

Publishing in Modestly Ranked Peer-reviewed Journals: Motivation and Inclusion for Researchers with Limited Resources

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Abstract: This short note argues that publishing in modestly ranked but genuinely peer-reviewed journals can be a rational and ethical route for researchers who face resource constraints. Evaluation systems that over-weight journal prestige can distort incentives, amplify cumulative advantage, and exacerbate inequities, while reform efforts such as the Leiden Manifesto and DORA recommend assessing research on its own merits rather than by venue metrics. Evidence also links pressure to publish in elite venues with stress and mental-health challenges among early-career researchers. I distinguish legitimate lower-rank journals from predatory outlets using consensus definitions and offer practical safeguards to avoid deceptive practices. This note concludes that authors, institutions, and evaluators can take to build inclusive publishing cultures that value rigor, transparency, and societal relevance over venue prestige. The aim is not to discount selectivity or novelty but to broaden pathways for credible dissemination so that constraints in funding, laboratory infrastructure, or network access do not silence valid scholarship.

Keywords: Research assessment; Journal prestige; Equity, DORA; Leiden Manifesto

Introduction: In general, researchers always have a mindset that there are always disadvantages or implications of publishing in low-rank journals for the scientific community and individual researchers. This is because publishing in low-ranked journals may result in limited visibility and credibility for the research. This can mean that the research may not reach a wide audience or receive as many citations, which are important indicators of impact and influence in academia. However, one of my papers published in a low-rank journal received a total citation of 41 in Google Scholar (as of 23 January 2024) published in 2019 [1], and this has exceeded the citation number (33 in total) in a relevant paper published in a high-rank journal since 2016 [2]. Researchers may face challenges obtaining research grants and promotions if their publication record primarily consists of low-ranked journal articles. Publishing in low-ranked journals may also lead to missed opportunities for collaboration and networking within the scientific community. However, it is argued this could be a good start for trustworthy collaboration and networking.

Early-career scientists and researchers in low-resource settings often face structural barriers when evaluation systems privilege journal-level prestige over the intrinsic quality and openness of research outputs. When hiring and promotion committees over-rely on venues as signals of quality, they unintentionally discourage methodologically careful but locally grounded work and push authors toward risk-averse topics that fit narrow conceptions of novelty [3-6]. This note advances a pragmatic argument: publishing in modestly ranked, peer-reviewed journals can be an appropriate and ethical choice when the work satisfies disciplinary standards, addresses relevant questions, and is reported transparently.

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The purpose is to articulate why this path can serve inclusion and scientific progress without compromising rigor, and to provide clear guardrails that differentiate legitimate journals from predatory outlets. This note complements my personal reflection with established work on responsible assessment and cumulative advantage, which together explain why venue prestige alone is a poor proxy for quality.

Approach and scope: This is a personal evidence-informed perspective. It synthesizes guidance and empirical work on research assessment reforms, publisher concentration, cumulative advantage, and researcher wellbeing. It does not report new empirical data. Claims are referenced to peer-reviewed studies and consensus statements where appropriate [3-4, 6-7, 9-10].

Discussion

a) Pressures, incentives, and mental health

It is almost undeniable that in today's competitive landscape of academia, the pressure to publish in high-ranking journals has become imperative for researchers seeking career advancement and recognition in their respective fields. Failure to do so can result in missed research grants, promotions, and individual recognition opportunities. Researchers must prioritize submitting their work to high-ranking journals to meet the demands of the academic publishing culture and secure their professional success [11]. This emphasis on publication in prestigious journals has created a "publish or perish" culture, where researchers must constantly produce high-quality articles to maintain their standing in the academic community and secure future opportunities [12].

When I asked my postgraduate students in the Research Methodology course at my university, 'Do you prefer to publish your work in high-rank journals to low-rank journals?' All answers were skewed to the former. Unknowingly or not, it has evolved to 'Publish in high rank journals or Perish'. From another angle, I see that the high pressure to publish only in high-rank journals could have a lot of negative implications in terms of mental health pressure and the facilitation of the cheating phenomenon to grow in academia.

Reasonably, the pressure to publish in high-ranking journals can have positive and negative academic consequences [13]. The pressure to publish in high-ranking journals has created a culture where academic success is measured by the number of publications and the reputation of the journals in which they are published rather than the impact of the research itself. This emphasis on publishing in high-ranking journals has led to a must publish in high ranked journal mentality, where researchers feel compelled to continually produce new research to maintain their academic standing and funding opportunities. However, this pressure can lead to a decline in the quality and significance of research as researchers prioritize quantity over quality. Rather than focusing on groundbreaking and important research questions, some researchers may feel compelled to pursue safer and more likely-to-be-published topics that align with high-ranking journals' current trends and interests. This narrow focus can impede intellectual diversity and innovative thinking within academic communities.

Furthermore, the pressure to publish in high-ranking journals can create a skewed perception of academic success and perpetuate systemic inequalities within academia. It can also contribute to a culture that values reputation over the actual content and impact of research articles. The pressure to publish in high-ranking journals has unquestionably become a dominant factor driving the conduct of research. Many scholars face the must publish in high ranked journal dilemma, where the demand for constant publication in esteemed journals could (possibly) overshadow the pursuit of innovative and essential research questions [14-18]. This publication imperative has led to a hyper-competitive environment, where the focus often shifts towards quantity over quality, echoing the sentiments of the "publish or perish" culture. I highly agree with the above based on my publication experience.

b) Why modestly ranked journals matter: Inclusivity case for low-rank journals

In the academic research community, there is a common perception that publishing in high-ranking journals is the ultimate goal and a marker of success. However, there are various reasons why publishing in low-rank journals should not be dismissed or overlooked. For starters, publishing in low-rank journals allows for wider dissemination of research findings. While high-ranking journals may have a larger readership, low-rank journals

often focus on niche areas or specific disciplines, which can lead to targeted exposure and engagement from a relevant audience.

Additionally, publishing in low-rank journals can provide valuable opportunities for early career researchers and scholars from marginalized groups. These individuals may face barriers and biases when trying to publish in high-ranking journals, making low-rank journals a more accessible avenue for their work to be recognized and valued at the beginning stage.

Furthermore, publishing in low-rank journals can help build a publication track record, which is crucial for early-career researchers. It also provides an opportunity for scholars from institutions with lower ranks to participate in the academic discourse and contribute to the field. While high-ranking journals have their place in the scholarly communication system, it is essential to recognize the importance of publishing in low-rank journals as a means of knowledge dissemination and inclusivity in academia.

This balanced approach to publishing contributes to a more comprehensive and diverse representation of research findings and scholarly contributions. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize that the small laboratory experimental data could usually be due to limited resources in terms of funding and difficulties in employing long-term researchers. This can result in a smaller scale of research output, making it challenging to compete for publication in high-ranking journals. Therefore, considering the constraints researchers face, it is crucial to acknowledge the value of contributing to low-rank journals as a platform for sharing valuable insights and findings.

Venue prestige is an imperfect proxy for research quality. Journal Impact Factors aggregate citation behavior across articles and fields and should not be used to evaluate individual outputs or researchers [5]. Responsible-assessment frameworks such as the Leiden Manifesto and DORA [4] recommend judging work on methodological rigour, transparency, and contribution rather than venue label [3-4]. Over-reliance on prestige can reproduce the “Matthew effect,” whereby recognition accrues disproportionately to already-advantaged groups and institutions (Merton, 1968 [8]). In practice, modestly ranked journals often provide timely, constructive peer review, especially for context-specific or applied studies that may not fit narrow novelty criteria. For researchers with limited access to expensive instrumentation or elite networks, such venues can be the most credible path to disseminate robust, ethically conducted studies that address regional or practice-oriented needs.

c) Guardrails against predatory publishing

Legitimate lower-rank journals are distinct from predatory outlets. Predatory journals and publishers prioritize self-interest at the expense of scholarship through deceptive practices, opaque governance, and lack of rigorous peer review [10]. To safeguard integrity, authors should: (i) verify indexing and archiving claims directly on the index’s site; (ii) review the editorial board for disciplinary credibility; (iii) examine peer-review policies and past issues for review quality; (iv) check membership in recognized initiatives that commit to ethical standards; and (v) beware of aggressive solicitations and unrealistic turnaround promises. These steps help differentiate legitimate modestly ranked journals—which contribute to disciplinary ecosystems—from deceptive outlets that erode trust.

d) Responsible assessment and practical steps

For authors: articulate a clear research question; follow domain standards for study design and reporting; pre-register when appropriate; share data and code or provide transparent justifications for any restrictions; and choose journals that match scope, audience, and methodological expectations. For evaluators and institutions: adopt DORA-aligned policies that de-emphasize journal-level metrics in hiring and promotion; request narrative CVs that allow candidates to explain the significance of a few key outputs; value open data, reproducible methods, and community impact [4,6]. For funders: support article-processing-charge waivers or diamond-open-access models that reduce inequity, and invest in shared research infrastructure where publisher concentration limits negotiating power [7].

e) Limitations and boundary conditions

Publishing in modestly ranked journals is not a license to lower standards. The argument here presumes adherence to rigorous methods, ethical approvals, and transparent reporting. Certain highly specialized or theory-building contributions may require venues with particular editorial expertise. Likewise, evaluators can and should weigh

originality and influence, but they should do so by reading the work and its uptake in the community rather than substituting venue prestige for judgment [3,6]. Finally, the structural pressures that drive prestige-seeking behaviors—including cumulative advantage dynamics and publisher oligopoly—are systemic and require policy reform alongside individual action [7-8].

f) Motivation and lived experience

I have been an active and working researcher since 1998 at my university as a research trainee. I faced many problems inside and outside myself and even in my laboratory. Resource limitations regarding research funding and maintenance issues of instrumental analysis in the laboratory have always been challenges facing all these years. As a postgraduate student in 1999, the notion of ‘If I just consider coming and doing the laboratory work in this un-motivating environment, or I would just go off ending doing other undertakings’ is always lingering in my mind.

Almost no driving forces make me stay working in the laboratory except for my passion for the topic of my research and the allowance scholarship I receive monthly to sustain my daily livelihood. Back to research materials and research funding, these limited resources have been stumbling blocks and challenging issues in the old days (1998-2003). Not many researchers could successfully graduate with Master's or PhD degrees from our laboratory. I see those who could survive ending graduation need extra motivation from many resources apart from family and beloved partner [19]. In this paper, I highlight the topic in the first two lines.

g) Practical stance and encouragement

Compared to high-rank journals, the submitted papers to the low-rank journals are easier to accept, but the acceptance rate is not necessarily 100%. When the published paper is seen online, there is a feeling of being appreciated or ‘seen’. I see publishing even in low-rank journals as a symbol of self-respect and self-confidence and an ever-growing search for new knowledge and when our work (thoughts and efforts) is seen [18], this can be one of the ultimate goals of human life.

While the pressure to publish in high-ranking journals is undeniable [11], it is crucial not to underestimate the value of publishing in lower-ranked journals. Researchers, especially those from institutions with limited resources and early-career scholars, often face challenges in competing for publication in high-ranking journals. The academic community's emphasis on high-ranking publications can create barriers for these researchers, hindering their ability to contribute to the academic discourse [19-20].

Therefore, while high-ranking journals undoubtedly play a critical role in academic research, it is important to appreciate the contributions made through publications in low-rank journals. Embracing a broader perspective on academic publishing can lead to a more inclusive and diverse scholarly community, ensuring that valuable research findings are shared and recognized across various platforms. Therefore, publishing a quantity of low-rank journals instead of high-quality high-rank papers should be well understood. The pressure to publish in high-ranking journals is pervasive and affects researchers at various stages of their careers and those from different institutions. The focus on high-ranking journals by institutions and the academic community has created barriers for early-career researchers and scholars from lower-ranked institutions.

h) Passion research in research writing that coming from publications in modestly ranked journals

Writing from modestly ranked journals often keeps passion close to the surface. The proximity to community concerns and the freedom to pursue unfashionable questions allow authors to frame problems with clarity and a sense of purpose that can fade in more commercial venues. Reviews that map big intellectual territories from modest platforms show how careful synthesis can set an agenda without large budgets or prestige labels [21]. First person reflections on teaching and fieldwork make the craft of research visible and pass along tacit knowledge about mentoring, persistence, and voice, which strengthens early career confidence and practice [22, 25]. Modestly ranked journals also carry difficult conversations about stress, burnout, and equity that larger outlets sometimes sideline, linking personal well-being to the sustainability of scholarship and proposing workable remedies grounded in day to day academic realities [23]. When the economics of publishing threaten access, arguments developed in these venues defend fairness in dissemination and call for models that protect curiosity driven work rather than gate it behind fees [24]. Together these contributions show that passion research thrives where editors

value substance over spectacle, and where the aim is to advance understanding and community rather than to chase optics [21-25].

Conclusion: Inclusive scholarly communication values rigor, openness, and relevance irrespective of venue prestige. For many early-career and resource-limited researchers, legitimate modestly ranked journals provide a credible pathway to share validated results, contribute to local and regional problem-solving, and build research trajectories anchored in integrity. Institutions, funders, and journals can accelerate this inclusivity by aligning policies with the Leiden Manifesto and DORA, rewarding transparent methods, responsible data sharing, and verifiable impact over journal labels.

As long as the paper has been peer-reviewed carefully, whether it is submitted to a high-ranked or low-rank journal, it is acceptable from academic point of view. Let me highlight that ‘motivation’ is the backbone and the significance of publishing in low-rank journals especially for those from less-privileged institutions. So, why not just keep on publishing, even in low-ranked journals, to keep our passion, knowledge and wisdom growing. We will reach the high-ranked height of journals with high impact factor, one day. So, cheer up and never give up our hope to enjoy our research!

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