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Promotion standards to discourage publishing in questionable journals: a follow-up study

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ABSTRACT

Predatory publishing poses significant challenges to academic integrity and progress. It requires the involvement of academic institutions, funding bodies, and policymakers to establish robust evaluation mechanisms and promote ethical publishing practices. This study examines the effectiveness of implementing promotion policies to discourage unethical academic publishing, focusing on Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Ghana. This study analyses 273 promotion applications submitted from January 2022 to November 2023, regardless of approval. The results show that researchers at KNUST submit relatively more publications to recommended outlets after the implementation of the new promotion guidelines. Moreover, with nine out of ten non-verified publications found to be from predatory journals, the verification process effectively discourages publication such outlets. Our study therefore confirms that the verification process can identify predatory publication outlets. Consequently, it is recommended that research institutions eliminate incentives for publishing in questionable outlets through publication criteria as part of promotion standards.

Introduction

Academic publishing is a cornerstone of academia and quality is integral (Koerber et al., 2023), but academic publishing is also liable to risk and fraud (Tomlinson, 2024) when publishers produce and manage journals in a fraudulent and pseudo-scholarly fashion (Downes, 2023).

Predatory publishing represent an unethical practice that introduces significant distortive effects on fair academic competitions, research careers, funds allocation and scientific progress (Caporale & Zagarella, 2023). Predatory publishing has far-reaching consequences as illustrated by Callaghan and Nicholson (2020) who identify the following four themes: a) the influences and consequences of Open-Access publishing on predatory journals, b) maintaining academic standards following the proliferation of predatory journals, c) the response of developing countries to predatory journals, and d) the need to restrain predatory journals. Consequently, the problems associated with predatory publishing are multifaceted, and there is nothing to suggest that the problems will go away by themselves as new scams keep occurring (Siler et al., 2021).

Publications lacking rigorous peer review processes enter the scholarly ecology which implies that substandard or even pseudoscientific content may be disseminated, leading to a dilution of the quality of scholarly literature. Thus, low-quality studies find their way into research syntheses, and there is no consensus among evidence synthesizers as to how these studies should be treated in an evidence synthesis (Barker et al., 2023; Pollock et al., 2023). Not only is the academic community at risk of being misinformed but it also undermines the trust in scientific research. The distortive effects pose a risk that potentially undermines the scientific community's trust and erodes the relationship between the scientific community and the general population (Caporale & Zagarella, 2023).

The struggle against predatory publishing typically involves the individual researchers being offered training (Balakumar & Jagadeesh, 2023; Boukacem-Zeghmouri, 2023; Dadkhah et al., 2023; Leena & Jeevan, 2022) or advice (Dora & Kampa, 2023). However, as stressed by Koerber et al. (2023) there is no shortage of information and training available related to scholarly publishing ethics. Marar et al. (2023) suggest designing educational programs or training interventions on the basis of a questionnaire to measure knowledge and perceptions of predatory journals among researchers. Some researchers are, however, already aware (Joaquin & Biana, 2023; Kurambayev & Freedman, 2023). Others may just mimic the behaviour of a senior colleague as

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suggested by Gerashchenko (2023) who finds that universities tend to adopt their leaders' dishonest behaviour. Therefore, the struggle against predatory publishing thus extends beyond individual researchers. It involves academic institutions, funding bodies and policymakers to establish robust evaluation mechanisms, raise awareness, and promote ethical publishing practices. Monitoring and evaluation can be used as means to restrain predatory publishing (Fahlevi et al., 2023; Tang & Jia, 2023).

Developing countries struggle in particular with predatory publishing (Cojocaru et al., 2022; El Bairi et al., 2023; Kurambayev & Freedman, 2023) as they lack proper policies or guidance (Otike et al., 2022). An earlier study shows, however, that promotion policies exist and they are effective in identifying and characterising questionable publications (Frandsen, Lamptey, Borteye, & Teye, 2022), but the effects of these policies are yet to be determined. In this study, we aim to determine the effect of implementing promotion policies to discourage unethical academic publishing. More specifically, we analyse if promotion applications include a decreasing share of publications in questionable outlets after the implementation of new tenure and promotion standards.

Literature review

There are numerous examples of how academic librarians are actively engaging in the education and guidance of researchers, students, and the broader academic community. According to Boufarss and Harviainen (2021) libraries and librarians contribute by providing appropriate infrastructure and educating users. In their empirical study of open access awareness among librarians they find that librarians re-intermediate themselves to act as gate openers instead of their traditional role as gatekeepers. Academic libraries develop and provide decision-making tools like Scholarly Tools Opposing Predatory Practices (STOPP) to appraise journals (Lopez & Gaspard, 2020), the web-based journal recommendation system named B!SON (Entrup et al., 2023) and safelists of journals and publishers (Akeroyd et al., 2022).

Academic librarians also raise awareness and educate authors and users of the literature, e.g. by incorporating discussions on predatory publishing into training sessions. A survey conducted in 2020 revealed that nearly half of the academic libraries in the US and Canada provide workshops on questionable publishing practices (Buitrago Ciro & Bowker, 2020). The survey also revealed that these practices are less common in other countries. Buitrago Ciro and Hernández Pérez (2023) present a set of workshops focusing on scholarly communication literacy, aiming to educate and safeguard novice researchers from the pitfalls of scholarly communication and unethical publishing practices. Feedback from participants indicates that these training sessions are perceived as highly effective educational tools. Librarians at the Mayo Clinic have incorporated predatory publishing education into ongoing literature searching training for internal medicine residents to protect scholarship and evidence-based practice (Gerberi et al., 2021).

Furthermore, academic libraries and librarians can collaborate with policy makers on different levels to prevent predatory publications. Mahajan and Mali (2021) argue that preventing predatory publications requires collaborative efforts among authors, library professionals, and government agencies. Previous studies show the existence and effectiveness of promotion policies in identifying and characterising questionable publications (Frandsen, Lamptey, Borteye, & Teye, 2022; Frandsen, Lamptey, Borteye, Teye, & Owusu-Ansah, 2022). The studies show that universities can be proactive in directing their faculty members toward appropriate and legitimate publication outlets and discourage faculty members from publishing in questionable journals.

Summing up, in response to the rise of predatory publishing, librarians have assumed pivotal roles in addressing this challenge, drawing on their expertise in information literacy, scholarly communication, and access to resources. Teixeira da Silva (2022) even recommends that academic librarians should proactively seek to collaborate with academics within their institutions, as well as engage with regional ethics and educational bodies or policy groups, demonstrating leadership and courage in rebranding their role.

Methods

This study is a follow-up study of a previous study (Frandsen, Lamptey, Borteye, & Teye, 2022) and therefore this study follows the same methods. This study uses the verification process for publications submitted for promotion implemented at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Ghana as case. The verification process at KNUST was initiated due to unfavourable feedback received from external assessors regarding the credibility of the journal articles submitted for assessment. To address this, the appointments and promotion committees in various colleges began involving librarians to verify the publication sources of research works submitted for promotion and tenure. The involvement of librarians naturally also led to an increase in requests for training and advice to allow researchers to consider the choice of publication sources before submitting their manuscripts for publication. The verification of publication sources gained significant support when the criteria for promoting senior members were reviewed by the Senior Members Appointment and Promotion Review Committee and approved by the University's Academic Board in 2019. The tenure and promotion standards aim to discourage faculty members from publishing in questionable outlets and encourage applicants to publish in recommended publication sources. Promotions are based on publications in the recommended publication outlets and thus quick and easy publications in questionable outlets are not considered. According to the promotion guidelines, applicants are encouraged to publish in outlets indexed in specific databases or published by designated publishers, essentially creating a safelist of recommended publication outlets. More specifically the promotion guidelines state that "[a]pplicants are encouraged to publish in, but not limited to credible journals indexed or published in the following [databases and publishers]". The list includes publishers, bibliographic databases, and journals with certain characteristics, such as institutional affiliation. While the list does not specify individual journals, all publications published in journals by the listed publishers, indexed in the listed databases, or journals with specified characteristics are automatically included on the university safelist, simplifying maintenance.

The promotion guidelines also outline the process of assessing the submitted publications: "The applicant's department in consultation with the university library shall carry out a verification exercise where necessary". Thus, a librarian from the university verifies the publications submitted by the applicant, detailing their indexing in databases and publishers. To verify the publications submitted for promotion, a verification form was created by the Human Resources Department and the University Library. The form is used by the librarians to indicate whether a publishing channel is listed or not listed. A compiled report is then provided to the assessment committee for application processing.

This study analyses all promotion applications from January 2022 to November 2023, irrespective of whether the promotions were granted. Each report, regardless of the outcome, specifies the applicant's name, college affiliation, the number of submitted publications, the number published and whether it is indexed in specified databases and publishers, and identifies the individual responsible for compiling the report, along with the sources used for publication verification.

The next step in this study after determining which publications that could not be verified by the librarians is to analyse these publications further. We examine the publications that could not be verified to investigate if the publication outlets are legitimate or whether there are concerns regarding the quality. To determine if the publication outlet is questionable, we use a combination of tools. The publication outlets undergo cross-referencing with Cabell's list of predatory reports. Additionally, the list of indexed journals in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) is used to evaluate the journals in DOAJ is conducted

based on predefined criteria. Consequently, we use several approaches to characterise the publication outlets that could not be verified by librarians. There are many safe and watchlists available, but there is no one list to rule them all and there is a need for clear, authoritative guidance (Grudniewicz et al., 2019). However, we use several approaches as this guidance is not available currently. Furthermore, we examine if the reference is not verified by mistake of the librarian. The verification process is made by a human and mistakes can occur. Finally, we examine if the reference can be identified using traditional bibliographic databases. If the reference cannot be retrieved using different combinations of words from the title and author name in large databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar we add this to the data set. Authors seeking to publish in low-barrier journals may also resort to self-publishing as argued by Omobowale et al. (2014) and therefore being able to identify the reference in bibliographic databases is a means to determine if it is self-published.

The analysis is carried out using descriptive statistics and graphic illustrations. Potential variations in the share of verified publications across colleges, time, and the number of submitted publications are scrutinized. We conduct statistical analyses to determine if there are significant differences in means between groups at the 0.05 significance level. This involves comparing the average values of certain variables across different categories to assess if the observed differences are likely due to chance or if they represent true disparities. In this case we conducted a one-way ANOVA to compare the means of the groups.

Results

During the two-year period 273 applications for promotions were processed by the librarians. The applicants came from College of Agriculture and Natural Resources ($n = 20$), College of Art and Built Environment ($n = 32$), College of Engineering ($n = 46$), College of Health Sciences ($n = 72$), College of Humanities and Social Sciences ($n = 67$), College of Science ($n = 35$).

The mean share of publications that were verified is 92.2 implying that more than 9 out 10 publication outputs in this case could be verified in the sense that the librarians could identify the publication outlet as one of the recommended outlets. Yet, while some applicants provide publications that could all be verified, others submit publications of which several cannot be verified. Thus, it becomes imperative to take the confidence interval into account, which involves the mean of our estimation along with its variation. Here, the mean is 92.2 % (95 % CI = 90.5, 94.0).

Fig. 1 provides an overview of the mean share of verified publications submitted for promotion and the six colleges at KNUST. The 95 % confidence interval is marked with a line. The figure shows that the mean share of verified publications ranges from 88.2 % in College of Agriculture and Natural Resources to 94.5 % in College of Engineering. The 95 % confidence intervals suggest some variation across applications. Indeed, the share of verified publications across all applications ranges from 14.3 % to 100 %.

Although, some variations exist across colleges the differences are not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tables are available in Appendix 1, and they show there was not a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by one-way ANOVA ($F(5,267) = 0.906$, $p = .477$).

Subsequently, we investigate the potential correlation between the quantity of submitted publications and the mean share of verified publications. The number of publications submitted for advancement is contingent upon the level of seniority sought in the promotion application. For instance, there are typically fewer submitted publications for a junior position, while the promotion guidelines stipulate a minimum of 15 submitted publications for a full professorship. It is a widespread perception that authors publishing in dubious journals tend to be relatively young and inexperienced (Demir, 2018; Xia et al., 2015). This implies that we would expect to find lower proportions of verified publications among junior faculty members. Fig. 2 illustrates the average proportions of verified publications among applicants who have submitted up to ten publications, between 11 and 14 publications, and 15 or more publications. This figure does not confirm the hypothesis that inexperienced researchers submit more publications for promotion in dubious journals. This is also confirmed in the statistical analyses. There was not statistically significant difference between groups as determined by one-way ANOVA ($F(2,270) = 0.653$, $p = .521$). Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tables are available in Appendix 1.

Finally, Table 1 presents an overview of non-verified publications, i.e. the publications submitted for promotion that is not identified by the librarians as a publication outlet included on the list of recommended outlets. Most of the submitted publications that were not verified by the librarians are listed in Cabell's predatory reports (88.7 %). A share of 5.2

Fig. 2. Share of verified publications submitted for promotion in percentages and number of submitted publications.

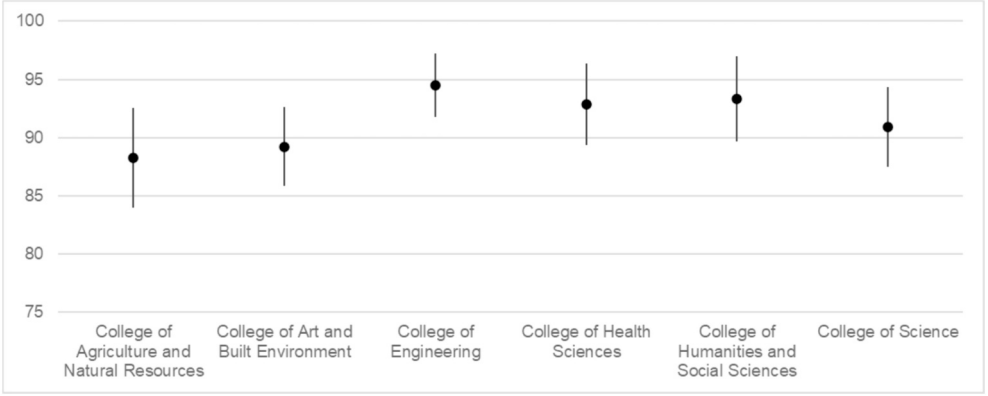

Fig. 1. Share of verified publications submitted for promotion in percentages and colleges.

Table 1
Characteristics of publications that could not be verified by librarians.

Publication outlet listed in Cabell's predatory reports	Not verified but on the list of recommended publication outlets	Publication outlet that could not be identified	Open access publications not indexed in DOAJ	Open access publications indexed in DOAJ	Total
204	1	12	11	2	230
88.7 %	0.4 %	5.2 %	4.8 %	0.9 %	100 %

% could not be identified, i.e. the reference cannot be identified using traditional bibliographic databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar. Consequently, it is difficult to see if these publications even exist. Furthermore, 4.8 % of the non-verified publications are open access but not indexed in DOAJ which is a cause for concern. Only 0.4 % is not verified by mistake. Consequently, the verification process seems to be able to identify questionable publication outlets.

Discussion

The results of this study show that after the implementation of the new promotion guidelines 9 out of 10 publications can be verified by librarians at KNUST. The mean share of submitted publications that can be verified differ somewhat across colleges. However, the differences are not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. The number of submitted publications in a promotion application constitute a proxy of seniority, but across three levels of seniority we find surprisingly little difference in the mean share of verified publications. The publications submitted for promotion that were not verified (approx. 10 % of all submitted publication) are mainly predatory (almost 9 out of 10). Some are difficult to identify, some are not on the list and only very few are not verified by mistake.

Compared to a previous study examining the submitted publications for promotion immediately after the implementation of new promotion guidelines at KNUST this study finds fewer non-verified publications on average (Frandsen, Lamptey, Borteye, & Teye, 2022). In the present study the share of verified publications is 92.2 % whereas the previous study found the mean share to be only 79.7 %. We cannot determine causation here, so the researchers may in fact publish a stable number of publications in non-verifiable publication outlets, but not submit them for promotion. However, the researchers seem to have responded to the changed incentives and submitted more publications published in the recommended publication outlets.

Publications that were not verified by librarians are largely published in publication outlets that are suspected of being predatory, as almost nine out of ten are published in journals found in Cabell's predatory reports. Our previous study found that two out of three publications were either Cabell's predatory reports or Cabell's list of journals under review for Predatory Reports (Frandsen, Lamptey, Borteye, & Teye, 2022). Hence, this study find that the verification process can efficiently identify predatory journals and only very few mistakes are made.

It is difficult to determine whether a journal is predatory. Typically, watchlists and safelists are used to identify a predatory journal. However, Grudniewicz et al. (2019) identify more than 90 lists and the lists do not necessarily reach the same conclusions regarding specific journals. Other methods for identification of predatory journals have been suggested. Chen and Wang (2022) suggest using combined citation analysis and altmetrics analysis to identify predatory journals. The use of machine learning for predatory journal classification has been suggested Chen et al. (2020); (Chen et al., 2023) These alternative approaches are under development but cannot at the moment replace traditional approaches for identifying non-legitimate journals.

Academic libraries develop and provide decision-making tools that becomes important infrastructure for authors and users of literature. The new promotion guidelines presented in this study can be considered a locally adjusted journal recommendation system providing faculty members at KNUST with safelists of journals and publishers. The list requires little maintenance and allows the university to proactively discourage faculty members from publishing in predatory journals, but the continued implementation requires the support from policy makers.

The struggle against predatory publishing includes individual researchers being offered training. Across the world many academic libraries offer training sessions to educate authors and users of literature which seems to be recognized as important areas by the participants. In the case presented in this paper, the librarians can advise faculty members on publication outlets, but incentives are also used at KNUST as promotions will be based on publications in the recommended publication outlets. Consequently, there is little incentive for researchers as KNUST to publish in questionable outlets. Using evaluations can be seen as incentives that might effectively discourage predatory publishing practices (Fahlevi et al., 2023; Tang & Jia, 2023). In this study we find that promotion is a strong incentive and researchers are responding to it.

Developing countries generally face notable challenges with predatory publishing due to insufficient policies or guidance (Otike et al., 2022). If younger researchers see the strategy working well for senior colleagues, it may even be an intentional choice to submit research to these questionable outlets (Gerashchenko, 2023). Individuals attaining academic or administrative positions without the necessary qualifications are sometimes referred to as a “zombie professorship” (Balehegn, 2017). Nonetheless, previous research shows that promotion policies are being implemented, and that these promotion policies can in fact effectively discern questionable publications (Frandsen, Lamptey, Borteye, Teye, & Owusu-Ansah, 2022). Furthermore, many faculty members are satisfied with the new tenure and promotion standards (Frandsen, Lamptey, Borteye, Teye, & Owusu-Ansah, 2022). The present study shows that when applying for promotion researchers adapt to the tenure and promotion standards as fewer non-verifiable publications are submitted over time. The librarians at KNUST fulfil a new role with the implementation of the new promotion guidelines and demonstrate the leadership and courage in rebranding their role as recommended by Teixeira da Silva (2022).

While this study on promotion standards to discourage publishing in questionable journals at KNUST provides valuable insights, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. First, the study focuses on a specific institution in Ghana, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other academic institutions with different contexts and promotion systems. Second, we studied promotion applications from January 2022 to November 2023 which is a relatively short time period. A longer time frame could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sustained impact of the promotion guidelines on publication choices. Third, researchers submitted more publications to recommended outlets after the implementation of new promotion guidelines, however, it is important to stress that we cannot causality, as other factors may have influenced publication choices. Finally, this study primarily focuses on characterising publication outlets through the verification process. Further investigation into the types of outlets where researchers are publishing could provide a more nuanced understanding of publication trends. Exploring these limitations further through additional research and a broader analytical framework could enhance our understanding of the effectiveness and implications of promotion standards in addressing predatory publishing practices.

This study provides insights into the consequences of implementing promotion guidelines to discourage publishing in questionable outlets

and investigate the effects of these guidelines over an extended period. Many questions have also arisen. First, it needs to be explored how these guidelines intersect with and potentially affect academic freedom, diversity of voices, and open access. Furthermore, further research is needed on reflexive tendencies and the incentive structures that drive publishing behaviour to understand how the promotion guidelines intersect with tenure and promotion criteria. In summary, future research should delve deeper into the multifaceted impact of promotion guidelines.

Conclusion

This study finds that after implementing the new promotion guidelines, researchers applying for promotion at KNUST submit more publications that are published in one of the recommended publication outlets. The study also shows that the publications that were not verified by librarians during the verification process are primarily published in predatory journals, as nine out of ten non-verified publications are published in such outlets. Thus, the verification process seems to discourage publication in these questionable outlets. Based on this study, we recommend that research institutions in developing countries consider removing the incentives for publishing in questionable publication outlets and implement promotion standards with incentives to publish in legitimate journals.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Tove Faber Frandsen: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Richard Bruce Lamptey:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Edward Mensah Borteye:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

We wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

We confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed. We further confirm that the order of authors listed in the manuscript has been approved by all of us.

We confirm that we have given due consideration to the protection of intellectual property associated with this work and that there are no impediments to publication, including the timing of publication, with respect to intellectual property. In so doing we confirm that we have followed the regulations of our institutions concerning intellectual property.

We understand that the Corresponding author is the sole contact for the Editorial process (including Editorial Manager and direct communications with the office). He/she is responsible for communicating with the other authors about progress, submissions of revisions and final approval of proofs. We confirm that we have provided a current, correct email address which is accessible by the Corresponding author.

Appendix 1. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Descriptives

Share

	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error	95 % confidence interval for mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower bound	Upper bound		
Up to 10	115	91.035	18.169	1.694	87.678	94.391	0.000	100.000
11 to 14	96	93.309	10.137	1.035	91.255	95.363	57.143	100.000
15+	62	92.758	14.705	1.868	89.024	96.492	23.529	100.000
Total	273	92.226	14.961	0.905	90.443	94.0084	0.000	100.000

ANOVA

Share

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	293.281	2	146.641	0.653	0.521
Within groups	60,586.624	270	224.395		
Total	60,879.905	272			

Appendix 2. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Descriptives

Share

	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error	95 % confidence interval for mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower bound	Upper bound		
Agriculture and Natural Resources	20	88.238	23.551	5.266	77.216	99.260	0.000	100.000
Art and Built Environment	32	89.212	16.915	2.990	83.114	95.311	23.529	100.000
Engineering	47	94.495	10.956	1.598	91.278	97.711	56.250	100.000
Health Sciences	72	92.838	14.122	1.664	89.520	96.157	14.286	100.000
Humanities and Social Sciences	67	93.298	14.729	1.799	89.705	96.891	28.571	100.000
Science	35	90.900	13.782	2.330	86.166	95.634	43.750	100.000

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(*continued*)

Descriptives								
Share								
	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error	95 % confidence interval for mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower bound	Upper bound		
Total	273	92.226	14.961	0.905	90.443	94.008	0.000	100.000

ANOVA					
Share					
	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	1016.033	5	203.207	0.906	0.477
Within groups	59,863.872	267	224.209		
Total	60,879.905	272			

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