



Falling prey to predatory journals: Experiences of nursing faculty

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ABSTRACT

Background: The term 'predatory journals' initially appeared in PubMed in 2012 and was coined by Professor Jeffrey Beall in a note published in the Nature Journal. It is used to denote fake journals with questionable peer review, fast track publishing processes against monetary payment and a predatory approach to target researchers through spam email.

Purpose: This study aimed to explore the experiences of nursing faculty concerning publication in predatory journals.

Methods: A simple qualitative design was used. The setting included a college of nursing in Jeddah Saudi Arabia. A purposive sampling technique, with eight faculty members, were included in the study. In-depth interviews were conducted, audio-recorded and analyzed using a simple content analysis approach.

Results: Three themes emerged with nine subthemes namely: i) *research professional obligations*; publishing pressure, research competitiveness, professional enhancement and promotion; ii) *fast publications*; escaping peer review, paying for quick service; iii) *after-effects*; emotional turmoil; characteristics of predatory journals.

Conclusion: This study showed that publishing in a predatory journal has serious consequences, both professional and personal. The findings also highlighted that anyone in the academic setting could fall prey to these journals. Lastly, despite the increasing knowledge of predatory publishing, there is still a lack of awareness about this dark side of publications. Hence, educational awareness of predatory journals is needed. It is also recommended that research, including other disciplines, be completed.

1. Introduction

The term 'predatory journals' initially appeared in PubMed in 2012 and was coined by Professor Jeffrey Beall in a note published in the Nature Journal (Forero et al., 2018). It is used to denote fake journals with questionable peer review, fast track publishing processes against monetary payment and a predatory approach to target researchers through spam email. There is an exponential growth in predatory publishers with the advent of open access journals that have affected several researchers, who were unable to distinguish between authentic and fake academic research outlets. Predatory journals publish all kinds of papers irrespective of quality, in exchange for a fee and claim to offer a speedy peer review process (Bagues, Sylos-Labini & Zinovyeva, 2019). They have grown as a booming industry operating with the sole purpose of making money, having no regard for scientific merit or research credibility. They employ information technology to disguise themselves as authentic journals and contact researchers via unsolicited emails, offering them lucrative opportunities to publish conveniently without any risk of manuscript rejection.

Plagiarism via duplication of research is readily observed in

predatory journals, which misquote information with dilution and distortion of scientific evidence (Owens & Nicoll, 2019). Unscientific falsified data and unsafe clinical practice presented in these journals are a threat to researchers and clinicians (Rupp et al., 2019). Procedures and techniques described in the very low-quality publications in health sciences have a negative implication on healthcare across the globe (Forero et al., 2018).

Although most of the victims of the predatory journals are naïve authors who mistakenly submit their research to them and have regretful realizations, later on, some cognizant contributors attempt to inflate their curriculum vitae using predatory publications (Pond et al., 2019). Sadly, authors published in predatory journals are acclaimed positively and promoted readily in cases where the scientific evaluators lack research expertise (Bagues, Sylos-Labini & Zinovyeva, 2019). This, in turn, sets the precedence of fake research in academic institutes and provides eager or inexperienced authors with opportunities to simply avoid the tedious process of pursuing publications in an authentic journal, which seems impregnable owing to its rigorous peer review process based on the quality of scientific presentation, the authenticity of data and integrity of research methodologies. In a similar vein, it is

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reported that 'lack of will' to pursue quality in research publications supersedes the 'lack of skill' to do standard research (Dehal et al., 2018). Recognition of publications in predatory journals in academic institutes discourages and demotivates genuine researchers who find it impossible to publish as frequently and swiftly in authentic journals as in fake counterparts and therefore stagger behind in the publication race. To curb this epidemic, coordinated efforts are required by all stakeholders in research, e.g. institutes, regulators, funders, researchers and study participants, i.e. patients (Lalu et al., 2017). The increased number in predatory journal publications from a country decreases the academic ranking of the country, leading to a lower position in academic ranking systems, e.g. Scimago (Forero et al., 2018). Hence, the current study aimed to explore the experiences of nursing faculty with regards to publication in predatory journals. This was one of the few research studies conducted on publications in predatory journals within nursing and within the Middle Eastern context.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and setting

This study followed a simple qualitative process, underpinned by a constructivist research paradigm. A simple qualitative approach was chosen as this allowed for a greater understanding of a phenomenon that is poorly understood at present. The study was conducted at a College of Nursing in Jeddah-Saudi Arabia. The college of nursing offers a four-year undergraduate nursing degree and a midwifery post-graduate program. The college consists of a staff complement of both Saudi and expatriate nursing faculty. The teaching staff includes Clinical Teaching Assistants, Lecturers, and Assistant Professors. The majority of faculty are PhD holders within the Assistant Professor rank.

2.2. Study participants sampling and sampling size

The participants of this study included only Assistant Professors, as these were the only faculty within the college that had experience with the phenomenon at hand. Also, Assistant Professors were actively involved in the publication process. Hence they were included in the study. Even though the college has lecturers as part of faculty, they were not actively engaged in publishing. During the duration of the study, there were a total of 20 Assistant Professors within the college.

This study followed a purposive sampling technique, where the researchers commenced the data collection by selecting participants whom they knew had published in predatory journals. Knowledge about faculty publishing in predatory journals was accessed from the faculty themselves. This was achieved by the researcher asking faculty about whether they had predatory publications after an assessment of individual publications were made by faculty themselves. The Beall's list of predatory journals and publishers that was available online during the time of the study was used to assess the publications. Any journal or publisher used by faculty for published articles that appeared on the list was classified as predatory. The researcher verified this. After this assessment was made, the researcher only approached the faculty that was willing to participate in the study. The informed consent form was only signed by participants who had predatory publications. The data collection started with two participants and then proceeded to include a total of eight participants until data saturation was reached.

2.3. Data collection

Data collection included eight in-depth interviews that were conducted in the privacy of the college environment, more specifically in the Research Unit of the College designated for research-related activities. Interviews were audio-recorded and ranged from 30 to 45 min. Data collection occurred over one month.

2.4. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using inductive content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017) which included reading and rereading the interview transcripts to get a sense of what the participants were expressing. Thereafter, the text was divided into main points/ideas referred to as meaning units (condensation) as represented by the participants. There the data was further analyzed into codes and lastly categories.

2.5. Academic rigour

The following principle of academic rigour was undertaken: dependability was ensured by a dependability audit that involved using an expert qualitative researcher to review the tapes, transcripts, field notes and reflexive journal that the researchers used during the duration of this study. A confirmability trail was also established by the researchers recording the research activities over time so that others can follow the research process undertaken. Member checking was also used for determining the credibility of the data found in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This involved the researcher providing feedback about the emerging data and interpretations to participants to ensure it was a true reflection of their reactions. Participants had no changes for the interpretations made by the researchers. The researchers provided sufficient thick descriptions by providing detailed descriptions of the research settings, participants, data collection methods which helped in establishing confidence and transferability of the in the data.

2.6. Ethical considerations

Data collection only commenced after approval was obtained from the Research Unit at the College and thereafter the Institutional Review Board – RJ19/057/J. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, participants were assured that confidentiality will be strictly maintained, both concerning individual participants and the name of the college. Pseudo names was used in the presentation of interview excerpts. Also, data for this study were managed with the uttermost privacy and only the researchers and two qualitative experts had access to the data. Data is stored on the computer protected by a password, only accessible to the researchers.

3. Research findings

3.1. Sample realization

Eight participants were included in the study, with an average of 45.4 years of age and 11 years of experience in academia. The average publications for the last academic year (2017–2018) were 26 publications for a total of all 20 assistant professors. Of the 26 publications, nine publications were found to be published in predatory journals as guided by the Bealls list at the time of data collection (June 2019). See Table 1.

The findings of this study are presented in three periods, related to

Table 1
Demographic details of participants.

Name	Age	Years of experience	
Participant 1	45	15	Mary
Participant 2	39	13	Jane
Participant 3	37	5	Laura
Participant 4	45	10	Catherine
Participant 5	47	6	Bella
Participant 6	48	11	Ella
Participant 7	50	16	Kyra
Participant 8	52	12	Reese

Table 2
Summary of findings.

Subthemes	Themes
Publishing pressure	<u>Antecedents for publication</u>
Research competitiveness	Research professional obligations
Professional enhancement and promotion	
No peer reviews	<u>During the publication process</u>
Paying for fast service	Fast publications
Finding out	<u>After publication</u>
Emotional turmoil	After effects
Characteristics of predatory journals	
Moving ahead	

the publication process: antecedents, during the publication and after the publication. The respective themes and subthemes are discussed regarding these periods, as indicated in Table 2 below.

3.1.1. Antecedents – research and professional obligations

The first theme that emerged was the theme of research and professional obligations with subthemes publishing pressure, research competitiveness, and professional enhancement.

3.1.1.1. Publishing pressure. Participants expressed that there was a constant pressure to publish to meet minimum research obligations within the institution.

one of the biggest factors is pressure, pressure as an academic to publish, because it goes back to the statement as an academic you either publish or you perish, so this continuous pressure within our working environment [Mary]

Participants stated that meeting the minimum publication quota per academic year was stressful and, in some instances, it was not possible to achieve the quota, as the publication process is lengthy

We have to publish at least one article per academic year... this can be very stressful as this is sometimes not possible as the publication process is time-consuming [Laura]

3.1.1.2. Research competitiveness. Further to this, participants also verbalized that the academic work environment can be a very competitive context, especially in terms of research and publishing. To be considered as an esteemed researcher, one has to acquire publications more frequently to be on top of the research ‘game’:

Being competitive. I wanted to have my standing in the field of research and one of the ways to do that is to have a good number of publications. [Mary]

I have to publish more to be on top of my game... to show that I have established in research in the field [Jane]

3.1.1.3. Professional enhancement and promotion. Participants also expressed that the need to publish was also related to ones' professional enhancement. One of the respondents verbalized that meeting the publication quota and exceeding the quota was also linked to the yearly performance appraisals. Meeting and exceeding the publication criteria on the performance appraisal was a part of professional enhancement which, could be achieved by an expedited publication process:

The pressure of actually meeting the performance appraisal criteria in terms of research as well...publishing the one article needed...even publishing more than one adds to my growth [Mary]

Another participant added that having more publications builds the curriculum vitae and allows for the chances of being promoted. Participants were driven by the ambitions of growth in terms of being

promoted to the next academic rank:

If I publish more, I can make my curriculum vitae stronger and apply for promotion...this makes my chances of being promoted a possibility...and I have to work towards that [Laura]

3.1.2. During the publication process – fast publications

The second theme that emerged was the theme of fast publications with subthemes no peer review and paying for fast service

3.1.2.1. Escaping peer review. Many participants expressed that the journal did not have any review process:

The journal does not review your article... there is no address of comments... acceptance is within days which allows you to get the publication as quickly as possible. [Catherine]

There is no real peer review. So, there is no subject to peers looking at your work and giving you feedback, so you are overlooking, or you are avoiding addressing comments, okay, so with regards to looking at comments, it is just an easy publication. [Ella]

The journal did not review my article and published my article without and review...from the time of submission to publication was 12 days. [Kyra]

3.1.2.2. Paying for fast service. Participants expressed that during the publication process, the journals had a publication fee that confirmed publication. The payment was most often requested in the dollar currency, and once the payment was made, the article was published a short period after:

The publication was guaranteed by payment of the publication fees...the journal would confirm that the article would be published quickly after payment was made. [Laura]

Once payment was made in dollars, my article was published immediately [Reese]

It's like the journal is asking you to pay for the service of publishing...fast tracking of your publication for an exchange of money. [Catherine]

3.1.3. After the publication – after effects

The third theme that emerged was related to time after the publication, such as experiences related to participants findings of the journals being predatory, and the consequences of publishing in a predatory journal. The theme that emerged was “after-effects” with subthemes of finding out, emotional turmoil, characteristics of predatory journals and the moving ahead.

3.1.3.1. Finding out. Participants expressed how they discovered that the journal they published in was predatory. Sources of finding were revealed as follows:

One participant expressed that she found out about the predatory journal through a colleague:

I found out through my colleague who informed me about the Beall's list and when I checked the list, the journal I published in was on the list [Laura]

Another participant expressed that she realized about the existence of predatory journals by people talking in the workplace, which created a sense of curiosity in her:

Well, there was the talk around it but not serious talk. ... It just falls into my ears. I think that I actually explored it myself and found it out and then I came across a publication... the dark side of publications and then I explored the Beall's List... and I realized that the journal I published in was fake. [Mary]

Another participant expressed that she found about her predatory publication upon applying for a promotion where she was informed by

the promotion committee:

I was informed by the promotion committee when I applied for a promotion, the committee assessed my publications and informed me about publication and the poor indexing [Jane]

3.1.3.2. Emotional turmoil. Many participants expressed a host of emotions such as dismay, shock, disappointment, and anger after finding out that the journal that they published work in was predatory.

So, to my dismay, I found out that that publication was fake or it was published in a predatory journal [Laura]

I was shocked after I found out... needless to say I was completely shocked that predatory existed and even more shocking was that I published in one of them [Laura]

Another participant expressed a feeling of being horrified after finding out about the predatory journal:

I was horrified at first, okay, horrified to find out that my name is attached to a publication that is in a predatory journal. [Bella]

The same participant also expressed feeling disappointed, as working on a manuscript is hard work. This participant also expressed a sense of shock knowing that she felt prey to a predatory journal, as she is usually very careful during the publication process:

I was disappointed because it is a lot of work to do research and to translate it into a manuscript, so a lot of disappointment but shock as well that this happened to me, you know because I am very ...how can I say ... I am very careful when it comes to publication.... I am supposed to be careful [Bella]

Another participant expressed anger after finding out about publishing in a predatory journal and knowing that the predatory publication will not be of any use and was seen as wasted publications.

I was so angry that such shady organizations exist that prey on people like us... I was really angry as this publication is now wasted and I cannot use it. [Reese]

3.1.3.3. Characteristics of predatory journals. Participants expressed that after much reflections on the process of publication in predatory journals, there was a need to learn about the nature of predatory journals. As there are no specific published criteria of what a predatory journal is, the following characteristics were described by the participants as possible characteristics through educating oneself.

One participant expressed that predatory journals often have a location or address that is in a completely different location to the actual journal address. In some instances, the address on the journal sometimes does not belong to the journal:

I mean the [physical] address for one. All of them are located in say Bosnia or Hyderabad, India and once you try to Google the location exactly in Google map, you will end up in the location of a garage and you can see it on a satellite map. So, that opened my eyes ...this is a sign [Mary]

Another participant described that the email format that one receives is characteristic of the use of certain words such as “greetings”, “accomplished researcher” and emails are received daily inviting authors to publish:

It made me very careful, it made me very skeptical, it made me a bit reluctant, so whenever I publish, I see the name of the journal and if I get an email saying greetings, accomplished scholar; I immediately put it on my block list, but they are so sneaky that they would make another webpage and then they will email you again. So, the only thing I ended up doing is that by deleting it, but I never go through a link that comes through an email [Mary]

Another participant expressed that the nature of the journal websites is characteristics of poorly designed pages such as inconsistent fonts, bright colours. The formatting of articles is also inconsistent such as the formatting of tables, the content and the referencing is different from article to article. In addition, the archives of the predatory journal reveal relatively few numbers of volumes and issues, respectively:

The journal website looks shady... the design almost looks unprofessional with bright colors and different fonts.... when you look at the articles, the volume is maximum 2 ...even the articles differ from the style in the formatting of tables and references... this is different from article to article [Laura]

Another participant expressed that reflecting on the process of publication in predatory journals, one can assume that characteristic of a predatory journal, is that most often there is no peer review and publication fees are payable to secure a publication:

Looking back at the red flags regarding predatory journals, I can now say that a characteristic of predatory journals is that it tends not to have peer review...so there is a fast publication, but publication will only be if the payment is made [Laura]

3.1.3.4. Moving ahead. Participants verbalized that that moving ahead working towards future publications included being open about verifying the nature of a journal for possible publication by asking and being part of blogs:

I corresponded with Beall and there was one journal I was thinking of publishing and I just sent So, I sent the name of that journal to him and he told me immediately that they are fake. So, I was very thankful to him and then I found myself being part of more and more of these blogs. [Catherine]

I check the indexing of the journal and ensure that it is indexed in a reputable place...I also use the Beall's list to check if either a journal or publisher is on the list... make sure that I check before I even consider a journal [Laura]

Another participant expressed that she became actively involved in talking to her colleagues about her experience with publication in a predatory journal and creating awareness:

By telling everyone about the Beall's list, by recommending the blogs to them, by being active members of the blogs and by sharing my experience with anyone who listens. ... I started telling them about Beall's list ... and I started telling them about these fake publications and for myself [Kyra]
After my experience...I shared what I have learned with the people at work...I have even thought of doing a formal presentation on predatory journals at work [Ella]

4. Discussion of findings

The antecedents to publishing in a predatory journal was highlighted in this study as research and professional obligations. The pressure of needing to publish leads to choosing a predatory journal. Cobey et al. (2018), conducted a study on the knowledge and motivators of researchers publishing in presumed predatory journals. It was highlighted that 8.5% of respondents reported publications in predatory journals were related to research obligations such as degree requirements and supporting the curriculum vitae of students. In addition, the qualitative findings by Cobey et al. (2018), reported that the personal motivators included academic promotions, publication pressure, salary increases and part of being a researcher. Kurt (2018) conducted a study on why authors publish in predatory journals and reported that participants expressed that numerous publications showed academic prowess and that participants felt considerable pressure to publish within the institutions that they were employed in.

Further, the findings of this study highlighted that the need to

publish was related to the annual performance appraisal, where the faculty must meet the standard minimum requirements of publications. Cobey et al. (2018) also documented academic pressure as a motivator to publish in predatory journals. According to Guraya et al. (2016), professional development, job retention, academic promotions of faculty are judged primarily by publication outputs resulting in academic pressure that may have adverse effects. This need to publish often arises in the faculty being tempted to take the shortest route to get published, which could mean predatory publishing (Ebadi & Zamani, 2018).

Participants' experiences related to the process of publications highlighted that publishing with predatory journals is fast and usually does not include a peer-review process. Eriksson and Helgesson (2018) and Manca et al. (2018) reported that a lack of proper peer review process is a defining characteristic of predatory journals. Moher also reiterates this, Shamseer, Cobey et al. (2017), which also highlighted that predatory journals have a shaky research methodology and lack of peer review. Beall (2016a, p 2) documented that historically authors were charged publication fees upon acceptance of manuscripts so that published articles are free for anyone to access. However, around 2008, publishers realized that they could make more money from authors if they accepted more manuscripts. This compromised the peer review process resulting in many gold open-access publishers performing only a " cursory " peer review. Therefore, most papers were accepted with the fees being pocketed. This has resulted in dishonesty where some journals and publishers have exploited the open-access model to profit from publishing. Further, Shen and Björk (2015), reported that open access journals, have a more rigorous peer-review process, and the average length of publication from time of submission to time of publication is 12 months. In contrast, for predatory journals, the average length of time from submission to publication for all disciplines was 2.7 months.

Participants within the current study also experienced that during the publication process payment of publication fees secured a publication. Shen and Björk (2015) documented that \$178 was the average author fee; however, with reputable open access journals, the cost could be higher to several thousands of dollars. According to a scoping review by Cobey et al. (2018), articles in predatory journals described the article processing fees to be lower than legitimate journals. However, according to the Likis (2019), not all journals which require article processing charges are predatory. Some practices include journals requiring payment when the article is submitted rather than when it is accepted.

In some cases, fees are not disclosed, or fees are unusually low, usually less than \$150. Further to this, the characteristics regarding article processing fees in some predatory journals were that these journals did not specify the article processing fees, and these journals had hidden article processing charges or hidden information on article processing charges. This is reiterated by McLeod, Savage, and Simkin (2018) who documented that predatory journals charge a large submission and publication fee. Furthermore, Beall (2016a) and Beall (2016b) reported that the researchers that are targeted the most are those who have access to grant money, and as a result of the golden open access model. Since the biomedical sciences have more funding, authors from these fields are more likely to be targeted. According to Oermann et al. (2016; p625) predatory journals charge an article processing fee that guarantees a publication. However, the articles published in predatory journals may not be "preserved digitally", and publishers may operate for a short period. The publication disappears when the publication of the journal ends.

One of the main findings of this study regarding the consequences of publishing in a predatory journal is that participants reflected on the characteristic of predatory journals. According to Likis (2019), predatory journal websites and predatory journal home pages are of low-resolution graphics, have spelling and grammatical errors and have links that do not work. According to Beall (2016a), many of the predatory journals misinterpret their headquarters by claiming that they are based in the USA or London, when in fact they are based in India or

Pakistan. The findings of this study also revealed that the websites of predatory journals are poorly designed and that standards of the journal itself were of a lower standard as the formatting of articles differed from one article to the next. According to Manca et al. (2018), the websites of predatory images are fuzzy and distorted and websites contain spelling and grammar errors.

5. Strengths and limitations

This study is the first to be conducted in the context of Saudi Arabia, including diverse nationalities of faculty. Even though the aim of the study is not to generalize findings, the study only included one college within the health sciences discipline in one university. The study also included only one rank of staff members. Also, the discussion of the findings of this study was limited, as there are very few published research articles on this phenomenon.

6. Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight that more research around predatory publications should be considered. In the context of Saudi Arabia, more research, including other disciplines, other settings, and different research designs, is recommended. Also, this study highlighted that more education around predatory journals is needed and the enormous publication pressures that academics experience. Hence this study also suggests that academic environments invest in training of staff regarding academic writing and the consequences of misconduct. Further to this, research policies should be amended to include issues related to predatory publications.

7. Conclusion

This study showed that publishing in a predatory journal has negative personal and professional consequences. The findings also highlighted that anyone in the academic setting could fall prey to these journals. Lastly, despite the increasing knowledge of predatory publishing, there is still a lack of awareness about this type of publication. Continuous education around predatory journals and publications should be made a priority within the academic arena, to curb this dark side of publication.

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Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at National Guard Health Affairs, Jeddah.

10. Ethics statement

All authors contributed to the conceptualization of the study, data collection, data analysis and the drafting of the manuscript. This work has not been previously submitted for publication. All authors approved the contents of the draft manuscript before submission to IJANS. All sources used are appropriately referenced.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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