

**Being a deliberate prey of a predator**

**Researchers' thoughts after having published in predatory journal**

Shaghaei, Najmeh; Wien, Charlotte; Holck, Jakob Povl; Thiesen, Anita L.; Ellegaard, Ole; Vlachos, Evgenios; Drachen, Thea Marie

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## Being a Deliberate Prey of a Predator – Researchers' Thoughts after having Published in a Predatory Journal

**Najmeh Shaghaei**

University of Southern Denmark

[nas@bib.sdu.dk](mailto:nas@bib.sdu.dk), [orcid.org/0000-0002-7884-8576](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7884-8576)

**Charlotte Wien**

University of Southern Denmark

[chw@bib.sdu.dk](mailto:chw@bib.sdu.dk), [orcid.org/0000-0002-3257-2084](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3257-2084)

**Jakob Povl Holck**

University of Southern Denmark

[holck@bib.sdu.dk](mailto:holck@bib.sdu.dk), [orcid.org/0000-0001-6388-2002](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6388-2002)

**Anita L. Thiesen**

University of Southern Denmark

[alt@bib.sdu.dk](mailto:alt@bib.sdu.dk), [orcid.org/0000-0001-9951-1350](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9951-1350)

**Ole Ellegaard**

University of Southern Denmark

[oleell@bib.sdu.dk](mailto:oleell@bib.sdu.dk), [orcid.org/0000-0003-3975-3969](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3975-3969)

**Evgenios Vlachos**

University of Southern Denmark

[evl@bib.sdu.dk](mailto:evl@bib.sdu.dk), [orcid.org/0000-0001-8235-0423](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8235-0423)

## Thea Marie Drachen

University of Southern Denmark

thmd@bib.sdu.dk, [orcid.org/0000-0003-4760-5536](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4760-5536)

### Abstract

A central question concerning scientific publishing is how researchers select journals to which they submit their work, since the choice of publication channel can make or break researchers. The gold-digger mentality developed by some publishers created the so-called predatory journals that accept manuscripts for a fee with little peer review. The literature claims that mainly researchers from low-ranked universities in developing countries publish in predatory journals. We decided to challenge this claim using the University of Southern Denmark as a case. We ran the Beall's List against our research registration database and identified 31 possibly predatory publications from a set of 6,851 publications within 2015–2016. A qualitative research interview revealed that experienced researchers from the developed world publish in predatory journals mainly for the same reasons as do researchers from developing countries: lack of awareness, speed and ease of the publication process, and a chance to get elsewhere rejected work published. However, our findings indicate that the Open Access potential and a larger readership outreach were also motives for publishing in Open Access journals with quick acceptance rates.

**Keywords:** Predatory journals; academic libraries; scholarly publishing; Open Access journals; researcher.

### 1. Introduction

On a regular basis, stories on how researchers publish fake articles in fake journals circulate the social media platforms. The story of how Mazières and Kohler managed to get an article containing nothing but an almost endless repetition of the sentence “Get me off Your Fucking Mailing List” in “International Journal of Advanced Computer Technology” is a classic (Mazières & Kohler, 2014). So is the story about Dr. O. Szust who sent 120

applications for an editorial position to predatory journals. Dr. O. Szust listed no significant scientific qualifications in her cover letter. Nevertheless, one third of the journals wrote back to Szust, offering her the position. In Polish, the word *oszust* means “fraud.” In fact, Dr. O. Szust was not a real person, but an invention by four Polish social psychologists in order to shed light on the sloppy editorial procedures of predatory journals (Sorokowski, Kulczycki, Sorokowska, & Pisanski, 2017). Last, but not least, there is the story of the two journalists who submitted a made-up conference proposal called ‘The Biomechanics of how pigs fly’ for a conference and got it accepted (Spears, 2017).

These stories amuse us because they are good examples of researchers giving the fake journals “a taste of their own medicine.” However, most of the time, the business of predatory journals is not amusing at all. Predatory journals are trick thieves of intellectual property.

It is often argued that authors, who become the prey of predatory journals, are “novice researchers, unwary higher degree students and overeager new academics,” who may be quite unaware of the damage that such publishing may do to their developing academic credibility and careers’ (Darbyshire, 2018), or that the hazard of such predatory publishing is mainly restricted to the developing world. Despite that, a recent study presented in *Nature* (Moher et al., 2017) showed that out of approximately 2,000 papers published in predatory journals, 27 % had a corresponding author from India, 5 % from Nigeria and 4 % from Iran. All these results were expected. What came as a surprise was that 15 % of the papers had an American corresponding author. So, although predatory journals may have been invented in developing countries, also researchers from other parts of the world seem to publish in them.

The purpose of this paper is to identify reasons why experienced researchers from the developed world publish in predatory journals. Prior to presenting our method and results, we will define what we mean by predatory publishing, state the rationale for our paper and present the literature that has inspired and qualified our work.

We will use what we believe is the most widely known conceptual definition of predatory publishing from Wikipedia, describing a predatory journal as follows:

*Predatory open-access publishing is an exploitative open-access academic publishing business model that involves charging publication fees to authors without providing the editorial and publishing services associated with legitimate journals. (Wikipedia, 2018)*

Concept-wise the definition is clear. Nonetheless, operationalizing it and thus creating an instrument with which one can separate predatory publishing from normal publishing is much more difficult.

The rationale for our work is three-fold. Firstly, as pointed out by Moher et al. (2017), predatory publishing is bad scientific behaviour, and as such, it can damage the public trust in science. To fight it, we must understand its reasons and investigate why researchers keep publishing in such journals. Secondly, we want to examine whether it is mainly/only young and inexperienced researchers who become the prey of predatory publishers. If this is found to be correct, then one must assume that the problem can be solved to a large degree through information and education of PhD students. Thirdly and finally, to satisfy our own curiosity and shed some light on this dark corner of Academia.

## **2. Related Research**

The process of selecting the best journal for submitting one's manuscript has always been of concern to the scientific community. But in the mid-1970s, this also became a topic for scholarly writings. Kochen and Tagliacozzo (1974) were among the first to propose a series of recommendations to assist authors in choosing the best journal for their papers. A follow-up study by Gordon (1984) stressed the implication of scientists' patterns of selection of journals for both the cognitive development of a field of study and the career development of its researchers. And since then, the body of literature on this topic has increased vastly.

Unfortunately, only a few papers examine the strategic consideration of the researchers for choosing a target journal. We believe that more studies on this facet are needed, since the extreme pressure on researchers to publish has both accentuated their need to publish fast and created a veritable explosion in the amount of questionable research media. Another way to find proper journals is to look at a list of recognized Open Access journals,

the Directory of Open Access Journals (<http://www.doaj.org>). They emphasize that there may be journals which are not found neither in this whitelist nor Beall's blacklist. Hence, researchers about to submit a manuscript also need to look into the matter. Some of the typical signs of predatory journals include undisclosed fees, editorial boards with unknown or apparently non-existent members, flawed functionality, poor design of the website and the choice of strange partners when it comes to indexing and impact calculation. Open Access (OA) publishing has introduced new business models where the paying customer is now the individual author rather than e.g. a professional research library. Predatory practices are thus increasingly adopted into mainstream publishing activities, since the potential financial return is irresistible even to well established companies (Eriksson & Helgesson, 2017).

Indications from current research (McCann & Polacsek, 2017; Xia et al., 2015) point towards junior researchers with little history of previous publications and coming from developing countries as those who are most prone to publish in predatory journals. The fact that they have paid a fee to publish their articles in new and low-prestige journals signifies an eagerness to build a publication record. In a recent study on the incentives of publishing in predatory outlets, Kurt (2018) finds that predatory publishing offers some services that may be considered beneficial by researchers from developing countries. In this study, several authors expressed fear of prejudice or rejection from journals with a rigorous practice of the Western research tradition.

Beall (2012) has argued that mainly inexperienced, unwary researchers are deceived by predatory publishers and counterfeit journals, and Moher and Srivastava (2015) claim that junior researchers "might be particularly vulnerable" to invitations from predatory journals. Christopher and Young (2015) have demonstrated that the majority of young prospective authors from Western countries also had no notion of the "predatory journal" concept, and suggested that guidance on how to differentiate legitimate OA practices from predatory ones should become a part of formal research training.

A different attitude may be expected from experienced scientists, who often emphasize journal prestige when choosing a publication channel. Although most researchers agree that it is important to publish in journals with high impact factors, they also agree that the impact factor alone does not mirror the true standing of a journal. Søreide and Winter (2010) found that journal reputation in general was the most influential factor, and that this preference

was positively correlated with age. It would be interesting to know whether this reflects a general “generation gap” in the values of researchers, or personal experience gathered during a career of research. Interestingly and somewhat contradictory, Pyne (2017) found a strong correlation between multiple predatory submissions and a high number of internal research awards among senior faculty at the business school of a young university. Publishing in higher quality journals did not seem to bring on more internal awards, and in some cases a negative correlation was even demonstrated. To get a paper accepted by a high-quality journal takes a relatively large investment of time at the expense of other meriting activities, which may be an explanation of this rather surprising finding. Pyne’s results suggest that some authors may be deliberate accessories to predatory publishing, rather than innocent victims.

Earlier, Banerjee (2013) also stated that those who choose to publish in predatory journals may gather an impressive number of articles published in “indexed peer-reviewed” journals in a very short period. Pursuing this line of thought, Drugaş (2015) stated that serious researchers who choose not to publish their work in fast bogus journals will be left behind in the rat race of academic promotions, unless quality and not quantity is taken into consideration for promotion. So why bother, why work hard and why wait, when a simpler solution is available? Given the current system of research evaluation, where not only quality, but also quantity of publication counts, scholars are motivated to publish as quickly and easily as possible (Haspelmath, 2013). Drugaş (2015) further argues that focusing more on quality than on quantity of research for promotion purposes would be a more viable long-term strategy to protect academia from low-quality, predatory journals. In this argument lies the assumption that the processes that lead to promotion do not take quality into consideration. Ideally, this should not be generalized to highly ranked universities in the developed world. However, it appears that such perverse incentives may also be suspected there.

In summary, previous research has not given any final answers to our research question of why experienced researchers from the developed world would choose to publish in predatory journals. The closest we come to an answer is Pyne’s study which indicates that quantitative performance measures might be a factor that enhances researchers’ incentives to publish in such dubious channels like predatory journals.

### 3. Methods

We have chosen the University of Southern Denmark (SDU) as a case both out of convenience and for methodological reasons. It was convenient as we had easy access to both the researchers themselves and the data on their publication practices. We also chose SDU for methodological reasons, since it is a so-called “most-unlikely case”: There are hardly any rewards for predatory publications to be obtained at SDU, and management generally shows respect for research and allocates adequate working hours for it. There is a general understanding internally that quality in publishing overrules quantity, most positions are tenure-track positions, the library informs and advises on predatory practices; and finally, SDU is a relatively highly ranked university internationally (250/350 on THE and QS). In other words, it is hard to identify any incentives for SDU researchers to publish in predatory journals, and in fact only a few cases were found.

Researchers from the University of Southern Denmark can choose to publish in journals listed in the BFI model or ‘Bibliometric Research Indicator’ model. The BFI model is used by the Danish state to allocate research funding and rewards research published in nationally as well as internationally recognized journals, books or conference series. The lists are maintained by boards of experts or researchers in the different scientific fields. In this way young and inexperienced researchers can avoid publishing in suspected predatory journals although Beck (2016) in a few cases found coincidence between journals from Beall’s lists and from the Danish BFI list.

We identified researchers from SDU who have published a scientific article in a possibly predatory journal by comparing all SDU journal articles published in the years 2015–2016 to Beall’s lists of stand-alone possibly predatory journals and possibly predatory publishers for the years 2014–2015. The numbers listed by Beall were 303 stand-alone journals and 477 publishers in January 2014, and 548 journals and 716 publishers in January 2015. Beall’s lists were originally retrieved from Jeffrey Beall’s homepage, but this is now closed, and the list can still be found at [web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org) (Web archive, 2017).

Lists of SDU publications were drawn from the university research registration system Pure. We only selected publications from journals or publishers appearing on a Beall’s list of the previous year, i.e. for articles published in



2016, Beall's list from January 2015 is used. This means that the authors might have known that Beall considered the journal or publisher to be possibly predatory. If a journal or publisher emerged on Beall's lists post-publication, then it might not have been possible for the author to identify that journal as potentially predatory when the article was submitted.

We identified 31 possibly predatory publications with 70 individual SDU researchers out of a total production of 3,373 articles in 2015 and 3,478 articles in 2016. This corresponds to almost 0.5 % of all SDU journal articles. Only 2 articles were published in journals from the "stand-alone" lists, but 29 articles were published in journals that are part of a possibly predatory publisher's portfolio. Here, we tacitly assume that any journal from such a publisher can be considered possibly predatory.

Only internal SDU researchers, i.e. current or former employees, were asked for an interview. We preferred to contact the first author, as this person is in most cases responsible for communication with the journal's editors. In cases when the corresponding author was different from the first author, as our next choice we asked him or her to participate in the interview to discuss his or her reflections on the choice of publication channel. The selected authors were invited to an open 1:1 interview by e-mail. A total of 6 faculty members accepted to be interviewed and the group varied from PhD students to experienced researchers in different academic fields. Demographic data for the participants are listed in Table 1.

The interview was scheduled to last approximately 30 minutes. To make sure that each participant was comfortable with the interview situation, every

*Table 1 Interviewee demographics.*

Interviewee	Title	Field	Number of published articles within 2015–2016	Number of articles published in Predatory journal within 2015–2016
Interviewee 1	Junior Researcher	Science	1	1
Interviewee 2	Senior researcher	Medicine	6	1
Interviewee 3	Junior Researcher	Science	7	1
Interviewee 4	Senior researcher	Engineering	2	1
Interviewee 5	Senior researcher	Management	4	1
Interviewee 6	Junior Researcher	Science	1	1

interview was based upon the participant's interest in discussing his/her article's specific topic. Before each interview, it was stressed that the participant's answers would be anonymized.

To gain the necessary qualitative data, we specified an interview guide and all questions were presented to each researcher. The interview guide is found in appendix A and had three columns. The first, left-hand column, specified the topics to be explored: (a) the research article, (b) the researcher's publication practice, (c) publication practices in the research community and (d) the organizational context for publication practices. The second column contained the 12 main interview questions, which could be supplemented by additional questions from the third column during the conversation. The overall aim of asking the researcher different questions about his/her considerations before publishing in a scientific journal that charges a publication fee was to obtain a saturation of the general topic during the interview, and to ensure that the attitudes/feelings of the researcher were expressed fully and in a balanced way.

The interviewers took care to conduct each interview in roughly the same manner. All but one interview took place in the participants' own offices. One person was given the option to answer the interview guide by e-mail. This was due to the work location of this researcher and a situational inability to use internet phone or mobile communication. Five interviews were recorded using a digital sound recorder. Subsequently, each recorded interview was transcribed and the audio recording deleted.

## **4. Results and Analysis**

The low number of possibly predatory publications that we found in our registration system, and consequently the number of interviews we conducted, could be addressed as a limitation to our study. Despite that fact, we found it promising that only 31 articles out of 6,851 were identified as possibly predatory.

### **4.1. Researchers' Publication Practice with Scientific Journals Charging Publication Fees**

The 6 interviews showed that the initiative for publishing in journals that charge publication fees can come from the researcher himself/herself or from

a supervisor/colleague/superior. Phishing attempts by the journals may also be a means to bring the researcher to pay for submission: After a conference, one researcher was contacted by a journal with an offer to (re)publish his conference paper. In some of the cases, the respondents were completely unaware of any issues with the chosen journals. A few seemed to have decided that parameters like publication speed, a minimum of editing, the need to publish their very first research article, the need to publish an elsewhere rejected work and the need to publish about a special in-between topic were more important than the publication fee or the journals' academic reputation (which may or may not have been investigated beforehand). In addition, a more general pressure at the institution may have led to the choice of a publication fee journal. At least two of the respondents were seemingly lured into paying by 1) the allegedly high "impact factor" of the journal in question and 2) the journal's use of a title that was found on the authoritative Danish BFI list, which is part of a performance-based funding system. Of course, impact factors can be manipulated or fake. The Journal Impact Factor was introduced by Eugene Garfield and is calculated from data in the JCR index, now by Clarivate Analytics. It is still considered as the authoritative standard. In lack of a "real" JCR Impact Factor, some journals claim alternative impact factors that are often dubiously calculated or simply fake. Furthermore, many dodgy journals use names that are either hijacked from high-quality journals or are made to appear very similar.

#### **4.2. Researchers' Experience with the Submission Process of a Potentially Predatory Journal**

Most respondents found that the submission process was easy. A few describe how the submission process wasn't different from submitting to any other journal – meaning that the review process was experienced as serious. One of the younger respondents thought the process was very time consuming. Some of the authors had to change their articles and provide additional information as in a conventional review. Others experienced a lack of feedback or only limited corrections of their articles. One of the older respondents discovered that the layout of his article had been corrupted on the journal's homepage. He tried to reach the editor to fix the problem but without any success, and ended up accepting the result. One of the respondents even volunteered to become a reviewer for the specific journal. This gave the respondent

special insights into the article acceptance practice of the publisher: An article that the respondent as a reviewer had rejected suddenly turned up in another journal belonging to the same publisher – suggesting that all that mattered to this publisher was the money. Today, the respondent avoids publishing in this journal. When compared to conventional journals, the submission fee journals generally had a much faster response time, which was considered positive by several of the respondents.

#### **4.3. Researchers' Consideration for Publishing Research**

We found that for all respondents, the most important criterion for selecting a journal is reaching as large a readership for the paper as possible. It means that the communication function of a journal and its reputation are both important. The journal fees are considered less important if the research reaches the right audience.

The second most important consideration is that the research should be published as Open Access. Our respondents found that Open Access research is viewed more often than research only available to subscribers, and that Open Access published research is cited more often. Also, they all felt that Open Access publications and data enabled them to carry out collaborative research internationally on a global scale.

Two of the senior respondents mentioned that they have a prepared list of high quality journals from their departments which single out journals by specific subjects and fields. They found it very efficient and time-saving, as it enabled them to select the right journal for empirical research. Although they had list of high quality journals, but due to being under pressure to get a chance of elevation to a tenured position and to publish their findings in a given time, they chose to publish in a journal with quick acceptance. Also, some of the respondents would talk to colleagues who are interested in the research topic when they are considering a journal.

One more point expressed by some of the respondents is the quick and easy publishing process. Although the quality of published papers and reaching the right group of readers are of great importance, our respondents valued a speedy process between submission, acceptance and publication.

#### **4.4. The Organizational Context for Publication Practices**

In this part, we asked researchers specifically whether they experienced any pressure to publish from their institutes and whether they have been rewarded for getting articles published.

Two of the junior respondents mentioned that they were under various kinds of pressure, either to finish a course or prepare for a job interview. Therefore, the fees charged by the journals are of less importance to them, as long as they are able to publish their research so that they can move forward to the next step in their professional life. The rest of the group had not experienced such pressures, but were encouraged to publish their latest ideas. Although none of them had been formally rewarded, a few earned a reputation among other colleagues across their institutes.

### **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion and as an answer to our research question, we found that the reasons why researchers from the developed world publish in predatory journals are quite the same as those from researchers from developing countries: Lack of awareness, speed and ease, a chance of getting rejected work published, or getting unpublishable work published anyway. Also, researchers from the developed world may be fooled by allegedly high impact factors or a journal name similar to that of a quality journal.

The scientific quality is low regardless of high acceptance rates in predatory journals but it could pose a problem if many researchers read and apply the results. The risk seems to be low because the scientific community in general prefers publications from well-established publishers. The risk can't be dismissed due to the fact that articles in predatory journals most likely are Open Access and all articles are easily searchable through the large databases as e.g. Google Scholar. Researchers from less established scientific communities are often found among the readers of this type of literature (Frandsen, 2017). In contrast, our respondents may face a problem if they place their articles in predatory journals. Serious academics may not read these journals and would therefore be missed as target readers.

What we find very interesting is that some of the researchers selected the possibly predatory journals due to their Open Access potential. For the

researchers, the size of the audience is of utmost importance, and due to the predatory journals' Open Access policy, some researchers argued that articles from such journals may be more read, used and cited than articles in mainstream high impact factor journals.

On top of that, we notice that we have not found conclusive evidence that the researchers experienced the publishing process as being very different from the one familiar to them from quality journals. On the contrary, several of them claimed that they had experienced a serious review process.

With the current climate in the traditional scientific publishing business, there may be reasons to reconsider the condemnation of the so-called predatory journals within certain disciplines.

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## Appendix 1. Interview guide

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### Research Question(s)

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Which considerations researchers make before publishing in one of the scientific journals that charge publication fees?

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Topics to be explored	Interview Questions	Additional Questions
Research article	Can you tell us about what made you write this research article?	Why did you decide to write it?
	How did you get to know about this journal?	Did you talk with your colleagues about which journal to publish in?
		Have you sent the article to other journals?
		Yes/No. What happened then?
		What made you decide on this journal?
		Have you published in this journal before?
	How did you experience the submission process?	What is your experience with this journal?



Topics to be explored	Interview Questions	Additional Questions
		<p>What is your experience with this journal compared to other journals? How did you experience the review process?</p> <p>Did you have to revise it before acceptance?</p> <p>Would you consider submitting an article to this journal again?</p> <p>Did you pay any publication fee for the publication?</p>
<p>Researcher's publication practice</p>	<p>Did you pay any publication fee for the publication?</p> <p>Could you describe as much detail as possible what you typically do when you publish research articles?</p> <p>How do you normally decide on which journal to publish your research article in?</p> <p>(listen for words like prestige, familiarity, waiting time, acceptance probability, credibility)</p>	<p>Yes. When did you pay the publication fee?</p> <p>Who paid for the publication fee?</p> <p>Do you decide on which journal to publish in before or after conducting your research?</p> <p>Have you had any research articles rejected?</p> <p>Yes. How do you feel about it?</p>

Topics to be explored	Interview Questions	Additional Questions
	Was the submission process with the article we have talked about different from other submission processes?	Yes. How was it different?  What do you like most/least about publishing?
Publication practices in research community	How much do you know about predatory journal?  Were you aware about this journal?	
	Do you typically talk with your colleagues about which journals to publish in?	Yes. Could you say something more about that?
Organizational context for publication practices	Have you experienced a pressure to publish?  Have you ever been rewarded for getting articles published?	From whom?  Yes? Have you been rewarded for getting published in your current position at SDU?