

## EUROMEDITERRANEAN BIOMEDICAL JOURNAL: A NEW POLICY ABOUT SELF-REFERENCING

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### ABSTRACT

The median self-citation rate of a researcher normally ranged between 10% and 25%. Recent works demonstrated that, among a list of around 100,000 researchers worldwide, hundreds of authors have collected more than a half of their work citations from themselves or their co-authors. During last years, EuroMediterranean Biomedical Journal progressively sought to improve the quality of the manuscripts published, introducing the requirement for all articles to be written in English and, before acceptance, to undergo to a native English speaker proof-reading process from 2012. Moreover, a new publishing layout and a renewed web-portal of the journal were introduced in 2017, representing a further upgrade after over 10 years of editorial activity. Finally, a renewed Editorial Board was designated in 2018. Nowadays, for the first time, the EMBJ Editorial Board unanimously has established a policy for self-referencing, accepting for peer reviews only manuscript with a number of self-citations no exceeding 25% of total references amount. Moreover, a major attention to consistency and coherence of self-cited references with the issues treated in the manuscript submitted, will be requested during peer-review process.

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### Editorial

In July 2019, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), one of the most important publisher-advisory board, evidenced that self-citation actually represents one of the main forms of citation manipulation [1].

In the month of August 2019, one of the first publicly available database of around 100,000 top scientists worldwide was published [2]. The authors used data reported on *Scopus*<sup>®</sup> to rank the 100,000 most-cited authors across all scientific fields, providing standardized information on citations, h-index, coauthorship-adjusted h-index, and other indicators [2].

Analyzing data of the top 100,000 authors for 1996–2017, a 12.7%, median percentage of self-citations (IQ range 8.6%–17.7%) emerged, varying consistently across researcher from 0 to 93.8% [2].

Moreover, in the same time period, more than a thousand authors have >40% self-citations, and more than eight thousands have >25% self-citations [2]. This kind of articles finally helped to flag authors extreme self-promoters and "citation farms", in which clusters of scientists massively cite each other [3]. The definition of self-citation in the cited study is wider, including citations by co-authors, with the objective to catch possible instances of citation farming [3].

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Moreover, also an analysis of the ratio of citations received to the number of papers in which those citations appear could be evaluated in future, for the identification of excessive self-promoting authors [3].

In particular, early-career researchers tend to have higher self-citation rates because, also in accordance with Legislation of their Country, need to increase scientific fields indicators for progression of their Academic career (so called "Youth effect") [4, 5].

Recently 5,575 subjects were pooled among *Nature*<sup>®</sup> experts asking them how to limit in future excessive self-citations [3].

Citation metrics that exclude self-citations (such as *Scopus*<sup>®</sup> that actually provides this opportunity), reporting self-citation rates of researchers and improve Journal policies about self-referencing were considered the most important solutions to curb self-citations in future [3, 6].

Similarly, editors in chief or academic editors of scientific journals are often more aware of the literature in their own journal, requiring, in the reasonable interest of improving article readability, to authors to read and reference material from that journal [1]. Otherwise, editors should be careful about merely suggesting possible citation additions from their own journal and about requests by peers to cite unrelated literature, because they have the great responsibility of overseeing the requests made by peers, assessing if are ethically appropriate or unethically [1,7].

Furthermore, also reviewers that are chosen according to their specific knowledge in the field can legitimately recommend important research which they conducted, especially if the inclusion could improve the author's article. In this case, Editor should verify consistency and ethicality of the additional citations suggestion, in order to avoid self-citations without a rationale and/or high proportions of self-citations without a rationale versus citations to others' work [1, 8].

Specifically, a recent research article, comparing self-citations by peer reviewers in a journal with single-blind peer review versus a journal with open peer review, showed no substantial differences in the pattern of peer reviewer self-citations [8].

Although in 2017 an article recently stated that men self-citations are more than 50% higher than women across several disciplines, a successive analysis, conducted on a sample of 1.6 million papers, showed no gender effect on self-citations [9, 10].

Self-citation was indeed recognized as an hallmark of productive authors, of any gender, used to cite novel publications early and to cross citation-barriers such as language and indexing [10].

These results were confirmed by Andersen JP et al. that found, in 2019, near-identical per-paper citation impact for women and men in first and last author positions, with self-citations and journal prestige accounting for most of the small average gender differences [11].

For all these reasons, unanimously, the Chairman, the deputy Editor, the academic Editors and the managing Editor of EuroMediterranean Biomedical Journal (EMBJ) considered appropriate to update the guidelines for authors with the specific section : "policy about self-referencing".

From January 2020, the authors of all manuscripts submitted to EMBJ should not overcome a 25% limit of self-citations among the overall amount of references.

All the citations, with a particular focus on references citing articles of the authors or co-authors, will be monitored, as expressively request of the Editorial Board, by all peer-reviewers of EMBJ.

The new limit for self-citations could represent a "golden mean" to guarantee readability to recent manuscripts published in the field by authors of manuscript submitted, especially if conducted by young researchers.

Since the beginning, in January 2006, Capsula Eburnea had the main goal of creating, at the same time, "an open scientific forum and a blog for young doctors and researchers" [12].

From 2009 to date, the journal has undergone extensive changes, becoming indexed in the main scientific search engines (Scopus, Directory of Open Access Journal, Google Scholar, Ulrich Periodical Directory), renewing its Editorial Team and Editorial Board extension to up to 60 young doctors with proven scientific experience from 15 countries around the world, encouraging the publication of articles in standardized English, through the introduction of a mandatory English translation service provided by native English-speaking translators to ensure high linguistic standards of the published articles, changing his name to "EuroMediterranean Biomedical Journal for young doctors (formerly: Capsula Eburnea)", modifying manuscript layout and the web rendering of [www.embj.org](http://www.embj.org) [13].

To conclude, we believe that so far, our editorial adventure has been very successful, having achieved our initial goals, and that the quality of the manuscripts published in the Journal has significantly improved over the years, also thanks to the growing international interest and participation. We also feel that the new policy about self-referencing is fitting to maintain the target population of young doctors, since we firmly believe that the scientific community should be especially welcoming to initiatives by young researchers.

Finally, we are confident that the new policies to limit self-citations could represent an essential upgrade after over 15 years of editorial activity, and that these improvements will be appreciated by our authors and, especially, our readers.

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