

Using Structural Variation Analysis to Measure Interdisciplinary Knowledge Integration in Operations Research

Khaled Mili

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6309-5452>

Department of Quantitative Methods, College of Business Administration, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia

Majdi Argoubi

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6560-5153>

University of Sousse, Tunisia

ABSTRACT

Traditional citation analyses often fail to capture how research reshapes intellectual landscapes. This study applies Structural Variation Analysis (SVA) to assess the interdisciplinary impact of a highly cited paper on the Cross-Entropy Method in Operations Research. Using co-citation network analysis, the authors examine structural shifts through key metrics, including modularity change ($\Delta M = 52.57$), cluster linkage ($CL = 135.2$), centrality divergence ($CKL = 0.47$), and entropy ($E = 0.98$). The findings reveal that this methodological paper plays a pivotal role in bridging previously unconnected research domains. Beyond accumulating citations, the Cross-Entropy Method has fundamentally altered research connectivity. SVA offers an early indicator of transformative research before conventional citation metrics can capture their full impact.

KEYWORDS

Bibliometric Analysis, Boundary-Spanning Research, Co-Citation Networks, Interdisciplinary Integration, Knowledge Diffusion, Scientific Impact Assessment, Structural Variation Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Background and Motivation

In today's increasingly complex scientific landscape, interdisciplinary research has become essential for addressing global challenges and advancing knowledge across diverse fields. Measuring how research fosters integration across disciplinary boundaries is thus a critical task in bibliometrics and information science.

Scientific impact assessment has traditionally relied on citation counts as primary indicators of research influence. However, this approach often fails to capture the transformative nature of boundary-spanning research that reconfigures intellectual landscapes by integrating diverse knowledge domains (Small, 2006; Uzzi et al., 2013). This limitation is particularly significant in operations research (OR), an inherently interdisciplinary field characterized by methodological diversity and applications ranging from healthcare management to sustainable supply chains and data science. While citation metrics provide valuable measures of scholarly recognition, they offer limited insight into how influential papers reshape knowledge networks through novel intellectual connections.

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Emerging models of interdisciplinary integration across service science (Manzoor et al., 2024) highlight the continued need to assess how research outputs influence broader intellectual and organizational structures.

Research Problem

Despite growing recognition of the importance of boundary-spanning research in scientific advancement, current impact assessment methods remain predominantly focused on cumulative citation counts, which require years to accumulate and provide limited information about a paper's structural influence on knowledge organization. Additionally, while network-based approaches have been applied to analyze research collaboration patterns in OR (Laengle et al., 2017; Merigó & Yang, 2017), few studies have systematically examined how individual publications reconfigure the field's intellectual structure through interdisciplinary integration.

This gap limits our ability to identify and support transformative research at early stages, an essential consideration for funding agencies, journal editors, and research institutions aiming to foster scientific innovation in OR.

Research Objectives

Our study operationalizes this gap by employing structural variation analysis (SVA) to systematically detect and quantify how research papers reconfigure co-citation networks. Building on Swanson (1986) and recent advances in the science of science (Foster et al., 2015; Uzzi et al., 2013), SVA offers early insight into structural transformations of knowledge networks, beyond what conventional citation analysis captures.

The effectiveness of SVA is supported by previous research demonstrating that structural variation metrics correlate with long-term citation impact (Chen, 2012). Studies have shown that papers establishing new connections between previously unlinked research clusters tend to achieve higher citation rates and exert longer-lasting influence. However, conventional citation analysis typically requires several years to detect such patterns, whereas SVA can detect breakthrough papers early by analyzing their immediate structural effects on co-citation networks.

To operationalize these objectives, we selected "A Tutorial on the Cross-Entropy Method" (de Boer et al., 2005) as a paradigmatic case study. This paper was chosen based on its outstanding citation record, its introduction of a methodological innovation that bridges distinct research domains, and its significant and well-documented impact in the field of OR. Its exceptional role in unifying approaches across stochastic optimization, rare event simulation, and machine learning makes it an ideal candidate for examining boundary-spanning mechanisms and testing the broader applicability of SVA within OR.

This study makes several theoretical and methodological contributions to information science and research evaluation:

- We extended the application of structural variation theory by demonstrating its utility in detecting transformative research within OR, broadening its scope beyond previous applications in biomedicine and computer science.
- We established empirical relationships between network-based structural metrics and interdisciplinary knowledge integration, offering a quantitative framework for assessing boundary-spanning impact.
- We proposed a complementary approach to research evaluation that combines traditional citation metrics with structural variation indicators, providing a more holistic assessment of scientific impact.

By applying this framework to OR, we provide a novel perspective on how influential research shapes disciplinary evolution through boundary-spanning integration. This approach not only advances

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