



# Navigating challenges and future directions for conflict of interest disclosure among Iranian authors in international journals

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** This study explores reviewers' perspectives on conflict of interest (COI) disclosures by Iranian authors submitting to international publishers such as Elsevier, Springer, and Frontiers. COI transparency is critical for academic credibility, yet limited research has focused on COI practices among Iranian researchers. This study addresses this gap by examining the prevalence and impact of COI disclosures on manuscript acceptance, and the effect of foreign collaborations on perceptions of submissions from Iran. **Methods:** Using a qualitative approach, structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 reviewers to gather insights into COI disclosure practices among Iranian authors and the factors influencing acceptance decisions. This mixed-method approach provided both quantitative and qualitative perspectives on COI issues and reviewer perceptions. **Results:** Results showed that COI disclosure among Iranian authors is low, with 92% of reviewers noting non-disclosure impacted their acceptance decisions. Reviewers also indicated that manuscripts with foreign co-authors were perceived more credibly, suggesting international collaborations may improve ethical perceptions. Additionally, Iranian authors often lack distinction between financial, relational, or professional COIs, possibly reflecting gaps in awareness or guidelines. Cultural and procedural challenges were also identified as barriers to adhering to global standards. **Conclusion:** This study suggests that enhancing COI education and implementing clear policies could empower Iranian authors to adopt best practices, supporting both their professional credibility and institutional reputation. Improved, context-aware COI practices could foster trust and integrity in research from Iran.

**Keywords:** Research, Conflict of Interest, Ethical publishing, Transparency.

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## INTRODUCTION

The undeniable role of basic and applied research forms the backbone of modern society, driving transformative changes, especially in fields as vital as human health and medical sciences. The impact of research here is direct and profound, enhancing public health and advancing the well-being of societies globally. Yet, in parallel with scientific advancements, new challenges emerge that threaten the very integrity of scientific contributions. One such challenge is the recent integration of artificial

intelligence—particularly tools like ChatGPT—into the academic and research workflow, which has stirred significant ethical questions (1, 2). The rise of AI-driven content creation has led to numerous retractions of AI-authored papers, underscoring the complexity of maintaining credibility and ethical standards in this evolving landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, showcased the power of rigorous, transparent research. Scientists across the world mobilized quickly to combat one of the deadliest respiratory diseases, producing life-saving insights vetted by prestigious journals like

*Science* and the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Thanks to these dedicated and ethically committed researchers, society can now embrace safer collaborative environments, freed from the constraints of social distancing. For researchers, publishing in esteemed journals remains a pinnacle of achievement. Yet, the journey is complex, demanding transparency in areas like conflicts of interest—an essential factor in sustaining research credibility (3). Conflicts of interest span financial, professional, and relational domains (4). Without disclosure, as in the case of a researcher tied to a sponsor with potential biases, credibility is at risk. Transparent ethics in publishing, however, protect public health and safeguard the research community's integrity. In some nations, including Iran, conflict of interest disclosure requires further attention (5). A more rigorous approach, tailored to local standards, could reinforce ethical integrity within academic and research institutions. Research into local practices, influenced by standards from prominent publishers like Elsevier and Springer, could guide ethical improvements at a national level. Ultimately, by fortifying ethical research practices, researchers not only advance their careers but also uplift the reputation of their institutions, positively impacting societal knowledge and growth. In this study, our objective is to investigate how reviewers perceive COI disclosures, particularly in the context of submissions from Iranian authors.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In this study, we employed a qualitative research approach to explore the disclosure of conflicts of interest (COI) among authors, with a focus on reviewers' perspectives from reputable international publishers, including Elsevier, Frontiers, and Springer. We used a structured questionnaire, available in the appendix, to gather data on attitudes and practices regarding COI disclosure. Additionally, we incorporated in-depth, semi-structured interviews, recognizing that open-ended interviews are among the most valuable methods for obtaining profound and authentic insights from research environments. We assured participants that their identities would remain confidential, thus encouraging

open and honest responses. This ethical and cultural guarantee was essential to ensure that participants could comfortably share their views without concerns over identity exposure. The open-ended interview questions aimed to provide a relaxed environment for participants, allowing for a thorough exploration of their opinions. This approach enabled us to capture nuanced information on how COI disclosures are managed, highlighting the challenges reviewers face when addressing these issues. Given the sensitive nature of COI discussions, we acknowledged the need for a method that would reduce potential discomfort among participants. As a result, the qualitative approach proved crucial, especially in addressing ethical concerns and cultural sensitivities in the context of editorial roles. Choosing this approach was necessary due to various legal and political constraints across European countries that limited direct cooperation with some editors and reviewers. Our team addressed these limitations by implementing additional confidentiality measures to ensure secure and candid participation.

### **Questionnaire for Open Oral Interview**

We have developed the following questions to examine various aspects of conflict of interest disclosures among Iranian-affiliated authors when submitting manuscripts to international journals.

#### **1. Number of Iranian Articles Reviewed in the Last 5 Years**

How many articles authored by Iranians have you reviewed over the past five years?

#### **2. Gender of the Participants in the Study**

Please specify the gender of the participants involved in this study.

#### **3. Experience of Stating Conflicts of Interest in Iranian Article Reviews**

Do you have any recollection of Iranian articles stating conflicts of interest during the review process?

#### **4. Impact of “Non-disclosure of Conflict of Interest” on Decision to Accept or Reject**

Has the non-disclosure of conflicts of interest by Iranian authors influenced your final decision to accept or reject a manuscript?

### 5. Trust in Manuscripts with Foreign-Affiliated Co-Authors

Does the presence of a foreign-affiliated co-author among Iranian authors increase your confidence in a manuscript that lacks a declared conflict of interest?

### 6. Distinction of Different Conflict of Interest Types by Iranian Authors

In your opinion, do Iranian authors distinguish between different types of conflicts of interest and disclose them clearly in their articles?

## RESULTS

In this study, 27 reviewers participated. The primary publishers targeted by Iranian authors were Elsevier, Springer, and Frontiers. Our first question investigated the number of Iranian articles reviewed by these reviewers over the past five years. Three reviewers assessed fewer than three Iranian papers, while the remaining reviewers handled between 5 and 49 papers, with an average of 16.4 papers reviewed over five years. No significant differences were observed between publishers regarding the number of papers reviewed. Fourteen of the 27 reviewers in our study were female ( $P$ -value > 0.05). Additionally, 18 reviewers reported no disclosure of potential conflicts of interest by Iranian authors in the past five years, whereas 3 (11%) reported a conflict of interest statement in one reviewed paper. Our next question explored the impact of “Non-disclosure of Conflict of Interest” on the decision to accept or reject a manuscript. Surprisingly, 92% of reviewers indicated that non-disclosure influenced their decision. This finding highlights the importance of disclosing conflicts of interest in fostering a positive perception among reviewers of papers with Iranian affiliations. We also examined “Trust in Manuscripts with Foreign-Affiliated Co-Authors.” All reviewers expressed that the presence of non-Iranian authors could increase the likelihood of acceptance, demonstrating the positive impact of international collaboration on the ethical perception of submissions. Finally, we investigated whether Iranian authors distinguish between different types of conflicts of interest in their articles. All reviewers responded negatively to this query, indicating a

lack of differentiation in conflict-of-interest reporting by Iranian authors.

## DISCUSSION

This study’s findings underscore critical ethical and procedural concerns around conflict of interest (COI) disclosures, especially in Iranian submissions to international journals. While COI transparency remains a fundamental pillar of ethical publishing globally, Iranian authors face pronounced challenges in meeting these standards (6). Our results reveal a considerable shortfall in COI disclosures, as only a small fraction of reviewers report encountering COI statements in the Iranian manuscripts they evaluated. Our results indicate a substantial gap in COI disclosure, with only a minority of reviewers encountering COI statements in the Iranian articles they reviewed. This lack of disclosure may stem from various factors, including limited awareness of COI standards, cultural differences in ethical practices, or potential reluctance due to perceived risks associated with full transparency. The strong influence of non-disclosure on reviewers’ decisions to accept or reject manuscripts (as reported by 92% of participants) underscores the critical role that transparent COI practices play in fostering trust and perceived credibility. Iran as a country that aim to progress in scientific authority should have pay attention to the similar issues and avoid further damages that hindering rapid growth in scientific production. This finding aligns with global publishing standards, where COI transparency is increasingly seen as essential to safeguarding research integrity and public health. Moreover, our observation that foreign co-authors positively impact reviewers’ trust suggests that international collaborations could be a valuable strategy for enhancing credibility and adherence to ethical norms, at least in short term future. Such partnerships might not only support Iranian authors in meeting global ethical standards but also foster knowledge transfer on best practices in COI management. The reviewers’ shared assessment that Iranian authors often do not differentiate adequately between conflict-of-interest (COI) types highlights a need for focused educational initiatives. Providing targeted training on the

distinct categories within COI—such as financial, relational, and professional—could significantly enhance authors' understanding and improve their disclosure practices. Additionally, implementing COI policies that consider local academic and cultural contexts, potentially drawing on standards set by major publishers like Elsevier, Springer, and Frontiers, could help boost Iranian authors' compliance and comfort with COI transparency. This shift would not only reinforce the credibility of their research but also align Iran's scientific community more closely with global standards. Understanding the concept of "scientific authority" within Iran's research landscape, particularly in relation to COI disclosure, is essential in examining how Iran's contributions and standards integrate with the broader international research environment.

### **Scientific Authority in Iran and Global Standards**

Iran's scientific authority is underpinned by a growing focus on basic and applied research, particularly in medical sciences and public health, where the country has established a notable presence. Research output has increased significantly in recent years, with Iranian researchers contributing to a range of disciplines and collaborating internationally. Yet, as in many developing research systems, the journey toward global standards for ethical practices, especially around conflict-of-interest disclosure, remains a work in progress. The study highlights conflict-of-interest issues as a significant challenge affecting the credibility of Iran's scientific community. Improving transparency and ethical standards in research publications could address these challenges. For Iranian researchers aiming to achieve greater visibility and respect in the global research arena, publishing in prestigious journals by global publishers such as Elsevier, Springer, and Frontiers represents an important goal. These publishers are noted for their rigorous standards, peer review processes, and extensive reach, which lend credibility to the researchers' work and help them contribute more effectively to the global body of knowledge. However, a gap remains in meeting international standards for transparency in conflict of interest (COI)

disclosures, which are often required by these publishers. This gap can be attributed to limited awareness of COI types, cultural differences in ethical practices, and concerns over potential repercussions associated with full disclosure. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the global reliance on rigorous, transparent research—an approach that Iranian institutions are increasingly striving to adopt (7). As this study suggests, establishing COI guidelines and training programs tailored to Iran's unique academic and cultural landscape can significantly enhance Iranian researchers' ability to align with international ethical standards, thereby fortifying the country's scientific authority. For Iran to maintain and strengthen its scientific reputation on the world stage, developing robust COI protocols that consider both international standards and local practices is crucial. This effort will not only elevate the trustworthiness of Iranian research but also encourage constructive international collaborations that can further enhance the credibility and impact of Iran's scientific contributions. In conclusion, these findings highlight a promising path forward for strengthening COI disclosure practices among Iranian researchers. By developing clear institutional guidelines and offering targeted training on conflict of interest (COI) practices, Iranian authors can be empowered to set high ethical standards in their publishing. This will not only help bridge current gaps but also open doors to broader recognition in international scientific journals, enhancing the global impact and credibility of Iranian research.

### **Limitations**

One notable limitation of this study was the hesitation some reviewers and journal managers exhibited during interviews, likely stemming from the sensitivity of the COI topic. This challenge, while expected, highlighted the importance of providing a secure and confidential space to facilitate open dialogue.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

None.

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