

Are citation analyses biased against qualitative analysis? A self-experiment

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There is a lot of discussion about the relative merits of qualitative and quantitative research. Authors of qualitative papers complain about the apparent bias of editors and (worse) reviewers against qualitative work. A primary reason for such frustrations appears to be that quant standards are applied to qualitative work, and – especially in US journals – qualitative work gets mainly published if the authors are able to extract some sort of quantitative-looking data (Bluhm, et al., 2009; Welch et al. 2009). Hence, qualitative researchers like to complain about an anti-qual bias in the reviewing process.

At the same time, there is hearsay that qualitative papers don't attract as many citations. That of course is difficult to assess because comparisons are bound to compare incomparable different types of work by people with different capabilities, selected by third parties with their own biases. So, I tried a little self-experiment. I classified my own published papers by methodology, and looked at the citations. The results are quite illuminating; they clearly show that my qualitative papers get less cited. This is despite the fact that I personally feel that my qualitative papers provide at least as much if not more insights; certainly I learned more of qualitative work than from hypothesis testing work – including qualitative work that didn't make it into the journals (e.g. our books, Estrin & Meyer, 2004; Meyer & Estrin, 2007). Of course, to make some general statements, someone would have to do such an analysis for a large number of scholars – which however is difficult as there are actually not that many people who have published both qual and quant work in top journals.

Table 1 reports my papers in top management journals, i.e. FT45 journal, tabulated by the main research method employed. Table 2 does the same exercise for second tier management journals.¹ I did not include any of my work published in economics journals as the dynamics are likely to be entirely different.

One can look at the numbers in Tables 1 and 2 in many ways, but it seems apparent that, after controlling for the age of the paper, qualitative papers receive fewer cites than either quantitative or pure theory papers. The only small consolidation is that qualitative papers seem to attract citations for longer, they are less quickly forgotten.²

What may explain these patterns? There are several possible reasons:

1. I may be a lousy qualitative researcher, and/or my qualitative papers are co-authored with less well-trained scholars. There is some merit to this suggestion as I am trained as a quant

¹ I exclude *Business Strategy Review*, *Thunderbird International Business Review* and *Strategic Change* as my publications in these journals are primarily geared towards practitioner or student audiences, and hence not designed to attract citations.

² There is a curious pattern in the citations for Meyer & Skak (2002) in that the paper received not a single SSCI citation in the first three years after publication, but gradually increased its annual citations, reaching six in 2011. Most non-blockbuster papers are declining in citations after five to seven years.

researcher and have learned qualitative and pure-theory research only later in life. However, this conflicts with my own subjective (!) bias that my qualitative papers are providing at least as novel insights as my quant papers.

2. Quant researchers prefer to cite quant papers because they better understand and appreciate them, along with pure theory as long as the latter are expressed in a positivistic style (i.e. in form of hypotheses), and review papers that provide legitimacy to a field of research. Despite the important synergies between qualitative and quantitative methods in a stream of research, as stressed in the methodology literature, quantitative studies are actually rarely informed by qualitative work. Since most papers published in top journals are quantitative, quantitative papers thus can attract more cites from methodologically like-minded scholars.
3. Qualitative work, by design, challenges established ways of thinking, either by introducing new concepts, such as brownfield (Meyer & Estrin, 2001), staged and partial acquisitions (Meyer & Tran 2006) or globalfocusing (Meyer 2006), or by suggesting new ways of looking at a managerial problem, such as an evolutionary perspective of post-acquisition processes (Meyer & Lieb-Doczy 2003) or learning perspectives on post-socialist enterprise restructuring (Dixon et al, 2007). New concepts or new perspectives however are less appealing to scholars proceeding with their established theories and methodologies, which frankly is what most researchers do. Thus, small modifications of established views, or syntheses of mainstream thinking are more likely to attract citations than radically new ideas. New ideas may be picked up only after considerable delays, and after the original author developed them through a stream of research rather than a single paper. If this happens, then indeed, a paper can become a blockbuster, as the famous Johansen and Vahlne (JIBS 1977) paper. Sadly, no one seems to have discovered blockbuster qualities in any of my qualitative paper – but I have not yet given up hope!

My personal conclusion from this analysis is that I will just continue to do what I like to do, combining different methods to apply whatever is most appropriate to the research question at hand. May be one day, I will write a real blockbuster qualitative paper.

However, this analysis also enables me to better understand why editors – who are often very concerned with 2-year citation scores for their journal – may in fact have an anti-qualitative bias when it comes to assessing papers.

Table 1: My Publications in Top Journals: Methods and Citations

Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS), Journal of Management Studies (JMS) and Strategic Management Journal (SMJ).

	Quantitative	qualitative	Pure theory	Reviews etc
2001	Meyer JIBS – 125/376	Meyer & Estrin JIBS – 38/134		
2003		Meyer & Lieb-Doczy JMS 22/65	Uhlenbruck, Meyer & Hitt JMS – 76/191	
2004				Meyer JIBS (P) – 100/117
2005	Meyer & Nguyen JMS – 54/152			Meyer & Peng JIBS (R) – 106/245
2006		Meyer JMS – 17/54		
2007				Meyer JIBS (C) – 18/32
2009	Estrin, Bagdasaryan & Meyer JMS 11/18 Meyer, Estrin, Bhaumik & Peng SMJ – 70/145 Meyer & Sinani JIBS – 13/72		Meyer, Wright & Pruthi SMJ – 17/26	
2010			Dixon, Meyer & Day JMS 3/11	
2011	Tan & Meyer JIBS – 0/9 Santangelo & Meyer JIBS – 0/2			Meyer, Mudambi & Narula JMS (I) 11/21
2012				Xu & Meyer JMS (R) n.a./n.a.
Total Cites	273 / 774	77 / 253	96 / 128	235 / 415
Papers	7	3	3	4
Average age	3.14	7.667	3.67	4.25
Age-adjusted cites per paper*	12.4 / 65.1	3.5 / 11.5	8.7 / 11.5	13.7 / 25.6

Notes: (C) Invited commentary, (I) = Introduction to a special issue, (P) = perspectives paper, (R) = Review and Research Agenda type paper, * = (cites/[2011-year]), averaged over all papers in this column.

Citations: the first number refers to SSCI cites including imprecise and 'in press' cites, the second number refers to cites in Google Scholar. Both numbers were updated on February 24, 2012.

Table 2: My Publications in 2nd Tier IB Journals: Methods and Citations

Asia-Pacific Journal of Management (APJM), European Management Journal (EMJ), Human Relations (HR), International Business Review (IBR), International Journal of Human Resource Management, (IJHRM), Journal of International Management (JIM), Journal of Management (JoM), Journal of World Business (JWB), Long Range Planning (LRP) and Management International Review (MIR).

	Quantitative	Qualitative	Pure theory	Reviews etc
1998		Meyer & Moller EMJ – 12/37		
2002		Meyer & Skak EMJ 22/86	Meyer JWB 11/54	
2004	Davis & Meyer IBR – 22/56 Bevan, Estrin & Meyer IBR – 70/195		Meyer APJM – 3/6	Meyer & Gelbuda MIR 2004 (I) – 15/36
2006		Meyer & Tran LRP – 15/50		Meyer APJM (P) – 66/133
2007		Dixon, Day & Meyer HR 6/17		Meyer APJM (C) – 13/25
2008	Estrin, Meyer, Wright & Foliano IBR 6/17 Yang, Mudambi & Meyer JoM 13/52			Gelbuda, Meyer & Delios JIM (I) – 10/32
2009	Li & Meyer JWB 9/17 Pruthi, Wright & Meyer IJHRM (2/7)			Meyer APJM (E) – 4/12
2010	Tan & Meyer JIM – 2/11			
2011	Estrin & Meyer MIR 1/2			
Total Cites		53 / 190	14 / 60	108 / 238
	125 / 357			
Papers		4	2	5
	8			
Average age		7.75	8.00	4.25
	3.13			
Age-adjusted cites per paper*		1.7 / 8.6	0.9 / 3.7	5.1 / 11.6
	5.0 / 14.0			

Notes: (C) Invited commentary, (E) = editorial, (I) = Introduction to a special issue, (P) = perspectives paper, * = (cites/[2011-year]), averaged over all papers in this column.

Citations: the first number refers to SSCI cites including imprecise and 'in press' cites, the second number refers to cites in Google Scholar. Both numbers were updated on February 24, 2012.

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