



Toulon-Verona Conference Excellence in Services 2008-2016: Primary highlights of the *best papers*

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Abstract

Purpose. This paper aims to review and explore the *primary highlights* of the *best papers*, which have been selected by the Toulon-Verona Conference Excellence in Services scientific committee for the period 2008-2016.

Methodology. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

Findings. 51 *best papers* have been selected by the TVC scientific committee by combined group of 145 authors. Lead authors were from a total of 50 higher education institutions from all over the world and one consultant (private sector). Six papers were self-authored while the 45 were multi-authored. The majority of the papers written by Italian authors (58.8%); followed by France, Greece, and Sweden (5.9% each); Australia, Portugal, Spain and UK (4% each); Austria, Norway, Slovenia and Vietnam (1.9% each). 37 papers were classified as research paper, 10 case studies, and four theoretical. There were 52,792 downloads only for 25 papers published at the *TQM Journal*. While in June 2017 the total number of citations was 498 and reflect 34 papers.

Practical implications. Analysis for the first time define trends (methodological) for the TVC's *best papers*, and suggest possible future research topic and methodological approach.

Originality/value. The findings are unique for the TVC conference and for the TQM special issues, and contribute to the literature of analyzing published papers.

Keywords

Excellence in services, quality management, thematic analysis, research papers, research methodology, citation analysis

1. Introduction

The Toulon-Verona Conference Excellence in Services (TVC) was founded by the University of Toulon and University of Verona in 1998. In TVC, both academics and practitioners are welcome to discuss issues about excellence and quality management in various domains of services (i.e. education, health care, public sector/local government, tourism, banking, insurance, logistics etc.). The conference looks at the role of Quality/Excellence, stakeholders, resources, processes, certifications, accreditations and labels, measurement and improvement in such institutions and activities. The purpose of this study is to review and explore the *primary highlights* of the *best papers*, which have been selected by the TVC's scientific committee for the period 2008-2016. *Main highlights* of each paper include number of authors, authorship profile (i.e. lead author affiliation, gender, and geographic location), co-authors' geographic locations, classification of the papers, research topics, varieties of research methods used, number of electronic downloads (as of June 2017), number of citations received by them, and subject keywords.

The importance of this study relies on the fact that an examination of the use of research methods is needed to examine possible patterns emerging over the past nine years in the area of excellence and quality management, especially among the *best papers* selected by a scientific committee. Excellence and quality management in services is an important research area in the domain of management research. Management researchers employed mostly quantitative, and qualitative approaches. Kim et al., (2010) stated there is "much debate on which approach is appropriate in management research, each approach has both advantages and weaknesses" (p. 687). Beyond quantitative and qualitative approaches, mixed methods are considered appropriate when the research questions concern process and dynamic phenomena such as innovation and change (Curall and Towler, 2003). Regarding methodological perspectives, my study helps to understand the diversity of research methods employed by the author/s and in their respective research area. Changes in the environment requires different methodological approaches by researchers; therefore, the analysis of the selected *best papers* from various countries contributes to the better understanding of research in the field of management. The possible range of different methodological approaches adopted by these *best papers* might also provide avenues for future research and the inclusion of those methodological approaches. Perhaps researchers could actualize specific research methods in their own area of expertise which might provide both professionals and academics working samples of current research methods for university students (undergraduate and graduate). Deciding on which methodologies work best for specific areas of management research is critical when designing a research project. This paper includes a review of the *best papers* (n=51) from 2008-2016 and is presented in sections: methodology, findings, and a concluding discussion.

2. Methodology

First, I obtained the articles from the TVC's archives (personal communication). For the period 2008-2016, a total of 51 *best papers* were selected by the scientific committee which I selected for analysis. In order to analyze the sample, I used a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013), which is a similar methodological approach used by several researchers (Davies, 2012; Nilsson et al., 2007). Additionally, I identified where these 51 *best papers* were published.

I examined each article to collect the required data. Data extracted included number of authors per paper and the lead authors' host organization. I then reviewed the gender of the

lead authors and analyzed that data for multiple-authored papers and their geographic location. Furthermore, I checked what the papers' classifications were. Usually, authors classify their papers as research papers, viewpoint, or a case study among others. The analysis involved finding statements about defining the specific research areas of those papers (i.e. business, logistics, banks, health care, education etc.). Regarding each paper's methodology, I asked questions such as: What was the preference for qualitative, quantitative or/and mixed methods research? What data collection methods were used? What data analysis methods were used? This lower level of analysis can be seen as taking place on thematic units (statements may be of different length and complexity, ranging from parts of a sentence to several paragraphs). Boyatzis (1998, p. 5) claimed that "thematic analysis enables scholars, observers, or practitioners to use a wide variety of types of information in a systematic manner that increases their accuracy or sensitivity in understanding and interpreting observations about people, events, situations, and organizations". Then, picking a specific month and year, June 2017, I discovered how many times each paper was downloaded and how many citations those papers had received. Finally, I collected data regarding subject keywords mentioned in the seven most cited papers.

I developed a coding sheet to ensure standardization, consistency and to insure that relevant data was collected for the content analysis (Palvia et al., 2003). In order to provide descriptive statistics, I quantized the qualitative data. I have previously used this mixed methods analysis (analyze quantitative data qualitative and vice versa) in other publications (Papadimitriou, 2011; Papadimitriou et al., 2015). For quantitative data I used descriptive statistics supplemented with graphical and tabulated abstracts.

3. Findings

TVC's *best papers* (n=51) are available in the conference proceedings publication and most of them have published in two management journals: *The TQM Journal* and *Sinergie Italian Journal of Management*. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the articles analyzed per publication by year.

Table 1. Number of Articles analyzed per publication per year

Year	<i>Best papers</i>	TQM	Sinergie	Proceedings
2008	9	9	0	0
2009	4	4	0	0
2010	5	1	1	3
2011	6	2	0	4
2012	4	2	2	0
2013	6	4		2
2014	7	3	2	2
2015	6	0	6	0
2016	4	0	0	4
Total	51	25	11	15

3.1. Numbers of authors

For the period 2008-2016, a total of 145 authors "recognized" by TVC scientific committee. The maximum number of authors on a paper was seven and six papers had only

one author. The majority of the papers (18) were produced by three authors (35.3%), while 6 papers (11.8%) were produced by a single author. Table 2 shows the number of authors per publication.

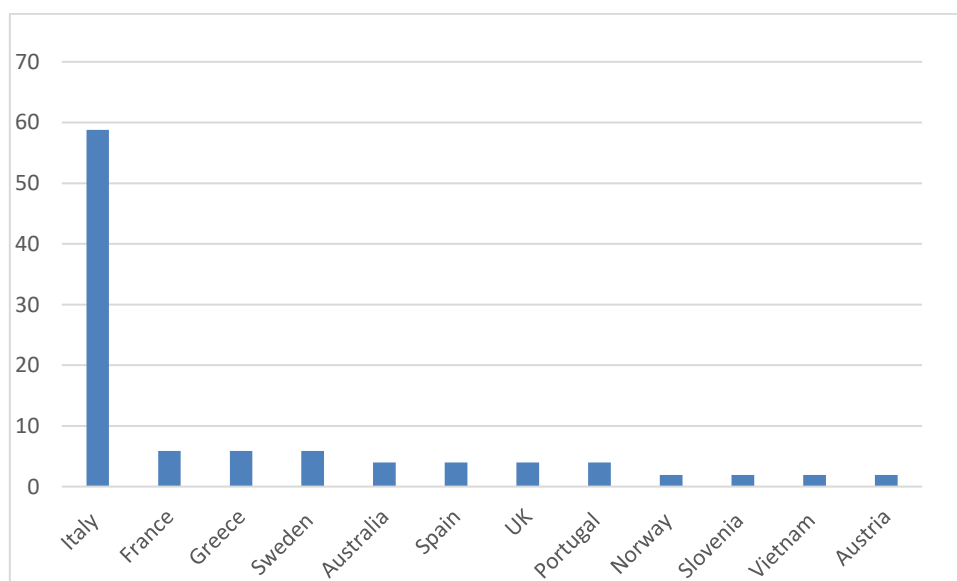
Table 2. Number of Authors per publication

# of Authors	TQM	Sinergie	Proceedings
1	5	0	1
2	8	5	2
3	5	4	9
4	7	1	2
5	0	0	0
6	0	1	1
7	0	1	0

3.2. Authorship profile: Lead authors' affiliation, geographic location, and gender

I enjoyed exploring the personal characteristics of the lead authors and researchers in the management area. The majority of the lead authors were affiliated with universities. Only one lead author was a consultant who was from Vietnam and not affiliated with any university. Analysis of authors' affiliation revealed that 48 lead authors were based in European universities and the remaining two were in Australian universities (3.9%). The majority of the first authors are from Italy (58.8%); followed by France, Greece, and Sweden (5.9% each); Australia, Portugal, Spain, and UK (4 % each); Austria, Norway, Slovenia and Vietnam (1.9% each) (Figure 1). The second characteristic of the lead authors was their gender. Data analysis revealed that gender gap of the examined *best papers* did not exist. Out of 51 lead authors 25 were female and 25 were males; only in one paper was not clear as to which gender the author belonged.

Figure 1. Percentage of lead author's geographic location



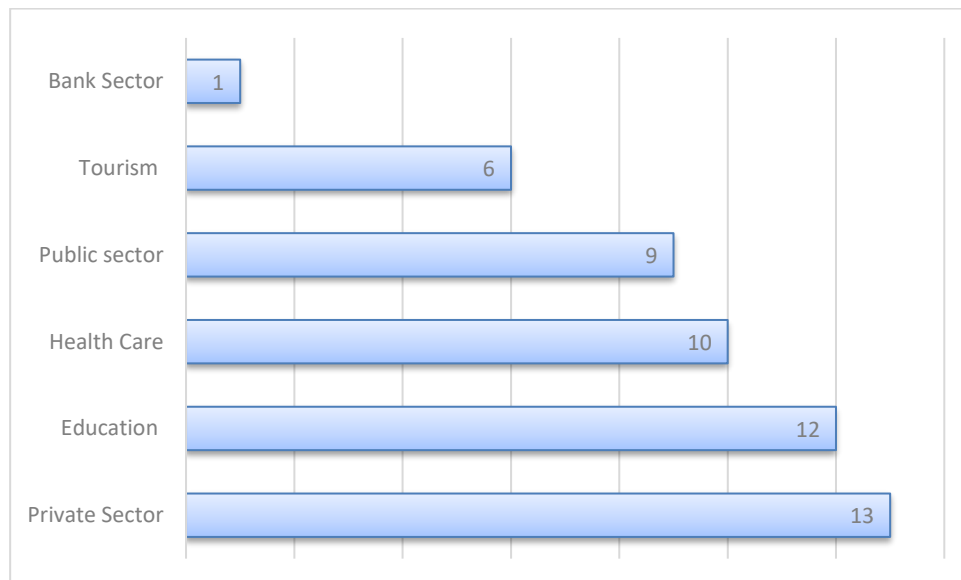
3.3. Co-authors' geographic location

Of the 45 multiple-authored *best papers*, 40 of these were co-authored from the same country and 5 were multi-nationally authored. The multinational mix was one paper each as follows (respective number of authors in parentheses): Greece and the Netherlands (two authors), Vietnam and France (two authors), Italy and Czech Republic (four authors), Italy and Australia (four authors), UK and France (two authors).

3.4. Specific research areas

Although the papers in the sample (n=51) share excellence in services theme, they can be traced back to different domains in services. From 2008 to 2016 the most frequently researched topics in TVC's best papers concerned the private sector (13 papers). Then, the next most researched topic during this time period was education (12 papers) which focused mainly on higher education. Then papers focused on healthcare areas, followed by the public sector (including local government) with nine papers. Those were followed by six papers on tourism and one in banking sector. Figure 2 demonstrates the share of each research area from total sample (n=51). The major research areas are education, health care, local government/public sector, tourism, banking.

Figure 2. Topics addressed in TVC 2008-2016 best papers (n=51)



3.5. Classification of papers

TVC requires that authors classify their paper into one of the following groups: research paper, conceptual paper, case study, literature review, view point, or technical paper. The most frequent classification was “research paper” (may involve the construction or testing of a model or framework, empirical, exploratory, empirical comparative, personal experience)-indicated for 37 (72.6%) of the papers. The remaining 27.4% were classified as: a) Case study – 10 papers (19.6%) and b). View point/theoretical/model design – 4 papers (7.8%).

3.6. Research Methodologies

From the classification of the papers as noted above, from 2008 to 2016, 37 papers classified as “research papers.” Data revealed that the most of the selected papers employed quantitative studies and accounted for 51.4% (n=19) while the remaining 18 papers were split between qualitative (24.3%, n=9) and mixed methods (24.3%, n=9). The mixed methods research involved a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In mixed methods papers authors either noted that they used multiple method, mixed method,

combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection, and triangulation. The most popular data collection was the survey (n=25). The second most popular included interviews (n=12). The third most popular data collection method was found in 7 papers which contained documents (including company records and websites). Additionally, three papers collected data via observations, two papers via focus groups. Finally, only one paper used secondary data. Data revealed that only 6 out of 19 quantitative papers used descriptive statistics, while in the remaining 13 papers, the researchers preferred using inferential statistics such as variance analysis (ANOVA), t-test, correlation (Pearson), factor analysis (confirmatory/exploratory), reliability analysis (Cronbach's' Alpha), structural equation modeling (SEM), multivariate statistical models, linear regression analysis, analysis with Frontier 4c software, principal component analysis, and relationship matrix calculated using the Super Decisions software. The descriptive quantitative papers mainly used variability, central tendency and relative standing test. In qualitative papers the authors preferred qualitative interpretive analysis. These papers used content, thematic analysis in which raw qualitative data was transcribed, coded, categorized and interpreted. In mixed methods researchers employed a combination of descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis mostly content analysis.

3.7. Downloads

TVC's *best papers* (n=51) are available at the conference proceedings publication and most of them have published in two management journals: *The TQM Journal* and *Sinergie Italian Journal of Management*. I only was able to calculate downloads for papers published at the *TQM Journal* (n=25). For those 25 papers during the June 2017, 52,792 downloads were recorder. The maximum number of downloads for any one paper was 6,817 and the minimum was 565. The larger number were attributed to a paper published in 2008 (6,817) by 2 Swedish authors (social media marketing), the second paper published in 2014 (6,337) by 2 Italian authors (green innovation and logistics), and the third paper with 6,137 downloads published in 2008 by 2 Greek authors (education).

3.8. Citations

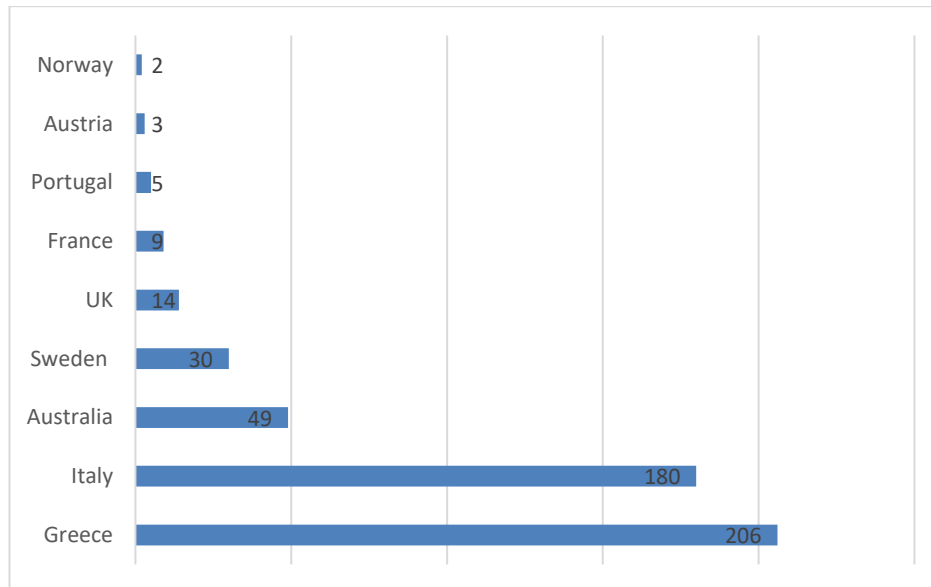
In June 2017, the total number of citations was 498 which applied to 34 papers. To conduct a deeper analysis, I focused on the 34 cited best papers. There were 89 unique authors associated with these 34 *best papers*. The maximum number of citations was 98 and the minimum 1. The most cited paper (98) written by 2 Greek authors, the second (85) also by 4 Greek authors, and the the third (45) by one Australian author. To provide a comprehensive picture of the best papers in excellence in services that received 20 citations and above across different countries, Table 4 specifies the publication date, the number of citations that paper received, downloads, author/s origin, the number of authors, and the gender of the first author. All seven most cited papers were published in *The TQM Journal*.

Table 4. Characteristics of the most cited papers

Year of publication	Citations	Downloads	Author/s Origin	Number of Authors	Gender of the first author
2008	98	6,137	Greece	2	male
2008	85	3,586	Greece	4	male
2009	45	3,104	Australia	1	male
2011	32	2,672	Italy	2	female
2008	28	3,061	Italy	2	male
2009	23	1,108	Greece/Netherlands	2	female
2014	20	6,337	Italy	2	female

Figure 3 shows the number of citations per county (first author's origin) that *best papers* have received for the period 2008-2016. This information can be used to compare the impact and visibility of *best papers* produced across various nations. Greece received the most citations (209), second was Italy (180), and third was Australia (49).

Figure 3. Total number of citations based on the first author's country of origin



3.9. Research areas (key words) and number of citations

In Table 5, I performed a data collection focused on keywords mentioned in the seven most cited papers.

Table 5. Most cited papers and keywords

Year of publication	Citations	Keywords	Methodological approach
2008	98	Organizational culture, service quality, higher education, job satisfaction, Greece	Survey. Principal component analysis
2008	85	Customer satisfaction, quality function deployment, analytical hierarchy process, customer requirements, service industry, competitive advantage	Survey and Interviews. Relationship matrix calculated using the Super Decisions software
2009	45	Strategic management, performance management, corporate strategy, critical success factors	Survey and Interviews. Descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis
2011	32	Italy, small to medium-sized enterprises, sustainable development, corporate strategy, value creation, corporate sustainability, intangible assets, case study	Case study.
2008	28	Tourism, innovation, customer relations, virtual organizations, consumer behavior, internet shopping	Interview and documents. Qualitative analysis
2009	23	ISO 9000 series, organizational analysis, universities, Greece, higher education, quality management	Documents and interviews. Descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis
2014	20	Sustainable innovation, green logistics, green supply chain management	Case study

4. Concluding Discussion Moving Forward

In this article, I set out to examine the *primary highlights* of the *best papers* selected by the academic committee of the Toulon-Verona Conference Excellence in Services for the period 2008-2016. It is my hope that such an investigation will provide scholars, practitioners, mostly graduate students, and the TVC's organizers an accurate glimpse of the excellence in services (management field) as it stands today as well prepare them for the opportunities that are on the horizon.

Overall, this study, which is the first of analyzing *primary highlights* of the *best papers* in a conference, by utilizing data implies that the contributing authors submitted high quality papers that promote their respective research areas and provide visibility for them and their institutions. All the submitted papers were published in the online conference proceedings. 34 out of 51 (67%) of the *best papers* have been cited and published in the TVC's proceedings and the *Sinergie Italian Journal of Management*. While ten of those articles (six from 2015 and 4 from 2016) were considered as new and usual, most articles require a few years before achieving such visibility and that number of citations. This large number of downloads appeared in papers published at *The TQM Journal*; however, no online information exist to calculate downloads from the TVC proceeding and from the *Sinergie Italian Journal of Management*. Clearly the TVC proceedings facilitates open access to quality research which is increasingly available from open online access. Attending and participating in a conference in excellence and quality management is an avenue for that can help elevate the quality and subsequently visibility of research in countries and institutions with growing interest in the field of quality management and excellence in services.

This study revealed that subjects discussed in the *best papers* clearly reflected the prevailing trends affecting that field. Most of the *best papers* appeared in areas of the private sector, education (higher education), public sector, and health care. From my current research and since few papers involved tourism and especially in banking, those areas could become the future focus of additional studies. Although tourism and quality services in banking have been done, thus far authors have not published articles or presented these topics to conferences to confirm such studies exist. Since such studies remain unknown, perhaps TVC conference leadership might reach out in calls for papers from various countries regarding both tourism and banking.

Data implied that the academic committee selected quality papers and not focused only in research papers. Another area for consideration is that there was no "discrimination" on research methodology. The selected research *best papers* were quantitative (51.4%), while the qualitative and mixed methods approach each shared 24.3%. This diversity demonstrates that prospective conference participants are welcome to use any well recognized of methodology.

The importance of keywords in retrieval of an article is crucial. Also the majority of those articles used more than one methods to collect the data and the majority had multiple authors. Those *best papers* used a combination of keywords which were more diverse as a set of two-keywords rather than a single word. Perhaps these results might have implications for future research for graduate students in selecting a methodology for their research project. This study also suggests that authors might explore divergent and multiples methodologies which also might assist novice researchers in their selection of study designs and methodologies. The competition to achieve a *best paper* status certainly exists and indicates that authors are required to improve the quality of their studies in order to ensure its selection as *best papers*.

Implications from this study's findings indicate that the quality of *best papers* implies that conference participants benefited from the conference and possibly established personal research networks as well as discovering potential in international collaboration across various academics. These types of collaborations have the potential to create new perspectives

in the field and quite possible contribute a new window of opportunity that could facilitate international collaborations among scholars in the area of excellence in services and quality management. In the future, perhaps an institution in the USA might host such a collaborative conference.

Moreover, this study contributes to the literature of analyzing published articles.

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Biographical sketch

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