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The Social Space of Sustainability Science: A Bibliometric Study of Leading Journals (1990-2021)

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Aim

A bibliometric study of a scientific field's core journals reveals central characteristics of the conceptual and social organization of the field, e.g., the most researched topics or the most prolific authors. Following this approach, this paper aims to analyze the organization of the growing field of sustainability science. The theoretical framework is derived from the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of scientific fields as social spaces characterized by capital available in different forms (such as the capital of the types social, cultural, economic, and symbolic).

Methodology

The most cited journals are elite publication subsets that can be conceived as places of competition for prestige (Vinkler, 2019) or—from a Bourdieusian perspective—symbolic capital (Chipidza & Tripp, 2021). The present study utilizes Clarivate Analytics' Journal Impact Factor (JIF) to assess the journal's prestige. Through this indicator, 18 journals and more than 94,000 documents were identified. The methods used to analyze this literature set are bibliometrics applied to these leading journals' publication data. Descriptive statistics and multivariate analyses were employed to operationalize the distribution of the different forms of capital in the field.

Key results/conclusions

Based on Bourdieu's theorization of scientific fields as social spaces and gauged through the number of co-authored publications, the data reveal a high degree of international collaboration in the field. The more recent presence of researchers and research organizations from China in this field's social space is also a noteworthy finding, which the paper discusses in light of recent traits of the global publishing ecosystem. Moreover, although environmental sustainability is still a significant concern of the research output of these journals, the data show an increasing number of authors concerned with economic and social sustainability issues. This trend corresponds to the growth of social science research published in these leading journals (although to a different extent).

References

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