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Citations of articles in predatory nursing journals

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ABSTRACT

Background: Nursing journals from predatory publication outlets may look authentic and seem to be a credible source of information. However, further inspection may reveal otherwise.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to analyze publication and dissemination patterns of articles published in known predatory nursing journals.

Method: Using Scopus, reference lists were searched for citations from seven identified predatory nursing journals. Bibliographic information and subsequent citation information were then collected and analyzed.

Findings: A total of 814 citations of articles published in predatory nursing journals were identified. Further analysis indicated that these articles were cited in 141 nonpredatory nursing journals of various types.

Discussion: Predatory nursing journals continue to persist, yet fewer may now be in existence. Education and information may help authors and reviewers identify predatory journals, thereby discouraging submissions to these publications and hesitancy among authors to cite articles published in them.

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The growth of the Internet has led to many changes in scholarly publishing. One significant change has been the expansion of open access (OA), making articles freely available to readers via the Internet, in comparison to subscription journals to which readers only have access to articles if they, or their library, subscribe to the journal or they pay to read them. With OA, the author, institution, or government pays a

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publication fee. An OA article may be published in an OA journal, maintained in an online repository of articles often in preprint form (articles prior to peer review) or as postprints (accepted articles prior to copyediting), or published in a traditional subscription journal that publishes articles without a fee but also has an option for hybrid OA. With OA, other than the article being freely available, the peer review process, indexing in bibliographic databases such as MEDLINE and the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), and other editorial and publishing practices are the same as traditional subscription journals (Baker et al., 2018; Cortegiani et al., 2018; Shen & Björk, 2015).

Predatory journals, sometimes referred to as pseudojournals, use an OA model but do not adhere to editorial and publishing standards. They have questionable peer review practices (if any peer review is done), publish deceptive information about the journal (e.g., the journal's impact factor and where the journal is indexed), and use spam emails to solicit submissions (Cobey et al., 2018; Cortegiani et al., 2018; Memon, 2018; Oermann et al., 2016). Published articles are available on the journal website but are not indexed in bibliographic databases such as MEDLINE and CINAHL for others to find when searching for a topic. A study of predatory nursing journals found that many journals only publish one or two volumes, and when they stop publishing, the articles are no longer available (Oermann et al., 2016). Other characteristics of predatory journals include editorial board members who may have no responsibilities with the journal or a background to serve as a board member; using similar names to reputable journals leading authors to believe they have submitted to a reputable journal; lack of transparency with journal operations, publication fees, and other processes; and blatant plagiarism in the articles they publish (Baker et al., 2018; Cobey et al., 2018; Cortegiani et al., 2018; Cortegiani, Sanfilippo, Tramarin, & Giarratano, 2018; Forero et al., 2018; Memon, 2018; Owens & Nicoll, 2019; Wicherts, 2016).

Studies of citations can reveal the communication of information through the literature and use of it by other authors. When a work is cited in a subsequent article, knowledge is transferred beyond the original source and contributes to the accumulation of nursing science (Kokol, Vošner, & Vermeulen, 2017). A recent citation analysis in a sample of 81 articles from 80 nursing journals demonstrated persistence, reach, and dissemination (Nicoll et al., 2018). Persistence was the ongoing citation of articles over many years; reach was patterns of geographic citations that encompassed countries across the globe; and dissemination was citation of articles beyond the nursing literature. When predatory journal articles are cited in nonpredatory nursing journals, that information is disseminated into the scholarly nursing literature and has the potential to compromise nursing science. To date limited studies have examined the citations of articles published in predatory journals, and none appear to have been done in nursing. The purpose of this study was to examine the dissemination of information from articles published in predatory nursing journals into the nursing literature through citation analysis.

Literature Review

Many studies have examined predatory publishing. Some of this research has documented the volume of predatory publishing, characteristics of authors and journals, and quality of articles (Cobey et al., 2018; Frandsen, 2017; Shamseer et al., 2017; Shen & Björk, 2015). To better describe characteristics of predatory journals, Cobey et al. (2018) conducted a scoping review of the literature on predatory journals. From 38 empirical studies, they identified more than 100 characteristics, which they then grouped into six areas: (1) journal operations, (2) articles, (3) editorial and peer review, (4) communication, (5) article processing charges, and (6) dissemination, indexing, and archiving.

An earlier study documented the scope of predatory publishing in nursing and described characteristics of 140 predatory nursing journals and authors (Oermann et al., 2016). Consistent with other fields, the journals' peer review and other editorial processes, publication practices, qualifications of editors and editorial boards, and article content were of questionable quality, and information at the journal website was often deceptive (Edie & Conklin, 2019; McCann & Polacsek, 2018; Oermann et al., 2016, 2017). Many journals published only one or two volumes and then published fewer articles or stopped publishing (Oermann et al., 2016). In a study of predatory nursing and midwifery journals, McCann and Polacsek (2018) reviewed the predatory publishing literature from 2007 to 2017, with the goal of developing guidelines for nurse clinicians, educators, and researchers to avoid selecting a predatory journal. They provided recommendations for authors and institutions to mitigate against predatory publishing.

Predatory journals typically solicit manuscripts via emails to potential authors. A collection of 206 email invitations from predatory journals and publishers sent to faculty and students in a school of nursing, over a 10-week period, documented the use of flattering language, awkward phrases, and often grammatical errors (Lewinski & Oermann, 2018). However, most of the emails from predatory publishers to nursing faculty and students ($n = 119$, 57.8%) did not have these clues that the journal might be predatory.

Fewer studies have tracked citations of predatory articles. In a study of 32 journals published by two predatory publishers in Nigeria, Nwagwu and Ojemeni (2015) found 12,596 citations in Google Scholar, 2.25 citations per article. Citations to 124 predatory journals were tracked in Scopus by Frandsen (2017). There were 1295 citations to these journals, less than 10 citations

per journal in a 4-year time period, resulting in Frandsen concluding that the citations to predatory journals in the nonpredatory literature was limited.

Ross-White, Godfrey, Sears, and Wilson (2019) examined the extent that articles in journals published by one of the major predatory publishers were cited in systematic reviews. From the list of more than 1,000 journals on the publisher's website, they identified 459 that related to health and biomedical sciences and searched for citations of articles in these journals in Google Scholar. They found 157 systematic reviews that cited an article from this publisher.

Concerned about the inclusion of predatory journals in library databases, used by students and faculty for their research, Nelson and Huffman (2015) examined ProQuest Central, EBSCO Academic Search Complete, Gale Academic OneFile, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) for predatory journals. The extent of predatory journals in these databases was limited: the DOAJ had the highest number of predatory publishers in its database (23 of 5,456 total publishers, 2.25%).

Method

Identification of Predatory Nursing Journals

To identify predatory journals for this citation analysis, the research team updated a list of predatory nursing journals they had compiled earlier using Beall's list (Beall, 2016; Oermann et al., 2016). Beall, an academic librarian, had maintained a list of OA publishers ($n = 1155$ on January 3, 2017) and journals ($n = 1294$ on January 3, 2017) that he characterized as predatory, generally based on their high fees to publish papers and limited peer review and editorial oversight. After his website closed in January 2017, the list (https://beallslist.weebly.com/standalone-journals.html) has been maintained by an anonymous website manager using the criteria originally established by Beall (Chawla, 2018). This list includes the publishers and standalone journals from the original Beall's list and a section on new publishers.

The team searched the websites of the 42 new predatory publishers and found nine that published nursing journals (as of September 15, 2018). In addition, we searched our original list of 140 predatory nursing journals to determine if each of the journals was still available. We used the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) for each journal to access its website. Of the original list of 140 nursing journals, 14 URLs did not open, three journals had no URL to access, and five indicated the journal website was under construction or domain had expired. This process yielded 118 predatory nursing journals (from our original study) plus nine new journals for a total of 127 predatory nursing journals.

Selection of Sample of Predatory Nursing Journals for Citation Analysis

Next, we updated the number of articles published by the 118 predatory nursing journals (from our original study) and identified the number of articles published in each of the nine predatory journals in nursing. We counted the numbers in the current issue plus the archives at the journal websites. We selected journals that had published at least 100 articles as of October 2018; the final sample included seven predatory nursing journals that published between 104 and 398 articles. These journals were on our original list and had been determined to reflect characteristics of predatory journals (Oermann et al., 2016).

Because predatory journals are not indexed in databases that provide article citation information, such as Scopus, the medical librarian on our research team developed a procedure to search the reference lists of thousands of articles in Scopus to identify citing articles (those that cited an article from one of the seven identified predatory nursing journals). First, she searched for the exact phrase of the predatory journal title (enclosed in curly brackets) in the Reference Source Title Field, limited to Nursing and English Language (Scopus search: (REFSRCTITLE ({}) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "NURS")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")). This produced a list of 814 articles in Scopus that cited at least one article from one of these predatory nursing journals. The search also included seven book chapters and one conference paper, which were omitted. This search in Scopus was completed in October 2018.

Second, she exported all results from Scopus including citation information, bibliographic information, and "include references" to Excel. Next, five members of the research team searched these references for the cited article and recorded the author name(s), article title, year published, and full citation. A research assistant went to each predatory journal website; downloaded the cited article to Airtable (Airtable, Inc., San Francisco, CA); and recorded the author affiliation (setting, city, state, country) and discipline. Data from the Excel spreadsheet were exported to Airtable.

Data Analysis

To confirm the accuracy of the citation and citing article data, we selected 10% of the predatory journal articles and repeated our process, modifying the data entered for a few citations. Data were exported from Excel to SAS/STAT software (ver. 9.3, SAS System for Windows, SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC) for analysis. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results

There were 814 citations to articles published in predatory nursing journals. These articles were cited in 141

Table 1 – Year Predatory Article Published and First Citation in Nonpredatory Journal

Year	Year PA Published *n* (%)	Year of First Citation of PA *n* (%)
2008	29 (3.56)	-
2009	16 (1.97)	1 (0.12)
2010	12 (1.47)	3 (0.37)
2011	13 (1.60)	5 (0.61)
2012	133 (16.34)	7 (0.86)
2013	196 (24.08)	25 (3.07)
2014	200 (24.57)	44 (5.41)
2015	145 (17.81)	121 (14.86)
2016	54 (6.63)	172 (21.13)
2017	14 (1.72)	236 (28.99)
2018	2 (0.25)	200 (24.57)

PA, predatory article.
N = 7 predatory nursing journals.

nonpredatory nursing journals of all types: scientific research, clinical specialty, education, administration, and others. The first predatory articles in this dataset were published in 2008 (*n* = 29, 3.56%). The first citation to one of these articles was in 2009 (*n* = 1). The number of citations has increased annually with a peak of 236 in 2017 (Table 1).

Predatory articles were generally cited between 1 and 4 years after their publication (Figure 1). The mean time between publication and citation was 2.95 (SD 1.68) years. Many of the predatory articles were cited multiple times and often by the authors of the article. For example, an article on the postoperative recovery period was cited 10 times (by the same authors), followed by articles on interpersonal neuroscience and virtual simulation, which were each cited nine times. Articles published in predatory journals were cited in all types of articles in the nonpredatory nursing literature including databased and non databased papers

Table 2 – Types of Documents in which Predatory Articles Were Cited

Type	*n* (%)
Article	713 (87.70)
Review	85 (10.46)
Editorial	10 (1.23)
Other	5 (0.62)

Type as identified in Scopus: Article: original research or opinion published in peer-reviewed journal; Review: significant review of original research, typically with an extensive bibliography; Editorial: Summary of several articles or provides editorial opinions or news (Elsevier, 2017, pp. 10-11).

and 85 articles that were identified in Scopus as reviews, defined by Scopus as "significant reviews of original research" (Elsevier, 2017, p. 11) (Table 2).

Citing Journal Characteristics

There was a wide range across the journals in the number of citations to predatory articles. Of the 141 nursing journals (nonpredatory), a third (*n* = 47) only published one article between 2009 and 2018 that cited a predatory article. However, other nursing journals published multiple articles with citations to predatory journals. At the top of the list was a clinical practice journal with 77 articles that included references to predatory articles. This journal was followed by a nursing education journal that published 55 articles with at least one citation to a predatory journal and another journal that focuses on disseminating research and scholarship in nursing with 35 articles citing a predatory publication (Figure 2). The median was 2. Most of the authors of articles that cited predatory journals were from the United States (*n* = 250, 30.9%), followed by Australia (*n* = 100, 12.4%), and Sweden (*n* = 67, 8.3%).

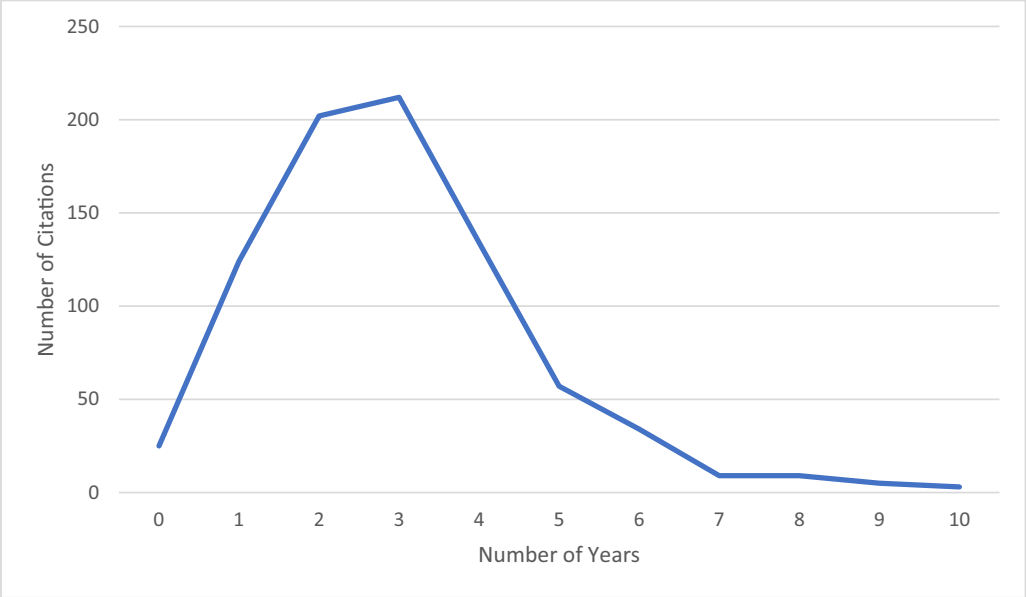

Figure 1 – Years to first citation of predatory article in nonpredatory nursing journal.

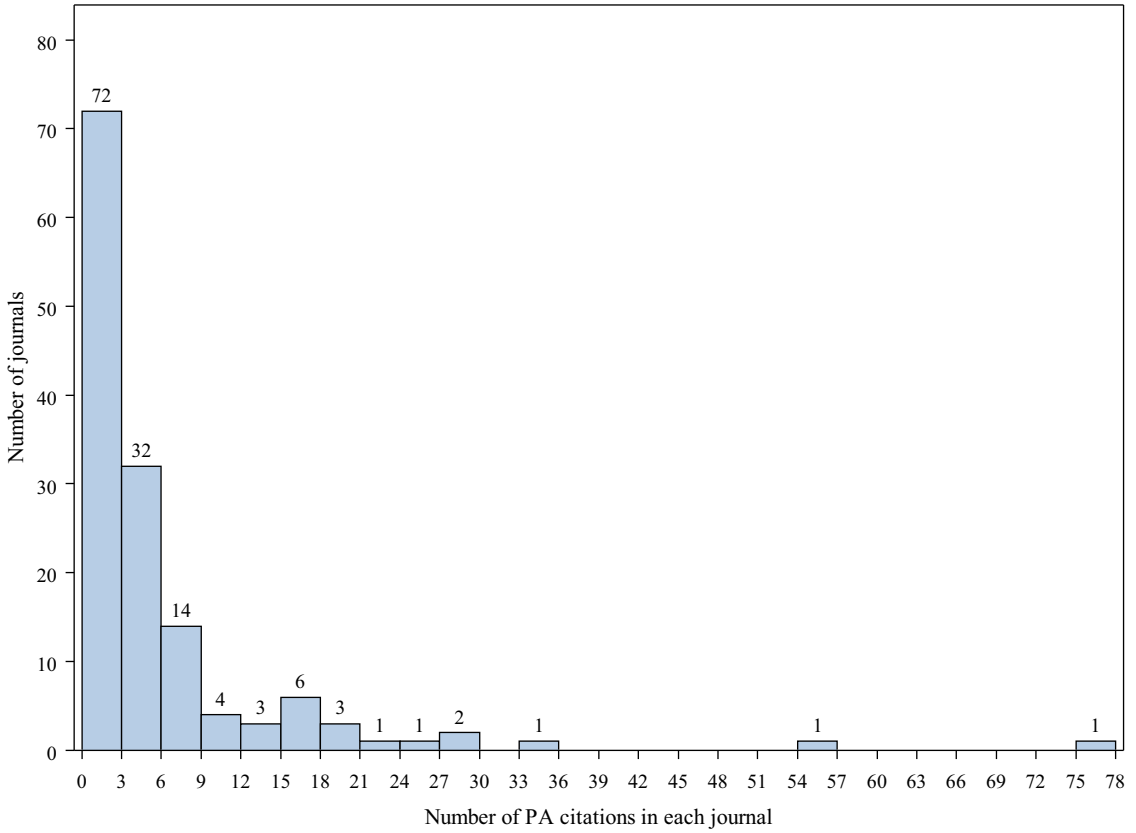

Figure 2 – Distribution of the number of predatory article (PA) citations in each nonpredatory nursing journal.

In an effort to learn more about the citing journals, we compared the number of citations of predatory articles between nursing journals with a PubMed ID (PMID, which includes journals in MEDLINE or PubMed Central) ($n = 530$, 65.1%) and those that did not have a PMID ($n = 284$, 34.9%). There were no differences in the number of citations. We also compared nursing journals with ($n = 361$) and without ($n = 453$) a Journal Impact Factor based on the 2018 Journal Citation Reports (Clarivate Analytics, 2019). There were no differences in the number of citations between these two groups.

Predatory Journal Articles: Author Characteristics

The majority of authors of predatory articles were from the United States ($n = 267$, 32.8%), followed by Sweden ($n = 98$, 12.1%), Australia, ($n = 66$, 8.1%), and Canada ($n = 54$, 6.6%). The number of authors ranged from 1 (121 articles, 14.9%) to 14 (2 articles, 0.25%). The mean number was 3.47 (SD 2.11) authors/article. Although the predatory journals were titled as nursing journals, the disciplines of the authors included both nursing (46.1%) and medicine (44.4%).

Discussion

An analysis of citations provides a means of identifying trends in a field, the impact and characteristics of authors and journals, and dissemination of research and knowledge through the literature (Nicoll et al., 2018). Studies have documented questionable peer review processes and lack of other editorial and publishing standards among predatory journals. Without a rigorous peer review, there is no mechanism to ensure the quality of articles, accuracy of information in them, and validity of the findings, with some findings that might be harmful to patients (Forero et al., 2018). By citing articles from predatory journals, authors spread information that may not be credible through the scientific literature for use by other researchers and clinicians. Our study did not examine how the predatory article was used in the citing article, from including it in a list of references to supporting a gap in knowledge or explaining the findings based on research reported in the predatory journal. Regardless, citing predatory articles disseminates these publications and knowledge in them beyond the original source.

Few studies have tracked citations of predatory articles. Nwagwu and Ojemeni (2015) documented 12,596 citations to 32 journals for a mean of 2.25 citations per article. In another study of citations to 124 predatory journals using Scopus, similar to our study, there were fewer than 10 citations per journal over a 4-year period, leading the author to conclude that the problem of citations to potentially predatory journals is not extensive (Frandsen, 2017). In our study, we documented a median of two articles per journal that

cited one of the seven predatory publications. While this is a small number of citations, we only examined these seven journals: the number would likely be higher if citations to all of the predatory nursing journals were tracked through the literature.

Predatory articles were generally cited between 1 and 4 years after their publication. In an earlier study of nursing research articles, the median length of time between the publication of the original study and the first citation was 1.5 years, with a range from 0 to 6 years (Oermann, Shaw-Kokot, Knafl, & Dowell, 2010). However, with OA journals and many nursing journals publishing ahead of print, current studies are needed to better understand time to citation.

There were 85 articles categorized as reviews in Scopus that cited predatory articles. We did not read these articles to determine how the predatory article was actually used, (e.g., in the background or as one of the research studies reviewed). Nurse authors conducting systematic and other types of reviews need to be careful about databases they search for articles. Ross-White et al. (2019) cautioned authors about searching in Google Scholar and PubMed Central because they did not have the same "quality control" for inclusion of publications as other bibliographic databases. Studies have found recently that some articles in predatory journals are cited in PubMed Central (Manca, Moher, Cugusi, Dvir, & Deriu, 2018). PubMed, a search interface frequently used by nurses and other health care professionals, includes both the MEDLINE database as well as PubMed Central articles published by NIH-funded researchers. MEDLINE and PubMed Central have different criteria for indexing journals. MEDLINE is a journal citation database managed by the National Library of Medicine that has rigorous criteria for journal inclusion, while PubMed Central is a full text repository for biomedical and life science articles that does not follow the same quality journal selection guidelines as MEDLINE. Due to this difference in selection criteria, predatory journal articles in PubMed Central may appear in PubMed search results alongside MEDLINE journal articles. When searching PubMed, researchers are advised to rely on MEDLINE indexed journals (Manca et al., 2018).

Our study confirmed that predatory journals in nursing continue to exist, and as journals cease publishing, new journals are started. However, the number might be decreasing. In a prior study we found 140 journals from 75 publishers; 3 years later, 22 of these original journals were no longer available, but there were nine new journals for a total of 127 predatory nursing journals. This decrease in number may be the result of fewer submissions and more awareness by nurse authors about predatory publishing. Peer reviewers need to be educated to look for these predatory journals as they review the currency and relevancy of references in manuscripts. Editors also have a responsibility to ask authors to omit those sources prior to publishing their papers.

Limitations

First, we used an updated version of Beall's list, which is maintained by an anonymous source. Criticisms of Beall's original list included a lack of transparency in the methodology for adding publishers and journals to the list, not seeking further information from publishers about issues with editorial and peer review processes, and inclusion of some new journals on the list without giving them adequate time to update their processes and websites (Richtig, Berger, Lange-Asschenfeldt, Aberer, & Richtig, 2018). However, the seven journals in this current project were in our original study of predatory nursing journals and determined to reflect characteristics of predatory journals (Oermann et al., 2016). Second, conclusions about the extent of citations of predatory articles in the nursing literature are limited by our study of only seven journals. Third, we did not analyze the quality of the cited articles. Although an earlier study revealed questionable article quality and relevance to nursing, we did not review the cited papers in this project. Consistent with studies on predatory journals, we assume the manuscripts did not go through a rigorous peer review; nevertheless, they may not be of poor quality.

Conclusions

Nurses at all levels are encouraged to trust and often apply findings published in nursing literature in their clinical practice. Research findings that are published in journals that do not exercise definitive standards with regard to peer review, editing, and publishing run the risk of deteriorating and discrediting nursing science and the body of scholarship that supports it.

This analysis revealed that predatory publishing in nursing continues to exist despite studies and discussions among academic communities about the significance and seriousness of this problem. In response, nurse researchers, authors, editors, and reviewers must remain aware of predatory nursing publications and concerns about citing these articles in the nonpredatory nursing literature. Information literacy skills education should include not only the importance of reviewing the content of the literature, but also the source. This includes the characteristics and practices of predatory publishers, which may help consumers of nursing research and other types of literature proceed with caution as they consider the content published by these outlets.

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