Why publish? Perspectives of North African researchers in the medical field

Pourquoi publier? Perspectives des chercheurs nord-africains dans le domaine médical

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Abstract

The act of publishing research is not just a procedural step; it is a fundamental part of the scientific process. It ensures transparency, accountability, and the continuous evolution of knowledge. This perspective paper aimed to revisit the theoretical reasons/motivations that lead researchers in the medical field to engaging in the publication process, and to determine those of researchers from a low-income country (Tunisia). When researchers publish their findings, they provide a foundation upon which others can build. This iterative process is what drives innovation and discovery. Moreover, the global nature of scientific research means that publications often transcend borders, enabling international collaboration. In addition, the societal impact of research cannot be overstated. Publications often serve as the bridge between scientific discovery and real-world application. Finally, the ethical dimension of publishing is also significant. By sharing their work, researchers contribute to the democratization of knowledge, ensuring that scientific advancements are accessible to all, rather than being confined to a select few. This is particularly important in addressing global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and inequality. The responses of a 44 university hospital doctors and doctoral students from a low-income country to the question “why publish?”, show a lack of awareness of the importance of publishing, both academically and economically. In summary, the publication of research is a multifaceted endeavor that serves both the scientific community and society. It is a testament to the collaborative and progressive nature of human inquiry, driving us toward a better understanding of the world and our place within it.

Key words: Scientific Communication, Research Ethics; Knowledge Dissemination; Global Health; Developing Countries

Résumé

Publier des recherches n'est pas seulement une étape procédurale; c'est une composante essentielle du processus scientifique. Cela garantit la transparence, la responsabilité et l'évolution continue des connaissances. Cet article de perspective vise à revisiter les raisons et motivations théoriques qui poussent les chercheurs du domaine médical à s’engager dans le processus de publication et à identifier celles des chercheurs d’un pays à faible revenu (Tunisie). Lorsque les chercheurs publient leurs résultats, ils fournissent une base sur laquelle d'autres peuvent s'appuyer. Ce processus itératif est le moteur de l'innovation et de la découverte. De plus, la nature mondiale de la recherche scientifique permet aux publications de transcender les frontières et de favoriser la collaboration internationale. L'impact sociétal de la recherche est également crucial. Les publications servent souvent de pont entre la découverte scientifique et son application concrète. Enfin, la dimension éthique de la publication est significative. En partageant leurs travaux, les chercheurs contribuent à la démocratisation du savoir, garantissant que les avancées scientifiques soient accessibles à tous, plutôt que confinées à un groupe restreint. Cela est particulièrement important pour relever des défis mondiaux tels que le changement climatique, les pandémies et les inégalités. Les réponses de 44 médecins hospitalo-universitaires et doctorants d’un pays à faible revenu à la question « pourquoi publier?» révèlent un manque de sensibilisation quant à l'importance de la publication, tant sur le plan académique qu’économique. En résumé, la publication scientifique est une entreprise aux multiples facettes qui fait bénéficier à la fois, la communauté scientifique et la société dans son ensemble. Elle témoigne de la nature collaborative et progressive de la recherche humaine, nous aidant à mieux comprendre le monde et notre place en son sein.

Mots clés: Communication scientifique, Éthique de la recherche, Diffusion des connaissances, Santé mondiale, Pays en développement

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LA TUNISIE MEDICALE-2025; Vol 103 (09): 1252-1257 DOI: 10.62438/tunismed.v103i9.6045

"Science knows no country, because knowledge belongs to humanity, and is the torch which illuminates the world" Louis Pasteur (1).

Introduction

Publishing in a medical-scientific journal is at the core of a researcher or teacher-researcher's profession (2-4). More than just a profession, it is a true mission aimed at disseminating results obtained in clinical, fundamental, or translational research to the scientific community to advance knowledge (2). Publishing is therefore both a duty and a necessity, as publication performance determines professional recognition and access to funding, without which research activities cannot continue (2, 5). The phrase "publish or perish" (PP) encapsulates the intense pressure on academics to frequently publish their research to sustain or advance their careers (6, 7). This pressure is particularly pronounced in research-intensive institutions, where publication records significantly influence hiring, promotions, and funding decisions (6, 7). While this emphasis on publishing can drive scientific progress, it has also been linked to negative outcomes, such as the replication crisis, where studies cannot be reproduced or validated, undermining scientific credibility (6, 7). The term "pay to publish or perish" (PPP) refers to the growing trend where researchers are required to pay fees to have their work published, especially in open-access journals (7). This model has raised concerns about equity, as it may disadvantage researchers from less-funded institutions or countries, potentially limiting the diversity of scholarly discourse (6, 7). Additionally, the financial burden of publication fees can strain research budgets and may incentivize the proliferation of low-quality or predatory journals that prioritize profit over rigorous peer review (6, 7). Both PP and PPP highlight systemic challenges in academia where the imperative to publish can overshadow the intrinsic value of research and contribute to questionable practices, such as academic fraud and plagiarism (6-8). These pressures necessitate a critical examination of current academic publishing models to promote ethical research practices and equitable access to publication opportunities (6, 7).

The geographical distribution of scientific production is shifting (9), as research activity in emerging countries challenges the monopoly of traditionally dominant scientific centers and reshapes the scientific landscape (10). For example, thanks to its publication-encouraging policy, Vietnam, which was "absent" from the scientific landscape in 2008, in 2025 it is experiencing the fastest growth in South Asia, multiplying its number of publications by a factor of 5 between 2008 and 2017 (10). Brazil, Iran and Indonesia are also models of successful integration into this global dynamic (11, 12), despite criticism of the quality of their publications (12). However, the current visibility of a large number of emerging countries remains limited (13), particularly in Africa, where scientific production remains largely "invisible", accounting for less than 1.8% of global scientific production (14). This absence is attributed to the existence of numerous obstacles, including limited financial resources, lack of international cooperation, limited access to communication tools such as the Internet, and university priorities focused more on education than on research (14).

This perspective paper aimed to revisit the theoretical reasons/motivations that lead researchers in the medical field to engaging in the publication process, and to determine those of researchers from a low-income country (Tunisia).

Methods

On February 18, 2025, the Research Vice Dean Committee of the Faculty of Medicine of Sousse (Tunisia) hosted a three-hour research mastermind session at the faculty, centered on the theme: "Kickoff – Why, When, and How to Publish?" The committee extended an invitation to all faculty members and PhD students affiliated with the doctoral school. Forty-four participants attended the session, with women comprising 84% of the attendees. The participants represented various specialties: medical (48%), fundamental sciences (18%), surgical (14%), and dental (9%). PhD students accounted for 11% of the attendees. The median (interquartile range) number of publications and h-index of participants were 2.0 (0.0; 6.5) and 0.5 (0.0; 2.0), respectively, based on Scopus data. For the session, participants were randomly assigned to seven tables, each with approximately six members, and one individual per table was designated as the spokesperson. An expert in medical writing (HBS in the authors' list) facilitated the session. The interactive format began with the expert distributing thought-provoking open questions such as "Why publish?" on slips of paper. Participants were given 5–7 minutes to reflect and write their responses, followed by five minutes of group discussion. Each spokesperson then summarized their table's collective insights, which were gathered and reviewed. Subsequently, the expert delivered a presentation addressing the key aspects of academic publishing. Each presentation was followed by an open discussion, allowing for further clarification and exchange of ideas. This paper was developed based on participant feedback, expert presentations, and a narrative review of relevant literature.

Results and discussion

Researchers publish their work for several theoretical reasons, which revolve around the dissemination of knowledge, scientific validation, professional recognition, and societal impact. These motivations are essential for understanding how the scientific community functions and its role in human progress. In a theoretical way, at least ten reasons can be advanced to answer the question: why to publish? (Table 1). Below is a detailed explanation of the ten reasons, accompanied sometimes by some practical examples illustrating some points (2-4).

Table 1. Theoretical motivations advanced to answer the question: why to publish?

i) Academic and ethical responsibility (duty of researchers and teacher-researchers)
ii) Recognition and survival in the scientific field
iii) Institutional obligation and necessity for research funding
iv) Dissemination of knowledge and contribution to scientific advancement
v) Scientific validation through peer review and participation in debates
vi) Academic and societal impact (public health, policy, innovation, etc.)
vii) Opportunities for collaboration and professional networking
viii) Career advancement and professional recognition
ix) Protection of intellectual property
x) Personal and philosophical motivations (beliefs, intellectual fulfillment, etc.)

i) Academic and ethical responsibility (duty of researchers and teacher-researchers)

The core of a researcher's profession, whether in clinical, surgical, fundamental, or translational research, is to make discoveries and share their findings with the medical and scientific community, thereby contributing to knowledge advancement (2). In North Africa, hospital-university physicians often devote less time to research than the one-third theoretically allocated to it (15). The remaining two-thirds are unevenly split between teaching and clinical duties, with clinical responsibilities increasingly dominating their workload.

ii) Recognition and survival in the scientific field

Publishing is essential for researchers, as their academic output determines their professional reputation and directly influences career progression (2). Publishing high-quality work helps researchers build a reputation in their field (16, 17). This enhances their expertise and legitimacy (16, 17). In public research organizations, career evaluations primarily rely on two bibliometric indicators, which are the impact factor (IF) and the h-index. In general, journals with an IF of 1 are considered low-impact, those between 1 to 3 are moderate, 3 to 5 are good to 10 are strong, and above 10 are excellent (19). The h-index is a metric that assesses a researcher's impact by considering both their publication count and citation frequency (20). H-index is calculated by different databases (e.g.; Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar), with Google Scholar often inflating scores due to duplicate records and non-academic sources (2, 20). An American study including 1703 gastroenterologists reported that assistant professors had an average h-index of 6, associate professors around 15, and full professors approximately 30 (21). While the h-index correlates well with research impact, it is influenced by career length and database discrepancies (2, 20, 21). In 2022, the journal Tunis Med had identified four Tunisian champions of scientific medical writing (5). At this time, their h-indices varied between 74 (for Pr Karim Chamari) and 114 (for Pr Faiez Zannad).

One advantage of bibliometric analysis is its ability to identify suspiciously high publication rates, which may indicate scientific misconduct (2). Overproduction of papers—sometimes called "publishing fever"—can damage a researcher's credibility and raise ethical concerns regarding the misuse of bibliometric evaluations for personal or financial gain (2). In this context, the Retraction Watch website and its database (22, 23) serve as a watchdog for scientific integrity by documenting retracted publications and promoting transparency and accountability in research.

iii) Institutional obligation and necessity for research funding

Funding is an essential resource for sustaining and advancing research activities. Without securing financial support, scientific progress becomes nearly impossible (2). Universities, laboratories, and funding organizations often require researchers to publish their results to justify the resources allocated to their projects. Researchers are required to i) Respond to requirements of universities/research institutes that mandate a certain number of publications, ii) Meet scientific production criteria for institutional evaluations/university rankings, and iii) Satisfy obligations of doctoral and postdoctoral training programs.

While controversial, bibliometric indicators play a crucial role in securing research grants (2, 24), and still influence selection processes. For example, in North America, 40% of universities continue to use IFs and h-indices (24). In France, some instances such as the high council for the evaluation of research and higher education (25) has begun incorporating additional qualitative criteria, including i) The originality and significance of the research, ii) Theoretical and methodological advancements, iii) Paradigm shifts and new research directions, iv) Scientific impact within the academic community, v) National and international visibility, and vi) The reputation and selectivity of publication venues.

Publishing research increases the visibility of researchers and improves their chances of obtaining grants for future projects. For example, a team of molecular biologists publishing in prestigious journals like The Lancet (2024 IF = 98.4) or Cell (2024 IF = 45.5) is more likely to receive funding from organizations like the National Institutes of Health in the US.

iv) Dissemination of knowledge and contribution to scientific advancement

Researchers publish their work to share their discoveries with the scientific community and the general public (2-4). This helps enrich collective knowledge and prevents duplication of efforts (2-4). For example, the publication of research on the human genome has enabled thousands of researchers worldwide to access crucial data for studying genetic diseases and developing personalized treatments.

v) Scientific validation through peer review, and participation in debates

Researchers are recommended to debate their results with other experts during scientific manifestations for example, and contribute to the advancement of the field. In addition, publishing in peer-reviewed journals allows researchers to submit their work for critical evaluation by their peers (26). This process allows improvement of the work through feedback and suggestions from peers, and ensures the rigor and reliability of the results (26). For example, studies on climate change published in journals like Nature (2024 IF = 50.5) or Science (2024 IF = 44.7) undergo rigorous peer review, which strengthens their credibility and influence on environmental policies.

vi) Academic and societal impact (public health, policy, innovation, etc.)

Researchers aim to contribute to the advancement of science and address societal challenges (27). Their work can have practical applications in fields such as health, environment, or technology. Researcher allow translating research findings into clinical applications to enhance treatments and diagnostics. Their work will influence Health policies and medical recommendations by providing scientific evidence to guide evidence-based medical practice For example, research on mRNA vaccines (like those developed by Pfizer-BioNTech for coronavirus disease 2019) has saved millions of lives and revolutionized modern medicine.
Research can provide data and recommendations that guide political and economic decisions. For example, an editorial, which was published in several journals including Tunis Med (28), called on health professionals to alert the public and international leaders to the major danger of nuclear war to public health and the essential life-support systems of the planet — and urge action to prevent it.

vii) Opportunities for collaboration and professional networking

Publishing attracts the attention of other researchers and institutions, leading to fruitful collaborations (27). For example, the work of the COVID-19-ECBATA (Effects of Confinement on knowledge, Beliefs/Attitudes, and Training in Athletes) consortium involved 111 researchers worldwide (29), thanks to the publication and dissemination of their research.

viii) Career advancement and professional recognition

For researchers, publishing is often a prerequisite for promotions, tenure, or academic distinctions. For example, a university professor who regularly publishes in high-impact journals is more likely to be promoted to a tenured position or receive scientific awards. Furthermore, PhD students and postdoctoral researchers, particularly those facing job insecurity, often face significant pressure to publish for career advancement (30).

Publishing helps building a reputation and gaining recognition in one's field. Publishing can attract collaborations with other researchers/institutions, and strength the researchers' chances of obtaining promotions, academic or hospital positions. In Tunisia, since 2019 each university teacher can apply for a bonus related to scientific production, which was established to stimulate high-quality scientific output within higher education and research institutions, enhancing the influence of Tunisian research and innovation and improving the global ranking of Tunisian universities (31). This bonus is awarded yearly on an individual basis, and could reach three times the gross monthly salary (31). Finally, publishing can allow some distinguished researchers gaining some awards such us the Sadok Besrour Prize for Excellence in Medicine and Health Sciences, which is awarded annually by the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in partnership with the Sadok Besrour Foundation and the University of Montreal (Canada) (32). This prize aims to reward excellence and innovation in the field of medical and health sciences research in Tunisia (32).

ix) Protection of intellectual property

Publishing allows researchers to establish priority for a discovery or innovation, which is crucial in a competitive scientific environment. For example, the publication of Rosalind Franklin's work on the structure of DNA helped recognize her contribution to the discovery of the double helix, even though she was not immediately credited (33).

x) Personal and philosophical motivations (beliefs, intellectual fulfillment, etc.)

Writing a scientific article is a demanding process that requires precision, thoroughness, and objectivity (2-4). Despite the challenges, completing a research publication brings significant intellectual satisfaction and fulfills the fundamental mission of advancing and sharing knowledge (2-4).
Besides, some authors publish because they are encouraged and recompensed by their religion. According to Abu Huraira (may Allah be pleased with him), the Messenger of God (peace and blessings be upon him) said: "*When a man dies, his deeds come to an end except for three: ongoing charity (sadaqah jariyah), beneficial knowledge, or a righteous child who prays for him*" (34). This hadith emphasizes the importance of leaving a positive, lasting legacy through acts that continue to benefit others even after one's death. It is widely referenced in Islamic teachings on knowledge (34).
Table 2 summarizes the responses of the 44 university hospital doctors and doctoral students to the question: "*why publish?*" The responses show a lack of awareness of the importance of publishing, both academically and economically. Although the responses varied, the prospects of publishing were mostly limited to personal career advancement. This reflects the absence of a "publishing culture" among our elites, which is a major

obstacle to our country's entry into the publishing dynamic mentioned above. Yet, the chances of success in this scientific revival are real, thanks to the multitude of opportunities currently available, including:

i) The popularization of data, where digital accessibility through open access is the main lever. Science is no longer elitist and the dissemination and sharing of knowledge is becoming a necessity for progress. In this sense, research is becoming increasingly collaborative and open to international networks, with publications co-authored by researchers from different countries.

ii) The use of artificial intelligence (AI), which offers a unique opportunity for emerging countries to catch up in terms of science, accelerate their publication output without the need for costly infrastructure, and thus increase their global influence. Thanks to its potential for massive data analysis and automation, AI makes it possible to generate, analyze and synthesize scientific results at unprecedented speed (e.g.; ChatGPT, Elicit or Scite) (35). Language is no longer a barrier, as AI is a great help for scientific writing, with remarkable fidelity to the English language (e.g.; ChatGPT, DeepL or Google Translate), enabling easier access to international journals (35). Similarly, AI offers assistance in identifying the most appropriate journals for publication, depending on the nature of the topic under discussion (35, 36).

Table 2. Responses of the 44 participants (university hospital doctors and doctoral students) to the question: why publish?

Reasons for publishing	Expressions used	Percentage
Academic reasons		
1. Enriching scientific debate	Advancing science, enriching knowledge, contributing to scientific progress, scientific advancement, reporting innovative ideas, improving research in tunisia	15%
2. Promoting good medical practice	Identify the particularities of our population, contribute to good medical practices, improve medical practices	5%
3. Acquire new knowledge	Improve my knowledge, progress	4%
4. Scientific collaboration	Promote collaboration, share knowledge with experts	4%
5. Validating new protocols	Developing new theories, documenting discoveries, managing new recommendations for medical practice	4%
6. Answering research questions	Answering research questions	2%
Personal reasons		
7. Dissemination of personal results, promotion of one's work	Disseminating results/knowledge, validating results, sharing/disseminating knowledge, exhibiting our results, co-publishing, promoting our results	29%
8. Visibility, recognition	Access to indexed journals, visibility in the medical field, academic recognition, being recognized,	14%
9. Career advancement	Curriculum vitae and promotion, career advancement, having a "rich" file for national competitions, having opportunities	14%
10. Experience and personal satisfaction	For the love of science, to report a personal experience, to add value to our work, to have an impact on the scientific community, personal satisfaction in publishing	9%

To conclude, the aforementioned theoretical and practical motivations demonstrate that scientific publication is a cornerstone of research. It not only advances science but also has a tangible impact on society. Practical examples illustrate how published work can transform entire fields, save lives, influence policies, and shape the future. Each publication contributes to an ecosystem of knowledge that may lead to a different behavior that benefits humanity as a whole.

Finally, the current study is one of three components of a project that addresses the following three queries: why, when and how to publish? The first part (ie; why to publish) is the aim of the present study. The purpose of the second part (ie; How to publish) aimed to identify strategies for successful medical publication, drawing on the experiences of Tunisian researchers (37). The third part aimed to investigate the pivotal moments during which the publication of a scientific paper may prove especially advantageous (38).

DECLARATION. The authors wish to disclose that two artificial intelligence tools (i.e.; Deep L translator and ChatGPT ephemeral) were utilized to enhance the clarity and coherence of the manuscript' writing. The tool was utilized for language refinement purposes only, ensuring the text was clear and coherent without altering the scientific content (17).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. The authors of this work would like to express their gratitude to the Faculty of Medicine of Sousse, represented by its Dean (Pr Mohamed BEN DHIAB) and the organizing committee of the Scientific Research Days "Research Mastermind" (mainly Ahmad LOGHMARI, Nawel ZAMMIT, Chayma SRIDI, Rahma AZZOUZI, and Farah AZZOUZI), for their valuable contribution to promoting academic research in Tunisia.

The authors would like also to express their sincere gratitude to the reviewer for his/her excellent feedback, which has substantially improved the quality of this work. His/her insightful comments and constructive suggestions were invaluable in refining our manuscript (26).

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