A Curious Case within Preprints: Is the Author Real?

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Not all science is conducted equally, that much has always been clear and is a problem that lends itself to various methods of quantification. A less scrutinized assumption at the heart of the scientific publication process, is that the author of a manuscript is a scientist. But how can we tell when that is not the case?

This came to my attention while evaluating submissions for a preprint server to provide quick feedback to authors. In that time, we found several very irregular submissions as described in the guest post "Imposters and Impersonators in Preprints" on the Scholarly Kitchen. Through an example shown below, the author has few or no publications on any topic prior to COVID; they have no publications in peer-reviewed journals (so far); and they appear to be an independent researcher. However, they are leveraging a few areas of open science practices and identifications that act as a proxy for trust. In particular, the open science practice of scientists posting preliminary work publicly on a known platform to openly distribute work (e.g., figshare, OSF, Zenodo) and the practice of having a unique author identifier through ORCID. Both posting to a platform and getting an ORCID ID requires no verification. An email is the only requirement for one. Both are important to open science and are often taken as a sign of trustworthiness.

Sudden Expertise published Across Platforms

There are a number of authors who appear to have become 'experts' in COVID and uploaded a number of articles on one or multiple preprint repositories all within a 12-month period. They even have populated ORCIDs with more than a list of their publications. Publishing only on COVID during 2020 could be expected for some researchers. However, not having any publications before submitting multiple manuscripts within one year on one topic seems odd even for a new researcher. A subset of this group promotes their work through multiple platforms.

Because of the newness of the preprint and repository integration within the scientific ecosystem, there are no known established guidelines for only using one platform per paper. Yet, this practice - when continuously used - appears to break the social contract of trust of open science. Put your working material somewhere public before you publish, just not everywhere.

The Curious Case of Kira Smith

Notes: As we notified each of the platforms affected by this, some data may no longer be available. As we are unsure of the gender of this persona, we use 'they/their' to refer to Kira Smith.

Kira Smith's multiple profiles paint them as a polymath researcher involved in fields ranging from aeronautics to COVID vaccination. All but one uploaded work on ORCID pertained to COVID. The one other item is a table describing opioids. The publications are on multiple established generalist repositories that support preprints (e.g., figshare, Authorea, SSRN). One of the papers is 'published' with the questionable publisher openventio.

Kira Smith's presented career captures the imagination. As such, and out of a sense of obligation to notify them of our attention, a member of our team attempted to reach out to Kira Smith using multiple email addresses available on their website and publications, in an attempt to gather feedback on these articles and find confirmation of their education history.

Their prompt response contained as many red flags as the original publications - under thirty words rife with font changes as well as various grammatical and capitalization errors. The response did not come from the email listed as corresponding author, but from another email found on Kira Smith's website. We received no replies from the other two email addresses in their profiles.

Additionally, we contacted the university Kira Smith has listed on ORCID and Academia to corroborate their PhD/M.D. claims but have received no response yet. Attempts to reach any of Kira Smith's alleged coworkers have been similarly fruitless, with one name (Dr. Ivar McAllan) yielding a variety of news articles on two men pleading guilty to health care fraud as the first search results. We do not believe there to be any connection from this Dr. McAllan to Smith, and yet, we cannot identify another possible Ival McAllan as a collaborator.

Challenges to Credibility

Papers: There are 9 unique papers across at least 8 platforms for a total of 28 papers available (see Table). The same paper is on multiple sharing platforms, and no one platform contains all of their papers. A few of the papers are translated between English and Italian and are counted as the same paper for our purposes.

Topic and Timeframe: Because the majority of the publications by this author solely pertain to COVID is suspicious. Each paper has scant citations, and the citations present are a mix of published scientific work both within and outside of the COVID literature as well as non-scientific websites. These are all single-author submissions as well.

Other Oddity: Kira Smith uses the handle 'KillForTheThrill' at multiple sites including their webpage. Most M.D.s and medical researchers, to my knowledge, would not publicly brand themselves as such.

Final Comments: The multiple completed profiles with vast expertise along with the sheer number of distributions of the papers is highly questionable. Most scientists tend to use a few of these resources but not as many, and rarely would they use preprint servers almost exclusively.

Table: Papers published across preprint platforms by 'Kira Smith'

	Title	OSF	Academia .edu	Zenodo	figshare	Authorea	Thesis Commons	Open-ventio*	SSRN
1	Novel Coronavirus: Hypothesis of Treatment with SIRT1 Inhibitors	X	X	X					
2	Vulnerabilità sistemi ICS/SCADA		X		X				
3	Coronavirus Treatment: eradicate Coronavirus by blocking replication, counteracting its defense system	X				X			
4	Tenovin-1 as potential Covid-19 treatment agent	X	X						
5	Eradicate Coronavirus by blocking replication, counteracting its defense system	XT	X	X			X		
6	PROBLEMS OF CORONAVIRUS PATHOGENESIS AND MEDICATIONS ACTUALLY USED	X	X		X				
7	Halting Coronavirus Replication		X					X	X
8	Covid-19 Pfizer Vaccine: The Worst-Case Scenario	XT	Y				X		
9	BNT162b2 Vaccine: possible codons misreading, errors in protein synthesis and alternative splicing's anomalies	XT	XT						

XT= Indicates both an original paper and translated version were placed on the same platform.

*Openventio is a suspected predatory publisher.

Disclosure

All authors work for Ripeta, a company automating checks of scientific research papers. Representatives from each platform mentioned as well as Kira Smith have been notified of these findings.