Avoiding predatory journals: Quick peer review processes too good to be true

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Abstract
Problem: Nursing is experiencing the growth of predatory journals with questionable peer review processes. These journals publish submissions quickly and do not enhance the authors’ reputation and scholarship of nursing.

Methods: A qualitative, descriptive study design examined the legitimacy of the peer-review process described on the websites of predatory nursing journals. Posted review processes (n = 53) were examined for quality indicators related to language use, author control, and transparency.

Findings: Of the 53 predatory nursing journals describing a peer-review process, the majority indicated that all submitted content was sent for peer review (n = 34, 64.15%). Most journals did not describe the criteria on which submitted articles would be evaluated (n = 39, 73.58%). Quality indicators for language included multiple grammatical errors and odd language and phrases (n = 39, 73.58%). Author control of tracking, revisions, and review of galley proofs were inconsistent in the described peer-review processes. The majority did not provide a way to track a manuscript through the process (n = 29, 54.72%). Most journals did not explain the types of peer review they conducted (n = 31, 58.49%).

Conclusion: Authors can sidestep the trap of publishing in predatory journals by paying attention to the peer review process when selecting a journal for publication.

KEYWORDS
controversy, education, ethics/moral courage, professional issues, quality

1 | BACKGROUND

Scholarly nursing journals provide clinicians, educators, and researchers with current evidence-based practice guidelines; innovations in education, technology, and patient care; and research findings that promote the science and practice of the nursing profession. To assure that manuscripts are appropriate, advance the profession, and meet rigorous methodological standards, publications must have mechanisms in place to critique the quality of the work.1

The peer review process is the means by which the publishing community establishes the quality of the research methods, accuracy and timeliness of the content, and relevance of the manuscript to the journal’s mission. The process includes four key elements: the editor’s approval, peer review, a decision (accept, reject, or revise and resubmit), and final proofs.2 Of these processes, peer review (finding expert reviewers and giving them time to evaluate the manuscript) is the most time-consuming and the most important stage in the publishing process. The editor uses reviewer feedback to make decisions on whether to publish and to advise authors on recommendations to improve the quality of the manuscript. A final proof gives an author the last chance to be sure that the manuscript is ready for publication.2

While the publishing community agrees that peer review maintains the integrity and quality of scholarly works, peer-review processes vary among journals. For this reason, scholarly publication guidelines recommend that the processes be explicitly described on
journal websites. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines also state that journal websites should not guarantee "very short peer review times," but be transparent regarding their peer-review processes to provide clarity to potential authors. This is often not the case with predatory journals, which do not detail the peer review process or what control the author will have during the publishing process.

The field of nursing, as with other disciplines, is experiencing the growth of predatory journals with questionable peer review and publishing practices. In response, the International Academy of Nursing Editors (INANE) began a campaign to raise awareness of predatory publishers, who operate "with profit as the driving force." The organization warns scholars that these journals: often promise a quick peer review, list a fabricated editorial board, publish journals with titles that are very similar to those of legitimate journals, and solicit content from authors through flattering emails.

Oermann et al identified 140 predatory nursing journals and found that about one-third (n = 46, 32.9%) did not indicate that submitted manuscripts were peer-reviewed. Of those journals that claimed to conduct a peer review, the processes were unclear. To clarify the legitimacy of the peer review process of predatory journals, Wicherts compared them to nonpredatory journals and found a positive association between the quality of journals and the transparency of their peer-review processes; predatory journals were the least transparent.

A recent study has shown that the overall quality of articles published in predatory nursing journals is poor or average at best, demonstrating that the peer-review processes must be inferior or nonexistent despite what journals claim on their websites. Thus far, no analysis has been done on the quality of the peer-review processes described in predatory nursing journal websites. The purpose of this study is to fill this gap in the literature and to identify common elements and characteristics in the practices of predatory journals. Our goal is to assist authors in differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate peer-review processes to avoid publishing in a low-quality journal.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Peer review analysis

A qualitative, descriptive study design was used to examine the legitimacy of the peer-review process as described in the publishing guidelines posted on the websites of predatory nursing journals. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the authors' university reviewed and approved the study as exempt.

2.2 | Sample

In a previous study, the authors identified 140 predatory nursing journals using Beall’s lists of standalone journal titles and publishers. The data set included 94 journals that indicated submitted manuscripts were peer reviewed and 66 journals with websites that included a description of the peer-review process. The authors reviewed these 66 journal websites in May 2017 and found that two publications no longer existed and 11 no longer had peer-review guidelines, leaving a sample of 53 journals.

2.3 | Data collection and analysis

The research team first identified 12 quality indicators of the peer-review process used by reputable traditional and open-access journal publishers. A data collection form, based on these criteria, was developed to capture these attributes, which were grouped into three main categories: language, author control, and transparency. Each of these categories was broken down into multiple quality indicators. Under language, quality indicators were: the absence of grammatical errors and the absence of odd language within the peer-review process description. Under author control, there were three quality indicators: the ability of authors to make revisions, review proofs, and track the publication process. Under transparency, the peer-review processes were checked for: type of peer review, a visual flow diagram of the process, article submission types, article submission process, peer-review criteria, and rejection rates.

Researchers reviewed the 53 journal websites' peer review processes, indicating a yes or no for each indicator as well as comments regarding the type of peer review, type of submission process, examples of odd language, and other general remarks. The reviews were completed by July 2017. Descriptive statistics were gathered using The Statistical Analysis System, version 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc, Cary, NC).

3 | RESULTS

Of the 53 predatory nursing journals describing a peer-review process, the majority stated that all submitted manuscript content was sent for peer review (n = 34, 64.15%). However, 30.19% (n = 16) did not indicate whether or not all content would be reviewed and 5.66% (n = 3) stated that not all content would be reviewed.

Most journals did not describe the criteria on which submitted articles would be evaluated (n = 39, 73.58%). Appropriate submission types (eg, research papers, reviews, editorials) were described in most journals (n = 39, 73.58%), absent in a few (n = 9, 16.98%), or not described in English (n = 5, 9.43%). Manuscript submission processes were primarily online: through an online manuscript-processing system (n = 16, 30.19%), online forms (n = 14, 26.42%), email (n = 7, 13.21%), email or online forms (n = 4, 7.55%), or a combination of email and online manuscript-processing systems (n = 11, 20.75%).

3.1 | Quality indicator: language

Quality indicators for language included multiple grammatical errors and odd language and phrases. Grammatical errors were found frequently in the description of the peer-review process (n = 39, 73.58%). Odd uses of the English language were commonly found (n = 25, 47.17%).
3.2 | Quality indicator: author control

Author control of tracking, revisions, and review of galley proofs was inconsistent in the described peer-review processes. The majority did not provide a way to track a manuscript through the process \( n = 29, 54.72\% \). The majority did allow for author revisions \( n = 44, 83.02\% \). However, 29 journals \( 54.72\% \) did not send galley proofs to authors, or if they did, they did not mention it.

3.3 | Quality indicator: transparency

Most journals did not explain the types of peer review they conducted \( n = 31, 58.49\% \). Of those that indicated a type of review \( n = 22, 41.51\% \), the majority were double-blinded \( n = 15, 68.18\% \), followed by single-blinded \( n = 6, 27.28\% \), and single-blinded or editor reviewed \( n = 1, 4.55\% \). A flow diagram of the peer-review process was included in some of the journals \( n = 14, 26.42\% \). The diagrams did not follow standard peer-review processes in most cases \( n = 10, 71.43\% \), and the text descriptions did not match the diagrams \( n = 6, 42.86\% \).

4 | DISCUSSION

Although the majority of journals described peer review processes, several results were found to be of concern that should lead potential authors to take caution in considering submission to these journals. Quality indicators of language, author control, and transparency of the peer review process were identified and categorized as "yellow flags" to proceed with caution or "red flags" to avoid these journals.

4.1 | Yellow flags

When comparing submission processes of predatory journals compared to legitimate journals, Shamseer et al.\(^{11}\) found nearly 100% of legitimate journals use online manuscript processing systems to handle submissions, reviews, and correspondence. Our findings indicate that only 30.19% of the predatory journals use these systems. Other means of submission, such as email, were described as easy ways to submit manuscripts for more rapid review and publication—characteristics found in predatory journals.\(^{11}\) In nonpredatory journals, the first step after submission is an editorial review for appropriateness. This step was missing in 30.19% of the predatory journals. Scholars should exercise caution when considering submissions to journals that do not use mainstream manuscript-processing systems or journals that do not follow the usual review processes.

4.2 | Red flags

4.2.1 | Quality indicator: language

Use of odd language is common in predatory journals and should serve as a warning to scholars.\(^{11,12}\) English is the primary language used in predatory journals, although the journals' countries of origin are not always clear.\(^{7}\) Many reports being international in scope, list editorial board members from countries where English is not the primary language. The predatory journals in this study had an overwhelming number of grammatical errors \( n = 39, 73.58\% \). In addition, almost half contained odd phrases and misused words \( n = 25, 47.17\% \). While authors may find it encouraging to have a journal that provides words of encouragement and hope for publication, but this is not a common sentiment in legitimate journals.

4.2.2 | Quality indicator: author control

After a manuscript is submitted to a journal, it is a common practice for manuscripts to be issued an identification number used to track the manuscript through the review process. More than half of the predatory journals did not provide a means of tracking a manuscript through the process \( n = 29, 54.72\% \). Some journals did not allow revisions \( n = 9, 16.98\% \) or did not send galley proofs to authors \( n = 29, 54.72\% \). The quality of the manuscript reflects this lack of final review and revision. Numerous writing errors and poor-quality research are common in predatory journal manuscripts.\(^{9}\) Authors' reputations are on the line after a manuscript is published. The integrity of the work and the author are at risk when control of the manuscript is lost. This should be a red flag for scholars considering publication in such a journal.

4.2.3 | Quality indicator: transparency

Many of the journals had elaborate flow charts and detailed descriptions of the importance of peer review. However, most journals also had discrepancies between the flow diagrams and the text that placed the legitimacy of the process into question. In nearly three-quarters of the journals with flow diagrams \( n = 10, 71.43\% \), the text was absent, text did not match the diagram, or diagrams included loss of author control. This lack of transparency should also alert authors to a process that is inconsistent with best practices in publishing.

4.3 | Implications for nurse scholars

It is imperative for nurses to contribute to science and the profession of nursing. However, it is a time-consuming process, which makes the lure of a quick and easy review process understandable. Legitimate journals need to do what they can to reduce the time between submission to decision and decision to publish. However, the transparency and quality of the process needs to be upheld.\(^{8}\)

Transparency and quality of the process are key indicators of legitimate journals (Box 1). In the case of predatory journals, looks can be deceiving as they often mimic the titles and author guidelines of legitimate journals. Scholars need to critically view the overall journal, publisher, and peer-review processes before targeting that journal with a submission.

First, look for discrepancies or missing steps. Next, read through the author guidelines for grammar and language use. Determine if
authors can track manuscripts throughout the submission process. Read carefully about how revisions are made and if final edits and proofs are part of the publishing process. If the time from acceptance to publication is short, time for revisions and reviewing final proofs may not be allowed. This is often the case in predatory journals, which have an average of 3.47 days from acceptance to publication.7

Finally, read articles in the journal and consider if the manuscript seems to have been reviewed and edited.9 Are there grammatical errors or questionable results and research methods? Does the research seem valid or useful? Do you want to have your work included in this journal?

After work is published in a predatory journal, it is difficult to retract or correct, and cannot be published in a legitimate journal. Avoiding predatory journals not only protects the quality of the nursing profession’s contributions to practice and research, but it also protects authors’ reputations. In many schools of nursing, the quality of journals in which faculty publish is considered in their performance reviews.7 The integrity of nursing scholarship depends on an author’s careful consideration of a journal’s reputation and legitimacy.

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REFERENCES


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