

REDUNDANT PUBLICATION – A dilemma of Publication Ethics

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The term duplicate or redundant publication was defined by the ICMJE as:

“publication of a paper that overlaps substantially with one already published, without clear, visible reference to the previous publication”.¹

Redundant publication cannot be ignored by an editor. More in practice in recent times, due to the availability of the electronic gadgets, it is mainly due to the race for publishing a large number of articles for academic purposes. Lack of time, insufficient research integrity and the competition to achieve more in a short span, makes an author resort to this unethical act.

Duplicate submission/publication is “the practice of submitting the same study to two journals or publishing similar contents from the same study in two journals. These submissions/publications can be nearly simultaneous or years later”.²

Both the practices are very much in use by authors because the disadvantages are either not anticipated or not known. There is also a need of a certain number of publications for their promotion or restrained due to shortage of time for conducting the research and then writing it.

Authors indulging in these unethical acts do not anticipate the risks they are undertaking. Detection of such falsified acts, which is very easy, will spoil their reputation, as the matter will be reported to the head of the institution. If the article is published and later retracted due to being a redundant/duplicate publication, the fact will not remain hidden. It could become evident during an interview. In some institutions, unethical acts are given serious consideration and can lead to demotion or barrier to promotion.

The disadvantage of duplicate or redundant publication are manifold. These articles can influence the results of systematic reviews or meta-analysis. The authors get an unfair privilege of an added publication. Such articles are a waste of resources for the journals, peer reviewers and readers and can be said to saturate the scientific literature with same results.

Journal editors have an important role and responsibility to ensure that ethical attributes in publications are maintained. It does amount to extra time consumed and

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at times developing animosity, but it is a moral obligation. It is mandatory for all journal editors to acquire good knowledge on all aspects of publication ethics. This is necessary for maintaining integrity and an above board working. It is the editor's duty to make the rules evident to the authors and implement them in the working of the journal. Policy statements regarding ethics especially Redundant/ Duplicate publication should be placed on a prominent place on the journal website. Managing a case of redundant publication requires time, repeated correspondence with the authors, the university office and the concerned authorities. This is time consuming and nerve taxing. Nevertheless it is a responsibility which has to be fulfilled.

For safeguarding the journal, it should be mandatory for every author submitting an article, to sign an undertaking that the full article or a part, be it a figure table or other contents have not been submitted elsewhere. However, experience has shown that despite signing this undertaking, authors submit the same article to two publishers.

Duplicate articles are reported to the journal, either by reviewers or readers. Having good peer reviewers is the biggest blessing for a journal. A peer reviewer can detect redundant or duplicate publication, if similar publications are searched for reading, before starting the process of review. Therefore, editors should search out experienced reviewers and hold on to them firmly.

The Journal of Pakistan Medical Association (JPMA) has experienced many cases of Redundant/Duplicate publications Over a period of twenty years the frequency has risen. The reason being a growing need for more publications or a certain number have to be completed for promotion or an exam. Some do not consider it unethical. *“It is my data and my hard work. I can do what I want to do with it”* wrote back one author. *“I need to build my career and you (editor) do not realize that you will be destroying my future,”* was the reply of another author.

In 2021, JPMA has experienced three cases of Dual publication/submission of whom two were post-publication detection and one was detected during the review process. This also shows the level of ignorance as many authors are not cognizant of the fact that retraction can be done after several years of publications

The first author of one of these articles, also the

corresponding author, after multiple reminders for submitting the revised version, wrote back four words, "*It has been published.*" What a pleasant surprise! Further discussions revealed that despite being a senior professor, how naïve and innocent was this author. After receiving a few unpleasant letters from this author, the fact became evident and the article was considered rejected. A letter of apology was eventually sent by the corresponding author.

The other two articles were published in 2019 and 2020, but brought to our notice in 2021. Intimation for the duplication of both articles was reported by readers. For one article, we submitted the case to the expert panel of COPE and the other article we handled ourselves according to the guidelines of COPE.² One article had been published, authored by the same team, in two other journals with JPMA being the third. The authors on being approached with all evidence, wrote back a letter of apology accepting their mistake along with being ignorant of the rules and a request not to retract the article as that could immensely damage the future career prospects of the authors.

As this was not possible, the article was retracted according to the guidelines of COPE.³

The second article published first in another national journal and three months later in JPMA, was reported by a reader. There was gross overlapping but with no referral to the other journal. The author insisted that the data was from the Ph.D thesis and it was his/her own hard work. There were no wrong intentions and he/she had forgotten to place this statement in the Disclaimer. The second publication, in JPMA, did not have the reference of the already published article in the other national journal.

The author tried his/her best to provide explanations for not having done anything unethical. Some rather unpleasant notes were sent to us. Detailed explanatory letters from our journal office finally made the situation evident to the author who sent a letter of apology. According to the guidelines of COPE the article was retracted.³

These three latest experiences cause an alert for us and other editors also.

Redundant/Duplicate publication, as described by COPE, calls for making the subject more evident to all editors and authors. The need for publications has risen tremendously as the number of medical universities have grown fast in Pakistan. There are only four indexed journals, facing a heavy burden of submissions. Authors of all levels, including undergraduate students, want to acquire publications for either promotion, post-graduate exams or for their CVs for getting a residency in USA. On the other

hand, time runs out as good research requires patience and quiet, peaceful days. Skills are deficient for writing the research. Supervisors are not interested or trained. Morals have changed over the time making authors resort to unethical means. The electronic gadgets have made life comfortable but with more chances to walk on the wrong path. All these factors together make an author resort to unethical behaviour.

On analyzing the present day situation observing the rise of such unethical publication experiences, it can only be concluded that the future holds greater responsibilities for the senior editors in developing countries. Research integrity and Responsible conduct of Research are an important part of every university's curriculum. Apparently this message is not being clearly conveyed to these institutions. If an author is dishonest in conducting and writing research, how can this person be honest with the diagnostics and treatment of patients?

The main responsibility of guiding the undergraduate medical students lies on the faculty. Apparently within the institutions, integrity and expertise is still deficient. The faculty has to guide the students and teach them the correct methods for conducting and writing research. It is the responsibility of the head of the institution to strengthen this section of the university.

As senior editors of medical journals, we have to play our roles by dispersing the knowledge on publication ethics. Pakistan Association of Medical Editors (PAME) has been organizing workshops and lectures for the faculty members of medical institutions, which includes publication ethics. Earlier, this year, JPMA held two workshops of six days sessions each for undergraduate medical students. Hopefully the authors and their supervisors will one day lessen the burden on the editor's shoulders and also bring peace of mind to themselves.

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