

Publishing research during pandemics: are you vulnerable to the COVID-19 or predatory publishers?

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Abstract

The coronavirus disease-2019 outbreak has spread rapidly affecting 1.4 million people across the world in only four months. Healthcare fraternity is struggling to circumvent the consequences of this fast spreading infection and communicating their scientific discoveries through research publications. As a result, the scientific output on COVID-19 is growing rapidly and both the journal editors and authors are interested to publish results on scientific discoveries about it as soon as possible. However, novice and improperly trained authors are at high risk for getting duped by deceptive journals, which might keep their research unnoticed by the scientific and general community. This paper discusses these potential risks posed by deceptive (predatory) journals, for prospective authors and scientific community, during the COVID-19 outbreak. It also presents ways to address those risks and the role of journal editors and academic organisations.

Keywords: COVID-19, 2019-nCoV disease, Disease outbreak, Open Access Publishing, Periodicals, Publications.

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Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) from Wuhan, China has strikingly rapid spread as compared to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome-associated coronavirus (SARS-CoV) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome-related coronavirus (MERS-CoV).¹ For instance, MERS took around two and half years to infect 1000 people and SARS took approximately 4 months, but SARS-CoV-2 reached this figure in only 48 days.¹ According to the World Health Organization's situation report of 9 April 2020, COVID-19 had affected 178 countries and 34 areas/territories, infecting 1436198 individuals and caused 85522 fatalities* across the world.² Moreover, a

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cross-country comparison of case fatality rate (CFR) and recovery rate (RR) across 116 countries found that between two time points (12 March 2020 versus 23 March 2020), there was an increase in CFR from 3.61% to 4.34% and a sharp decline in RR from 55.83% to 29.29%.³

Healthcare professionals (HCPs), physicians, scientists and researchers across the world are trying their best to mitigate the consequences of this pandemic. It appears to be the main focus of attention for the press, social media and scientific community. In addition, this is evident from the rapid rise in the number of scientific publications on coronavirus and COVID-19. For instance, a literature search in Scopus database (6 April 2020) using the keywords "Covid-19" OR "Corona virus" OR "Coronavirus" in the title-abstract-keywords of the peer-reviewed journal publications yielded 18974 results. The search was then limited to the keyword "Covid-19" only, which resulted in 926 (750 open access) papers published in 2020. The study by Huang et al published in the Lancet, with 326 citations just within 2 months after its publication, was the highest cited publication on COVID-19.⁴ The search was repeated on 10 April 2020 and 1011 documents for "Covid-19" (i.e. average 21.25 papers per day) were found. On the same day, search for "Covid-19" in ClinicalTrials.gov found 440 clinical trials (see the supplementary material). It seems that during the current COVID-19 pandemic, HCPs, physicians and researchers are eager to publish their results at the earliest and the journals are more interested to publish on COVID-19.

The brighter side of addressing the problem of COVID-19 is that researchers are publishing papers on regular basis as soon as new evidence emerges in order to benefit the science and humanity. In addition, many journals have announced special supplements and thematic issues related to COVID-19. Some of these journals are offering a fast-track review and rapid online publication after acceptance. However, there may be a dark side of this positive trend which should be acknowledged and discussed. There is a possibility that in these uncertain times where many people want to publish their rich experiences and research, some novice and improperly trained researchers planning to publish COVID-19 research may be duped into submitting it to deceptive

*According to the situation report - 105, there were 3435894 confirmed cases and 86108 fatalities as of 4 May, 2020 (please refer to the Coronavirus disease (COVID-2019) situation reports on the WHO website).

(predatory) journals. In addition, the pressure to publish more may be tempting for some wanting a quick publication on the COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, this paper aims to discuss the potential risks for prospective authors and scientific community posed by deceptive journals during the COVID-19 outbreak, and provide ways for addressing them.

Deceptive (Predatory) Journals

The so called predatory journals (we prefer calling them deceptive journals) were recognised as an academic scam for the first time during 2011 and have increased by several folds during the last few years.^{5,6} These journals may be defined as "*entities that prioritize self-interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterized by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publication practices, a lack of transparency, and/or the use of aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation practices*".⁷ According to a 2019 paper, there are over 90 checklists available to help authors detect deceptive journals.⁷ Shen et al found that most of the authors publishing in deceptive journals are from Asia and Africa, and some authors have also suggested that this problem is limited to naïve researchers.^{8,9} However, this does not hold true as evidence suggests that deceptive journals have duped researchers from almost all regions of the world, irrespective of their experience and academic credentials.¹⁰⁻¹³ A study of 46,000 participants found that about 5% of researchers based in Italy published in deceptive journals.¹⁰ Another study uncovered that millions of dollars were wasted on publishing funded research in these journals.¹¹ This suggests that many researchers publishing on COVID-19 may be at risk of publishing in deceptive journals. It is also important to understand that there are low quality legitimate journals in different countries, with limited readership and journal visibility.⁵ Publishing in these journals may seem comparatively easier than publishing in unattainable high quality open-access journals. Therefore, researchers should consider publishing in these outlets rather than falling prey to the deceptive journals.

Apart from the widely known approaches used by deceptive journals, they often get assistance from individual agents in order to get submissions from researchers at the cost of some money.^{5,14-16} In addition, they also get help from brokering agencies that lure the authors by giving them a false impression that their manuscripts will be accepted by prestigious journals.^{15,16} Recently, one of the authors of this paper was invited by such brokering agencies to write papers from researchers from a country or organization in exchange for authorship. Thus, it would be reasonable to say that the

need for rapid dissemination of information during the COVID-19 pandemic might serve as a window of opportunity for these academic scammers (both agencies and individuals) in deceiving and getting large amounts of money from prospective authors and their funding agencies. Similarly, some lazy academics in need of quick publications for meeting the eligibility requirements for promotion would find this situation as a golden opportunity for them. This is highly relevant in the context of institutions and countries where policy-makers and stakeholders have little to do about the quality of the publications. Therefore, higher education organisations and committees foreseeing promotion criteria should be vigilant about the likelihood of this strange phenomenon of a symbiotic relationship between deceptive journals and greedy academics.¹⁷ Serious authors who find journal selection a daunting process due to insufficient training in this skill should get help from seniors and experts. They should also try to learn about the process of journal selection and should do a thorough work on finding a suitable journal for their research. The "Think, Check, Submit" (<https://thinkchecksubmit.org>) initiative may serve as a good starting point. The YouTube video "*Avoiding 'predatory' journals (and understanding OA publishing)*" is also a helpful learning tool.¹⁸

At the same time, journal editors have the responsibility to reduce the occurrence of this menace by updating the website of their journals. The websites of some Korean journals, such as the *Journal of Educational Evaluation for Health Professions* (<https://www.jeehp.org/>), *Science Editing* (<https://www.scienceediting.org/>) and the *Journal of Korean Medical Science* (<https://jkms.org/>) are a few good examples for other regional journals. These journals have set up transparent websites and provide information on almost every aspect of publishing in detail. Moreover, their indexing status can be easily confirmed since they provide a direct hyperlink to the relevant indexing database. It is suggested that regional, low-quality legitimate journals should seek guidance from the publishers and editors of these journals and try to improve their policies and expand their journal indexing as well as, avoid displaying false or questionable indexing services (e.g. ResearchGate or Index Copernicus) on their website.¹⁹ It will not be possible without the official support from national academic organisations and accreditation bodies. The opinion that subsidised publishing models in developing countries may help deter predatory (deceptive) publishing practices and facilitate regional authors in publishing their work seems strongly meaningful in the current context.^{15,20,21} Such a model is especially helpful for the researchers from poor countries who cannot afford to pay high publication

charges.

Conclusion

We believe that the COVID-19 is a serious issue for the scientific community and humanity from the whole world. In this situation, research community should be aware of the risk of publications in deceptive journals and some lazy, non-serious individuals taking an advantage of the opportunity. The onus to fight deceptive journals alongside COVID-19 lies on experienced researchers to create awareness among the community, the stakeholders to tighten the policies and not let any system-deceivers meet their goals through shortcuts, and regional journal editors to update their journal websites and have facilitating policies for researchers from the region.

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