

Pride and Concern for Bibliometric Achievements: Deserved Results or Result of Cites Inflation?

We are delighted to announce the publication of the latest bibliometric scores by Clarivate's Journal Citation Reports (JCR) and Scopus. The official journal impact factor (JIF) for 2022 is 2.7, the corresponding Cite Score being 3.1, thus reflecting the growing impact and success of our journal and validating our efforts to publish high-quality research. Such a positive trend is corroborated by other metrics, such as the immediacy index, and has been achieved in a few years by a small, independently managed, and fully open-access journal not applying, so far, any article processing charge. Thanks to the Italian Society of Occupational Medicine's sponsorship of its official journal, only scientific merit makes us decide whether to accept or decline submissions. The decision to publish research articles in English has been crucial in widening the readership and increasing the journal's international visibility, particularly in countries where Occupational Medicine is still growing.

We want to thank all authors who have entrusted us with their original research, our dedicated editorial staff, and our reviewers for helping us maintain the highest standards of academic rigor as a reliable source of knowledge dissemination. A concerning trend tempering our enthusiasm for recent bibliometric achievements has emerged in recent years, a phenomenon I would call 'citeflation'¹. Citeflation can be described as the inflationary growth in the number of citations in academic literature. It refers to excessively citing papers, not necessarily for their intellectual merit or contribution to a particular study but for boosting one's visibility and impact metrics. This phenomenon distorts scholarly work's value and undermines scientific research's integrity and reliability.

The pressure to publish frequently and gain recognition has intensified with academic institutions placing increased emphasis on researchers' publication records. As a result, scholars are under immense pressure to produce an impressive number of publications while maintaining a high citation count. Some researchers resort to excessive self-citation or manipulative citation practices in this hypercompetitive environment.

One major consequence of citeflation is the distortion it creates in perceived research impact. Inflated citation counts can give an illusion of significant influence within a field, leading to biased assessments in hiring decisions, promotions, grant allocations, and tenure evaluations. As scholars strive for greater prestige and recognition through artificial means, the true quality and novelty of their contributions may be overshadowed by inflated metrics.

Moreover, citeflation hampers scientific progress in two fundamental ways. First, it perpetuates echo chambers within academia by reinforcing existing beliefs instead of encouraging critical thinking and diverse perspectives. Researchers repeatedly cite well-known papers within their subfields while overlooking potentially valuable contributions from lesser-known authors or interdisciplinary studies. Second, it erodes the credibility of academic publishing. Scientific progress is built on the foundation of rigorous peer review and meticulous validation of research findings. However, when citations become a currency for reputation and career advancement, the integrity of the peer review process can be compromised. Researchers may feel compelled to cite influential authors excessively or exchange citations as a form of academic favoritism.

To address Citeflation, several steps can be taken. Academic institutions must prioritize quality over quantity and foster an environment where originality, creativity, and sound research methodology are valued

¹Note: The term "Citeflation" and the concept of excessive citation practices have not gained widespread recognition in the academic community. It is proposed in this editorial serves as a speculative piece to highlight the potential negative consequences of such practices, i.e., the devaluation of scholarly impact and the need for vigilance in maintaining academic integrity.

above citation counts alone. Peer reviewers should be wary of manipulative citation patterns during the evaluation process and emphasize the importance of intellectual contribution rather than sheer quantity.

Although excellent scientists lend, in most cases free of charge, their prestige, their commitment, and their hard work to publishers, and maintain their high standard of scientific rigor, predatory and mega journals born in the last few decades often have less stringent criteria for acceptance than traditional subject-specific journals, particularly in special issues, which means more papers can be published, potentially leading to more citations. Scholars publishing in such special issues may benefit from increased visibility and citation counts. However, this emphasis on quantity can result in a lower average quality of published papers. With a flood of articles being released, the thoroughness of peer review processes may be compromised.

We adopt strict guidelines for citation practices, discouraging excessive self-citation and encouraging reference diversity. Additionally, technological advancements in citation analysis tools could be utilized to identify potential cases of citeflation and flag suspicious patterns.

QUANTITY OR QUALITY IN ACADEMIC PROMOTION?

Even leaving aside malpractice or misconduct cases, it is time for scientists, especially the junior ones, to ask themselves: is my bibliometric record well deserved or rather a consequence of citeflation? Similarly, mentors should ask themselves whether encouragement and support they give to their pupils is going far beyond their mission and duty.

Bibliometric criteria were introduced to avoid competition among mentors when acting as commissioners with the responsibility for assigning academic positions and to base their decisions on a transparent and possibly objective assessment of scientific merit. After two decades, we are back to the problem: how can we assess the individual scientific productivity, and how can we separate the candidate's contribution from the overall activity of the team?

Combating citeflation requires collective efforts from researchers, institutions, funding agencies, and publishers. It demands a cultural shift within academia whereby scholars prioritize genuine impact over superficial metrics. By valuing intellectual rigor, collaboration, and integrity in research practices, we can restore the true essence of scholarly pursuit - advancing knowledge for the betterment of society.

As stakeholders in academia strive for excellence and impact, they must guard against this malpractice by promoting genuine scholarship and reevaluating current assessment metrics. Perhaps through a transition phase, we can only ensure that academic pursuits focus on meaningful contributions to human knowledge rather than inflated numbers on a page.

Finally, the primary academic job is teaching, and while scientific achievements are important, they alone do not justify a tenure track position.

ANTONIO MUTTI