



Addressing Unethical Editorial Practices in Academic Publishing: A Case of Unwarranted Rejection Based on Prolific Authorship

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Abstract

This article examines an unethical editorial practice by an international journal, which recently rejected a manuscript solely based on the author's prolific output of letters to the editor. In a letter to the author, the editorial team cited the "flagging" of the author's high volume of published letters as a reason for rejecting a submitted manuscript. This raises serious concerns regarding bias, fairness, and transparency in the editorial decision-making process. The practice of rejecting work due to an author's perceived prolific authorship, especially when there is no clear evidence of misconduct or lack of originality, compromises the ethical standards of academic publishing. Such actions not only undermine the integrity of the peer review process but also pose risks to academic freedom. This article explores the potential ethical breaches involved in this case, including the lack of due diligence, transparency, and professionalism, and calls for a more rigorous, unbiased approach in editorial practices.

Keywords: Editorial ethics, manuscript rejection, academic publishing, peer review, prolific authorship, transparency, bias, academic freedom.

Introduction

The editorial process in academic publishing is designed to maintain the quality, integrity, and rigor of scholarly communication. Editors are entrusted with upholding ethical standards, ensuring fairness, and providing constructive feedback to authors. However, recent correspondence with the journal, an international journal, reveals a concerning trend: the rejection of a manuscript based on the author's prolific output of letters to the editor. This raises questions about the ethical practices of the editorial team and the overall fairness of their decision-making process. Bias in any process of journal in consideration of manuscript and publication is totally unwanted and it might be unethical practice of the journal and editor [1],

The Unethical Rejection Based on Prolific Authorship

“After careful consideration, I regret to inform you that it will not be considered for publication in Brain Communications. Your prolific authorship of letters to the editor has been flagged.”

In a recent rejection letter, the editorial team mentioned to the author that their manuscript would not be considered for publication due to the "flagging" of their prolific authorship of letters to the editor. The letter implied that the high number of letters published by the author was problematic, but provided no clear explanation as to how this factor was related to the content or quality of the manuscript under consideration. This reasoning is troubling for several reasons:

- 1. Lack of Relevance to Manuscript Quality:** The volume of an author’s previous publications, particularly if they consist of letters to the editor, should not be a factor in determining the quality or merit of a new manuscript. The content of the manuscript should be evaluated on its own merits, including its originality, relevance to the field, and contribution to the scholarly discourse. The decision to reject a paper based solely on prolific authorship suggests a form of bias that undermines the peer review process.
- 2. Failure to Consider the Author's Work in Context:** Many academic authors contribute to journals through letters to the editor, which are often shorter commentaries or responses to previous articles. These contributions may reflect a range of valuable insights, critical engagement with recent literature, or responses to current issues in the field. Rejecting an author because of their volume of such contributions overlooks the diversity of scholarly work and fails to appreciate the legitimate role letters to the editor play in academic discourse.
- 3. Unwarranted Bias and Bias Toward "Prolific" Authors:** While some journals may establish thresholds to limit the number of submissions from highly prolific authors, doing so without clear guidelines or transparent criteria creates the risk of bias. The rejection of manuscripts based on "prolific authorship" can be seen as an arbitrary measure that punishes researchers for their contributions rather than evaluating the quality of their work. This undermines the principles of fairness, equity, and scholarly openness.

Ethical Breaches in the Editorial Process

The decision to reject a manuscript for reasons unrelated to its academic content or quality raises serious concerns about the ethical standards of the editorial process. Several ethical breaches are evident in this case:

- **Lack of Transparency:** The editorial team did not provide a clear explanation of why prolific authorship would lead to manuscript rejection. Transparency in decision-making is essential in academic publishing to ensure that authors can understand the reasons for rejection and, if necessary, improve their submissions.
- **Bias in Manuscript Evaluation:** Evaluating manuscripts based on an author’s history of publications-particularly if it involves subjective criteria such as the volume of letters-introduces bias into the process. Every manuscript should be evaluated independently of the author's previous work or perceived "prolificness."

- **Failure to Uphold Academic Freedom:** Academic publishing should encourage the free exchange of ideas, unimpeded by factors such as an author's publication history. The rejection of a paper for reasons unrelated to its academic value undermines academic freedom by silencing contributors based on subjective editorial judgments.

Implications for Academic Publishing

The editorial decision made by the journal has wider implications for academic publishing. If other journals follow similar practices, it could lead to an environment where authors are penalized for the frequency of their contributions rather than their content or scholarly impact. This not only risks discouraging engagement with academic journals but also potentially limits the diversity of voices in the academic community. Editors have a responsibility to ensure that their decision-making process is grounded in objective criteria and supported by clear, fair guidelines.

Recommendations for Ethical Editorial Practices

In light of the concerns raised by this case, we propose several recommendations to promote ethical editorial practices:

- 1. Objective Evaluation Criteria:** Manuscripts should be evaluated based on their content, originality, and relevance, rather than the author's previous publication history, particularly in the context of letters to the editor. Editorial boards should clearly define and communicate the criteria for manuscript evaluation to ensure transparency.
- 2. Clarification of Prolific Authorship Policies:** If a journal has a policy limiting submissions from prolific authors, it should be clearly stated in its submission guidelines. The policy should be applied consistently, and authors should be informed of how such policies will impact their submissions.
- 3. Encouraging Academic Engagement:** Rather than discouraging prolific authors, journals should foster an environment of engagement where frequent contributors are valued for their critical input and scholarly interaction. Letters to the editor, responses, and commentaries play a vital role in academic discourse and should not be viewed negatively by editorial boards.

Conclusion

The rejection of a manuscript by the journal based solely on an author's prolific output of letters to the editor is an example of an unethical editorial practice. This decision undermines the integrity of the peer review process, introduces bias into manuscript evaluation, and disregards the value of diverse scholarly contributions. Academic journals must ensure that their editorial practices are grounded in fairness, transparency, and a commitment to scholarly integrity. Moving forward, it is essential for journals to reevaluate their editorial criteria to prevent similar unethical decisions that could harm both authors and the academic community as a whole.

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