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Editorial **Open Access**

Predatory publishing: What it is and how to avoid it

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Introduction

Academic publishing is at the heart of scientific communication. It acts as a primary means for disseminating research findings, validating knowledge, and advancing academia and social development. Through peer-reviewed publications, researchers contribute to advancing knowledge, ensuring that ideas are scrutinized, refined, and made accessible to others for application or further investigation (Bornmann, 2011; Merton, 1973). Publishing also functions as a mechanism for academic recognition and career advancement, reinforcing the principles of accountability, transparency, and intellectual exchange that form the basis of the scientific community (Meadows, 1998; van Dalen & Henkens, 2012). Beyond the scholarly realm, academic publishing informs public policy, technological innovation, and educational practices, and in this way, it links research to broader societal needs (Suber, 2012; Ziman, 2001). Through scholarly publications, teachers can become more effective practitioners who can transfer their knowledge to their students in an evidence-based, research-informed manner (Healey, 2005; Heng et al., 2022). Thus, academic publishing not only sustains the integrity and vitality of academia but also facilitates the translation of knowledge into social and economic value.

In recent years, the rise of open access (OA) publishing has reshaped the landscape of academic communication. By removing paywalls and access restrictions, OA publishing has enhanced the visibility, accessibility, use, and impact of research outputs. Unlike traditional subscription-based models, OA

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allows unrestricted online access to scholarly works, enabling researchers, particularly those in developing countries, to engage with and build upon existing knowledge without accessibility constraints (Piwowar et al., 2018; Suber, 2012). This democratization of knowledge not only increases citation rates and academic influence for authors (Tennant et al., 2016) but also accelerates interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation by making research outputs more widely available to researchers, policymakers, educators, and the public (Björk & Solomon, 2012). As a result, the OA movement aligns with the broader goals of academia, which are to advance knowledge and society by enabling inclusivity, transparency, and equitable participation in global research dialogues (Fecher & Friesike, 2014).

However, the rapid growth of OA publishing has also given rise to a troubling phenomenon: the proliferation of predatory publishers that exploit the author-pays model for financial gain without providing legitimate peer review or editorial oversight (Beall, 2012; Cobey et al., 2018; Shen & Björk, 2015). These entities often represent themselves as reputable journals, soliciting submissions through deceptive practices and publishing low-quality or even fraudulent research (Beall, 2016a; Cobey et al., 2018). The absence of rigorous peer review undermines the credibility of academic publishing and threatens to erode public trust in scholarly communication (Grudniewicz et al., 2019; Heng, 2025). Moreover, inexperienced researchers, particularly from less affluent countries in the Global South, are disproportionately vulnerable to predatory outlets due to limited awareness or pressure to publish to meet degree requirements or advance their careers (Heng, 2025; Macháček & Srholec, 2022). In this sense, while OA publishing has greatly enhanced knowledge dissemination, the rise of predatory publishing underscores the need for stronger academic literacy, institutional safeguards, and global commitment to uphold the integrity and ethics of scholarly publishing (Pollock et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this editorial is to raise awareness about the issue of predatory publishing, a deceptive practice in which illegitimate journals exploit the OA model by charging publication fees without providing genuine peer review, editorial quality control, or academic integrity (Beall, 2016b). Predatory publishers pose significant risks to the academic community by disseminating unverified research, damaging the credibility of legitimate scholarship, and misleading early-career researchers eager to publish

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(Grudniewicz et al., 2019; Heng, 2025). Understanding this problem is crucial because it undermines the foundations of scholarly communication and erodes public trust in science. In the context of Cambodian academia, this issue has raised great concern, as more academics and research students publish their scholarly works in predatory or low-quality journals (Heng, 2025). Therefore, this editorial seeks to explain how predatory publishing operates, why it matters for individual researchers and institutions, and what strategies can be employed to identify and avoid predatory outlets.

Understanding predatory publishing

Predatory publishing refers to a deceptive form of academic dissemination in which profit is prioritized over scholarly integrity. The term was introduced by Jeffrey Beall, who described predatory publishers as entities that "publish counterfeit journals to exploit the open-access model in which the author pays" (Beall, 2012, p. 179). Although the concept has since evolved, contemporary research continues to emphasize that predatory journals present themselves as genuine scholarly outlets while accepting "articles for publication—along with authors' fees—without performing promised quality checks for issues such as plagiarism or ethical approval" (Grudniewicz et al., 2019, p. 210).

Predatory journals usually exhibit several identifiable characteristics. Common features include an absence of rigorous peer review, misleading or false claims about impact factors or indexing, fabricated editorial boards, and aggressive email solicitations targeting inexperienced researchers (Beall, 2017; Shen & Björk, 2015). Many also engage in deceptive website practices, such as imitating the titles or formatting of reputable journals to mislead authors (Cobey et al., 2018; Elmore & Weston, 2020).

The rise of predatory publishing poses significant problems for the academic community. First, it undermines scholarly integrity. Articles published without proper peer review may contain inaccuracies, methodological flaws, or unsubstantiated claims, which weaken the reliability of academic literature (Eve & Priego, 2017; Moher et al., 2017). Second, predatory journals exploit researchers, particularly early-career scholars, who may be pressured to publish but lack the expertise to evaluate journal legitimacy (Eriksson & Helgesson, 2017; Heng, 2025). Third, these journals contribute to the spread of misinformation by allowing unvetted or low-quality research to circulate

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widely, which can mislead policymakers, practitioners, and other scholars (Eve & Priego, 2017; Grudniewicz et al., 2019).

It is, therefore, essential to distinguish predatory journals from legitimate open-access journals. High-quality open-access outlets adhere to recognized editorial standards, transparent peer-review processes, ethical oversight, and established indexing practices (Suber, 2012). Predatory journals, by contrast, mimic the open-access model but prioritize profit over quality, offering little or no editorial rigor (Beall, 2012; Shen & Björk, 2015). Recognizing this distinction is vital to safeguarding the credibility of scholarly communication.

The growth of predatory publishing

Predatory publishing emerged alongside the expansion of the open-access movement. While open access was aimed at democratizing access to research and removing financial barriers for readers, some actors exploited the author-pays model to create low-quality, pay-to-publish outlets (Beall, 2012; Suber, 2012). Early alerts to the problem (Beall, 2012, 2017) were followed by systematic investigations showing rapid market growth and substantial article volumes in journals classified as potentially predatory (Shamseer et al., 2017; Shen & Björk, 2015).

Global trends indicate large and rapid expansion. Drawing on multiple sources of journal listings and databases, Shen and Björk (2015) estimated that articles in journals they labelled as predatory rose from roughly 53,000 in 2010 to an estimated 420,000 in 2014. This sharp rise illustrates both rapid proliferation and broad uptake across regions and disciplines. Subsequent scoping and comparative studies have documented the continuing international footprint of predatory outlets and their distinguishing features (Cobey et al., 2018; Shamseer et al., 2017).

There are various structural and cultural explanations for why researchers fall victim to predatory journals. The 'publish-or-perish' incentives in academia push scholars to maximize publication counts and productivity metrics. This pressure creates demand that predatory publishers meet quickly and cheaply (Demir, 2018; Eriksson & Helgesson, 2017). Lack of awareness, particularly among researchers in low- and middle-income countries or among early-career scholars unfamiliar with journal quality markers, increases susceptibility (Cobey et al., 2018; Heng, 2025; Shamseer et al., 2017). Additional pressures to

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publish rapidly (e.g., career timelines, grant deadlines) make the fast turnaround offered by predatory journals attractive despite the reputational and scholarly threat of predatory publishing (Demir, 2018; Moher et al., 2017). Taken together, historical context, documented growth in article volumes, and the interaction of systemic incentives and information asymmetries explain the expansion of predatory publishing and why many researchers continue to submit to these outlets.

Red flags: How to identify predatory journals

When identifying predatory journals, we need to conduct a careful evaluation of a journal's practices, communication patterns, and transparency. First, one of the most evident warning signs is aggressive or spam-like email invitations (Elmore & Weston, 2020). Predatory publishers often send mass, unsolicited emails praising a researcher's work and urging rapid submission. These solicitations are a well-documented tactic used to attract inexperienced authors (Cobey et al., 2018; Eriksson & Helgesson, 2017).

Second, another red flag is a broad or unrealistic journal scope. Predatory journals frequently claim to publish across unrelated disciplines, for example, combining medicine, engineering, and social sciences, indicating a lack of editorial specialization (Shamseer et al., 2017). Legitimate journals typically define a clear scholarly focus aligned with the expertise of their editorial team.

Third, the editorial board is another critical element to examine. Questionable journals often list scholars without their consent, use unverifiable names, or provide no institutional affiliations (Elmore & Weston, 2020; Moher et al., 2017). A credible journal provides full editorial transparency, including verifiable affiliations and clear editorial responsibilities.

Fourth, promises of rapid or guaranteed publication are also common indicators of predatory practices. Shen and Björk (2015) found that predatory journals frequently advertise extremely short turnaround times, reflecting the absence of meaningful peer review. Authentic peer review necessarily requires time, multiple reviewers, and opportunities for revision (Kelly et al., 2014).

Fifth, predatory publishers also employ fake or misleading impact factors, with many often citing nonexistent indexing services or fabricated metrics. Grudniewicz et al. (2019) noted that many predatory journals display invented

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metrics meant to mimic legitimate ones, such as the Journal Impact Factor or Scopus CiteScore.

Sixth, excessively high article processing charges (APCs) without transparent justification constitute another warning sign (Elmore & Weston, 2020). While APCs are common in reputable open-access publishing, predatory journals often charge fees that are not commensurate with editorial services provided (Suber, 2012).

Finally, the journal website often reveals quality concerns. Poor grammar, broken hyperlinks, imitation of legitimate journal titles, and missing contact information are frequently observed in predatory outlets (Elmore & Weston, 2020; Eriksson & Helgesson, 2017; Shamseer et al., 2017). Real-world investigations further illustrate these red flags. For example, Bohannon's (2013) experiment showed that many journals accepted a deliberately flawed manuscript without proper peer review, exemplifying how predatory outlets readily publish low-quality research.

Consequences of publishing in predatory journals

Publishing in predatory journals can have significant consequences for individual researchers and the broader academic community. One key concern is the loss of credibility for authors (Aboyade et al., 2024). Because predatory journals lack legitimate peer review and quality control, scholars associated with them may be perceived as careless or uninformed, which can damage professional reputation (Eriksson & Helgesson, 2017). A related problem is that research published in predatory journals is rarely recognized, cited, or respected (Björk et al., 2020). These journals are typically excluded from reputable indexing services and academic databases, which severely limits scholarly visibility and impact (Shen & Björk, 2015). As a result, even high-quality studies lose academic value when disseminated through predatory channels.

Predatory publishing can also undermine academic career progression. Hiring committees, promotion panels, and grant agencies increasingly scrutinize publication venues, and publications in predatory journals may be interpreted as an attempt to inflate academic output dishonestly (Eve & Priego, 2017; Moher et al., 2017). This can have long-term consequences for career advancement. In addition, authors may face financial exploitation. Many predatory journals

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charge high APCs without offering editorial services or ensuring long-term archiving (Elmore & Weston, 2020; Suber, 2012). These fees can be particularly detrimental to early-career researchers and scholars in low- and middle-income countries.

Beyond individual harm, predatory publishing has negative impacts on the academic community and public trust in research. The dissemination of unvetted or poor-quality research increases the risk of misinformation influencing policy, practice, and public understanding (Eve & Priego, 2017). As Grudniewicz et al. (2019) argued, predatory journals undermine the integrity of scholarly communication by blurring the lines between credible and illegitimate science. Overall, the consequences of publishing in predatory outlets are more than academic publication; they negatively impact academic integrity, weaken scholarly communication, and threaten public trust in research (Elmore & Weston, 2020; Eve & Priego, 2017).

How to avoid predatory publishing

To avoid predatory publishing, researchers should conduct systematic checks before choosing where to publish. A crucial first step is assessing the journal's credentials (Leonard et al., 2021). Reputable journals are typically indexed in well-established databases such as the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Scopus, and Web of Science, all of which apply stringent evaluation criteria related to transparency, peer review, and editorial quality. While indexing does not guarantee excellence, absence from such databases, especially when accompanied by unclear or exaggerated claims, should be treated with skepticism (Demir, 2018).

Utilizing structured tools such as the *Think.Check.Submit.* checklist can further support sound decision-making when selecting a journal (Elmore & Weston, 2020). This initiative provides guiding questions to help authors evaluate a journal's aims, scope, editorial practices, and peer review processes. Evidence from broader scholarly research on checklist-based assessment indicates that such structured tools can enhance researchers' awareness of predatory publishing characteristics. A systematic review by Cukier et al. (2020) identified 93 checklists developed to help authors detect potentially predatory journals, demonstrating strong recognition within the academic community of the value of structured evaluation tools. However, the review also noted that only a small proportion of these checklists were developed through evidence-based

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methods, which highlights the need for rigorous, validated instruments. Despite this limitation, the widespread use of checklists shows that structured approaches, such as the *Think.Check.Submit.* checklist, play an important role in helping researchers critically assess journal legitimacy and avoid predatory outlets (Khabour et al., 2024).

Assessing the editorial board is another important strategy. Legitimate journals generally list recognized scholars with institutional affiliations. If editorial board members are unknown in the field, lack verifiable academic backgrounds, or appear on the editorial boards of multiple unrelated journals, researchers should be cautious (Elmore & Weston, 2020). In addition, a journal's peer review policy should be clearly described, including the type of review and expected timelines. Unrealistically fast acceptance promises or unclear review procedures are commonly associated with predatory outlets (Cobey et al., 2018; Elmore & Weston, 2020).

Researchers should also be skeptical of unsolicited email invitations to submit manuscripts or join editorial boards. Such invitations often use flattery, emphasize rapid publication, or highlight extensive scopes. Genuine high-quality journals rarely use mass solicitation, and responsible publishers do not guarantee publication in exchange for fees (Anderson, 2018). Moreover, empirical studies of solicitation emails have demonstrated that many come from journals subsequently identified as predatory, with common red flags including promises of guaranteed acceptance, vague review processes, and failure to disclose publication fees upfront (Shen & Björk, 2015; Wilson, 2022).

Another effective strategy is to consult mentors, supervisors, colleagues, or academic librarians. Librarians, in particular, are usually trained in evaluating journal quality and can provide guidance on trustworthy information sources and publisher practices (Cukier et al., 2020; Leonard et al., 2021). Major publishers' journal-finder tools, such as Elsevier Journal Finder or Springer Journal Suggester, can also be used to identify suitable venues. However, authors must still critically assess each recommended journal. In the context of Cambodia, authors may refer to the ASEAN Citation Index or Indonesia's Science and Technology Index for legitimate journals recognized by these indexes. Publishing in journals managed by relevant ministries such as the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport or educational institutions such as the

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Royal University of Phnom Penh or the Institute of Technology of Cambodia is also a viable option.

Institutional repositories offer another safe alternative to predatory publishing. Many universities maintain digital archives where researchers can deposit their peer-reviewed articles, theses, and datasets, ensuring long-term preservation and open accessibility while maintaining institutional oversight (Santos-Hermosa, 2023). Similarly, preprint servers, such as arXiv for physics and mathematics or SSRN for social sciences, allow researchers to share manuscripts before formal peer review. These platforms facilitate early feedback and scholarly discussion without the financial or ethical risks associated with predatory journals (Björk & Solomon, 2013).

Finally, awareness-raising efforts at institutional levels in the form of workshops, research integrity training, and guidelines can play an important role in equipping scholars to recognize and avoid predatory publishers (Aboyade et al., 2024; Heng, 2025). Research has shown that enhanced institutional support reduces researchers' vulnerability to deceptive publishing practices (Shen & Björk, 2015). Heng (2025) recommended that universities should provide training for supervisors and students on publishing ethics, research integrity, and academic publishing standards to help them distinguish legitimate journals from predatory ones and avoid predatory outlets.

Conclusion

Predatory publishing poses a serious threat to research quality, scholarly credibility, and the integrity of academic communication. These predatory platforms typically lack rigorous peer review, transparent editorial standards, and legitimate indexing, making them harmful to both individual researchers and the broader academic community. Thus, understanding what predatory journals are and why they matter is essential, especially for early-career researchers who may be more vulnerable to misleading publishing practices. To avoid predatory outlets, researchers can verify journal credentials, consult credible databases, evaluate editorial boards, and use structured tools such as the *Think.Check.Submit.* checklist. They can also seek guidance from mentors, colleagues, and librarians.

Moving forward, researchers must be vigilant and proactive. Keeping abreast of publishing standards, participating in institutional training, and fostering

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open conversations about publication ethics all contribute to a more responsible scholarly environment. Promoting good practices and supporting peers, especially junior researchers, can help strengthen collective awareness and reduce susceptibility to predatory practices. Ultimately, responsible publishing is vital for maintaining public trust, advancing knowledge, and ensuring that research contributes meaningfully to academia and society.

In the context of Cambodia, where there is a rapid expansion of research output, including publications in predatory journals (Heng, 2025), future research is needed to examine local scholars' awareness, perceptions, and experiences pertaining to predatory publishing. Empirical research could explore the prevalence of predatory publishing within Cambodian higher education, the factors that render researchers vulnerable to predatory publishing, and the effectiveness of institutional policies and training programs. Such evidence would provide valuable insights to strengthen national research integrity frameworks, support research capacity building, and guide universities in developing targeted interventions to promote ethical and responsible publishing practices.

Overview of this issue

Six articles are included in the present issue (Volume 5, Number 2) of the *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research* (CJER). Among these articles, one is an original article based on data from a cross-sectional survey, and the rest are review articles relying on secondary data. The first article in this issue was contributed by Vitou Tes. The article examines factors influencing Cambodian Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) students' decisions to enroll in TVET programs. Analysis of survey data with 119 Cambodian students shows that pull factors, such as curricula and teachers' competencies, exert greater influence on students' decisions to enroll in TVET programs than push factors, such as interests and motivation.

The second article is a systematic review article written by Englalin Ek. In the article, the author discusses effective design features of digital professional development to support teachers in integrating digital technologies into teaching. The review, based on 11 empirical studies, shows three design features that foster the effectiveness of digital professional development. These included the need to address teachers' content and pedagogical needs, provide active learning opportunities, and offer ongoing and meaningful support.

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The third article examines issues concerning the quality of education and research in Cambodian higher education. It is authored by Kimkong Heng, who proposes directions for reforms, focusing on (a) addressing the issue of fragmentation of sectoral governance, (b) improving teaching and learning as well as assessment practices, and (c) promoting independent learning and research engagement. The article argues for improving higher education quality and promoting independent learning and research.

The fourth article is written by Vitou Tes and Sroem Khen. It discusses the roles of soft skills in enhancing graduates' employability. Drawing on secondary sources, the article argues that there are various soft skills essential for students, including leadership, communication, networking, negotiation, teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving, self-marketing, learnability, and anger management. The article recommends strategies for developing soft skills for employability enhancement, focusing on promoting self-directed learning, implementing extracurricular activity programs, integrating work-based learning opportunities, offering mentorship and training initiatives, and improving curricula through enhanced industry-university collaboration.

The fifth article focuses on digital literacy integration in higher education. It is contributed by Chhayna Cheng, who reviews secondary sources to provide a synthesis of the benefits and drawbacks of integrating digital literacy in higher education. The article highlights that digital literacy can enhance student engagement, provide flexibility in learning, and foster academic performance. However, it could lead to over-reliance on digital applications, breaches of academic ethics, and distractions to students' learning concentration. The article suggests integrating digital literacy into curricula and improving access to information and communication technology to support students in the increasingly digitalized learning environment.

The final article in this issue is about lexical cohesive devices used in poetry. In the article, Jonathan M. Macaraeg analyzes Telegram poetry to examine lexical cohesion in poetic texts. The analysis shows that reiteration and collocation were the most prominent lexical cohesive devices and that antonyms, as lexical cohesive devices, are more common than synonyms. Common themes among the analyzed poetics include reflections on life, love, and sorrow. The article

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concludes that Telegram poetry can be used to support English language teaching and learning.

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During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT to develop an outline and find relevant references. After using this tool to support the writing of this editorial, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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