invention of academic prestige and the bibliometric studies. We, in this short note of research, explore the impossibilities, limitations and problems of the current tourism research which remains culturally embraced to impact factor logic. To put things in bluntly, the current obsession for impact factor in the academy is gradually leading the discipline into an unparalleled crisis.

Key words: tourism research, investigation, higher education, impact factor.

Resumen

A lo largo de las décadas, los epistemólogos y teóricos del turismo han dedicado considerables esfuerzos a sentar las bases para la maduración de la disciplina. Esta llamada maduración tomaría la delantera cuando el turismo se situará no solo como un sólido objeto de estudio, sino que las publicaciones profesionales alcanzaran el rigor científico. El número de publicaciones en el ámbito turístico se ha triplicado ciertamente en los últimos años, pero hoy el turismo tiene muchas barreras para convertirse en una opción consolidada. Esto ocurre por muchas razones. Uno de ellos asociado al problema del factor de impacto, la invención del prestigio académico y los estudios bibliométricos. Nosotros, en esta breve nota de investigación, exploramos las imposibilidades, limitaciones y problemas de la investigación turística actual que permanece culturalmente abrazada a la lógica del factor de impacto. Para decirlo sin rodeos, la actual obsesión por el factor de impacto en la academia está llevando poco a poco a la disciplina a una crisis sin parangón.

Palabras clave: investigación turística, investigación, educación superior, factor de impacto.

It is noteworthy that the bibliometric studies have been multiplied over recent years in the constellations of tourism and hospitality. For some reason, which is hard to precise here, the mania for these studies was practically palpable just after the 2000s (Barrios et

al 2008). These works mainly focus on the different positions of authors according to two key variables, the number of publications most of them located in top-tiered or leading journals, and the number of citations expressed in the I-10 and Hirsch indexes (Law et al 2009; Gursoy & Sandstrom, 2016). Particularly, H-index measures the correlations between citations and the number of publications while creating a hierarchy of scholars worldwide (McKercher 2007; Sheldon, 1991).

The utility of bibliometric studies has been unquestionable. On one hand, it allows the understanding of the networks of scholars as well as the trending topics. On another, it consolidates the emergence of new discussions revolving around the future of the tourism industry (Evren & Kozak, 2014). Echoing Jafar Jafari, the scientification [maturation] of tourism research depends not only on the number of publications but also on the calibration of reliable resources to obtain mix-balanced conclusions (Jafari 2005).

From Jafari onwards, scholars strongly believed that the maturation of the disciplined depended upon the number and impacts of publications in the fields of tourism and other disciplines. For more than four decades, tourism-related studies strived for situating tourism as a serious discipline (Xiao & Smith, 2006; Wardle & Buckley, 2014; Butler 2015). Henceforth, the culture of metrics has occupied a central position in the configuration of tourism epistemology since its onset (Beckendorff & Zehrer 2013). Having said this, some critical voices have alerted not only on the problems revolving around the culture of publishing or perishing but also on the epistemological discrepancies left by the culture of metrics (Korstanje 2021; 2023).

One of the pioneering scholars who claimed the problems of tourism research was doubtless Michael C. Hall. To wit, he argues convincingly that bibliometric analysis often emphasizes the importance of publishing or citation factors excluding other hybridized methods. At the same time, bibliometric analysis is mainly marked by an institutional and policy vacuum dominated by private organization evaluations. To some extent, those protocols orchestrated to evaluate professors' performance, which is strictly based on productivity, simply overlook the quality factor.

The problem with quantitative methods lies in the lack of what experts dubbed the descriptive factor. Instead of measuring, description helps to shed light on the current understanding of tourism future. To put simply, the correlation between two variables [mainly measured by the employment of quantitative methods] does not explain the causality of events. Of course, as Hall adheres, these types of evaluations correspond with the obsession for gaining further funding and the monopoly of financial resources in tourism higher education.

Per his viewpoint, there is a momentum in the discipline [following the current reasoning] where a paper situated in a highly ranked journal has more impact or importance as a source of measurement than its genuine contribution to the specialized literature (Hall 2011). In addition, Graham Dann called attention to the control of the Anglophone world

in knowledge production as well as peer-review processes in leading tourism journals (Dann 2011). In consonance with this, John Tribe exerts a caustic critique of what he calls “the indiscipline of tourism”. As Tribe eloquently observes, the burgeoning growth of publications over recent years has not had a direct impact on the consolidation of tourism research. What is more important, tourism research not only faces a crisis of sense but also a great dispersion because of the lack of a shared agenda in the academic tribes (Tribe 1997; 2010).

As the previous critical argument is given, a mix-balanced discussion is at least needed. The bibliometric culture has strengths and weaknesses. Among the strengths, the bibliometric analysis allows the rapid identification of those factors or topics the academic tribe is investigating. Besides, it recreates the conditions of dialogue [to resolve the problems of the industry in the years to come] as well as cooperation toward multidisciplinary research (Koseoglu et al 2016). In the next lines, we shall identify [if not scrutinize] the weaknesses behind bibliometric-based studies.

At a closer look, there is a dichotomy given by the H-index as a key factor impact evaluation. H-index never reflects the real contribution of the author to the field [or the paper quality], but only the interplay between the number of publications and the impact factor. For the sake of clarity let's put a concrete example, with only for papers published in his life, Albert Einstein would have a low H- index. This reminds us that some of the most recognized scholars who had earned international awards globally seem not to be the most cited ones. Furthermore, being cited does not mean that the paper has a direct contribution to the discipline. Most citations are critiques of methodological problems. Some disciplines [like mobilities theories, anthropology, or cultural studies] are less prone to productivity and citation factors than marketing or management.

This behooves us to consider the fact that the citation impact varies on culture, language, and of course discipline. Under some conditions, impact factors recreate a hierarchy of authors -most of them English native speakers- that serve as real gatekeepers [simply because they are part of leading journals] of the produced knowledge. Scholars are simply cited as emulating fashionable behavior instead of their contribution to the field. It is not simplistic to say that “being cited” does not depend on self-performance. It is a question of trust [where the attention of colleagues is captivated], publicity, and successful strategies in placing the papers in the appropriate journals. Here, four additional problem surfaces: the role of reviewers is not paid.

Although some journals have implemented rewards programs for reviewers to resolve this problem, no less true is that some reviewers condition their approval to a situation of dependency. Authors are pressed to cite reviewers` works or simply to papers previously published by the intended journal. In this way, journals have more possibilities to promote further positions in the impact factor list. It is important to mention that quantitative

methods are often prioritized over qualitative forms of evaluation, as Hall ultimately lamented.

Another point of discussion in this entry is the database selection process. This includes the sampling process where some important journals are excluded from the analysis. Albeit some books and book chapters are highly cited, they are not selected in the bibliometric studies. The opposite is equally true, some indexes or databases [like Scopus or WOS] are highly preferred by authors excluding other larger ones [like google scholar]. Returning to Hall's assumption, if we start from the premise that the citation factor does not mean a higher paper quality, this begs the question: why Scimago or WOS are more important than other databases in the sampling process? These indexes only represent a small portion of the academic tribe.

The act of selecting the publications placed in the top-tiered journals has an additional limitation. Significant material such as books, book chapters, or doctoral theses, which certainly obtain higher citations, are systematically ignored. Scholars more cited in Scopus probably are not the most cited in other sources or databases [i.e., google scholar]. What seems to be more important to discuss, bibliometric culture reaffirms the hegemony of the greatest editorial corporations while cementing the logic of pay-for-journals. As a result of this, institutional or university presses or classic journals are in decline, or simply incorporated into the leading worldwide publishers. Pay-for-journals keep restricted access to published material to a global audience.

Some scholars in developing countries have serious restrictions to access this material though they paradoxically are pressed by their institutions to publish in leading journals. In consequence, the proposed manuscript has two fatal problems, the literature is far from being updated, and the topic is far from being original. It is safe to say that the current bibliometric culture, which holds the glue on some asymmetries between Global South and North, not only harms the discipline but also entraps academicians into an ivory tower and a climate of extreme competition. In parallel, some low-skill fieldworkers are debarred into a peripheral position in the global academic hierarchy. Some institutional pressures lead low-resource academicians to access predatory journals which charge them back for publishing.

Let's explain that predatory journals are defined as fraudulent or deceptive pseudo-journals that often violate scientific practices. In most cases, these journals manipulate the author's desperation [promising faster publications] charging them back excessive fees while in others the peer review process is poor and inadequate. The rise and popularity of these journals explain on basis of two combined factors. Universities exerted considerable pressure on their professors to publish their works in accredited journals. At the same time, universities are frequently evaluated according to the number of publications of their researchers. More ranked the university, more financial resources, and students. This leads some scholars to criticize the culture of publishing or

perishing as the cornerstone of the commoditization of higher education (Van Raan 2005).

Furthermore, the restricted access to the published material put universities between the wall and the deep blue sea. Universities should pay significant fees to publishers for sharing with students the material their professors ultimately publish. Universities double pay the researchers' wages, and the access royalties. Therefore, important universities like Cambridge, Oxford, and Chicago recently called on their researchers not to publish works in WOS and Scopus [in a type of unparalleled boycott]. As an initiative, leading publishers implemented a new policy of open access [billing to authors for the fees] but paradoxically these fees are sometimes out of the possibilities of researchers.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that the bibliometric culture has a direct impact on the higher education system. Some universities impose strict rules and procedures, which include the publication of two or three papers in top-tiered journals annually so that academicians keep their tenure. Plausibly, this creates a vicious circle where professional fieldworkers leave their classrooms in the hands of amateur [low-paid] professors. One of the most palpable consequences associated with the fact that pre- or post-graduate students have countless methodological limitations to finalize their theses. No less true seems to be that the urgency for publishing put authors in a dilemma: writing exclusively on the topic of the moment or finding some innovative unexplored themes.

In the few months that marked the Post COVID-19 context, it is estimated more than 250.00 items are found on google scholar. This happens simply because scholars are not motivated by their object of study [or main scope] but rather by the higher journal impact factor estimated for their publications. Here a new point emerges: Is this the precondition towards the expansion of the discipline or its final ruin? Last but not least, this literary piece is far from being an empirical note of research in the strict sense of the word [as I am accustomed to writing] but it lays the foundations for embracing new methods in the evaluation, not to the future of tourism research in the future.

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