



The Effect of Article Processing Charge-Driven Publishing on Author Credibility and Research Integrity

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Abstract

The global research climate has changed as a result of the introduction of Article Processing Charges (APCs) as a primary funding mechanism for open-access publications. Although APCs have facilitated access to and dissemination of scientific knowledge, their abuse has given rise to significant ethical concerns, particularly with regard to authorship credibility and study integrity. The consequences of improperly regulated APC-driven publishing models which encourage unethical writing practices, compromise peer-review standards, and aid in the rise of predatory journals which are severely examined in this article. The repercussions on scientific credibility, academic evaluation systems, and public trust in research are discussed, along with recommendations for re-establishing integrity in scholarly publishing.

Keywords: Open Access Publishing; Predatory Journals; Research Integrity; Authorship Ethics; and Article Processing Fees

Introduction

The long-standing obstacles imposed by subscription-based scholarly communication methods gave rise to the open-access publishing movement. Its main goal was to remove paywalls that limited readership to wealthy organisations and people in order to democratise access to scientific knowledge. Open access was intended to speed up scientific discovery, improve international collaboration, and guarantee that research outputs—especially those with public health and societal relevance—are available to policymakers, practitioners, and the general public by permitting unfettered online access to peer-reviewed research [1].

The Article Processing Charge (APC), a fee paid by authors, organisations, or funding agencies to defray the costs of manuscript handling, peer review management, editorial services, digital hosting, and long-term archiving, is a key component of the operational model of many open-access journals. APCs are, in theory, a transparent way to keep journals running while allowing readers to access them for free. In fact, this strategy has greatly increased scientific research's visibility, diffusion, and citation potential—especially for academics from schools that didn't previously have access to pricey journal subscriptions [2].

However, the academic community is becoming increasingly concerned about the APC model's unforeseen effects for research quality and scholarly ethics as a result of its quick commercialisation. There is a chance that editorial standards could be weakened as certain journals' ability to make money depends more on the number of articles they publish than on the quality of their content. In these kinds of settings, the motivation to accept papers may take precedence over the obligation to maintain thorough peer-review procedures, rigorous methodology, and ethical compliance [3].

More importantly, in some publication circumstances, the emphasis on APC payment over intellectual contribution has led to a concerning redefining of authorship. The traditional requirements of authorship, such as a significant contribution to the study's inception, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and manuscript draughting, now seem to be outweighed in certain cases by the ability to submit APCs. By permitting practices like honorary authorship, guest authorship, and the marginalisation of legitimate contributors with little financial resources, this change jeopardises the legitimacy of [4].

In low- and middle-income nations, where publication metrics are frequently strongly linked to professional reputation, funding opportunities, and academic promotion, the consequences of this tendency are especially noticeable. In these situations, the temptation to publish—along with the lack of institutional support for APCs—may push researchers towards commercially motivated journals



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Received Date: 30 May 2026

Accepted Date: 13 Jul 2026

Published Date: 15 Jul 2026

Citation:

Nnodim Johnkennedy. The Effect of Article Processing Charge-Driven Publishing on Author Credibility and Research Integrity. WebLog J Clin Case Rep. wjccr.2026.g1503. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21738699>

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with lax quality control procedures or unethical publication channels. As a result, the fundamental values of accountability, transparency, and integrity in research are jeopardised, eroding public confidence in scientific findings and escalating worldwide disparities in the creation of knowledge [5].

Authorship Credibility in Scientific Studies

In academic publishing, authorship is much more than just a name appearing on a scholarly piece; it denotes accountability, intellectual contribution, and shared responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work published. Authorship assigns accountability for the study's conception, implementation, analysis, interpretation, and results while also acknowledging scholarly work. International organisations like the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) have established explicit authorship criteria to protect these principles. These criteria stipulate that authors must actively participate in the draughting or critical revision of the manuscript, approve the final version for publication, accept responsibility for all aspects of the work, and make significant contributions to the conception or design of the study, acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data [6].

Even though these rules are clear, the growing prevalence of APC-driven publishing models has made it easier for unethical authorship activities to proliferate. Editorial control and ethical accountability are weakened in certain publication circumstances where financial concerns related to Article Processing Charges (APCs) seem to take precedence over adherence to recognised authorship standards [7].

Gift authorship, sometimes known as honorary authorship, is one such technique in which people are named as authors even if they have contributed little to nothing to the research. This practice is frequently driven by institutional politics, hierarchical pressures, or the desire to add senior or powerful names to a document in order to increase its perceived credibility. Gift authorship skews the academic record and threatens the merit-based acknowledgement of true contributors [8].

Paid authorship is another troubling trend, in which people's names are added to papers in return for money, usually to share APC responsibilities or to fictitiously boost publication records. Authorship is directly commodified by this technique, which turns scholarly credit from a representation of scientific responsibility and intellectual work into a transactional asset [9].

Ghost authorship, which happens when people who significantly contributed to a study—like data analysis, article draughting, or study coordination—are purposefully left off the author list, is equally troublesome. The purpose of this omission could be to hide the involvement of third parties or to give preference to those who can pay for publishing. In addition to transgressing ethical norms, ghostwriting obfuscates accountability, making it challenging to pinpoint the authors of a work's scientific content.

When taken as a whole, these unethical authoring activities degrade scientific accountability procedures, undermine the integrity of academic merit and advancement systems, and damage the reputation of scholarly publishing. There are significant ramifications for research evaluation, policy formation, and public trust in academic scholarship when authorship no longer accurately represents intellectual contribution and accountability [10].

APC-driven Publishing and the Emergence of Predatory Journals

One of the most detrimental effects of the unrestrained use of the Article Processing Charge (APC) model is the emergence of predatory journals, which put financial gain ahead of scientific responsibility and academic rigour. These journals intentionally mimic reputable open-access publications while eschewing the core values of ethical supervision, editorial excellence, and transparency that support respectable scientific publishing.

Peer review procedures are usually either nonexistent, weakened, or cursory in predatory publications. Within a few days after submission, manuscripts are frequently accepted with little to no indication that they have undergone a critical scrutiny by competent reviewers. Acceptance is often dependent more on the timely payment of APCs than on the research's novelty, scientific value, or methodological soundness. These journals frequently promote assured or exceptionally quick publishing timeframes, taking advantage of the demands placed on scholars pursuing tenure, promotion, or grant compliance [11].

The falsification of journal identity is another characteristic of predatory publishing. In order to trick authors into believing they are legitimate, many predatory outlets use names that closely mimic those of well-known, respectable journals. Furthermore, these journals frequently have editorial boards that are difficult to identify or verify, make inaccurate or unsubstantial claims about indexing, and withhold information about their peer-review or retraction procedures. When listed, editorial board members might not have given their permission or might not have the necessary academic background [12].

Authorship is rapidly being turned from an ethical and intellectual commitment into a business transaction in APC-driven predatory cultures. Rather than scientific merit or ethical conformity, manuscripts are approved solely based on the authors' capacity to pay publication fees [7]. This leads to the introduction of poorly planned, poorly assessed, non-reproducible, or unethical research into the scientific literature. This raises significant hazards and weakens the cumulative character of scientific knowledge, especially in health-related fields where faulty findings can affect public policy and clinical practice [13].

The spread of predatory journals has made it more difficult to distinguish between reliable research and publications that are deceptive or of poor quality, which has further muddled the landscape of scholarly communication. It has becoming more challenging for readers, reviewers, and assessors to discern between genuine, peer-reviewed science and pseudo-scholarship. Predatory publications undermine research evaluation processes and inflate publishing metrics without commensurate intellectual value for funding organisations and academic institutions [14].

In the end, the rise of predatory, APC-driven journals undermines the integrity of international scientific debate, diminishes the value of respectable scholarly work, and erodes confidence in open-access publishing. The preservation of the integrity and moral underpinnings of academic publication necessitates increased awareness, more robust institutional policies, and shared accountability from publishers, authors, editors, and regulators [15].

Impact on the Research's Integrity

Honesty, transparency, reproducibility, accountability, and ethical responsibility at every stage of the research lifecycle—from study inception and data collection to analysis, reporting, and publication—are the cornerstones of research integrity. These guidelines guarantee that scientific discoveries are trustworthy, verifiable, and deserving of public confidence. However, these fundamental principles are seriously threatened by publication processes that are too motivated by Article Processing Charges (APCs), especially in open-access settings with lax regulations. Several aspects of research integrity are jeopardised when financial incentives are prioritised over academic rigour [16].

By assessing methodological soundness, originality, ethical compliance, and the validity of results, peer review acts as the main quality control process in academic publishing, protecting the scientific record. Peer review is frequently accelerated, shallow, or nonexistent in APC-driven publishing schemes, particularly in predatory or low-quality journals. Some publications purposefully abbreviate review periods or circumvent stringent evaluation procedures in order to increase money, which leads to the acceptance of articles without sufficient review [9].

Methodological errors, improper statistical analyses, selective reporting, data manipulation, and unsupported conclusions can all find their way into the scientific literature when there is no genuine peer review. This eventually erodes the repeatability of scientific findings and erodes trust in published research. Compromised peer review can have major and far-reaching effects in fields like the biomedical and clinical sciences, where published research directly influences decisions about diagnosis, treatment, and public health [14].

The likelihood of scientific misconduct, such as plagiarism, data fabrication, and falsification, is greatly increased by inadequate editorial monitoring. Effective plagiarism detection methods, data-verification procedures, and ethical review checks are frequently absent from journals that place a high priority on APC revenue. Consequently, it is possible for fake datasets, altered photos, duplicate manuscripts, and recycled material to pass unnoticed and end up in the published record. The evidence base used to support future research, therapeutic recommendations, and policy decisions is distorted when fraudulent or plagiarised research is published. Such misconceptions have the potential to misallocate research funds, jeopardise patient safety, and undermine trust in evidence-based practice in the biological and clinical sciences. Further exacerbating the long-term effects of degraded research integrity is the longevity of untrustworthy papers, which makes systematic reviews and meta-analyses more difficult.

A key element of research integrity is accountability, which calls on authors, editors, and publishers to be accountable for the veracity, moral behaviour, and societal ramifications of their published work. It is frequently unclear who is responsible for research results in APC-driven publication contexts because authorship and acceptance are strongly linked to cash transactions. It is hard to determine who is responsible for mistakes, moral failings, or wrongdoing when authorship is commodified [15].

Additionally, journals with profit-driven business models might not have strong post-publication supervision procedures, such as retractions, corrections, or statements of concern. Fear of monetary loss or reputational damage may prevent ethical transgressions from

being addressed. In addition to spreading false information, this failure to update the scientific record shows that unethical behaviour is acceptable, undermining the moral foundation of academic research [16].

Impacts on Academia and Society

APC-induced distortions in authorship and publication processes have systemic implications on the larger academic and scientific enterprise that go well beyond isolated cases or individual works. Conventional academic evaluation and promotion frameworks are severely undermined when publication methods place an emphasis on quantity rather than quality. It is impossible to discern between opportunistic or profit-driven outputs and significant scholarly contributions using metrics that primarily rely on publication counts rather than methodological rigour, creativity, and societal importance. As a result, academic tenure, promotion, and grading schemes are no longer able to recognise and honour true intellectual brilliance [17].

In APC-driven publishing contexts, early-career scholars are especially vulnerable. Many early-stage researchers lack the knowledge or institutional support needed to critically evaluate journal credibility since they are under tremendous pressure to publish quickly in order to obtain funding, employment, or advancement. This makes them more vulnerable to predatory journals that offer quick publication in return for APCs. Academic careers may suffer long-term consequences from such events, such as harm to one's reputation, a lack of appreciation for published work, and fewer chances for funding and collaboration.

The dissemination of subpar or unethical research into the scientific literature has a significant negative impact on public trust at the societal level. The resulting contradictions, retractions, or failures undermine trust in science as a trustworthy source of truth when faulty or deceptive research informs clinical recommendations, public policy, or health measures. Disseminating faulty findings can result in poor decision-making that causes real-world suffering in disciplines like environmental science, public health, and medicine where research directly affects human well-being [21].

Additionally, variations in APC funding worsen already-existing worldwide inequalities in the creation and sharing of knowledge. International financial methods and institutional APC support are frequently unavailable to researchers from low- and middle-income nations, institutions with limited resources, and independent research contexts. Because of this, individuals encounter considerable obstacles when trying to publish in respectable, influential publications that uphold strict editorial standards. In addition to limiting variety in scientific discourse and marginalising important research views, this financial exclusion perpetuates a system where scholarly exposure is overwhelmingly determined by financial capacity rather than intellectual competence [18].

Striking a Balance Between Ethical Publication and Open Access

It is crucial to stress that Article Processing Charges (APCs) are not intrinsically immoral nor incompatible with scientific publishing of the highest calibre. As a sustainable way to finance stringent peer-review procedures, expert editorial management, digital infrastructure, and long-term archiving, many respectable and well-established journals openly use APCs. APC-based

approaches can coexist with high academic standards and favourably impact the accessibility and diffusion of scientific knowledge when they are appropriately governed and applied responsibly. When financial incentives start to take precedence above scholarly and intellectual standards for publication, an ethical dilemma occurs. Under such conditions, the APC model is susceptible to abuse, with acceptance choices being affected more by the authors' financial capacity than by the submitted work's originality, methodological rigour, ethical soundness, or scientific value. This change jeopardises the integrity of the academic record and undercuts the fundamentals of scholarly communication [19].

APC-based publishing must adhere to a number of fundamental standards in order to be ethical and reliable. First and foremost, charging structures must be transparent and easily understood. Particularly for researchers from low- and middle-income nations, journals should be transparent about APC amounts, what the fees cover, and any waivers or discounts that may be available. Transparency fosters trust between publishers and authors and lowers the possibility of unstated fees [20].

Second, regardless of payment status, rigorous, impartial, and reliable peer-review procedures must be upheld. Peer reviewers should be chosen based on their subject-matter competence and free from conflicts of interest, and editorial choices should be completely isolated from financial transactions. The key factor that determines whether a paper is accepted or rejected must continue to be the integrity of peer review.

Third, in order to maintain accountability and stop unethical authoring practices, authorship contribution declarations must be precise and comprehensive. It is easier to make sure that authorship reflects true intellectual contribution rather than financial participation when each author's function is explicitly disclosed, in accordance with recognised rules like those of the ICMJE.

Last but not least, rigorous and responsible editorial control is essential. Editors are required to uphold moral standards consistently, respond to accusations of wrongdoing, and put in place efficient post-publication procedures, such as retractions, expressions of concern, and corrections where needed. Maintaining the legitimacy of APC-based publications requires editorial independence from commercial pressures [21].

Indeed, when integrated into open, strictly regulated, and morally sound editorial frameworks, APCs can serve as a valid and moral part of contemporary academic publishing. The dedication of journals and institutions to put intellectual excellence, ethical responsibility, and scientific integrity ahead of financial gain is ultimately what determines the longevity and credibility of open-access publication, not the existence of APCs.

Ways for Restoring Research Integrity and Authorship Credibility

A diversified strategy is needed to lessen the detrimental effects of APC-driven publishing and rebuild the reputation of authorship and research integrity. The following tactics are suggested: First, to guarantee that papers are assessed exclusively on the basis of scientific merit, methodological rigour, and ethical conformity, journals must establish strict editorial and peer-review procedures. Clear authorship contribution verification, conflict of interest disclosure, and compliance with international standards like the

ICMJE and COPE should all be regularly enforced. To avoid compromising quality control, editorial boards should be free from financial incentives and conduct routine audits of review procedures.

Second, when it comes to employment, promotion, and grant evaluation criteria, universities, research organisations, and funding agencies ought to give more weight to the calibre of research outputs than to their quantity. Instead of just counting publications, institutional rules must acknowledge significant contributions to scientific knowledge, methodological innovation, and ethical behaviour. To lower financial barriers to acceptable publication routes, universities can also offer organised support for APCs in reputable journals, especially for researchers from low- and middle-income backgrounds.

Thirdly, required training in research ethics, responsible authoring, and publication standards should be provided to doctorate candidates, postgraduate students, and early-career researchers. Topics including authorship standards, peer review, preventing plagiarism, data integrity, and identifying predatory publications should all be included in such programs. The occurrence of unethical actions can be significantly decreased by developing a solid ethical foundation from the beginning of a researcher's career.

Additionally, academic regulators, research funders, and professional indexing organisations should create and implement systems to penalise journals that consistently participate in unethical behaviour. Funding recognition, bibliometric evaluations, and indexing databases should not include predatory or noncompliant journals.

Conclusion

APC-driven publishing has altered the way academics communicate with one another, posing both challenges and opportunities. The legitimacy of scientific knowledge is undermined when APC fees replace true authorship and rigorous peer review. Collaboration between authors, institutions, publishers, and policymakers is necessary to maintain the integrity of scholarly publications. The only way scientific research can continue to be a trustworthy source of information, novel concepts, and societal advancement is through ethical management of open-access models.

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