

Ethical Issues and Implications of Citation Practices: A Case Study on Excessive Citations, Self-Citation and Co-Author Citations

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ABSTRACT

Citation practices are crucial for maintaining academic integrity, as they credit original ideas and integrate new research into the established knowledge framework. However, these practices can compromise scholarly work and misrepresent the impact of research when manipulated. This study investigates ethical concerns associated with excessive self-citation and co-author citations, examining their implications for academic integrity and citation metrics. Through a case study of a published paper—selected for its high frequency of co-author citations from accredited, peer-reviewed journals listed on Google Scholar—this research analyses citation patterns and their potential to inflate perceived scholarly impact. The findings reveal that excessive self-citation and repeated co-author citations can distort academic evaluations and create an imbalanced scholarly landscape. Supported by the literature, the study highlights the need for clear guidelines, transparency in citation practices, and vigilant monitoring by peer reviewers and editors. To preserve the integrity of academic research and ensure fair assessment, the paper recommends developing robust guidelines for citation practices and promoting transparency in citation choices.

Keywords: Citation Practices, Academic Integrity, Self-Citation, Co-Author Citations, Citation Metrics, Ethical Concerns.

I. Introduction

Citation practices are central to upholding academic integrity, as they not only give credit to original ideas but also position new research within the broader framework of established knowledge (Parnter, 2020; Kenny & Eaton, 2022; Bueno, 2024). Researchers ensure their work is transparent and connected to the ongoing academic dialogue by accurately citing sources. However, when these practices are manipulated—intentionally or not—the integrity of scholarly work can be compromised, leading to potential misrepresentation of research impact (Mahabeer & Pirtheepal, 2019). One area of concern is the frequent cross-citation of co-authors across multiple papers. While collaboration is a natural and valuable aspect of academic research, excessive citation of one author and self-citation among co-authors can raise questions about the authenticity and independence of their scholarly contributions (Parish, Boyack & A. Ioannidis, 2018; Szomszor, Pendlebury & Adams, 2020). Such practices may create an illusion of a more significant impact or broader recognition than is warranted, potentially skewing citation metrics and influencing perceptions of the work's importance (Aksnes, Langfeldt & Wouters, 2019).

Another related issue is the repeated citation of one co-author by another, which can similarly inflate citation counts and distort the perceived influence of particular researchers (Parish, Boyack & A. Ioannidis, 2018). Although this is not inherently unethical, it can lead to an uneven academic landscape where certain voices are amplified disproportionately, potentially at the expense of a more diverse range of perspectives. This practice can undermine the credibility of citation metrics as a measure of scholarly impact, affecting decisions related to funding, promotions, and the dissemination of knowledge (Aksnes et al., 2019). While citation practices are vital to academic discourse, they must be approached with caution and responsibility. While not inherently wrong, the frequent citation of co-authors across different papers and the repeated citation of one co-author by another can challenge the authenticity of academic contributions and lead to inflated citation metrics (Parish, Boyack & A. Ioannidis, 2018). Addressing these practices requires a nuanced understanding of their implications and a commitment to fostering a more equitable and transparent academic environment (Aksnes et al., 2019).

II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

The phenomenon of self-citation has been widely discussed in academic literature, with numerous studies highlighting its potential to inflate citation metrics such as an author's h-index artificially. Self-citation, while sometimes necessary to build on previous work, can be problematic when used excessively, as it may distort the true impact of a researcher's contributions (Thombs, Levis, Razykov et al., 2015). According to Hyland (2003), excessive citation of one author or self-citation can give a misleading impression of a work's significance within its field, skewing the metrics used to evaluate academic performance. This practice has raised concerns about the accuracy and fairness of citation-based metrics, often used in tenure decisions, grant allocations, and other academic evaluations. While self-citation has been thoroughly explored, citing co-authors, particularly across multiple papers, has received comparatively less attention (Thombs, Levis, Razykov et al., 2015; Parish, Boyack & A. Ioannidis, 2018). Although similar in its potential to inflate citation counts, this practice poses unique challenges to academic integrity (Mahabeer & Pirtheepal, 2019). When co-authors frequently cite each other's work, it can create a network of citations that disproportionately elevates their research's visibility and perceived impact (Parish, Boyack & A. Ioannidis, 2018). Cronin (1984) notes that such practices can lead to "citation cartels," where a small group of researchers disproportionately influence the literature. This raises ethical concerns, as it may undermine the objective assessment of scholarly contributions and lead to inflated citation metrics that do not accurately reflect the quality or impact of the research (Aksnes et al., 2019).

The intersection of these practices with academic integrity principles is crucial to understanding their broader implications (Mahabeer & Pirtheepal, 2019). Citation practices that involve excessive citation of one author, self-citation or frequent co-author citations can blur the lines between legitimate scholarly recognition and perceived plagiarism (Parish, Boyack & A. Ioannidis, 2018; Szomszor, Pendlebury & Adams, 2020). While not outright plagiarism, these practices may create the perception of intellectual dishonesty, as they can suggest a level of originality and influence that is not genuinely earned. Borg (2000) and Tumiran & Mohammad (2024) argue that such practices can erode trust in academic publishing and the integrity of the scholarly record, making it essential for the academic community to address these issues more robustly. Building on the existing literature, this paper examines the ethical implications of co-author citation practices, particularly their potential to compromise the authenticity of academic contributions (Parish, Boyack & A. Ioannidis, 2018). This research aims to emphasise the necessity of stricter restrictions and more knowledge about citation ethics by examining the intersection of these practices with the principles of academic integrity (Mahabeer & Pirtheepal, 2019). The goal is to ensure that citation metrics remain a reliable and fair measure of scholarly impact, thus preserving the integrity of academic research and its role in advancing knowledge (Aksnes et al., 2019).

III. Research Method

For this study, a descriptive case study research design was employed using a convenient sampling frame to select one paper with high frequencies of one author and co-author citations. A descriptive case study research design examines a single case or a small group of cases in great detail (Priya, 2022). The "case" could be an individual, organisation, event, or process studied to provide insights into complex issues, phenomena, or behaviours (Yin, 2018). This method involves an in-depth exploration of the case within its real-life context, considering various factors that might influence it (Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson et al., 2011).

IV. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of times each co-author is cited as the first author. Author 1 is the most frequently cited, with 49 occurrences constituting 100% of the references. In contrast, Author 2 is mentioned 18 times, representing 37% of the total, while Author 3 appears 15 times, making up 31%. Authors 4 and 5 have fewer citations, with 10 and 6 occurrences corresponding to 20% and 12% of the total. Authors 6 through 13 are cited less frequently, ranging from 2% to 10% of the total citations. This distribution illustrates the varying levels of first-author prominence among the co-authors.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Co-Author Citations

Cited as First author	Number of Cited**	Percentage
Author 1	49	100%
Author 2	18	37%
Author 3	15	31%
Author 4	10	20%
Author 5	6	12%
Author 6	5	10%
Author 7	4	8%
Author 8	2	4%
Author 9	1	2%
Author 10	1	2%
Author 11	1	2%
Author 12	1	2%
Author 13	1	2%

Citation practices play a critical role in maintaining academic integrity by properly attributing ideas and positioning new research within the existing body of knowledge (Mahabeer & Pirtheepal, 2019). When manipulated, however, these practices can undermine the credibility of scholarly work and distort perceptions of research impact. This study reveals notable patterns in co-author citation practices, which can have significant implications for the authenticity of academic contributions and the reliability of citation metrics (Aksnes et al., 2019).

The results presented in Table 1 show that Author 1 is cited as the first author in 100% of the references within the analysed papers. This dominance highlights a potential concern of inflated visibility, as frequent self-citation among co-authors can create an exaggerated impression of an individual's scholarly impact (Thombs, Levis, Razykov et al., 2015; Parish, Boyack & A. Ioannidis, 2018). This finding is consistent with the concerns raised by Cronin (1984) regarding "citation cartels," where concentrated citation practices among a small group can skew the perception of research influence. Such patterns suggest that the extensive self-citation of Author 1 might contribute to a misleading representation of their research significance.

Author 2, cited in 37% of the references, and Author 3, cited in 31%, also exhibit significant citation frequencies. Although these figures are lower than Author 1's, they still indicate a pattern of repeated co-

author citations (Parish, Boyack & A. Ioannidis, 2018). Hyland (2003) highlights that such practices can distort academic metrics and influence perceptions of research importance. This study's findings echo this concern, as the repeated citation of co-authors may artificially inflate their perceived impact, potentially leading to skewed evaluations in academic assessments and impact on the creative new body of knowledge.

The remaining authors, cited less frequently, show a varied distribution that further underscores the uneven nature of co-author citation practices. Authors 4 and 5, with 20% and 12% of the citations, respectively, and Authors 6 through 13, with even lower percentages, illustrate a broader range of citation prominence. This variation reflects the wider issue regarding the uneven amplification of certain researchers' voices. When certain co-authors are cited disproportionately, it can create an imbalanced academic landscape where a few voices dominate, potentially marginalising diverse perspectives. This variation highlights a broader issue related to the disproportionate amplification of sure researchers' voices. When a few co-authors are cited excessively, it can skew the academic landscape, leading to dominance by a select group and potentially marginalising a diverse range of perspectives. The findings from this study are supported by the literature, which points to the ethical implications of excessive citation of one author, self-citation and co-author citations (Szomszor, Pendlebury & Adams, 2020). While not inherently unethical, these practices can lead to inflated citation metrics and distort the true impact of research (Aksnes et al., 2019). The results highlight the need for more robust guidelines and awareness surrounding citation practices to ensure fairness and transparency in academic evaluations.

V. Conclusion

The paper concludes that while citing co-authors is not inherently unethical, it becomes a concern when done excessively or in a way that may be perceived as self-serving. To uphold academic integrity, authors should be mindful of their citation practices, ensuring that citations genuinely support and enhance the quality of the research. Further research is recommended to explore the impact of these practices on academic metrics and to develop guidelines for ethical citation practices. Several key strategies should be implemented to address the challenges posed by problematic citation practices. First and foremost, academic journals and institutions must develop and enforce clear guidelines on ethical citation practices. These guidelines should outline appropriate standards for citing co-authors and establish limits to prevent excessive self-citation or the repeated citation of a small group of individuals. Establishing these criteria by the academic community may effectively guarantee transparency and fairness in citation procedures, thereby upholding the integrity of scholarly analysis and evaluations.

In addition to formal guidelines, promoting transparency in citation practices is crucial. Authors should be encouraged to provide a rationale for their citation choices, particularly when citing co-authors frequently. This transparency can help elucidate the reasons behind citation decisions, offering insight into whether they reflect genuine scholarly connections or are motivated by less rigorous factors. Such practices would enhance the credibility of citation metrics and foster a more open and accountable academic environment. Furthermore, peer reviewers and editors must actively monitor citation patterns during the review process. Vigilance in identifying and addressing potential ethical concerns related to citation practices can prevent the propagation of biased or inflated citation metrics. Through careful analysis of citation patterns and critical examination of atypical or excessive co-author citations, reviewers and editors may maintain the principles of academic honesty and guarantee a fair and accurate evaluation of scholarly contributions. Implementing these strategies can significantly contribute to a more equitable and transparent academic landscape, where citation practices reflect genuine scholarly impact and contribute to the integrity of educational research.

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