

The Academic Journal Guide: A View from Category Theory.

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Abstract

The Academic Journal Guide (AJG), used as a proxy measure for the quality of academic research, has not been assessed using the expectations of categorisation theory. Hypotheses are tested using data from four subject areas: Marketing, Management, International Business and Strategy. The majority of variance between categories is explained from proprietary citation data. The remainder is not explained by the criteria used in category definitions and the judgement data that should help users are not publicly available. Overlap between journal categories of their impact data is substantial. Analysis suggests a third of journals might be re-categorised by one or even two categories to reduce overlap. Bias towards UK-based journals does not help explain why overlap exists. Journal ratings cannot however be appealed without a change in a journal's characteristics.

1.0 Introduction

The rating and categorisation of academic journals have become surrogate measures for the quality of an academic's research output [Jarwal et al. 2009; Taylor, 2011; Myers & Kahn, 2021; DORA, 2025; Hudson, 2025] and that of whole departments, despite longstanding and persistent calls for their decoupling [Seglen, 1997; DORA, 2025; Lockett, 2025]. The natural reaction to being evaluated with publicly available measures is to change behaviour [Espeland & Sauder, 2007] implying academics will seek to publish in journals in higher categories when it might be more logical to publish elsewhere. Journals which have value in promoting for example a specialist area may then suffer [Anderson et al., 2021; Rafols et al., 2012] hence the need to consider the robustness of the criteria journal rankings employ. There are a range of journal metrics, each with their own strengths and weaknesses [Mingers, & Harzing, 2007; Myers, & Kahn, 2021; Mingers et al., 2012; Saad, 2006] but many rely in whole or in part upon how many times work is cited, commonly referred to as its 'impact'. Impact is used to assess both individual papers and that of the journals they appear in. More qualitative, judgement, data can be used alongside such an approach.

This paper concerns the influential Academic Journal Guide (AJG) published by the Chartered Association of Business School (CABS) whose methodology combines (continuous) impact data with qualitative judgement to allocate journals within a discrete hierarchy of 5 categories in 22 individual business-related subject areas. The aim here is to provide a theoretically informed view of the AJG approach using categorization theory. Specifically, the gap in our understanding is whether the CABS categorisation of journals can be justified from such a theoretical perspective and if not what changes are implied. The aim is primarily to make a theoretically informed contribution to the existing literature on journal rankings.

The paper is structured as follows: a description of the AJG is provided within the context of journal and research metrics, followed by a discussion of relevant prior work within categorisation theory and then by the hypotheses this implies in the current context. These are then tested using AJG data from four

subject areas and found to be only partially supported. These findings are then discussed to help identify implications for management practice.

2.0 Journal Metrics

Prior work on the value of impact metrics (how often work is cited) can differ markedly as to whether they reflect actual research quality [Currie, 2023]. The use of any journal ranking may encourage '*rank chasing*' [Adler & Harzing, 2009] and discourage less mainstream [Anderson et al., 2021] or interdisciplinary research [Rafols et al., 2012]. Partly to counter such concern several rankings including the AJG combine informed opinion with hard data [CABS, 2024] although this may introduce a separate problem that of evaluator bias [Hoepner & Unerman, 2012].

There are mixed opinions among faculty as to the value of journal rankings. While 44% of British based academics refer to journal rankings in their CV's [Walker et al., 2019] their attitudes towards journal rankings are generally negative, apart from those publishing in the 'leading' journals in their fields [Brooks, et al., 2023]. There is evidence for example that marketing academics tend to agree more than disagree about which journals are the most prestigious [Baumgartner & Pieters, 2003] and that there is considerable consensus across different published rankings, at least within that business discipline [Yoo, 2009].

Several countries have performance based research funding systems [Auranen & Nieminen, 2010] and some such as the UK use journal rankings to assess the quality of current research where the challenge is to assess such work before there has been sufficient time for it to be cited. Articles in higher ranked journals are cited more frequently into the future [Podsakoff et al., 2005] suggesting that rankings based upon past citation rates do indicate the future impact of the work they accept. A paper in a well-regarded journal is likely to be seen as more authoritative due to the source credibility effect [Pornpitakpan, 2004]. While their causal ordering is disputed, there is a positive correlation between AJG data and judgements made in the assessment of UK research quality (the Research Excellence Framework or REF) and impact at the departmental level [Morgan-Thomas et al., 2024, Blackburn et al., 2024].

2.1 The AJG

CABS members include over 100, mainly British, business schools. Their AJG guide is influential both there and internationally [Bryce et al., 2020]. Its role is to '*support academics and Deans in the navigation of the research environment and its complexity, through the provision of robust evidence informed information and data*' [CABS, 2025]. The AJG categorises journals (not papers) into four main groups each with its own definition (Table 1). The highest ranked group is further subdivided, although most work including the original classification [Morris et al, 2009] considers just the four divisions (the protocol adopted here). These definitions should guide the decision-making as to which category a journal is allocated to. All refer to citation impact factors and the AJG uses their presence (or absence) to identify, and distinguish between, categories. The level of refereeing is also mentioned in each

definition, with journals rated 1 being likely to be ‘relatively lightly’ reviewed. Most notably, given that this is by far the largest group in terms of journal numbers, few journals in this group are expected to have impact data.

The methodology for the first ABS Guide involved starting from ‘a list of all journals from which three or more articles were submitted to the business and management panel at RAE 2001’ and supplemented using lists from six UK business schools [Morris et al., 2009] a mammoth task for the 823 journals in the original guide. Journals lacking impact data at the time were allocated to group 1. Judgements were then made as to journal quality (including the status of its editor and editorial board and the content of three recent issues) to produce a provisional ranking using the category criteria. These were made available for comment, and a panel subsequently considered such views. Since then, journals could be considered for regrading if there had been a substantial change in their metrics or in the nature of the journal [AJG, 2024] which implies that having metrics incompatible with a grading cannot be used as grounds for reclassification.

Rating	Meaning of Quality Rating
4*	Journals of Distinction. Within the business and management field including economics, there are a small number of grade 4 journals that are recognised world-wide as exemplars of excellence. As the world leading journals in the field, they would be ranked among the highest in terms of impact factor. The initial paper selection and review process would be rigorous and demanding. Accepted papers would typically not only bring to bear large scale data and/or rigour in theory, but also be extremely finely crafted and provide major advances to their field.
4	All journals rated 4 (whether included in the Journal of Distinction category or not) publish the most original and best-executed research. As top journals in their field, these journals typically have high submission and low acceptance rates. Papers are heavily refereed. These top journals generally have among the highest citation impact factors within their field.
3	3 rated journals publish original and well executed research papers and are highly regarded. These journals typically have good submission rates and are very selective in what they publish. Papers are heavily refereed. These highly regarded journals generally have good to excellent journal metrics relative to others in their field, although at present not all journals in this category carry a citation impact factor.
2	Journals in this category publish original research of an acceptable standard. For these well regarded journals in their field, papers are fully refereed according to accepted standards and conventions. Citation impact factors are somewhat more modest in certain cases. Many excellent practitioner-oriented articles are published in 2-rated journals.
1	These journals, in general, publish research of a recognised, but more modest standard in their field. Papers are in many instances refereed relatively lightly according to accepted conventions. Few journals in this category carry a citation impact factor.

Table (1) Academic Guide 2021, Ratings Definitions <https://d1sqxrh4fb2al3.cloudfront.net/academic-journal-guide-2021-methodology-final.pdf> accessed 16th January 2025. Reproduced with permission and copyright CABS.

CABS claim a '*remarkable general consensus*' on the ranking of individual journals and assure users that '*One or two ratings may still appear unusual to users, but it is worth considering that the Scientific Committee includes many experts who are party to a wide range of information*' [CABS, 2024]. So, while citation metrics can be expected to influence AJG ratings, opinion should also be a significant influence. Much is made of the use of peer review in recent discussion of the AJG [Krueger, 2017; Walters, 2025; Teymourifar, 2026]. Where individual journal rankings do not reflect their citation metrics, it is then reasonable to assume that this opinion is the source of such variance, but how much the categorisation of journals is attributable to impact data is unknown.

The latest version of the AJG at the time of writing is AJG2024. The impact data used for the ratings were from the years 2017 to 2021. This comes from an analysis of up to four impact metrics (see below) wherein the dominant methodology is to count citations. The proportion of journals in each category within the AJG rankings is relevant. Of the 1822 journals listed in AJG2024, 43.3% were rated 1 (the lowest grade), 31% at 2, 17.7% at 3 and only 8.0% at 4 or 4*. Numerically the AJG is then dominated by journals in categories 1 or 2 (74%). However, given the correlation between REF and AJG ratings [Morris et al., 2009; Harvey et al., 2010; Blackburn et al., 2024; Morgan-Thomas 2024] and the use of the AJG in selecting work to be submitted to the REF [Hudson, 2024; Tourish & Willmott, 2015; Blackburn et al, 2024], British and other academics whose countries use the AJB will look to publish in journals rated 3 or 4 in the AJG rather than 1 or 2. Editors and publishers will also be concerned that the journals they manage will be rated as high as possible to attract more citable work and to charge libraries accordingly.

The AJG approach uses four proprietary measures of journal citation, the JIF, the SJR, SNIP and CiteScore, each converted by them to a ranking within each of 22 subject areas [CABS,2024]. (The AJG rankings cannot then be compared between subject areas). JIF data are not available for many journals (and are not considered in detail in this paper). How each measure treats citations differs. For example, the SJR weights citations by the prestige (i.e. the ranking) of the journal where the citation occurs. JIF, SJR, and SNIP use the Scopus database of journals to count citations, which, the author estimates, includes about just half of all journals published in management and business.

The main value of the AJG stems from the allocation of journals into a limited number of defined groups or categories (Table 1). Once placed into an AJG group, journals are not placed into a rank order within that group. Hence, the most relevant theoretical perspective to evaluate the AJG is that of categorisation.

3.0 Categorisation Theory

Boghossian and David [2021] define categories as '*social constructions that differentiate among entities*'. Categorisation in turn refers to the process of sorting and organizing items into groups based upon their shared characteristics. Categorisation plays a key role in imposing coherence on the social world by partitioning items into groups [Vergne, & Wry, 2014]. The aim is to provide the maximum amount of information for the minimum effort by the user [Rosch, 1978] through the simplification offered for those

trying to make sense of the totality, thus facilitating their judgement decisions [Vergne, & Wry, 2014]. The main consequence is that interpretation and communication are both made easier [Alessandroni, & Rodríguez, 2020]. Categories represent a shared meaning between the actors involved in the field and they represent conceptual boundaries which serve as a basis for comparison [David, & Lee, 2022]. One further consequence is that once a series of (often similar) objects have been placed into categories, we behave differently towards each, depending upon its category [Harnad, 2017].

There are various approaches to categorisation. For example, an exemplar of each category can act as a guide [Poitrenaud, et al., 2005] or category definitions can be used to allocate membership [Deroy, 2019]. The advantage of the latter approach is that definitions or lists of attributes can act as boundaries specifying what offerings must possess to fall within one category or another [Vergne, & Wry, 2014]. Often a category represents a collective agreement by audiences on the similarities of its members where members can be regarded as close substitutes for each other. Alternatively, category membership can be based on ideals rather than features and members can differ from each other because they exist to achieve the same outcome [Boghossian & David, 2021; David & Lee, 2022; Durand & Khaire, 2017]. In the AJG journals are first allocated to one of 22 subject areas and then into a hierarchy where each category has its own definition (Table 1). These should clearly identify the category into which a journal falls and guide the more qualitative decision-making inherent in the CABS approach.

How consistent the categorisation decisions are between individuals depends upon whether each category is clearly defined and whether evaluators use their own opinions [Gaillard et al., 2011]. Items can be grouped or moved depending upon the information provided to the evaluator [Kim et al., 2020], but once an item has been categorized it may be relatively difficult to recategorize it, for example when new information is forthcoming, as the category the item had been placed in originally acts as an anchor point. Any change in category will go against a previous judgment and may require a deal of mental processing by the assessor [Sherif et al., 1958; De Bruyn, & Prokopec, 2017]. Consequently, category members may need to advocate, for example by lobbying and getting consumer attention, to have their group membership changed [David, & Lee, 2022]. The presence of group effects, here changing the views of an expert panel, can be expected to magnify the challenge [Ledgerwood, & Chaiken, 2007]. Recategorization is an issue with the AJG as to be considered for a move requires evidence of a change in a journal's metrics or its 'nature' [AJG 2024:Appendix].

In summary categorisation theory points to the need for a clear process, here the use of category definitions and expert opinion, so that members of the social system involved can rely upon the outcome in their decision-making. Category members also benefit from being clearly associated with a single category as it can help confer legitimacy [David, & Lee, 2022]. There are several factors that must be traded against the benefits of categorisation. One is the assumption that objects within each category are homogeneous in character [Bentley, et al., 2009] and differ clearly from those within adjacent groups. Another is the loss of information that turning continuous into categorical data can cause [Taylor, & Yu, 2002].

3.1 Expert Opinion

The origins of journal lists including the AJG are in those created within individual departments as guides to staff as to the journals they should be aiming to publish within [Morris et al., 2009]. Not surprisingly such lists are accused of bias favouring the outlets used by those who created the lists. There are other sources of bias other than direct self-interest. For example, the AJG has been critiqued for containing country bias, the preferential rating of journals published in the UK [Wu et al., 2025]. Similar allegations have been made that American databases show bias against European journals [Nieminen, & Isohanni, 1999]. However informed opinion can be useful when comparing journal impact data when for example if the journal is known to 'encourage' citation from work it has published previously [Chorus, & Waltman, 2016]. Opinions often vary as to which journals should be considered for use particularly those with lower rankings [Watson, & Montabon, 2014]. Acceptance rates for example can be used as an indicator of journal quality although studies differ as to their association [Cahn, 2014; Haensly et al., 2008; Sugimoto et al, 2013]. Citation numbers for individual papers within a journal vary markedly such that the majority of citations for work in a journal stem from a minority of its content and a wide range of factors have been identified to explain why specific papers are highly cited [Tahamtan et al., 2016]. They can be divided into 3 categories, paper related, such as the novelty of the subject matter, journal related including the perceived quality of the journal and author related such as their prestige. Such factors can be highly subjective. Submission numbers can change if what has become known as the 'reputation' of the journal alter, including changes in impact measures, negative reviews of the review process, and retractions [Gaston et al., 2020].

3.2 Hypotheses

Categorisation theory often emphasises that categories should be both distinct and well defined [Deroy, 2019]. In the case of the AJG hierarchy, journals are allocated using both their impact data and decisions validated by expert opinion. The value of expert opinion is often emphasised [CABS, 2024; AJG, 2024] as a distinguishing feature compared to approaches which simply allocate journals into four groups depending upon which quartile of impact data they belong to (e.g. SCImago's Q1-Q4 ranking). However, the relative role of impact data and opinion in the AJG is unclear as while the impact data used are made public, the opinion data are not. However, the greater the role of impact data, logic suggests, the lesser the role of expert opinion will have been. If impact data have a predominant role we can expect the average of impact data for the journals in adjacent groups to differ significantly and to improve with the category level. This issue is relevant to the critique of the use of journal rankings to assess research quality in DORA [2013] which emphasises '*the need to eliminate the use of journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, in funding, appointment, and promotion considerations*' and '*the need to assess research on its own merits rather than on the basis of the journal in which the research is published*'. The AJG methodology [CABS, 2024] mentions DORA four times including: '*...we share DORA's concern with bibliometrics as an over-riding measure of research quality, and hence our emphasis on peer opinion, encompassing a careful reading of typical work and scientific merit that is encountered in particular journals*' [CABS 2024 p8].

This strongly suggests that bibliometrics would not dominate AJG categorisation. To help test this the following are proposed:

H1a: Impact data for journals within a subject area will differ significantly (a) across and (b) between AJG categories.

H1b: Impact data will not dominate the categorisation of journals to their AJG category

If H1b is not supported, the definitions of categories other than impact data should explain rankings. AJG category definitions differ on the standard of reviewing (Table 1). For example, level 3 and 4 journals are *'heavily refereed'*, level 2 journals are *'fully refereed'* but level 1 journals *'are in many instances refereed relatively lightly according to accepted conventions'*. Consequently:

H2: The level of reviewing will vary between AJG categories, being lower in the lowest category.

The definitions also distinguish between the impact metrics of different categories with the most telling statement being again for level 1 journals (the category containing the highest number of journals) *'Few journals in this category carry a citation impact factor'*. Hence:

H3: The number of citation metrics available for journals will increase with AJG level, being the lowest for level 1

If reviewing levels and the availability of citation metrics cannot explain the difference between journals in different AJG categories, the opinion of the CABS experts is the likely explanation. One danger here is that of systematic bias and the AJG has been accused of favouring British based journals [Wu et al., 2025]. Hence:

H4: UK based journals will be more favourably treated in the AJG compared with non-UK based journals

4.0 Methods

Data obtained from the AJG 2022 were analysed for journals listed under 4 subject areas: Marketing, General Management, Ethics, Gender and Social Responsibility (referred to in the AJG and here as 'Management'), International Business and Area Studies (referred to hereafter as 'IB') and Strategy, as the author had knowledge of publishing and reviewing in each. There are 22 subject areas in AJG 2022 and a total of 1822 journals. The four areas chosen contained 324, Marketing 78, Management 111, IB 56 and Strategy 27. Strategy is the smallest group and Management and Marketing the third and eighth largest of the 22. In the Marketing category the percentage of journals rated 3 or 4 (including 4*) in AJB2024 was 25.6%, in Management 18.9%, in IB 19.6% and in Strategy 18.5%. The average for all subject areas was 25.7%.

The data were first explored qualitatively and quantitatively. AJG ratings were taken for the three main impact data series used to create them (CiteScore, SNIP and SJR) from the AJG database, which quotes

their values from 2017–2021 data converted into rankings within each subject area, i.e. the journal with the highest impact score is ranked 1 and so on. As the number of journals ranked at 4 and 4* form by far the smallest categories their data were combined, as their definitions [Table 1 and Morris et al., 2009] imply they can be. Not all journals had data for each of the three measures and the following statistical analyses focus on those that did unless specified. Initial analyses showed the three impact ratings were very highly correlated for each subject area with Correlation Coefficients above 0.85 and p values less than .001 for each binary correlation. Consequently, the ratings were summed to create the measure of citation impact used hereafter. This measure was used to test H1a and b using Anova and Ordinal Logistic Regression.

The websites for individual journals and an internet search using the term ‘Is <name of journal> double blind reviewed?’ were used to search for information on reviewing processes to help assess H2. H3 particularly whether the availability of citation metrics for level 1 journals is relatively low was tested by exploring the AJG database. To assess H4 Ordinal Logistic Regression was first used to identify journals that might be considered outliers within their categories and reallocated to a higher or lower category. The country origins of those identified for such moves were then compared.

5.0 Findings

5.1 Impact

To test H1 a and b, first one way anova was used to assess the overall significance of impact data on category membership [Table 2].

Table 2				
One-way anova of Impact data				
Subject Area	N	F	Sig.	Eta Squared
Marketing	78	37.2	< .001	.61
Management	91	47.2	< .001	.62
IB	52	29.1	< .001	.65
Strategy	24	12.7	< .001	.66

This picture contrasted with that from graphing the data (an example is given in Fig. 1 for Marketing journals; for other subject areas see Appendix). The overlap between the impact data for adjacent categories is substantial and the sample sizes and variances of each group differ. Consequently, to protect against Type I error inflation and ensure a robust analysis, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was adopted to compare between groups.

Figure (1) Impact data by CABS/AJG category for Marketing journals

It proved significant for all subject areas ($p < .001$). To pinpoint where the differences occurred, post-hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using a Bonferroni adjustment. Each of the comparisons between categories 2 and 3 and between 3 and 4 show significant overlap (Table 3) as the p values exceed .05. The categories overlap in terms of their ranking data. Several journals had impact data considerably above the mean for a higher category or below the mean for a lower category, as the Figures illustrate.

Table 3
Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test
comparing adjacent pairs of AJG categories: p
values (Bonferroni-adjusted values).

AJB group pairs				
Subject Area	N	1–2	2–3	3–4
Marketing	78	.007	.618	.948
Management	91	< .001	.129	1.0
IB	52	.003	.279	1.0
Strategy	24	.151	1.0	1.0

As a final test, Ordinal Logistic Regression was used to predict AJG rankings from the summed impact data, Table 4. In each case the regressions proved significant at $p < .001$, with the Nagelkerke [1991] measure of pseudo R^2 suggesting a substantial association between impact and AJG category in line with the effect sizes shown in Table 2. H1b is still however supported as the association between impact data and category membership is not completely dominant.

Table 4
Prediction of AJG category from summed
impact data

Subject Area	Chi²	N	Sig	R²
Marketing	72.0	78	< .001	.671
Management	83.5	91	< .001	.660
IB	54.7	52	< .001	.728
Strategy	25.6	24	< .001	.725

In summary, H1a that impact data varies significantly across and between AJG categories is supported. However, H1b that impact data does not fully explain the categorisation of journals is also supported. Impact data appears to account for around two thirds to three quarters of the variance in categorisation but the significant overlaps between categories 2 and 3 and 3 and 4 are of concern, particularly as the impact data of some individual journals, those that could have been categorised two groups above,

suggest that they could have been either miscategorised or the impact data over-ridden by strong expert opinion, including that about the level of reviewing.

4.2 Reviewing

One point of differentiation between categories emphasised in their definitions is the standard of reviewing, encapsulated in H2. To assess H2 the number of reviewers that can be expected for a paper was first obtained from each journal's website. Given the strong statement about journals ranked 1 in the AJG the analysis focused on these.

For almost all Marketing journals (including those in level 1) there was a clear statement on their websites to the effect that the papers published were double blind peer reviewed (74 of 78). In a few instances the statements made for level 1 journals were somewhat ambiguous as to the number of reviewers used, but this was also true for journals rated 2 to 4. For some level 1 journals, three reviewers were specified. In only one instance for Marketing journals could the statement on reviewing be taken to mean that only one reviewer would be used. Even this was contradicted by the results of the internet search, which did not identify any issues with the reviewing of any of the Marketing journals graded at 1 in AJG2024. There were no instances of journals claiming that they were reviewed only by an editor.

A similar approach was used for the 111 Management journals. 54 of the 57 ranked at 1 included a statement to the effect that submissions were double blind reviewed. Of the 3 that did not, 1 had ceased publication, 1 published case studies only and a third implied a review. 9 stated explicitly that two or more reviewers would be used and only 1 implied that a single reviewer (in addition to an editor) would assess a submitted paper. While several statements were again somewhat vague, this was the same for level 4 journals, one of whom used two associate editors as the sole reviewers. No issues were identified in the internet search. 14 level 1 Management journals had no impact data for the three approaches cited in AJG2024, although 3 of these did have data available for 2025 online. Two higher rated journals (one at 2 the other at 3) had no impact data for AJG2024.

The 28 Strategy journals in AJG24 form one of the smaller groups: level 4 (3), level 3 (2), level 2 (7), and level 1 (16). As the Strategy group is small it makes it easier to discuss the role of JIF data. Of the 24 journals with impact data, only 9 had JIF data, all 4 journals rated 4, one rated 3, 2 rated 2 and 2 rated 1. As with the other impact data sources the JIF information is ranked in the AJG. Consequently, in the AJG24 dataset one journal rated 1 is ranked 9th on JIF while being ranked 22nd or 24th on the other three impact measures. However, even this anomaly could not explain why so many journals were not placed into a different group when doing so would provide better discrimination between groups. There were no impact data in AJG2024 for 4 journals of the 16 rated 1. However, all 16 claimed double-blind reviewing, although for one this was from editorial staff only. 4 did not specify how many reviewers would normally be involved. 2 implied one only. 7 stated two or 'at least 2'. One stated 3 on average.

For IB journals, both level 4 journals said they used at least 2 reviewers for each paper. Of the 9 graded 3, 5 also indicated using at least 2 reviewers, and another stated its review 'usually involves' two. Another

implied there would be more than one reviewer. For two journals no statement could be found on their webpages. Of the 16 journals rated at 2, 9 said they used two or more reviewers, two implied they did, three journals had statements about their double blind process, and for two journals no statement could be found. 18 of the 29 Level 1 journals claimed 2 or more reviewers per submission, the rest a double blind process with no numbers implied and in only 1 instance was no clear statement found.

In summary the reviewing policies of journals across the four subject areas were similar across all 4 categories and did not reflect the expectation that papers accepted for review by higher ranked journals would likely be treated to a more rigorous process. There was no evidence from the number of referees used to support the definition of level 1 journals that *‘Papers are in many instances refereed relatively lightly according to accepted conventions’*.

Next the availability of impact data was assessed. The definition for level 3 includes: *‘at present not all journals in this category carry a citation impact factor’* and for level 1: *‘Few journals in this category carry a citation impact factor’*. Table 4 summarises the data from AJG 2024 for the availability in that database for all of the three main impact databases. All level 4 journals had data for each. Level 1 journals were more likely to have at least one missing measure, but this applied to only about a quarter. Most had the three main impact data apparently used to guide the categorisation. Many of the journals with missing data for one or more of the years in which the AJB 2024 ranking were compiled (2017–2021) did have impact data by the end of that period. Almost all journals were found to have Google H index data, a point returned to later. While a lack of impact data would make assessing a journal very difficult, there is little or no evidence here to support H3, that a lack of data is a major criterion.

Table 4
Percentage of journals with missing citation data
for one or more measure in AJG 2022 by subject
area

Subject Area	Category				
	N	1	2	3	4
Management	109	25.8	3.3	7.7	0
Marketing	78	2.6	5.3	0	0
IB	56	10.3	0	11.1	0
Strategy	28	25.0	0	0	0

To assess the potential influence of opinion in the categorisation of journals and identify those whose group membership might need explanation from expert opinion, the output from Ordinal Logistic Regression was revisited. The group membership derived from the latter (based solely on summed impact data) was compared with the actual CABS ranking for those journals which had complete impact data, Table 5. N is the number of journals with full impact data. The fit statistics suggest that as the Pearson value is high, that impact is strongly associated with AJG category. The numbers that would be

promoted or demoted based upon similarity of impact data were obtained by comparing the predicted and actual group memberships. This represented between a quarter and a third of journals with impact data. In all but two cases (one marketing and one strategy journal) the implied reclassification would have been of one category. In the former cases a larger move (from Group 1 to Group 3) was implied.

Table 5
Journals that might be re-categorised based solely upon their Impact data

Subject Area	N	Number Promoted	Number Demoted	Model Fit: Chi ² p value	Goodness of Fit Pearson
Management	91	13	18	83.5, < .001	1.0
Marketing	76	13	15	72.0, < .001	1.0
IB	52	9	8	54.7, < .001	.99
Strategy	24	3	3	25.6, < .001	.71

Table 5 gives a quantitative view of the visual picture provided by the graphing of journal impact data by category (Figure 1 and Appendix). The main effect of the reclassification was to reduce the overlap in impact data between adjacent groups.

Table 6

Nationality of journals that might be re-categorised based solely upon their Impact data ¹ Number in model ²Main Source: SCImago in 2026

Subject Area	N ¹	UK Based ²	Number Promoted	Number Demoted	UK Based Promoted	UK Based Demoted
Management	91	55	13	18	12	10
Marketing	76	39	13	15	8	6
IB	54	35	9	8	7	6
Strategy	24	17	3	3	3	2
Total	245	146	38	44	30	24

Most journals in the four subject areas were categorised by SCImago in 2026 as being from the UK. Of the 146 UK based journals the modelling suggested that 30 (20.5%) should be promoted compared to 8 of the 99 non-UK based journals (8.0%) in the sample of 4 subject areas. This is significant (Chi²(1, N = 245) = 7.01, p = .008). The numbers were closer for journals identified for demotion (24 UK (16.4%) and 20 non-UK (20.2%)) and the difference is not significant (Chi²(1, N = 245) = 0.57, p = .45). If bias exists in the categorisation of journals it favours non-UK journals, and H4 is not supported.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 *A Categorisation theory perspective*

Most prior work focuses on the use of journal rankings and not on the theory behind them.

Categorisation theory is rarely mentioned, but it can offer useful insights and a structure to appraise journal categorisation. Its application forms the major contribution to theory from this paper. One of the best cited articles on categorisation [Mervis, & Rosch, 1981] poses a series of questions to evaluate a categorisation scheme, including whether there are any a priori reasons for dividing objects into categories; whether all category members are equally representative of the category and whether the boundaries of categories are well defined. The logic of having four categories is not clearly argued for the AJG and this number and their definition have changed since its inception [see Morris, et al., 2009 and AJG, 2024]. There is no publicly available evidence for this number of categories. While there is a close association between the AJG ratings and those in the UK's REF [Brooks et al., 2023; Blackburn et al., 2024], their definitions of research quality differ markedly.

Based upon Categorisation theory and prior work, five hypotheses were used as guides to explore the categories used and their definitions in more detail. H1a proposed that impact metrics should differ across AJG categories. This is supported when assessed holistically (average metrics are stronger the higher a AJG group's rating). H1b proposed that impact data would not dominate AJG rankings, but the data suggest they do explain more than half of the variance between rankings. Little or no support could be found for H2, that reviewing standards can help explain categorisation, by examining the policies of individual journals or from an internet search and certainly not to the extent of over-riding impact data for as many as a third of journals. H3 concerns the availability of impact metrics across groups. Level 1 journals can lack impact data as used in the CABS approach, but most have all three of the main indices, something that must have been known to the reviewing panels. Higher ranked journals tend to be more likely to qualify to have JIF data. To do so journals must meet 24 criteria [Clarivate, 2026] which are non-impact and clearly listed.

What is most worrying is the level of overlap between journal metrics in adjacent categories as illustrated by Figs. 1–4, and confirmed in Table 5. A journal can have impact metrics which suggest one classification when compared with the measures of similar journals, but then be given a very different ranking in the AJG but with no publicly available data to help explain this. H4 concerning the potential for a country of origin bias was rejected emphasising the need for transparency of criteria and ratings.

5.2 *The value of expert opinion*

Certain types of article, including reviews and those containing construct definitions, tend to be more heavily cited and those using qualitative rather than quantitative methodologies less so [Antonakis et al., 2014; Stremersch et al., 2015]. Papers in specialist subjects or journals are likely to receive fewer citations. Consequently, the type of articles journals publish as well as their rigour can influence their impact and therefore the ranking of the journal. Citations can be 'gamed' not only by authors but by journals requiring authors to include citations from within the same journal [Macdonald, 2022]. Impact metrics should not then be used as a sole source of research quality evaluation [Auranen & Nieminen,

2010] and informed judgement is clearly relevant. However, what if any such data are used is not publicly available for the AJG. Impact data metrics, for all their weaknesses as measures of research quality, are far more transparent [Macdonald & Kam, 2007; Tadjewski, 2018] and appear to explain the majority of variance between AJG categories. DORA [2013] requests that organizations that supply metrics: *'Be open and transparent by providing data and methods used to calculate all metrics'*. CABS do not do so.

One study has shown a link between the ranking of a journal and the citation level of its reviewers [Lei, 2022] suggesting that the better ranked journals can rely upon the views of more experienced reviewers. The instructions given to reviewers can vary between high and low ranked journals. The former appear to stress theoretical contribution and methodological validity while the latter give more emphasis to the empirical contribution and the quality of communication [Seeber, 2020]. There are solid grounds for defining categories using reviewing standards. One option would be to build upon existing surveys of researchers' opinions [Fry et al., 1985, Brown, & Huefner 1994; Rosenstreich, & Wooliscroft, 2006] or the approach used by Clarivate [Clarivate 2026]. The authors of accepted (and rejected) articles could be surveyed about the review process they had experienced. For the 1822 journals in AJG this would be a substantial but not impractical undertaking. Such data should be available for public scrutiny in the same way as it would be within any academic work.

5.3 Further Implications

There are significant issues in differentiating between AJG rating groups using impact data. Journals might be moved between groups to eliminate outliers (unless there are data that can be scrutinised to explain otherwise) and improve the level of discrimination between groups. Journals can already be recategorized, but the process is limited to those whose metrics or nature have changed substantially since the previous review. A journal whose metrics clearly show that it is miscategorised cannot then move. One suggestion would be that journals whose metrics suggest they are outliers are reviewed routinely.

Criteria used to define each AJG level do not appear to be supported by the categories themselves. Their definitions must be revisited so that definitions and groupings are better aligned.

6.0. Conclusion

Having lists of journals intended to guide publication strategy and the assessment of research output has been criticised and often with passion [Willmott, 2011] but they can have value. It is clear from the literature cited earlier that the use of AJG ratings to assess academics and their work is contentious. The widely cited review of Adler & Harzing [2009] called for a moratorium of the use of journal rankings until their validity is improved. The perspective of categorisation theory here adds further evidence for change in the predominant one of that type in the UK, the AJG which still reflects impact data. Unless opinion data are made available the AJG will not match DORA criteria. The next iteration of the AJG is due in 2027. It will be interesting to see what changes have been made. Adopting a more theoretical

approach to creating and managing the listing has the advantage of creating a clear framework against which they can be judged.

6.1 Limitations

This paper has considered only 4 subject areas, and further work might usefully include similar analyses within others. The numbers of journals in group 4 are low, an issue when considering the significance of some tests. However, a visual comparison of impact data can be used to confirm their validity.

Declarations

Author Contribution

The paper is sole authored and he was responsible for all aspects of its content

Data Availability

The data used in this paper are largely copyright and are available from the CABS website. The spreadsheets containing the data downloaded for this paper and that derived from it, as well as other data, are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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Footnotes

1. Private communication 06/03/2025

Figures

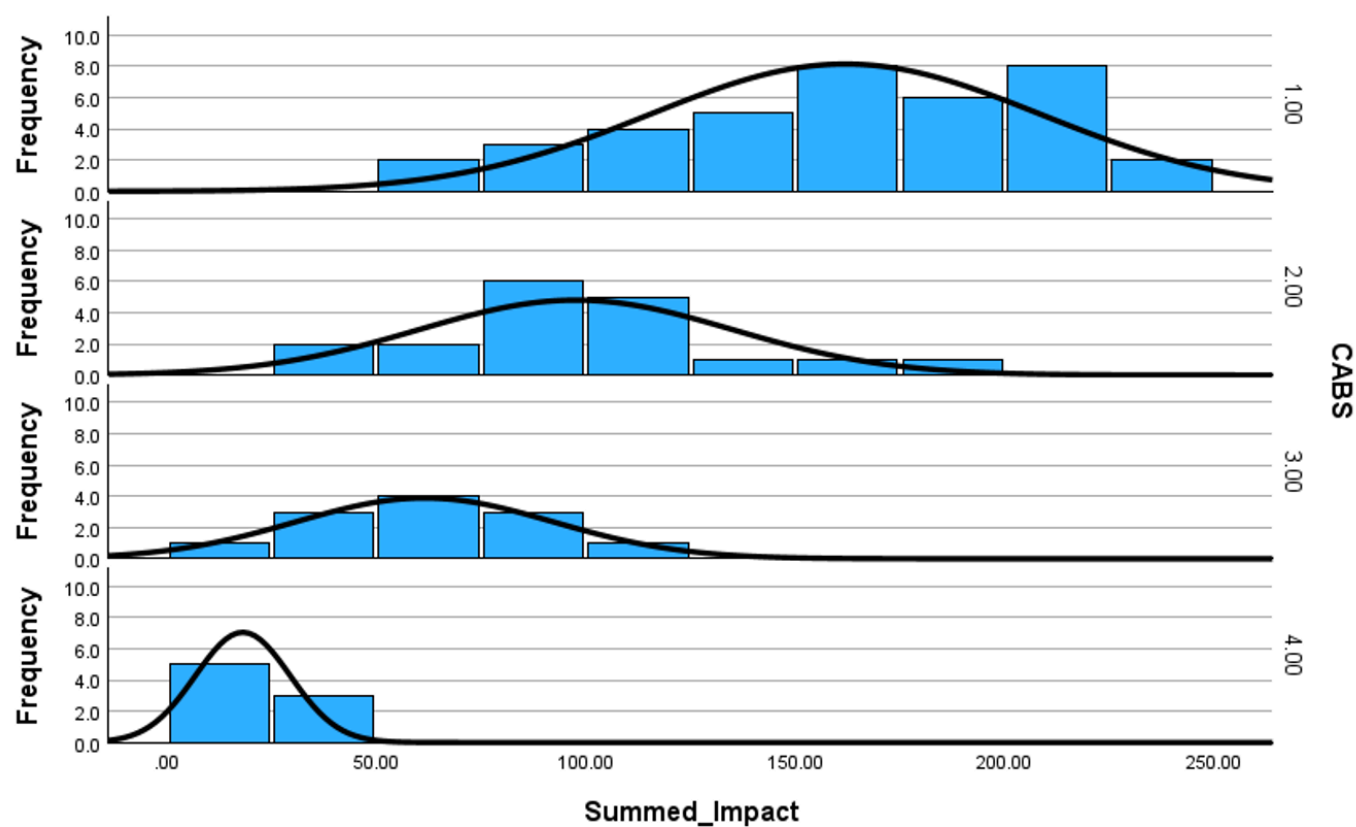


Figure 1

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