

1-1-2011

What's in a name: Journal rebranding and its consequences on citations

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Recommended Citation

Huggett, Sarah (2011) "What's in a name: Journal rebranding and its consequences on citations,"
Research Trends: Vol. 1 : Iss. 21 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://www.researchtrends.com/researchtrends/vol1/iss21/3>

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Section 2: Behind the Data

What's in a name?
Journal rebranding and its
consequences on citations

Sarah Huggett

Companies invest millions in establishing brand identity, and often just as much to rebrand themselves to reach new customers. Although they operate on more limited budgets, academic journals are in principle not very different. There can be several reasons why a journal opts for a new image through a title change¹; a fundamental transformation, such as a merger with another journal or split into different publications, is often a compelling reason for a new title. More incremental adjustments, such as a change of editor or publisher, or a shift in the journal's scope, audience, or frequency of publication can also explain rebranding efforts. More recently, changes in publication format such as a move to an electronic version instead of, or in parallel with, a print version has also been identified as a reason for journals to rebrand themselves. However, a journal title change can have various implications for the whole academic community¹, and more often than not such rebranding is perceived negatively².

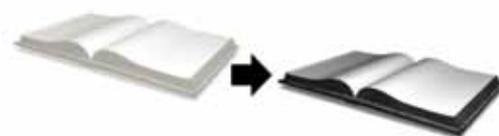
When confusion reigns

A journal title change may be confusing to librarians, readers and authors, and can therefore result in a loss of the continuity that well-known journal brands have established. This can have serious bibliometric consequences on impact metrics: it was recently found that the negative effect of a journal title change can be bibliometrically felt at the journal level for three to four years³.

This is corroborated by Research Trends' own case study of citations and references for 10 journals that changed title in 2000. Anecdotal evidence gleaned through reference lists suggests that journal title changes can indeed lead to erroneous references from authors and a "loss" of citations by those indexing services matching citations to journal titles only, which may struggle to assign them to their intended source accurately.

Erroneous citations and references were found for all 10 journals that changed title in 2000; for most of them even in articles published in the journals themselves in years around the title change. For instance, a 1999 article from one title was correctly referenced as being published under the old journal title 30 times, but incorrectly referred to as

being published under the new title 5 times. In another journal, one article even contained one correct reference to an article published under the old journal title three years prior to the change, but also one incorrect reference to an article as having been published under the new title, (despite the article in question having been published a full year prior to the title change).



The genetics of error

Such erroneous citations can then snowball through the scientific communities, as found in a recent study that drew an analogy between the transmission of erroneous references and genetic mutations in biology: just as genetic mutations are passed on from parent to offspring, so too are bibliometric "mutations" passed on from researcher to researcher as they draw on previous citation formats in their own work, and spread the erroneous form⁴. This could partly explain the lengthy bibliometric impact of a journal title change³. As always in situations where confusion is likely, the best safeguard is clear communication and diligent checking by all those interested in preserving a reliable and trusted scholarly journal archive.

Further reading:

1. Monroe Foggini, C. (1992) "Title changes: another view", *Serials Librarian*, Vol. 23, issue 1-2, pp. 71-83.
2. Afes, V.B., Wrynn, P.E. (1993) "Biomedical journal title changes: reasons, trends, and impact", *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*, Vol. 1, issue 1, pp. 48-53.
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4. Specht, C.G. (2010) "Opinion: Mutations of citations", *The Scientist News*