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Correspondence

Jay N Shah
Dept. of Surgery, Patan
Hospital, Patan Academy of
Health Sciences (PAHS),
Lalitpur, Nepal.

Email: drjaywufei@gmail.com
drjaywufei@hotmail.com

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Appropriate citation and accuracy of references: read full text before citing

Jay N Shah  

Prof., Dept. of Surgery, Patan Hospital, Patan Academy of Health Sciences (PAHS), Lalitpur, Kathmandu, Nepal

Reference accuracy is important for good science. Cited references must be verifiable and accessible to the readers, reviewers, and editors. When the source cannot be found, it raises question of the quality of the manuscript, and also undermine the credibility of the journal (and editors). Almost all the domains of peer-reviewed medical journal literature report errors in referencing and citations which affect indexing, abstracting, and publication metrics. Citation is properly referring to information presented by others' and provides authenticity to own work by directing readers to the sources.

Digital technology has made it easier to substantiate the reference list. Earlier, the journals/editors even required the authors to send a photocopy of the first page of cited references to improve accuracy. Checking the source by actually accessing and reading the full text is necessary before citing them. A study has shown that 80% of writers do not read the article before citing them.¹ This raises the issue if authors, researchers, and scientists "lie" when presenting evidence without reading all of the papers they cite in their manuscripts and listing the citations in references.^{1,2,3,4,5}

The number of citations is credited and used as a measure of successful research publication by a scientist. Studies show that majority of the citations to a published article are simply copied from the lists of references from other papers without actually reading. This creates a domino effect or more precisely 'Matthew Effect' and cumulative advantage for a paper that was cited is likely to be cited again, and again copied in the reference list in the future.^{6,7} Copy-pasting the references may propagate wrong or misprint citations, starting from the misprint, and subsequent copying.³ Citation number does not measure how many times the cited paper was read. There are many types of metrics, at the author level and also at the level of journals, institutions, etcetra.⁸ Theories behind citations, interpretation, and validity of citations are linked to the impact and quality of research. Quality of research includes its credibility/reliability, originality, science, and societal value and relevance; whereas, the citation reflects (mostly) scientific relevance.⁹

Many factors influence the citation, e.g. the search engine, wording and length of title with more keywords, number and affiliation authors (from a developed country); in addition, more cited references and word counts, and recent publication positively affect the citation.¹⁰

Scientists are human beings and make mistakes in citation and referencing. A common mistake is “copy-pasting” from someone else’s reference without actually reading the paper. The manual cross-check of references in-text with the reference list and vice versa is important. The copy-pasting and ‘plagiarism’ in a scientific publication is serious misconduct and must be avoided.¹¹ The referencing management software (RMS), for example, Zotero, Mendeley, Endnote, etc. comes in handy to organize the references and minimize errors.¹² The RMS helps store searched literature, embed in-text citations, and later prepare the list of references in a specific style (must be checked manually to comply with the requirements of the journal). Citation and accuracy of referencing is greatly facilitated by the functionality of RMS by allowing a browser add-on and integration into a word processor for the ease of importing citations/literatures while writing and later during the revision which may require moving text or paragraphs with citation/s will automatically get re-sequenced in the text and accordingly in the reference list (bibliography). The software also allows collaboration among researcher team, saving time, cost.

Reference error happens frequently by all types of researchers. An overall reference error rate of 93.1% and major error (citation of a poster as if it were an article, or citing a ‘ghost paper’) were reported at 22.5%.¹³ The ‘ghost citations’ have doubled over the years, from delisted and discontinued journals, among which medicine by subject areas tops the list.¹⁴ The study found that >400 scientific papers (on the Web of Science and Google Scholar) cited a ‘Phantom’ reference that never existed, and 40 of the references were from reputed journals, which highlights the

careless writing and quality control from journals.^{15,16}

Most journals have adopted policies that require authors to provide functional ‘hyperlinks’ (e.g., [JPAHS](#), in order of preference for DOI, PubMed, Google Scholar, Full Text, Weblink), the one-click searchable link helps readers arrive at the source of cited article to complete the cycle of scientific publication.^{5,17} Use of DOI and hyperlinks to the source can reduce citation errors, and facilitate retrieval of references.

Physicians with unprofessional behavior during training are 3 times more likely to continue to do so in their career and face disciplinary action. Awareness and mentoring for professionalism during the training period are considered useful. Society’s trust in physicians depends on professionalism, which is listed as a ‘core competency for physicians and scientists. Falsification of publications is unprofessional behavior.

The use of unverifiable publications or “ghost publications” i.e. unverifiable publications are reported in 1% to 38% by residents in various Canadian and American residency programs.¹⁸ A recent study found nearly 10% (1/11) of pediatric anesthesia fellowship applications had unverifiable publications, and among 9-variables studies, only ‘public vs. private’ medical school was significantly associated with publication misrepresentation.¹⁹

Types of citation errors include missing or incorrect five entries, i.e., authors’ names, journal title, article title, publication year, volume issue (number), and page number; And, the journal’s modifications for punctuations. The citation errors may be related to the author and also to the journal. The author's carelessness for details of citation style, typographical errors, failure to use reference management software, haste in submission to the journal without a thorough revision and formatting of the manuscript, etc. The journals factors may be a lack of up-to-date referencing guidelines and inattention

from reviewers, and editors to verify the citations and references.^{2,20}

Appropriate referencing requires the author to strictly follow the journal's style and format for in-text citations and listing the references. The author's guideline should be read carefully before formatting the references and also requires re-checking and editing of the format because the reference manager software does not always ensure the specific modifications (e.g., information for authors, [JPAHS](#)) used by various journals.

The stakeholders- researchers, reviewers, editors, journals, academia, and readers need to keep an eye on how knowledge is gathered and from which source, and how the research is conducted and disseminated. Professionalism is necessary in research, writing, and publication. For this, we all need to work together.

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