

Predatory Journals and Conferences: Impacts and Strategies to Protect Scholarly Integrity

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ABSTRACT

Predatory journals and fraudulent conferences use deceptive practices to pressure early-career scholars and graduate students to publish and disseminate their work. Aggressive marketing and promises of quick review and rapid publication persuade emerging academic scholars to fall into for-profit schemes that damage individual reputations, waste money, and compromise research integrity. Scholars and mentors in a healthy academic community can strengthen academic integrity by using evidence-based resources and recommendations to recognize and avoid entanglement with predatory publishers and conferences. Professional development is key to navigating a continuously evolving landscape in academic publishing. Academic institutions and mentors can support emerging scholars by prioritizing quality over quantity in academic dissemination and promoting policies and guidelines that help scholars choose legitimate journals and conferences.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite increasing awareness of predatory publishers and conferences, deceptive practices related to the dissemination of knowledge continue to lure scholars into fraudulent schemes cleverly disguised as scholarship opportunities. Novice scholars are especially vulnerable to predatory journals and conferences due to a lack of experience and pressure to disseminate (Laine et al., 2025). Substantial pressure to publish combined with lack of knowledge and mentorship in the publication process can lead to unintentional decisions to publish in predatory journals (Schiavo, 2024). Published works in predatory journals are very difficult to retract, cause harm to evidence-based practice and misinformation for making treatment decisions and damage the professional reputation of the academic community and its individual scholars (Dadkhah et al., 2024). Falling victim to a predatory journal also has substantial negative effects on an academic's mental and emotional well-being (Chambers, 2019).

Fraudulent publishers rose to prominence by exploiting several factors in an evolving model of academic publication, including a transition from print journals to online access, growth of open-access options, and a shortage

of qualified peer reviewers (Beall, 2012). Later, fraudulent conferences followed a similar pattern of deceit and are now even more challenging to detect, track, and avoid (Lakhota, 2022). This article explains how predatory publications and conferences infiltrated the legitimate body of scientific literature, describes their deceptive practices, and offers resources for selecting reputable scholarship venues.

BACKGROUND

The prevalence and influence of predatory publishing and fraudulent conferences have expanded rapidly since deceptive practices in the scholarly publishing system appeared in the early 2000s. Jeffrey Beall described “predatory” journals as exploiting the open access model by charging for the acceptance of an article with minimal editorial review and oversight from the scientific community (Beall, 2012). Beall characterized the primary motivation of predatory publishers as maximization of profit rather than open dissemination of scholarly evidence. In 2015, the estimated number of predatory journals was 10,000 (Shen & Björk, 2015). In 2021, the number of predatory journals was estimated at over 15,000 (Linacre, 2021), and the rate of growth in number of journals exceeded the rate of increase in number of publications, which suggests that many journals are fraudulent to some degree (Siler et al., 2021). Rapid growth of predatory publications over the past decade has added substantially to the complexity of their detection and avoidance, and the prevalence of fraudulent publications in fields of health promotion and wellness is difficult to track. However, Dadkhah et al. (2024) identified 18 healthcare topics that appeared in hijacked journals, including cancer, diabetes, patient care and plant extracts for medical purposes, nursing, women’s health, physical education, and pain management. These topics involve key issues of concern for healthy academic communities, emphasizing the urgency to increase awareness of fraudulent publication practices. By the end of 2024, there were over 18,000 predatory journals (Linacre, 2024). Cabell’s Predatory Reports lists criteria for classifying a journal as fraudulent, including duplication of branding from a reputable journal, absence of an editorial board or a rigorous peer review process, and misleading claims about a journal being indexed in databases or having high impact factors (Teixeira da Silva, 2023).

Recognizing Predatory Journals and Fraudulent Conferences

Recognizing “red flags,” such as poor grammar, high publication fees, short review timelines, inflated impact factors, overly flattering language, aggressive email solicitation, fake editorial boards, and absence of indexing in databases such as Scopus and PubMed, is the first line of defense (Elmore & Weston, 2020). Predatory journals and conferences often rebrand using the logos and banners of reputable journals or organizations to circumvent the tools for identifying suspicious activity (Martinino et al., 2023). A predatory journal exploits pressure on academic scholars to “publish or perish” by promising a rapid turnaround time from submission to publication (Chandra & Dasgupta, 2024). Predatory publishers normally use aggressive email invitations praising a scholar’s work and inviting them to submit a paper to a journal with a title that is deceptively similar to the titles of reputable journals.

Fraudulent conferences follow a similar pattern, inundating email inboxes with invitations to be a high-profile speaker at a conference in a highly desirable tourism city. The invitations include unknown speakers (Godskesen et al., 2022), are not associated with reputable professional organizations, claim a broad scope of topics and disciplines, and ultimately demand fees that fuel their for-profit model (Lakhani et al., 2024).

Negative Impacts

Predatory publishing poses significant threats to the academic and scientific community, affecting research integrity, the spread of misinformation, individual and organizational reputations, and misuse of resources (Forero et al., 2018). Many predatory publishers forgo or abbreviate the peer review process, a cornerstone of scientific integrity. Without peer review, flawed or inaccurate results may be widely published and accepted, distorting the body of scientific literature. This misinformation can spread quickly, negatively impacting practice and policy that rely on evidence-informed decisions (Richtig, 2018). Conversely, valid and reliable research findings that were published in a predatory journal may suddenly disappear, further perpetuating misinformation and confusion about the state of the science.

Predatory publishers often target inexperienced researchers (Laine et al., 2025). Once the submission process is completed, requests for submission removal or retraction prove difficult without payment of more fees (Chambers, 2019). Substantial resources may be wasted as authors not only pay fees at the time of submission but are also required to pay additional, unexpected fees to complete various stages of publication (Chambers, 2019). Payment of these fees may yield little or no value, as submissions get published only to be removed without notice. Significant time and legal resources are often needed to navigate the predatory publication process effectively, particularly when reclaiming a scientific manuscript (Richtig, 2018). The affiliated institution may also experience negative impacts, as work done under their purview may be inaccurate, misleading, and not consistently citable.

Resources to Protect Scholarly Integrity

Fortunately, there are resources available to help identify predatory journals and conferences, such as academic librarians, guides, checklists, and detection tools (Lopez & Gaspard, 2020). “Think. Check. Submit” (<https://thinkchecksubmit.org/>) is an online resource that assists in identifying illegitimate publishers of books, journals, and conferences by posing specific questions. These include whether the journal is recognizable, how the publisher can be contacted, how manuscripts undergo peer review, and details regarding any publishing fees. Confirmation of acceptable answers based on information available on a publisher’s website indicates that the journal is probably legitimate. “Think. Check. Attend” (<https://thinkcheckattend.org/>) is a similar resource for assessing the legitimacy of academic conferences.

Cabell’s is a subscription resource with a feature called *Journalytics Academic*, which filters medical journals and provides comprehensive metrics on a publication's credibility and strength. *Journalytics Academic* is a searchable database offering publisher contact information, submission and review processes, acceptance rates, and metrics (Cabell's, n.d.).

Ulrichs Web Global Serials Directory is a subscription service often available in medical libraries. The directory allows a journal to be searched by title and provides detailed information about the distribution, origin, publisher, and database indexing (Ulrichsweb Global Serials Directory, 2025).

The Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) lists open-access journals worldwide and is managed by a Danish community-governed foundation (DOAJ, 2015). Beall’s List is a periodically updated website listing journals that make false claims about being indexed by the DOAJ. The website lists journals removed by the DOAJ, questionable medical periodicals, and information on questionable conferences (Beall's List, 2024).

Summary of Recommendations

- Provide professional development on questionable publications and fraudulent conferences.
- Recognize the differences between pay-to-publish and open access. Pay-to-publish (likely fraudulent) models typically ask for money to review the article upon submission (article processing fee). Open access fees are often optional (acceptance for publication is not dependent on paying up front) and paid after a rigorous peer-review and editing process.
- Organizations that fund scholarly work need clear policies to avoid questionable practices.
- Watch for signs of hijacked (duplicated) websites of reputable publishers and journals.
- Partner with libraries or professional organizations to explore existing or potential open-access agreements (sometimes called “read and publish agreements”) and support.
- Prioritize quality over quantity in the scholarship and evaluation of faculty and clinician performance.

Deceptive practices are sophisticated and constantly evolving to avoid detection. Be skeptical of uninvited email announcements or solicitations for publications. Vetting all interesting dissemination opportunities is essential to prevent exploitation and damage to the integrity of research findings.

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