

Predatory journals in applied linguistics: The who, the what, and the why

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Abstract

Predatory journals are a cause for concern in academia, and authors who publish in predatory journals are stigmatised. Yet, 20% of all research articles are still published in predatory journals. There has been little research, with most conducted in biomedicine, into this issue. This paper investigates why researchers choose to publish in predatory journals in applied linguistics through a bibliometric analysis of 200 articles and a survey of 15 authors. The bibliometric analysis shows that, although research topics are similar for articles in predatory and high-level journals, authors of articles in predatory journals are more likely to be located in the academic periphery in Asia and Africa. The survey showed that authors were not aware that their chosen journal was predatory, and several journals did not charge fees. Authors chose journals because of unsolicited requests for articles, recommendations from colleagues and fast turnaround times, but regretted their choice on learning the journal was predatory. The findings show that the black-and-white division of journals into predatory and non-predatory needs to be replaced by a more nuanced perspective, and that the dominant perception of predatory journals derived from the academic core needs to be adapted for contexts in the academic periphery.

1. Introduction

The confluence of two relatively recent trends in academic publishing has led to the emergence of predatory journals, or journals “with a reputation for being of low quality and being dishonest with regard to peer review and publishing costs” (Xia et al., 2015: 2). On the one hand, academics are under increasing pressure to publish research with a focus on quantity, rather than quality, of publications underpinning many universities’ hiring, promotion and tenure decisions (Gasparyan et al., 2016; van Dalen & Henkens, 2012). On the other, the Open Access movement (see Willinsky, 2006) has created a new model of research publication which “supersedes all potential alternative modes of access to the scholarly literature” (Tennant et al., 2016: 632). Under the gold model of Open Access publishing, authors pay journals to publish their research. One unintended consequence of this model is that it is possible for unscrupulous journal publishers to make money without any need to guarantee the quality of the work they publish and thus they can avoid the need for the careful peer review so central to the research enterprise, a practice which is “corrupting scholarly communication” (Beall, 2013: 593). The literature is replete with warnings against predatory journals and many universities have policies penalising publications in such journals, yet they still exist and academics still submit large numbers of articles to predatory publishers. Given this conflict between advice and practice, there is surprisingly little research into who publishes in predatory journals and why they do this, and none that I am aware of in the discipline of applied linguistics. This article examines recent issues of several journals in applied linguistics which have been identified as predatory focusing on the nationalities of the authors and the topics of articles. In addition, a questionnaire was sent to 116 authors to elicit why they chose to publish in that journal. The goal of this article therefore is to find out the who, the what and the why of publishing in predatory journals in applied linguistics.

1.1 Identifying predatory journals

Journals charging large fees for poor-quality editorial and publishing services have variously been called predatory journals, pseudo-journals, bogus journals and scam journals. The most commonly used term, predatory journals, was coined by Jeffrey Beall who for many years maintained Beall's list of predatory journals and publishers. Although Beall's list was closed in 2017, it is still available through the Internet Archive, and several organisations and individuals have attempted to keep updated replacement lists (e.g. Cabell's, predatoryjournals.org). These lists all use certain criteria for identifying predatory journals.

Perhaps the three most influential sets of criteria for identifying predatory journals are the criteria used in setting up Beall's list (see e.g. Beall, 2016), the criteria used by Cabell's to rate predatory journals (see Toutloff, 2019), and the criteria developed by the Grand Valley State University Libraries (see Beaubien and Eckard, 2014). Although applying the criteria can be problematic and weighting the importance of different criteria is subjective, eight broad bases for criteria predominate:

1. Journal website (e.g. predatory journal websites often have language mistakes or text copied from other sites)
2. Editor or editorial board (e.g. most members of the board are from one country for an 'International' journal)
3. False information (e.g. excessively high impact factors)
4. Article processing charges (e.g. a statement that fees are charged but no amount is given)
5. Unrealistic turnaround times (e.g. a statement promising a review within a few days)
6. Academic discipline (e.g. the journal publishes articles clearly outside its stated field)
7. Article quality (e.g. some published articles are clearly non-academic)
8. Soliciting articles (e.g. the journal sends numerous spam messages soliciting articles)

In addition, there are three sets of criteria for identifying journals which are not predatory (Hansoti, Langdorf & Murphy, 2016; Laine & Winker, 2017): the Directory of Open Access journals criteria for receiving the DOAJ Seal, the checklist produced by the Think, Check, Submit initiative, and inclusion of journals in reputable academic databases. Using the criteria for both predatory and non-predatory journals, Shen and Björk (2015) estimated that in 2014 there were 8,000 predatory journals which published 420,000 articles, or about 20% of all research articles published that year. In addition, they calculated an average article processing charge of 178 US dollars and a turnaround of 2 months from initial submission to publication.

1.2 The impact of predatory journals

A key concern with predatory journals is that they publish low-quality research since the peer review, if any, is cursory. Numerous reports and discussions in science-related media where attempts are made to get completely inappropriate articles published are evidence for predatory journals' lack of attention to quality. Most notoriously, Mazières and Kohler's 'article' which consisted solely of "Get me off your fucking mailing list" repeated 863 times (see <https://www.scs.stanford.edu/~dm/home/papers/remove.pdf>) was accepted for publication in a predatory journal. While amusing, such reports are not representative of the vast majority of articles submitted to predatory journals and also downplay the impact of such journals on research cultures.

Beall (2015), working within a framework of five functions of scholarly communication, provides several arguments about the harmful impact of predatory journals: they pollute the academic record with junk research, they allow academics to be rewarded for worthless or even fake research, and they create an overload of information for researchers. In contrast to this last point, Clark and Smith (2015) argue that publishing research in predatory journals means that the research is not discoverable and so knowledge gets lost.

Overall, there are numerous editorials and opinion pieces stating that predatory journals are damaging academia, but there is a surprising lack of specific cogent arguments for how this damage occurs. Nevertheless, many of the editorials use very strong language. There is a “deluge of poor quality, unchecked and invalidated articles” (Smart, 2016: 77), and predatory publishers are “crooks and conmen, money launderers, cybercriminals, forgerers, identity thieves” (Darbyshire, 2017: 1727). The majority of these warnings come from the discipline of medical science. While several authors investigating predatory journals work in other fields, there is very little discussion of the issues in the humanities and social sciences. In applied linguistics, for example, the only discussion of predatory journals that I am aware of is Renandya (2014).

While the vast majority of the literature views predatory journals as a damaging influence on research, a few authors question this characterisation. Some question Beall’s criteria and the opacity with which these are applied to journals, pointing out that some journals charging no fees and some journals indexed in Scopus are on Beall’s list (Macháček & Srholec, 2017; Teixeira da Silva, 2017). The inclusion of such journals implies that Beall’s list should be applied cautiously in contrast to the blanket application used by many institutions. Other authors (e.g. Truth, 2012) take a critical perspective. While acknowledging the damaging influence of some predatory journals, Truth argues that much of the discussion about predatory journals is based on the imposition of elite Western research cultures onto the academic periphery without any consideration of alternative purposes and contexts.

2. Research into predatory journals

Overall, academic discussions of predatory journals appear to be based more on authors’ beliefs than on empirical evidence. The majority of articles on predatory journals are opinion pieces and there are very few research studies specifically collecting data on these journals. Those which do exist fall into two categories: bibliometric research and survey research.

The bibliometric research focuses primarily on the location of researchers publishing in predatory journals. Much of this work shows that predatory journal authorship is dominated by researchers working in lower-income economies such as India, Iran and Nigeria (Shen & Björk, 2015; Xia et al., 2015). This picture was challenged somewhat by Moher et al. (2017) who found that, although India was the most common location of authors with Nigeria and Iran also in the top four, the United States accounted for 15% of corresponding authors.

The bibliometric research also considers other issues. Xia et al. (2015) looked at the publication record of predatory journal authors as well as their location. For the majority of authors, their publication in a predatory journal was their first ever, and very few authors had previously published more than five articles. The target authorship of predatory journals, then, appears to be novice researchers primarily in countries in the academic periphery. Moher et al. (2017), in addition to author location, examined the quality of articles and found numerous problems. For example, there was almost no reporting of assessment of the risk of bias, and only 40% of articles mentioned receiving approval from an ethics committee. All of this bibliometric research was conducted in the discipline of biomedicine.

The three survey research studies I have found aim to elicit why authors decide to publish in predatory journals. First, Cohen et al. (2019), again working in biomedicine, conducted an Internet survey of predatory journal authors and editors. Most authors were not aware of the issue of predatory journals and, once informed, stated that they would not publish in such journals again. Their main reasons for choosing the journals were their desire to publish in an open-access journal for research dissemination and responding to communications soliciting submissions. The editors had a greater awareness of predatory publishing, but 40% of them did not know that they had been listed as editors of the journals, a clearly unethical practice.

Second, Shaghaei et al. (2018) focused on their own university – the fairly high-ranked University of Southern Denmark in the developed world. They found that 0.5% of publications from the university were in journals included on Beall's list and conducted interviews with the authors of these articles. Pressure to publish was behind most authors' decisions to choose these journals with some authors deciding that the benefits of fast publication with minimum revisions outweighed the problems with journal quality, while others were misled by fake impact factors and journal names similar to those on approved lists.

Third, Kurt (2018) conducted a qualitative survey of authors of predatory journal articles in the hard sciences selected at random. There were four reasons behind authors' decisions about place of publication: social identity threat where authors felt that Western editors were biased against them so that they preferred to publish in local journals, lack of awareness that the journal was predatory combined with invitations to submit, pressure to publish quickly, and a lack of confidence in their research proficiency.

The research oeuvre concerning predatory journals, then, is sparse and largely restricted to the hard sciences, especially biomedicine. If the academic discussions around such journals are to move beyond claims based on opinion, further research is needed, especially within the soft sciences. This article therefore combines bibliometric and survey approaches to investigate publishing in predatory journals in the soft-science discipline of applied linguistics.

3. Methodology

To identify the who, the what and the why of publishing in predatory journals in applied linguistics, there are three main stages of data collection: selecting journals and articles to investigate, identifying author location (the who) and article topic (the what) for the selected articles, and conducting a survey of authors' reasons and decisions in publishing in predatory journals (the why).

3.1 Journal and article selection

To identify predatory journals, we can use existing databases such as Beall's list or apply the various criteria proposed for the purpose. One criterion (criterion 8 above) for identifying predatory journals is that they send prospective authors unsolicited requests for articles (Beall, 2016). The first stage in identifying journals was therefore to examine those journals from which I had received spam requests for articles in the previous six months, giving an initial list of 14 journals. Of these, five did not publish articles in applied linguistics and one had several broken links on its website making article selection problematic. This initial selection, then, resulted in eight journals, each of which appeared to meet at least one further criterion for being categorised as predatory. To expand the selection, Beall's list was searched for journals including "applied linguistics", "linguistics" or "English language" in their titles and the journal descriptions of the results were checked. Beall's list was used as it is still the best-known and is still being used in its archived form by some institutions in developing countries to judge publications. Seven further journals were added using this method.

The websites of these journals were checked to confirm that they are predatory journals using the eight criteria. All 15 journals met at least some of the criteria. For example, large chunks of the description of one of the journals on its About page were exactly the same as descriptions for at least 40 other journals; one journal describing itself as a linguistics and literature journal had recently published an article on gastrointestinal endoscopy; and the first sentence of a paper in one journal is

"I strongly believe that DEAR EMINENT MR. PRESIDENT DONALD J. TRUMP is the greatest president of USA ever and is the greatest politician (I mean scientist in the field of politics) in the world ever."

The 15 journals chosen together with the predatory journal criteria which they meet are shown in Table 1. From the overall ratings (where higher values represent greater predatoriness), it can be seen that there is a lot of variation in how predatory the journals are.

Table 1. Predatory criteria ratings for the 15 journals

<i>Journal</i>	<i>Website</i>	<i>Editor</i>	<i>Information</i>	<i>Charges</i>	<i>Turnaround</i>	<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Soliciting</i>	<i>Overall rating</i>
Academia Journal of Educational Research	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	7
Anglisticum: International Journal of Literature, Linguistics and Interdisciplinary Studies	X	X				X	X		4
International Journal of English and Cultural Studies				X		X		X	3
International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies		X		X	X				3
International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSII)	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	7
International Journal of Language and Applied Linguistics (IJLAL)	X	X			X			X	4
International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics	X								1
International Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Culture		X							1
Journal of Advances in Linguistics	X	X			X			X	4
Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research	X	X	X		X				4
Journal of Educational Research and Reviews	X		X		X	X		X	5
Journal of ELT and Applied Linguistics		X			X			X	3
Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies (JHSSSS)	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	7
Studies in English Language Teaching	X	X		X	X		X	X	6
The Modern Journal of Applied Linguistics	X	X		X			X		4

Within these 15 journals, 200 articles published within the previous 18 months on topics falling into the discipline of applied linguistics were identified. Originally, it was intended to use these 200 articles for both the bibliographic and survey investigations. However, five of these journals (generally those meeting more of the criteria of predatory journals) give no contact details for authors, so the articles in these journals could only be used for the bibliographic investigation. There were 116 articles with author contact details in ten journals which were used for the survey.

3.2 Author location and article topic

For all 200 articles, the author location and article topic were identified. The country of the corresponding author's affiliation was used for author location. These were then categorised by continent, and whether particular journals favoured authors from particular countries was also examined.

For article topic, eight categories of topics were induced from the article titles (where these were unclear, the abstracts were used). These are not intended to be definitive categories of applied linguistics research; rather, they are working categories for application to this set of articles. The categories are operationalised in Table 2 together with two examples of articles in each category. An inter-rater reliability check of the coding gave a Cohen's Kappa value of 0.83 (interpreted as excellent). The categories were compared against author location to see if authors from certain countries preferred publishing on certain topics.

To allow further interpretation of the findings on author location and article topic, a second set of articles from recent issues of three high-level applied linguistics journals with broad coverage of sub-disciplines of the field was compiled. 80 articles from *Applied Linguistics*, *TESOL Quarterly* and *System* were chosen as a benchmark. The figures for author location and article topics in predatory journals were compared against the respective figures in these journals to see if there were differences.

3.3 Survey of authors' reasons

Since there is very little previous research into authors' reasons for publishing in predatory journals, any survey should be open-ended as there are few concrete expectations of what participants could answer. Therefore, an open-ended questionnaire was sent by e-mail to the 116 corresponding authors for whom contact details were provided. Of these, four messages bounced, leaving 112 potential respondents.

The questionnaire was largely based on that used by Kurt (2018), follows institutional ethics requirements, and is given in the appendix. The questionnaire and cover e-mails were individualised by including the article title to increase response rates. The questionnaire has one item concerning choice of research topic, two concerning choice of journal, one concerning problems encountered in publishing research, and two concerning the predatory nature of the journal chosen.

Table 2. Categories of article topic

<i>Topic category</i>	<i>Operationalisation</i>	<i>Typical data</i>	<i>Example article titles</i>
Critical analyses	Focus on social implications of language use	Authentic texts	A critical discourse analysis to power relations in Chinese TV news interviews Analyzing literature discourse of being unpredictable aspect of the war based on the sociogram
Genre/register analyses	Focus on specific uses of language associated with contexts	Authentic texts	Exploring the diachronic and genre distributions of interpersonal metaphor: A corpus-based study The means by which writers present a proposition as an opinion in English research articles
Sociolinguistic or variationist studies	Focus on geographical variation in language use	Authentic texts	The English in Ghana: British, American or hybrid English? The linguistic features of onomatopoeia words in Arabic-English: A contrastive study
Research into student characteristics	Focus on affective or cognitive characteristics of students	Student self-report	The relationship between learning styles and willingness to communicate among EFL learners regarding gender Motivation for learning among college students at “Qassim University” in Saudi Arabia
Research into student performance	Focus on students’ use or performance in a language	Student use of language	A study of acquisition of /t/ by Chinese pre-school EFL children L2 proficiency and L2 development stages: A learner corpus analysis
Research into teacher issues	Focus on teachers’ characteristics, performance or beliefs	Teacher self-reports	Juxtaposing prospect with vision: Focusing on Iranian EFL teachers’ perspectives EFL teachers’ awareness, practices and challenges of teaching English communicatively in Oman post basic education schools
Research into teaching activities	Focus on the effects of specific classroom practices	Student use of language	Developing EFL learners vocabulary by reading English comprehension in EFL classroom The effects of utilizing smart phones in enhancing students’ English essay writing skills in Pakistan
Research into teaching theory or curriculum	Focus on the content or methodology of teaching	Academic or curriculum documents	Classroom culture and its importance in the post methods era for designing pedagogy in Bangladesh Teachability learnability hypothesis and its implications for language instruction

From the 112 potential respondents, 15 responses were received. This response rate of 13.4% is comparable to the response rates of Cohen et al. (2019) and Kurt (2018). The responses were loosely grouped into clusters reflecting similar concerns.

Details of the 15 authors who responded to the survey are given in Table 3. Each author was assigned an ID number with lower numbers indicating a publication in a less predatory journal providing some contextualisation for the quotations presented. As can be seen in Table 3, the authors are predominantly from Asian countries and from countries on the academic periphery.

Table 3. Details of the survey respondents

<i>Author ID</i>	<i>Journal in which article was published</i>	<i>Journal rating</i>	<i>Author country</i>
1	International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics	1	Japan
2	International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics	1	Japan
3	International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics	1	China
4	International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies	3	Nigeria
5	International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies	3	Iran
6	Journal of ELT and Applied Linguistics	3	Malaysia
7	International Journal of Language and Applied Linguistics	4	Canada
8	International Journal of Language and Applied Linguistics	4	Iran
9	International Journal of Language and Applied Linguistics	4	Iran
10	Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research	4	Congo
11	Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research	4	Iran
12	The Modern Journal of Applied Linguistics	4	India
13	Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies	7	Ghana
14	Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies	7	Bangladesh
15	Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies	7	Pakistan

4. Results

The first two research focuses (the who and the what) were investigated using the bibliographic data from 200 articles. The third focus (the why) used the 15 responses to the questionnaire.

4.1 The who: Author location

The author affiliations of the 200 articles in predatory journals cover 53 different countries, but these are dominated by countries in Asia. The top five countries for author affiliations in predatory journals are China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan and Malaysia. China is also represented in the top five countries publishing in high-level journals (the USA, the UK, Japan, China and Australia). Table 4 shows the percentages for both regions and countries of the affiliations of authors in the 200 predatory journal articles and in the 80 articles in the three high-level applied linguistics journals.

Table 4. Author locations in predatory and high-level journals

<i>Region</i>	<i>% Share of global researchers in 2013 (Source: UNESCO, 2015)</i>	<i>% of articles in predatory journals</i>	<i>% of articles in high-level journals</i>
Africa	2.4	9.0	0.0
Americas	22.2	6.0	37.5
Asia	42.8	74.0	32.5
Europe	31.0	9.5	22.5
Oceania	1.6	1.5	7.5
<hr/>			
<i>Country</i>	<i>% Share of global researchers in 2013 (Source: UNESCO, 2015)</i>	<i>% of articles in predatory journals</i>	<i>% of articles in high-level journals</i>
China	19.9	15.0	7.5
Iran	0.7	12.0	1.2
Saudi	0.1	8.5	1.2
Uzbekistan	0.2	6.0	0.0
Malaysia	0.6	5.5	0.0
USA	16.9	2.0	31.2
UK	3.5	0.5	15.0
Japan	8.8	2.5	8.8
Australia	1.2	1.5	5.0

There are two confounding factors that we need to consider in interpreting the locations of the authors. First, as Table 4 shows, we need to consider the total number of researchers in countries and regions, as those with more researchers are likely to produce more publications. Using figures from UNESCO, Table 4 shows the USA and the UK outperforming the number of researchers in the top journals (all five countries in these journals are in the top 15 largest economies in the world), whereas researchers from mid-sized Asian countries tend to publish in predatory journals.

Second, some of the selected journals show a bias towards publishing articles by authors from certain countries. For three of the journals, at least half of the authors come from a single country. In two cases, this is Iran; in one case, Uzbekistan (and this journal is the only journal with Uzbekistani authors). There is some evidence, then, that some predatory journals act as disseminators of localised research.

4.2 The what: Article topic

Based on their titles, the 200 articles in predatory journals were coded into eight topic categories. The percentages of articles within each category in both predatory and high-level journals are given in Table 5. While there is some variation both within and between journal types, overall there are no clear preferences for any particular research topic in either journal type. There are, however, some national preferences for research topics within the predatory journals. Authors from China are responsible for a large proportion of the articles on discourse (critical and genre/register analyses), authors from Iran for articles concerning teachers (teacher issues and teaching activities), and authors from Uzbekistan for articles on sociolinguistics.

Table 5. Research topics in predatory and high-level journals

<i>Topic category</i>	<i>% of articles in predatory journals</i>	<i>% of articles in high-level journals</i>
<i>Critical analyses</i>	4.5	11.2
<i>Genre/register analyses</i>	13.5	5.0
<i>Sociolinguistic or variationist studies</i>	17.0	23.8
<i>Research into student characteristics</i>	7.5	16.2
<i>Research into student performance</i>	16.0	28.8
<i>Research into teacher issues</i>	10.5	7.5
<i>Research into teaching activities</i>	17.0	11.2
<i>Research into teaching theory or curriculum</i>	14.0	8.8

4.3 The why: Reasons for publishing in predatory journals

The open-ended questionnaires aimed to elicit the reasons underpinning the decision making of authors who had published in predatory journals. From their responses, all of the authors appeared to be fairly ethical academics who wished to make contributions to the field of applied linguistics through their research. Their chosen research topics were based on their beliefs and experiences (“I think reflection is the key for successful teaching” [Author 11], “this topic is one of the stumbling blocks for most of bilingual speakers and most importantly for my students” [Author 10]), a fairly common basis for choosing a research topic among top-ranked applied linguistics researchers (Watson Todd, 2011). They encountered problems in collecting data, writing up their research and formatting articles to meet journal requirements, again common problems for all researchers. What distinguishes these authors is where they chose to publish their research.

4.3.1 *Reasons for choosing to publish in a predatory journal*

Among the criteria used to identify predatory journals used by predatoryjournals.org are their “aggressive solicitation” of articles, their “extremely fast turnaround times for peer review”, and “misleading information about the journal’s editorial board”. All of these were factors influencing the choice of journal of a few authors.

The use of spamming to solicit articles appears to be a reasonably effective strategy for predatory journals as it was a key consideration for three of the 15 respondents (“their frequent messages to my email” [Author 8], “it appeared in Facebook seeking papers for publications” [Author 6]). Given pressure to publish from their institutions (“as per institute norms, I had to publish at least a paper in a year” [Author 12]), speed of publication was another important factor for many authors (“I decided to go with this since it was ... fast with the review” [Author 7], “one month or two were enough to have one’s article published” [Author 10]). The fast turnaround time was seen as an advantage over mainstream journals (“many journals do not have clear policies; they take too much time to review and come back with a consistent feedback” [Author 10]). The dubious information given on the journal website was also impressive enough to persuade the authors that the journal was respectable (“a long list of professors as their editors” [Author 8], “it had a good editorial team coming from different universities of the world” [Author 10]). The characteristics of journals which are used to identify them as predatory, then, appear to also act as factors attracting authors to choose those journals as places to publish.

Two further reasons for choosing a particular journal were mentioned by several authors. First, the journal was the official place of publication for a conference (“it is the journal of the conference at which I presented a paper” [Author 1]). Second, the journal was recommended by a colleague or supervisor (“one of my colleagues made me familiar with this journal” [Author 5]).

The most commonly cited reason underpinning decisions about choosing a place to publish, however, was money, perhaps surprising given the reputation of predatory journals for charging unreasonable fees. Some of the authors view paying for their research to be published as the norm, a mandatory stage in the research process (“After conducting a study, one faces the sometimes unsurmountable wall of having to pay for publishing” [Author 13], “publications are not sponsored which means that I have to use my own money to submit my projects for publication” [Author 10]). In some cases, the journal was chosen because the article processing fee was relatively low:

I submitted this paper to a number of journals who accepted it after some suggestions from the reviewers, but their publication charges are overwhelming especially that I have to pay these by myself. I thought this journal’s charges are reasonable. [Author 13]

In many cases, the chosen journal was free (which makes their categorisation as predatory somewhat dubious), and in a few cases the journal was recommended by the editor of a fee-charging journal when the author could not pay that journal’s required fee:

Managing publication fees was a bit difficult for me so I am grateful to the editor of Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies considering my paper without any charge. [Author 14]

There are times that some journals because I could not pay publication charges have suggested some free journals to me and I had to resubmit my paper to them and go through the same process of reviewing. [Author 13]

My paper has been reviewed by International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation then as I failed to pay fees they suggest me to publish that journal and I agree. [Author 14]

4.3.2 *Reactions of authors on learning the journal was predatory*

In the survey, authors were informed that their article had been published in a journal that had been “included in some lists of predatory journals”. 11 of the 15 respondents were not previously aware of this, perhaps unsurprising as most of the journals did not charge for publishing articles. Even if they did not know that the journal was predatory, a couple of authors realised that it was not a high-quality journal (“the review process is not as rigorous as standard journals” [Author 9]).

On being asked whether they would have chosen that journal if they had known that it was predatory, the majority of the authors responded in the negative. Their reasons for rejecting the idea of publishing in predatory journals variously concerned ethics, consequences and practicalities:

The answer is clear, no! The reason is that as researchers we MUST follow the ethical issues of publishing. A paper should go under rigorous review and be refereed by qualified experts. [Author 9]

Absolutely no. Writing a scientific paper is actually demanding, so I think no one has the tendency to make his/her hard work spoilt by its being published in a low quality journal. [Author 8]

No, because I need to get promoted, and, unfortunately, publishing an article in such and such journals is of no help to me. [Author 5]

While rejecting predatory journals as places to publish, a couple of the authors questioned the origins of the lists of predatory journals:

I would not publish a paper in a predatory journal for any reason. While I do not hundred percent agree to some lists of so called predatory journals because ANYBODY could make a list and that most journals no matter their reputation, are business entities, predatory journals are a no-no for me. [Author 13]

No, but the problem is to know exactly who has that authority to categorize journals as predatory or not. If there are serious, clear and reliable criteria that can be vulgarized by academics on which academic institutions would agree on, why should I then publish in a journal that is questionable? [Author 10]

It is clear that the authors were not intending to be deceptive in choosing to publish in a predatory journal. Indeed, a couple of respondents asked for advice about how to identify predatory and non-predatory journals (I sent them appropriate links). On the other hand, it is unclear whether these journals, especially those charging no fees, warrant being categorised as predatory.

5. Discussion

Predatory journals are a cause for concern in academic publishing. The journal that accepted Mazières and Kohler’s ‘article’ and the journal that published the article with the first sentence quoted earlier clearly have low or non-existent levels of quality control, and journals which list academics as editors without their permission are clearly unethical (Cohen et al., 2019). The existence of predatory journals means that an unethical academic can pad their CV with worthless articles to get a promotion at the expense of a more ethical academic. The work of Jeffrey Beall in drawing attention to the issue of predatory journals warrants praise.

To help the academic community identify which journals are predatory, Beall created Beall's list, again a worthy contribution. However, Beall's list suffers from two key problems. First, the list may be too inclusive. At the time the list was taken offline in 2017, almost 1,300 journals and over 1,000 publishers were included. The basis for their inclusion was somewhat opaque, and Beall's list presented a black-and-white view of predatory publishing – a journal is either predatory or it is ethical. Second, the ways in which institutes and academics use Beall's list is often problematic. The list is treated as gospel. If a journal is listed, it is indubitably bad.

The findings from the survey in this study, however, suggest that we need to take a more nuanced perspective on predatory journals. The more recently created lists at predatoryjournals.org and Cabell's overcome some of the problems associated with Beall's list. In predatoryjournals.org, there are fewer journals and publishers included (roughly 400 journals and 20 publishers), each journal is given a rating from 0 to 10 for its predatoriness (although in practice, the vast majority of journals are rated 10), and brief justifications for the ratings are given. For this website, predatoriness is treated as a continuum. Similarly, Cabell's also gives ratings and now includes 13,500 journals suggesting that claims that Beall's list was too inclusive may not be valid. More problematically for authors in the academic periphery, Cabell's charges for access to its information and so is unlikely to be accessible.

The approach of treating predatoriness as a continuum in these more recent lists is potentially helpful. In Table 1, several journals, including two with the highest ratings, do not charge authors to publish which raises questions about why they are categorised as predatory. Admittedly, as one respondent in the survey said, "the review process is not as rigorous as standard journals" [Author 9], but there is also a massive amount of variation in quality of review among non-predatory journals. Indeed, it seems likely that several journals in reputable databases such as Scopus could receive a rating of 1 or more on the criteria used in Table 1 which would give them the same rating as at least two journals which have been identified as predatory. Whether a journal is predatory or not is not an all-or-nothing judgment.

Despite treating predatoriness as a continuum, organisations like Cabell's still divide journals into the binary categories of qualified and predatory. A better approach would be to create a database that provides a rating for all journals, not just those identified as potentially predatory. Ratings could be based on both the criteria used to identify predatory journals and, say, the criteria used to assess quartile ranking of journals in Scopus. With all journals included on such a list, users would of necessity need to view journal quality as a continuum, and different score cutoff points for journal trustworthiness could be used by different institutions for different purposes.

Although some of the journals investigated in this study might not truly be predatory, the articles they publish are generally not of very high quality. Many use outdated theories and approaches, such as simply counting the number of different types of grammatical errors in student writing, while others apply an existing well-used tool, such as a questionnaire, to a new context without justifying why this is worthwhile. This, however, does not mean that they should not be published at all. Nearly all of the articles are clearly genuine attempts to conduct and report research, even in a journal like IJHSSI which warrants a high rating for predatoriness. By publishing in a journal categorised as predatory, the author is stigmatised for their choice of place of publication, even though they do not intend to deceive. The polemics stigmatising publishing in predatory journals are written by well-published, well-respected researchers working in institutions with well-developed research cultures located in the academic core. Whether such core-derived beliefs should be applied to researchers working in periphery contexts where expectations are very different and where research cultures are far less developed is unclear.

With the coverage of predatoryjournals.org limited to the hard sciences, with Cabell's charging for access, and with Beall's list becoming more and more outdated, it is difficult for authors, even those aware of the issue of predatory publishing, to know if a journal which is not included in the major databases such as Scopus is considered predatory or not. In this study, the authors were not aware that their chosen journal was classified as predatory. In some cases, the authors viewed the pay-to-publish model as the norm and so, perhaps, were not as critical of the open access journal they had chosen as they should have been. Of the 15 respondents, four appeared to assume that paying to publish is the standard (and perhaps the only) practice in academic publishing. These four included the three respondents from African countries, and all work in countries classified by the World bank as lower middle income countries. Researchers from such countries are least able to pay publication fees, yet the most likely to believe such fees are necessary and so perhaps the most susceptible to solicitations from predatory journals. Worryingly, in several cases it was features associated with predatoriness (article solicitation, quick turnaround and seemingly prestigious editorial boards) that attracted the researchers to choose predatory journals as places of publication.

Since the predatory features may attract researchers, there is a clear need for education on the issue of predatory journals, particularly for researchers working in the academic periphery. While it is easy to say that there are already numerous websites giving advice about where to publish, the fact that predatory journals still attract researchers suggests they are not very effective. One alternative approach is to include the issue of journal choice on study skills or research article writing courses for postgraduate students, especially on courses where many students are likely to work in academic periphery contexts in the future. Given that journal quality is not a black-and-white issue, a lesson on journal choice could include identifying quality journals (such as through the Scimago Journal Ranking website) as well as guidance and practice on how to identify predatory journals from their websites. Such teaching should not be prescriptive since there are more factors than journal quality that can influence place of publication choices. For instance, an Uzbekistani researcher choosing a place to publish an article of particular relevance to other Uzbekistani researchers may choose to publish in *Anglisticum* despite its predatory rating of 4 since this journal appears to be a key medium of communication within the Uzbekistani research community. The postgraduate students on such courses should also be encouraged to run workshops on journal choice for colleagues in the future to provide a wider dissemination of the issue.

6. Conclusion

The continued existence of predatory journals as a major outlet for research dissemination requires an explanation. The frequent polemics originating in the academic core which portray such journals as irredeemably evil simply emphasise the importance of such an explanation. With little research focusing on the issue and none in the soft sciences, this article aims to provide some insights into who publishes in predatory journals on what topics and for what reasons in the discipline of applied linguistics. The authors of articles published in predatory journals are mostly from the academic periphery in Asia and Africa and are making genuine attempts to disseminate their research investigating mainstream topics even if it is not of the highest quality. They are under pressure to publish and so solicitations for articles promising fast turnaround times are attractive. Although all of the journals investigated in this study have been categorised as predatory, in some cases such a categorisation is dubious, since the journals do not charge for publication, do not engage in aggressive solicitation, and provide a genuine if limited review of submissions. Despite this, authors publishing in such journals may end up being stigmatised.

A more nuanced perspective is needed, and the current dichotomy of journals being either predatory or genuine needs to be replaced by a continuum on which all journals, from the most predatory to the most respected, can be placed. Doing this would allow researchers, whether from the academic core or the academic periphery, to identify journals appropriate to their research and to the expectations of the context.

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Appendix: The survey questionnaire into predatory journals

Survey on publishing practices

Many thanks for taking the time to participate in this survey. I would appreciate it if you could answer the questions below (please insert your responses in the appropriate places). Completing the survey and returning it is taken as an indication of your consent to take part in this research project. Your responses will be kept anonymous and the raw data will not be shared with anyone else. You may be contacted for follow-up questions later. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at XXX

This survey concerns your article entitled [Article title] published in [Journal title]. When answering the questions, please think about this article.

1. Could you explain why you chose this topic as the focus of your research?

[Insert your response here]

2. Could you explain how you became aware of this journal?

[Insert your response here]

3. Could you explain what made you submit this article to this particular journal?

[Insert your response here]

4. What problems and obstacles do you frequently encounter in writing and publishing research articles?

[Insert your response here]

5. Did you know that [Journal title] where you published this article is included in some lists of predatory journals? [Note: A predatory journal is a journal which has a poor reputation for quality because of inadequate peer review. The journal's main aim is to make money rather than promote scholarship.]

[Insert your response here]

6. If you had known that [Journal title] has been categorized as predatory before publishing your article, would you still have published in this journal? Please explain why.

[Insert your response here]

7. If you have any additional concerns, comments or questions, please write them here.

[Insert your response here]