Description

The titles of journal articles fall under three basic categories:

1. Declarative – states main findings or conclusions of the article
2. Descriptive – describes the subject of the article, but leaves out the findings/conclusion
3. Interrogative – the subject of the article takes the form of a question

Each style or type of title is perfectly functional. However, the type of title used in research articles may no longer be a simple matter of the author's preference or a journal's guidelines.

Both authors and journal editors benefit from a multitude of readers viewing the work. These views are recorded as citation metrics. High citation metrics promotes prestige for both the author and the journal in which the article is published. With the introduction of the Altmetric Top 100 in 2013, there is a new way to track readership. Altmetric tracks the 100 most shared journal articles—everyone wants to make it on the list. Researchers are now taking a look at how the title of a research article may affect readership.

The *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology* (JCE) Report

In June 2016, Nicola Di Girolamo DMV, MSc(EBHC), PhD and Reint M. Reynders DDS, MSc, MSc(EBHC) presented a study entitled, "*Association between titles of healthcare articles and inclusion in the Altmetric Top 100*." They posited the following key objectives of an article title:

- Summarize the article content
- Trigger the curiosity of the reader
- Improve indexing of the article

They looked for differences between declarative and descriptive (referred to as "Indicative") titles and how that affected readership in a variety of online platforms, including social media, and in Altmetric. Di Girolamo and Reynders selected healthcare articles from those named in the Altmetric Top 100 between 2013 and 2015—108 medical and health sciences articles were matched to 216 control articles. The abstract from their report in the *JCE* is referenced below.

For each title, they measured the following

- Number of characters (length of the article title)
- Number of uncommon words
- Is it declarative?

The findings observed in the study are as follows:

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1. Titles in the Altmetric Top 100 were 102.6 characters long, included 3.4 uncommon words, and 29.6% were declarative
2. Declarative titles having lesser uncommon words were significantly more represented in the Altmetric Top 100
3. Declarative titles had 2.8 times the odds of being in the top list
4. For every extra uncommon word used in the title, there was a 1.4 increase in the odds of being a non-Altmetric Top 100 article
5. The conclusion of the study showed that an informative and easy to understand title might help in bridging the gap between scholarly and social media dissemination.

In addition, the authors also state that, despite the limitations of their study, the findings showed that the characteristics of a title only explained a part of the variability between articles that are highly discussed and those that are not.

BioMed Central Study

Another study, entitled, "*Do declarative titles affect readers' perceptions of research findings? A randomized trial"* was conducted by Elizabeth Wager, Douglas G. Altman, Iveta Simera and Tudor P. Toma and appears in BioMed Central's Research Integrity and Peer Review. Unlike the study by Di Girolamo and Reynders, Wager, et al., looked at whether the title of a journal article affected the reader's agreement with the article's conclusion or findings.

The basic structure of the trial is as follows:

- Study participants were made to read two abstracts describing studies of a fictitious treatment for a fictitious condition
- For each, the participants indicated agreement with the statement, "Anticox is an effective treatment for pain in Green's syndrome"
- They had used 100mm Visual Analog Scales ranging from disagree completely to agree completely
- The study comprised of 144 participants

The authors concluded that they did not find any evidence in the use of a declarative title affecting readers' perceptions in the study. They also suggested that editors' who feared that declarative titles influenced readers' judgments about the study conclusions were unfounded in regards to the reports of randomized trials.

Journal Requirements and General Recommendations

In 2004, JCE proceeded with a full implementation of their policy for authors to use declarative titles for newly submitted articles. Clearly, the journal's editors believed that short, declarative titles would be an

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efficient way to attract readers and for their scholarly articles to be indexed. Although the implementation of the JCE policy was 12 years prior to the study regarding the Altmetric Top 100, JCE editors anticipated the usefulness and importance of declarative titles.

Academic publishing is going the way of all other communication, at least where the titles are concerned: short and impactful. While there is no telling how long a platform like Twitter will last, the trend towards using language in its most abbreviated form is everywhere. Authors and journal editors, even in the open access world, still rely upon citation metrics to measure success. The Altmetric Top 100 is just one of the newest ways to assess the acclaim of an author's work and, by association, the publishing journal or platform. Following this study by Di Girolamo and Reynders, it is likely that more journals and academic publishers will recommend the use of declarative titles in scholarly articles.

Category

1. Manuscripts & Grants
2. Reporting Research

Date Created
2017/02/03
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