

A conceptual commentary for the academic knowledge-sharing ecosystem: Journals with identification issue

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Abstract

The digitalization of the academic knowledge-sharing industry has underscored problems associated with inferior academic knowledge-sharing platforms. This article examines a subset of such platforms, academic journals without identification codes. Although reliable in practice, publishing with these journals results in minimal academic value, as their lack of identification prevents indexing by scholarly databases. This paper revisits one underexplored problem: institutionally affiliated journals operating without a valid, verifiable, or internally consistent International Standard Serial Number. Using an exploratory, existence-oriented, case observation design, the study confirms the presence of multiple cases. Thus, this article contributes to establishing a research agenda for the academic knowledge-sharing ecosystem.

Keywords: Identification code, journal, publishing platform, academic database, International Standard Serial Number (ISSN).

Introduction

Communication on knowledge-sharing platforms relies heavily on intrinsic motivations such as altruism in society, emphasizing the importance of platforms that facilitate high-quality interactions and reliable knowledge exchange (Taylor & Murthy, 2009). Publication platforms are currently among the most common channels through which scholars share research data and findings, contributing to academic knowledge (Atai et al., 2018). Scholars' primary role is to conduct research to contribute to knowledge, publish and disseminate that knowledge, and consequently receive citations (Klamer & Dalen, 2002). However, standard publication platforms did not become common until after the Second World War. Initially, as explained by Burnham (1990), casual references within submitted manuscripts might have occurred on an individual basis, and gradual standardization of peer-review processing by scientific journals occurred in the twentieth century to fulfill the demands of a more professional class. Standard journals have active editorial boards focused on the scholarly elements of the journals (Chen et al., 2023). They have a well-organized and standard review process for submitted manuscripts, where peer reviews are performed by experts (Burnham, 1990; Sorooshian, 2017b). Thus, incorporating roles such as

publisher, author, reviewer, or editor into a portfolio enhances academic value when these platforms are recognized, especially when they are well-ranked, indexed, and abstracted by esteemed scientific databases and systems.

For decades, the publishing industry relied heavily on paper; however, even this industry was required to become digitalized in today's technologically advanced environment (Øiestad & Bugge, 2014; Park et al., 2010; Sindhu, 2008). This shift to modernization appears to have been an incentive for the transformation and generation of different online publication platforms and digital libraries (Obst, 2003). This transformation was linked to the desire to exploit all the opportunities provided by information and communication technology; it was also a means to minimize costs (Guédon et al., 2019). While the transition from paper to digital was positive, it presented concerns for the scholarly community (Oxford Analytica, 2015; Brunetti et al., 2022).

It was positive because sharing research results was not equally accessible to all; digitization improved accessibility (Guédon et al., 2019). However, Brembs et al. (2023) argued that current publication platform systems are unsatisfactory. For instance, the scholarly community observed that not all these modernized publication platforms remained quality-controlled. Certain publication platforms have now been classified as inferior, not because they are modernized but due to the following technology side effects (Weingart & Taubert, 2017): (1) the digitization of formal science communication; (2) the rise of self-observation of science through publication, citation, and utility-based indicators; (3) the increased observation of science by the mass media; and (4) the increasing importance of profit-making by many academic publishers and other information providers.

While the inferior platforms encompass a wide range of topics, they add minimal or no value to academic publications. Inferior publishing platforms are a cause of concern for the scholarly community and are grouped into different subclasses. Hijacked (also known as fake or clone) journals are perhaps the most troubling subclass of the inferior publishing platforms (Abalkina, 2024; Asim & Sorooshian, 2020). In this subclass, although the original journals have been published on well-indexed platforms, most of them do not have websites. Therefore, fraudsters can create a website with all the hallmarks of the original journal to gather manuscripts from academics and offer acceptance by charging the authors a fee (Jalalian & Dadkhah, 2015; Sorooshian, 2016).

Another subclass of inferior publishing platforms is pseudo and predatory journals (Chen et al., 2023). These pose as academic journals but do not conduct standard peer reviews for the acceptance of manuscripts; their main goal is to gain business targets rather than scientific contributions (Beall, 2016; Lopez & Gaspard, 2020; Sorooshian, 2020). Similarly, predatory congress, meeting, or symposium (CMS) proceedings have recently been addressed, as they are increasing, with serious emerging trends (Lang et al., 2019; Sorooshian, 2017a; Teixeira Da Silva et al., 2017). Even now, scholars may become victims of inferior or predatory book and monograph publishers (B&M P) (Lopez & Gaspard, 2020).

Inferior journals are not limited to the above-discussed subclasses; other groups remain relatively undetectable. Other subclasses of inferior publishing platforms may have existed long before the three named. As shown in Figure 1, this article proposes an argument for a new subclass of inferior journals, journals without identification, which are very similar to standard journals in practice,

but publishing in them adds minimal or no value. Although identification-deficient journals may overlap with these categories in some cases, the overlap is irrelevant. A journal can be honestly managed yet still be infrastructurally weak because it lacks a valid and verifiable identifier.

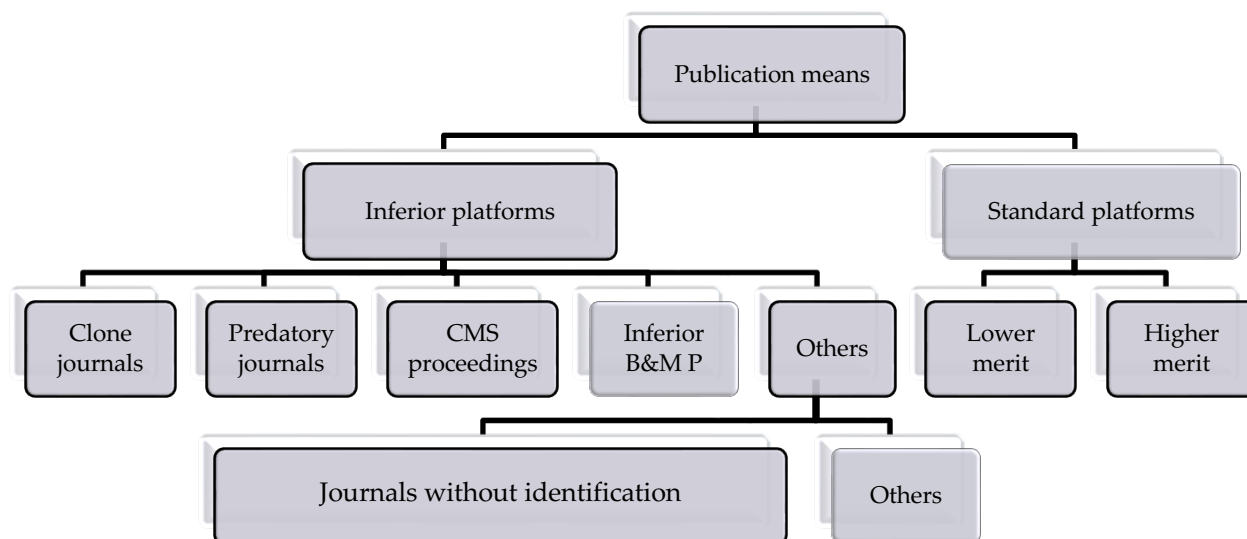


Figure 1. Publication Means

Why is identification important? The authors base their discussion on widely accepted scholarly standards, indexers, or organizations, including the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE; <https://publicationethics.org/>), Open Access Scholarly Publishing Association (OASPA; <https://oaspa.org/>), European Association of Science Editors (<https://ease.org.uk/>), Association of University Presses (<https://aupresses.org/>), Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ; <https://doaj.org/>), Web of Science (<https://www.webofscience.com/>), Scopus (<https://www.scopus.com/>), and PubMed (National Library of Medicine; <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>). While these organizations operate at various levels, all, directly or indirectly, acknowledge the importance of standardized identifiers for honest and reliable publishing. For example, they stated that all journals' operations should be documented. Different types of identifiers exist within digital libraries (Hakala, 2006). The identifiers can be viewed as object-level schemes (such as Digital Object Identifiers [DOI]; Chandrakar, 2006) or persistent uniform resource locators (Ducut et al., 2008), which refer to individual articles, and collection-level schemes (taking a publication platform, journal, or conference proceeding as an entity), which are the focus of this paper. Hence, at the collection level, readers and indexers require a standard identification code to verify a journal's processes and history, and the publishing platforms must include this identifying information. The indexing and editorial ethics standards impose procedures for corrections and retractions, and an international standard identification code enables clear tracking of publication platforms. Moreover, metadata management requires international standard identifiers because they serve as the technical structure enabling libraries and databases to collect and preserve content over time. In 1975, the International Standard Organization (ISO) documented the ISO 3297 standard that defines the International Standard Serial Number (Béquet, 2018; ISSN; Skrzypczak, 2014). For all publication platforms, the ISSN

International Centre or its authorized centers oversee the identification code registration (Skrzypczak, 2014). Likewise, database errors and identifier irregularities affect the reliability of scholarly infrastructures (Franceschini et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2021), including citation indexes and DOI records. These bodies of work are important because they show that scholarly communication can fail not only at the level of article quality but also at the level of infrastructure and identification. However, this underexplored problem remains insufficiently theorized: some journals may still operate without a valid ISSN, with an ISSN that cannot be verified, or with contradictory ISSN information across their pages and external records. This paper's objective is modest but fundamental: to confirm whether this type of journal exists. This objective matches the scope of the evidence; the contribution is therefore neither a prevalence estimate nor a claim that all journals without an ISSN are fraudulent. Instead, it is an argument that identification deficiency constitutes a distinct infrastructural weakness deserving explicit scholarly attention.

Methodological Approach

This study is designed to be exploratory; it combines case identification and verification. This design is logically and methodologically appropriate because the paper investigates a poorly described phenomenon in its real-world setting and seeks to first establish existence and then refine its conceptual boundaries (Eisenhardt, 1989; Siggelkow, 2007). For an existence claim, a verified case is logically sufficient (Siggelkow, 2007; Yin, 2018). Figure 2 visualizes our approach to verifying the existence of the pursued new subclass of inferior journals.

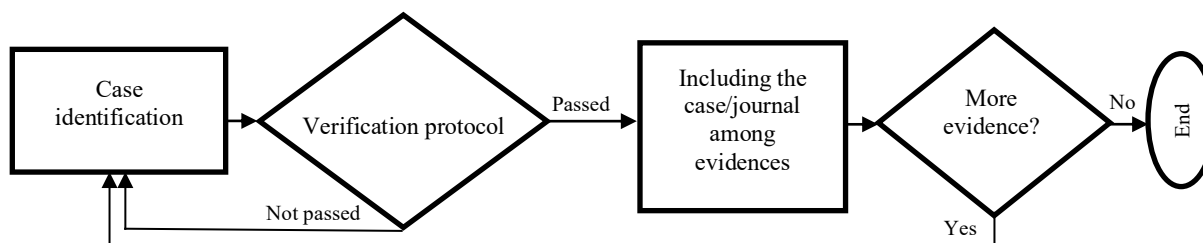


Figure 2. Phenomenon Validation Process

Case Identification

The focus was proving the existence of journals without ISSN identification codes at the collection level, and our case identification was conducted through iterative purposive web searching. We conducted a series of separate and individual search attempts. Google (<https://www.google.com/>) is the leading search engine worldwide (Taieb-Maimon & Harush, 2024). Thus, the plan was to use this search engine to search for the term “journal” and then review the results. Lists of the search outcomes were checked for journals and trialed to determine whether any of the identified journals could be classified in the defined subclass. Based on the search results, accessible journal sites were located through web navigation, beginning with refining the search as potentially relevant cases emerged. We disregarded non-English web pages due to language barriers.

To prevent confusion with fake or any other form of false journals, we only included evidence from journals published by higher education institutions (not private or third-party publishers),

marked by their webpage addresses. Thus, a case was included when all the following conditions were met: the website presented itself as a scholarly journal; the journal appeared to be affiliated with a university or higher education institution; and the site showed signs of actual journal operation, including publishing at least two volumes or issues, editorial or publisher information, and submission guidance, thus, currently accepting new submissions for their forthcoming volumes. Cases were excluded when they were clearly inactive stubs with no evidence of operation, or newsletters or magazines rather than scholarly journals. The aim was to locate well-documented candidate cases that could confirm or disconfirm the existence of the phenomenon under study.

Verification Protocol

Each included case was verified in two stages. First, the journal website was examined. Relevant evidence included masthead pages, about pages, homepages, issue archives, contact pages, submission pages, and any location where identifier claims appeared. Second, to avoid subjective bias, this paper applied the ISSN website (<https://portal.issn.org/>) as a cross-validation tool to verify the existence of ISSNs as identification codes for journals, and the claimed title and identifier information were cross-checked against the ISSN portal. The verification task was specific: it asked whether the journal name, publisher, or institutional affiliation, and displayed identifier information aligned to support the journal's claim to a stable serial identity. Where alignment failed, the nature of the failure was documented: missing identifier, unverified claim, or contradiction.

Evidence Recording

Within-case memos summarized the identification problem, location of the evidence on the site, registry cross-check result, and probable consequences for journal verification. However, cases/journal titles are withheld in the manuscript because some cases remain active and direct naming can unintentionally direct traffic toward problematic sites or exacerbate title confusion. The confidentiality decision, therefore, reflects a harm-reduction logic and not an attempt to evade scrutiny.

Stopping Rule

Yin (2018), Easton (2010), and Siggelkow (2007) demonstrated that even one documented real-world case provides adequate evidence to confirm that the phenomenon occurs. However, additional cases are useful for testing whether the initial observation was a solitary anomaly or an isolated mistake. Accordingly, this study did not stop at the first confirmed case. This approach is closer to information power and replication logic than to statistical saturation or population inference (Eisenhardt, 1989). Thus, we determined that this stopping rule was as a confidence threshold to claim the existence of a phenomenon and establish a research agenda. It should not be misunderstood as a claim to estimate prevalence; however, it is sufficient for the narrower objective of this paper: confirming existence. This study, therefore, makes no representation claim regarding the global population of these journals.

Hence, we continued with iterative purposive web searching with registry cross-verification until they identified sufficient observation of journal platforms lacking an ISSN identification code, and this served as confirmation of the existence of subclasses of inferior publishing platforms. This

method is distinguished by repeated, differing attempts performed until sufficient evidence is gathered. Although this exploratory approach was time-consuming, it is the only option when evidence is not cited but must be discovered.

Findings

Using Google Search, we conducted their evidence searches independently and at different locations. We commenced this exploratory web search part-time in mid-2021, and by mid-2022, we had successfully identified ten journals that supported the subclass we discussed and proposed, having no valid ISSN identification code. Briefly, for the purpose of submitting this manuscript, an additional list of 10 pieces of evidence from journal cases, whose names, after the peer review of this manuscript, have been kept confidential, was prepared and submitted. These journals were investigated in the ISSN portal, and it was discovered that the journals had inaccurate (or no) ISSN codes. Specifically, they had been published for a few years but were not actual and identifiable journals.

Among the ten verified cases, as summarized in Table 1, four displayed no ISSN, and the ISSN portal could not validate their title. The remaining cases displayed invalid ISSN or e-ISSN information but could not be verified via ISSN portal records. Among them, one displayed a direct contradiction between the portal record and the identifier shown on the journal website.

Table 1. Evidence Record

Case	Active journal since #	Journal portal check	Verification check	Additional identity risk
1	2018	No ISSN displayed	No ISSN identified	--
2	2019	No ISSN displayed	No ISSN identified	--
3	2014	Claimed an ISSN	ISSN unconfirmed	Similar-title conflict
4	2014	Claimed an e-ISSN	e-ISSN unconfirmed	--
5	2014	Contradictory e-ISSN	Contradictory e-ISSN	--
6	2017	Claimed ISSN and e-ISSN	ISSN and e-ISSN unconfirmed	--
7	2016	No ISSN displayed	No ISSN identified	--
8	2012	Claimed an ISSN	ISSN claim unconfirmed	Same-name conflict
9	2016	Claimed an ISSN	ISSN claim unconfirmed	--
10	2019	No ISSN displayed	No ISSN identified	--

In two cases, we observed that even on the ISSN homepage, journals existed with the same or very similar names, with an ISSN code and belonging to another publisher, from a different country, with a completely different website and publisher.

Across the cases, three recurring configurations were observed:

1. The first configuration appears superficially simple. It is journals displaying no ISSN despite showing outward signs of journal activity, such as archives, editorial boards, and published papers. The ISSN portal also did not identify the journal name for any registered ISSN.
2. The second configuration is more complex. It involved journals displaying a number labeled as ISSN or e-ISSN, but for which the title-publisher combination could not be verified in the registry or appeared inconsistent with the journal's claims. This configuration is particularly important because it can create a false sense of legitimacy. Authors, reviewers, and institutional administrators may assume that the presence of a number labeled ISSN is equivalent to successful registration, when the label may be incorrect, outdated, miscopied, or attached to another title. Practically, unverifiable claims can be as damaging as missing identifiers because they obscure rather than resolve the verification problem.
3. The third configuration involves contradiction. It involved journals displaying contradictory identifier information across their pages, such as one number on the homepage and another in the contact, archive, or policy sections, or contradictions between the website and registry record. Such a contradiction increases uncertainty in a way that is analytically distinct from the two prior configurations. The journal may have attempted to comply, yet its presentation introduces ambiguity. Contradiction also raises the possibility of downstream metadata contamination because libraries, databases, and authors may extract different values from different parts of the site. Even when no malicious intent is involved, contradictory identity information weakens trust and makes the journal more vulnerable to confusion with other titles.

These configurations correspond to progressively different types of identity failure, but they all compromise confidence in the journal's basic serial identity. Therefore, the existence of these case journals is not recognized, and they are not perceived as real journals. As such, all the articles they collect are published on an unidentifiable platform. Although this type of journal is less recognized in the literature, it is also a subclass of inferior journals, as publishing with such journals does not yield the desired credit for the publishers, editors, reviewers, and authors.

Discussion

Our study took a minimum-infrastructure view of scholarly communication. Three elements are especially relevant. First, journals require identity: a title must be distinguishable and verifiable. Second, journals require governance transparency: authors and institutions should be able to determine who is responsible for the platform and whether its stated claims are coherent. Third, journals require discoverability: the platform must be visible to the cataloging, indexing, and linking systems through which scholarship travels. When ISSN information is absent or contradictory, all three elements can be weakened, even if article-level intentions remain sincere.

The lack of journal management skills among editors can lead to different issues (Sorooshian & Parsia, 2018). Editors of a newly established journal, for example, are obligated to know that the journal should have an ISSN from the International Centre for the Registration of Serial Publications (CIEPS). The CIEPS, also known as the ISSN International Centre, is an intergovernmental union that manages the identification and description of journals and other serial publications (ISSN). This center was established in early 1976 in France under the terms of an earlier agreement between the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the host country. The 8-digit ISSN code is used to recognize a publication platform and is mandatory in numerous countries (ISSN). It is universally accepted

that this code is necessary for all journals to be continued on a regular or irregular basis (ISSN). Having been established for half a century, the ISSN is the main identifier in the data environment (Romano Reynolds & Hanson, 2017) for printed (ISSN) or electronic (e-ISSN) journals. However, this observation confirms that the ISSN Centre has failed in building sufficient community awareness.

If, for instance, Journal A has no ISSN code, anyone could create the same Journal A and obtain an ISSN code for it, such that the original Journal A would no longer be considered a genuine journal. Therefore, the ISSN code is the foundation for the creation of any journal. Considering that hiring, promotion, and firing are all heavily influenced by a scholar's citation record in academia (Ale Ebrahim et al., 2014; Ale Ebrahim et al., 2013; Klamer & Dalen, 2002) and that abstracting and indexing services offered by external databases increase the visibility and citations of material published in journals (Ale Ebrahim et al., 2013, 2014), it is vital that journals are indexed in several databases to gain citation. The ISSN code serves as an identification code for a journal to be indexed or cited (Mondal & Mondal, 2020; Padula, 2019), for example, in the Scopus database (Cantu-Ortiz, 2017). However, this article acknowledges the possibility of obtaining incorrect information from some databases (Franceschini et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2021).

A journal with a valid ISSN can still be poor quality, deceptive, or badly governed. ISSN registration is therefore not a guarantee of legitimacy; it is a baseline component of journal identity. Nonetheless, the main analytical contribution of this article is to show that a journal can be problematic at the infrastructure level even when it is not directly predatory, hijacked, or intentionally deceptive. This distinction helps explain why some authors, editors, and institutions may misunderstand the problem. Much of the existing discourse on problematic journals concerns motives and ethics: Who is cheating? Who is misleading authors? These questions remain vital. However, the present cases demonstrate that the effect is also important. A journal that cannot clearly establish its serial identity is weaker than it should be, even before considering questions of quality or intent. As the collected cases were university-published journals, they had potentially performed their function appropriately in all their past few volumes, and the standard process of submission, review, and publishing was considered. They aimed to make a scientific contribution; however, as they did not follow the proper procedure, they formed a supplementary subclass of inferior journals because they lacked an ISSN code.

The cases suggest four mechanisms through which identification deficiency is important. The first is title ambiguity. Journal titles are not always unique, and similar or overlapping names are common in scholarly communication. Without a valid and stable identifier, a journal becomes more difficult to distinguish from other serials, creating room for confusion, mistaken attribution, and, in extreme cases, even impersonation. The second mechanism is metadata and discoverability failure. Scholarly visibility depends on more than posting PDFs online. It requires consistent metadata that can travel across catalogs, archives, portals, and indexing systems. The ISSN infrastructure exists to support this layer of serial identification. When journal identity is missing or contradictory, discoverability can be weakened even if articles remain technically accessible on the web. This point should be stated carefully: lacking an ISSN does not automatically make indexing impossible in every database. However, it creates an avoidable barrier to verification and standardized metadata exchange. The third mechanism is organizational accountability. In several cases, the site suggested that the journal was institutionally legitimate because it was hosted on a

university domain or used university branding. However, that branding can mask infrastructural weakness. Authors may infer that a university-hosted journal has necessarily completed the basic steps of journal setup, while administrators may count the title among institutional scholarly assets without checking whether it satisfies minimum identification standards. Identification deficiency thus creates a governance blind spot: responsibility appears to exist, but the underlying editorial infrastructure remains incomplete. The fourth mechanism is evaluation and preservation risk. The scholarly record depends on durable linking and clear title histories. When the journal identity is weak, long-term tracking of the publication, assessment of its status, and coordination with preservation services become more difficult. This does not mean that every identification-deficient journal will disappear. Instead, it means that the conditions for sustainable stewardship are less secure than they should be. In this sense, the cases reinforce a broader lesson from the literature on scholarly infrastructures: weak metadata practices produce cumulative downstream costs (Brembs et al., 2023; Guédon et al., 2019).

The findings also suggest that journal quality discussions should be broadened beyond article review processes. The COPE/DOAJ/OASPA principles emphasize transparency, clarity of ownership, and basic publishing standards (COPE, DOAJ, OASPA, & WAME, 2022). The present study complements that agenda by emphasizing title identity as one of the baseline conditions that make transparency meaningful. A journal cannot be fully transparent if its identity cannot be checked coherently across site- and registry-level records.

For universities, the implication is that launching or hosting a journal should trigger a formal governance workflow rather than an ad hoc website project. Before a journal is presented to authors as an institutional outlet, the institution should verify title uniqueness, obtain and display valid identifiers, document editorial responsibility, and assign a responsible office for periodic compliance checks. Libraries and scholarly communication units are natural partners in this process because they already work at the interface of metadata, discoverability, and preservation. A university wishing to own the prestige of a journal should also own the infrastructure required to make that journal legible and accountable.

For editors and editorial boards, the study suggests that training should include identifier governance and not only peer review procedures. Editorial professionalism begins before manuscript handling. It includes understanding what makes a journal verifiable as a serial publication. Short practical checklists derived from the ISSN system, transparency principles, and author-facing tools such as Think. Check. Submit. could help less experienced journal teams prevent avoidable mistakes before they become systemic problems (Think. Check. Submit., n.d.; COPE, DOAJ, OASPA, & WAME, 2022).

For national libraries, ISSN centers, and policy actors, the study indicates a preventive rather than purely corrective strategy. While the problem documented here is small compared with the global publishing system, it is the type of low-visibility weakness that accumulates over time. Outreach targeting new and institutionally hosted journals, clearer onboarding guidance, and lightweight audits of publicly visible identifier claims may avoid many cases. The policy question is therefore not whether every weak journal should be punished. It is whether the scholarly ecosystem can make baseline infrastructural compliance easier, earlier, and more visible.

Conclusion

This article aimed to open a discussion on the limitations of current scientific communication, particularly from the perspective of academic knowledge-sharing platforms, and to contribute to a better understanding of inferior journals. The digital era has created new challenges for the scholarly community. While digitalization has helped the publishing industry develop profitable business models, improve the shareability of scholarly outputs, and provide users with tracking and identification codes, it has also intensified academic competition and enabled the emergence of problematic publishing practices. As a result, several subclasses of inferior publishing platforms have emerged as side effects of digitalization. By identifying ten cases, this study confirms the existence of the problem.

Practically, the findings support earlier and clearer identifier governance by editors, universities, libraries, and ISSN-supporting institutions. Scholarly communication depends not only on good-quality articles and good intentions but also on correct and verifiable infrastructures. Where journal identity is weak, trust is weakened. Recognizing identification-deficient journals as a distinct problem is, therefore, a necessary step toward improving the reliability of the digital scholarly ecosystem. This study also has limitations that future research may address. The sample is purposive rather than representative. The findings, therefore, establish existence but not prevalence. Moreover, the evidence is based on public websites and registry checks rather than empirical data analysis or internal institutional records. Nonetheless, since existence is confirmed, the burden shifts from proof that the phenomenon can occur to explanation of how and why it recurs. The additional cases reported here enable that shift.

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