

Predatory Journals and the Quest for Research Integrity in the Global South: Challenges, Realities, and Pathways Forward

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ABSTRACT

Predatory publishing has become a pressing challenge to research integrity, with disproportionate impacts on scholars in the Global South, where systemic inequities, limited resources, and intense publication pressures create vulnerabilities. This article situates predatory journals within broader global academic imbalances, showing how they exploit under-resourced researchers, erode scientific credibility, and reinforce epistemic marginalization. Using insights from recent literature, case analyses, and policy documents, the study reveals that early-career academics, often lacking adequate training in publishing ethics and constrained by evaluation systems that reward quantity over quality, are especially at risk. These dynamics not only jeopardize individual careers but also weaken the global visibility and credibility of knowledge produced in the Global South. At the same time, emerging initiatives, including institutional reforms, mentorship schemes, awareness campaigns, and the growth of equitable open-access infrastructures, demonstrate promising pathways forward. The article concludes that sustainable solutions require confronting structural inequalities while strengthening local capacity, reshaping research assessment, and fostering international collaboration. Only through such integrated efforts can research integrity be safeguarded and scholars in under-resourced contexts be empowered to contribute meaningfully and equitably to global scientific discourse.

KEYWORDS

Predatory publishing, research integrity, Global South, academic publishing, knowledge inequity, scholarly communication, open access, research assessment

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INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of predatory journals poses one of the most pressing threats to global research integrity. Defined as outlets that exploit the open-access publishing model without providing rigorous peer review, editorial oversight, or transparency, predatory journals have grown rapidly over the past two decades¹. While this issue is global, its impact is disproportionately severe in the Global South, where structural inequities in research funding, training, and evaluation systems heighten researcher vulnerability². In many countries, scholars face immense pressure to publish frequently for career advancement, often in contexts where reputable publishing opportunities are limited. Consequently, predatory journals exploit these



systemic gaps, offering fast-track publication at the expense of scientific quality. The importance of addressing this challenge lies not only in safeguarding the integrity of individual research outputs but also in protecting the credibility of entire knowledge systems in under-resourced contexts. Recent scholarship shows that predatory publishing practices erode trust in science, waste limited research funds, and reinforce global knowledge inequities by marginalizing legitimate contributions from the Global South³. Despite increasing awareness, controversies remain regarding whether predatory publishing reflects individual researcher misconduct, systemic inequities, or a combination of both⁴. This article critically engages with the problem of predatory publishing in the Global South, drawing cases from Nigeria, India, and Indonesia. It investigates the systemic drivers that enable such practices, evaluates existing interventions, and highlights contrasting scholarly perspectives on responsibility and reform. By situating predatory publishing within wider structural inequities in global academic systems, the discussion emphasizes that sustainable solutions must integrate institutional reforms, researcher capacity building, and international collaboration while simultaneously strengthening local resilience. The purpose of this study is to develop an evidence-based framework for understanding and addressing predatory publishing, to safeguard research integrity, reduce epistemic inequalities, and foster more equitable and trustworthy systems of scholarly communication in the Global South and beyond. The article on sustainable solutions requires addressing structural inequities while fostering local resilience against exploitative publishing practices.

PREDATORY PUBLISHING IN CONTEXT

The rise of predatory publishing is closely tied to the growth of open-access models. While open access aims to democratize knowledge, the “author-pays” model has created fertile ground for exploitation. Predatory journals mimic legitimate outlets, charging fees without providing quality assurance⁵. Studies estimate that tens of thousands of predatory journals are currently in operation, publishing hundreds of thousands of articles annually⁶. In the Global North, researchers are increasingly aware of the risks and better equipped with institutional safeguards. Conversely, scholars in the Global South often lack training in identifying predatory outlets, face language barriers, and have fewer opportunities to publish in reputable journals⁷. This asymmetry illustrates a deeper structural imbalance in global scholarly communication, reinforcing what Santos⁸ terms “epistemic injustice.” The systemic drivers of predatory publishing are broadly categorized into six, including evaluation pressures, funding inequities, lack of awareness, global exclusion, and technological exploitation collectively create vulnerabilities that sustain exploitative publishing practices. The figure illustrates the systemic drivers of predatory publishing, showing that these factors collectively create vulnerabilities that sustain exploitative publishing practices (Fig. 1).

CASE INSIGHTS

Nigeria: Nigeria exemplifies the convergence of systemic pressure and limited support structures. Promotion criteria in Nigerian universities often prioritize quantity over quality of publications⁹. Combined with limited access to reputable journals due to subscription costs, this has led many academics to fall prey to predatory outlets. A 2022 survey found that over 30% of early-career Nigerian researchers had unknowingly published in predatory journals¹⁰.

India: India faces similar challenges, compounded by its massive higher education sector. Government policies have historically emphasized publication counts in global indexing databases, inadvertently encouraging predatory publishing¹¹. Although the University Grants Commission (UGC) has created a “care list” of approved journals, loopholes persist, and some predatory outlets have managed to infiltrate the list¹².

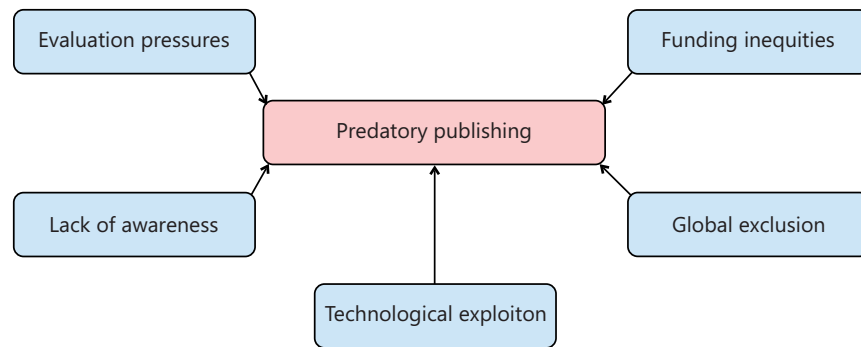


Fig. 1: Conceptual overview of systemic drivers fueling predatory publishing in the Global South

Indonesia: Indonesia, with its ambitious push to increase publication output, also demonstrates the risks of quantity-driven policies. The government requires postgraduate students to publish articles as a graduation requirement, which has increased susceptibility to predatory journals¹³. While Indonesia's Sinta indexing system has improved journal vetting, challenges remain, particularly for early-career researchers in peripheral institutions¹⁴.

DRIVERS OF PREDATORY PUBLISHING IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Several systemic drivers converge to fuel predatory publishing

Evaluation pressures: Performance appraisal systems often emphasize the number of publications rather than their quality¹⁵.

Funding inequities: Limited research funding restricts access to reputable outlets with high publication fees, pushing researchers toward cheaper, questionable journals¹⁶.

Lack of awareness: Many early-career scholars are unaware of predatory practices or lack training in publication ethics¹⁷.

Global exclusion: Researchers from the Global South face difficulties publishing in high-impact journals due to language barriers, editorial bias, or research focus misalignment¹⁷.

Technological exploitation: Predatory journals use professional-looking websites and spam invitations, making it difficult to distinguish them from legitimate outlets¹⁷.

IMPACTS ON RESEARCH INTEGRITY

The consequences of predatory publishing extend beyond individual reputations. First, it undermines the credibility of research from the Global South, reinforcing stereotypes of poor-quality scholarship. Second, it wastes scarce resources, as publication fees are diverted from research activities. Third, it pollutes the scientific record, as predatory articles are often indexed in databases and cited by unsuspecting researchers. Finally, it deepens epistemic inequalities by delegitimizing knowledge produced in under-resourced contexts¹⁸.

CHALLENGES AND INSIGHTS

Ethical ambiguities: One of the main controversies lies in determining responsibility. Some argue that researchers knowingly exploit predatory journals to inflate CVs, while others contend that systemic pressures and lack of awareness leave them with limited choices¹⁹. Both perspectives highlight the ethical complexities in contexts where institutional structures incentivize quantity over quality.

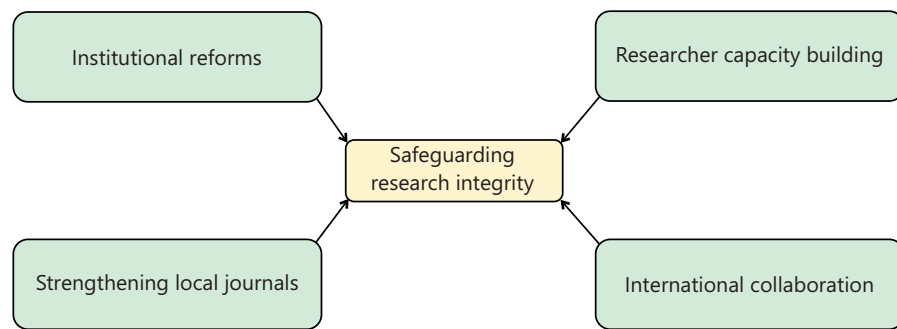


Fig. 2: Framework of pathways to safeguard research integrity through institutional reforms, researcher capacity building, strengthening local journals, and international collaboration

Table 1: Selected initiatives and frameworks addressing predatory publishing and promoting equitable scholarly communication

Initiative/framework	Scope and purpose	Strengths	Limitations/challenges
Think. Check. Submit.	Global campaign to help researchers identify trustworthy journals before submitting	Simple checklists; researcher-friendly; widely translated	Limited adoption in low-resource contexts; relies on researcher awareness
Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)	Index of reputable open-access journals meeting strict transparency criteria	Provides quality assurance; promotes visibility of legitimate OA journals	Resource-intensive vetting; some regional journals were excluded due to the criteria
African Journals Online (AJOL)	Platform for African-published scholarly journals	Increases visibility of Global South research; region-specific support	Limited coverage outside Africa; quality varies across journals
Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)	International body offering ethical guidance to editors and publishers	Provides global standards; supports editors in tackling misconduct	Voluntary membership; limited reach in under-resourced regions
Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA)	Global initiative reforming research assessment beyond journal metrics	Promotes quality over quantity; aligns with DORA principles	Early adoption phase; requires institutional buy-in
UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science (2021)	Global policy promoting inclusive, transparent, and equitable science	Emphasizes epistemic justice; formal recognition by UN member states	Implementation is uneven; it requires strong national policy alignment

Ineffectiveness of blacklists: Blacklists such as Beall's List initially raised awareness, but they have been criticized for a lack of transparency and for penalizing emerging Global South journals unfairly²⁰. Scholars argue that blacklists risk reinforcing global hierarchies by delegitimizing non-Western publishing models.

Structural inequities: Predatory publishing cannot be fully addressed without tackling the structural inequities that sustain it. Global North publishers dominate scholarly communication, often marginalizing local journals. The concentration of impact-factor-driven publishing models exacerbates exclusion²¹. Unless research evaluation frameworks change, predatory publishing will persist as a symptom of deeper inequalities.

Pathways forward: The key pathways to safeguarding research integrity entail emphasizing the role of institutional reforms, researcher capacity building, upholding local journals, and fostering international collaboration as interconnected strategies to counter predatory publishing (Fig. 2).

Institutional reforms: Universities and funding agencies must revise evaluation criteria to emphasize quality, transparency, and societal impact rather than sheer output²². Policies like the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) provide global models for reform.

Researcher capacity building: Awareness campaigns, mentorship programs, and training in publication ethics are crucial. Initiatives like Think. Check. Submit. We have made progress, but require stronger institutional support in the Global South.

Strengthening local journals: Investment in credible, regionally relevant journals can reduce reliance on predatory outlets. Programs like the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and AJOL (African Journals Online) demonstrate the potential of equitable open-access infrastructures.

International collaboration: Global efforts should aim to level the playing field by supporting equitable open access, capacity building, and North-South partnerships. The UNESCO's 2021 Recommendation on Open Science emphasizes inclusivity and transparency as key pillars for reform²³.

Table 1 summarizes major initiatives and frameworks addressing predatory publishing and promoting equitable scholarly communication. It highlights their scope and purpose, key strengths, and associated challenges, showing how efforts such as Think. Check. Submit, DOAJ, AJOL, COPE, CoARA, and the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science contribute to safeguarding research integrity, while also facing limitations in adoption, coverage, or implementation.

CONCLUSION

Predatory publishing represents both a symptom and a driver of systemic inequities in global scholarly communication. While its proliferation threatens research integrity worldwide, the Global South remains disproportionately affected due to structural vulnerabilities, evaluation pressures, and resource constraints. Country-level insights from Nigeria, India, and Indonesia underscore how policies that prioritize publication output inadvertently fuel predatory practices. Addressing these challenges requires more than individual vigilance. Sustainable solutions must combine institutional reforms, researcher training, investment in local journals, and global collaboration. Ultimately, tackling predatory publishing is inseparable from the broader quest for research equity and epistemic justice. By confronting systemic inequities and empowering Global South scholars, the global academic community can safeguard integrity while ensuring that diverse voices contribute meaningfully to knowledge production.

SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

This study discovered the underlying drivers that make researchers in the Global South more vulnerable to predatory publishing, such as limited funding, weak mentorship, restricted access to credible journals, and career pressures that prioritize publication counts over quality. The analysis highlights how these factors not only damage scientific integrity but also diminish the visibility of valuable research. The insights can be beneficial for policymakers, academic institutions, and international organizations seeking to strengthen research systems and safeguard scholarly communication. This study will help researchers to uncover the critical areas of structural inequality and systemic barriers that many were not able to explore. Thus, a new theory on equitable knowledge production and research integrity may be arrived at.

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