

## Coauthorship Substitution in Virtual Scientific Repositories

To the editor

Over recent years, virtual repositories for scientific production have become very popular, such as ResearchGate® (RG), Academia.edu®, or Google Scholar®. In these online databases, users create a profile and upload or select published articles, theses, or papers from the Internet. They are highly convenient, as they increase the visibility of publications and, therefore, the possibility of receiving citations, collaborations, etc. These online repositories also offer ranking systems, such as Google® i10 or i5, the h-index, etc. It is in the interest of those who publish articles to place their works in these repositories. The system for uploading these publications is either a personal one, manually, or the system collects information and asks if the author has coauthored the paper.

The purpose of this letter is to warn the community about a new form of scientific misconduct, consisting of impersonating people with the same last name and first name initials in articles published and posted in these repositories. I accidentally discovered in June 2022 that a person from Ecuador, Luisana Graciela Martínez, was listed as a co-author in several of my articles where she was substituting the identity of a researcher I mentored in her doctoral thesis, Gabriela Luján Martínez. Note that they share the surname and the initials of both names. Because only the initials and the last name appear in the repositories, the hoax does not show up at once. Luisana was probably in kindergarten when the article was published in 1961, since she graduated from the University of Guayaquil in October 2021 (Degree project, 2021. <http://repositorio.ug.edu.ec/handle/redug/57849>). However, in the Research Gate listings, she appeared with an index h=5, the result of Gabriela Luján's research. I

informed Luisana of the error and asked her to remove those postings from her profile, with no answer. I then reported the situation to Research Gate, and after some checking, they deleted the denounced papers from her profile.

In October 2022, I found another such case: in this instance, Constanza Vegas Vásquez, from the University of Valparaíso, Chile, was supplanting César Vásquez, an Argentine virologist, my first doctoral thesis director, who died in 1983. By that time, Constanza may not have been born, although she was assigned coauthorship of articles co-written by me, 2, and another 14 by César, with 184 citations and an enviable h=8 index. Again, there was no response to the query, so I wrote to RG and the Universidad de Valparaíso, who indicated that she no longer belonged to their academic staff. Besides, in this case, Constanza appeared to impersonate the identity of a Peruvian botanist, with publications from 2006. That is, it is not about a simple human error but an act to intentionally supplant the identity of several people. In this case, RG automatically deleted Constanza's profile from its database.

As a rule, these individuals take names of deceased, retired persons or articles with multiple co-authorships. The papers chosen usually have only initials and are not very fresh, so they have more citations. They are often from years before the arrival of ORCID and other digital signature systems.

RG solved both problems quickly. The question remains of how many undetected cases of impersonation remain, both in RG and other repositories. When questioned, RG stated that they act relying on the honesty of individuals to accept or reject coauthorship; however, these findings indicate that it is a more common phenomenon than expected.

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Apart from the anecdotal side, I would like to alert colleagues, particularly those with a track record in publications, to be vigilant about these cases of authorship theft, which harms those who are authors. In practice, the supplanted articles do not appear in the metrics of their original authors, which reduces the ranking, positioning, citation, and the like, of the people concerned.

If they find in their scientific profiles names of strange people –generally from other Latin American countries– in their profile or as top coauthors, collaborators, laboratory members, or simply coauthors, they are likely to find cases like the ones reported here.

**Conflicts of interest:** the author declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

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