

Indexed, Ranked, but Not Verified: Why Bibliometric Status Cannot Guarantee Scholarly Integrity in the Age of AI-Hallucinated Citations

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Preamble

A question that should unsettle every editor, reviewer, and author is this: *What happens when fabricated, unverifiable references appear in peer-reviewed articles published in indexed journals?* This is no longer hypothetical. It is a reality that forces us to confront an uncomfortable truth: indexation is not innocence, and a Scopus badge is not a certificate of integrity. As Deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Medicosphere*, I believe this demands urgent attention. The integrity of the scholarly record, the foundation of scientific progress, is under threat from generative artificial intelligence.

The Scope of the Problem

AI-hallucinated citations are passing peer review at scale. At NeurIPS 2025, one of the world's most prestigious conferences, 100 fabricated citations appeared across 53 accepted papers, approximately 1% of all papers, and every single one evaded detection by 3–5 expert reviewers per paper ¹. The citations were identified through automated hallucination screening and subsequently verified using web searches, academic databases including Google Scholar, PubMed, arXiv, and CrossRef, as well as DOI/URL validation.

The problem extends beyond conferences. Fabricated ChatGPT references have appeared in preprints and journals, carrying “negative reputational consequences for journals which appear in fictional citations” ². Even retracted papers continue accumulating citations; one study found that, by 23 March 2023, a set of retracted papers had accumulated 287 citations in Web of Science Core Collection and 253 in Scopus ³.

The Illusion of Bibliometric Status

When an article is indexed in Scopus or Web of Science, what does that status certify? It certifies formal criteria: regularity, peer review processes, metadata. It does not certify that every reference is real. It does not certify that every claim is supported by traceable sources. Consider the implications. A Q2 or Q3 journal carries an aura of credibility. Authors cite such articles with confidence. Institutions evaluate researchers based on them. But when the

references in those articles are hallucinations, the entire edifice of scholarly communication built on verifiable prior knowledge begins to crumble.

Nagarkar warned in 2023: if ChatGPT appears as a co-author in indexed journals, it corrupts bibliometric studies and creates artificial profiles, h-indices, and citation metrics for non-human entities ⁴.

Beyond Hallucinations: The Broader Crisis

Hallucinated references are the tip of the iceberg. Beneath lies "*letter bombing*" high volume, machine generated critiques that exploit citable correspondence units to inflate publication profiles. In data dense specialties, AI driven letters target complex clinical trials with abstract criticisms that appear legitimate but lack substantive engagement. The result is a manufactured scholarly ecosystem where metrics reflect the ability to game the system, not genuine intellectual contribution ⁵.

What This Means for Medicosphere

As the editorial team of *Medicosphere*, we have a responsibility to protect the integrity of what we publish:

- 1. Verify References:** The NeurIPS 2025 finding 100 hallucinations passed 3–5 expert reviewers, proves human peer review alone is insufficient. We must implement mandatory automated citation verification at submission ¹.
- 2. Enforce Clear AI Policies:** ICMJE, COPE, Elsevier, and IEEE uniformly state that AI tools cannot be authors. AI can be a tool for language polishing or brainstorming but it cannot be an author. Every AI use must be transparently disclosed.
- 3. Rethink What Indexation Means:** Indexation is not a guarantee of integrity. When retracted papers continue accumulating citations, when paper mill products pass peer review ⁶, and when AI-hallucinated citations appear in elite venues, the assumption that indexation guarantees integrity is demonstrably false.
- 4. Invest in Detection and Training:** Automated citation verification should complement human review. Reviewers need training to recognize hallucination patterns: *Total Fabrication*, *Partial Attribute Corruption*, *Identifier Hijacking*, *Placeholder Hallucination*, and *Semantic Hallucination* ¹.
- 5. Address Incentive Structures:** Publication-linked financial incentives drive questionable practices ⁴. Reform is needed moving from crude publication counts toward qualitative assessment.

A Call to Action

To authors: Verify every reference. Disclose AI use. Never list AI as a co-author.

To reviewers: Read critically. Flag suspicious citations. Learn hallucination patterns.

To fellow editors: Implement reference verification. Enforce AI policies. Lead by example.

To the academic community: Stop treating bibliometric status as integrity. A Q1 ranking or Scopus indexation does not make an article true only verifiable, accountable scholarship does.

Conclusion

Indexation is not innocence. Neither is publication. In the age of AI-hallucinated citations, we can no longer treat the scholarly record as self-validating. We must actively verify, critically evaluate, and collectively safeguard the literature we produce and consume. *Medicosphere* is committed to this mission. We invite you to join us. The future of trustworthy medical research depends on it.

Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing

The authors affirm that the usage of generative artificial intelligence tools, including DeepL and DeepSeek, is intended solely for language refinement and grammatical correction throughout the manuscript drafting process. These tools were not used for generating content, data analysis, or interpretation. The authors are fully responsible for the accuracy and integrity of the content as well as the conclusions presented in this study

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