

PREDATORY PUBLISHING AND RESEARCH INTEGRITY VULNERABILITIES IN FRAGILE ACADEMIC SYSTEMS: EVIDENCE FROM SIERRA LEONE

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Background and aim:

Predatory publishing poses a growing threat to research integrity; particularly in fragile academic systems where regulatory oversight; mentorship structures; and editorial literacy remain limited. This study examines the extent, drivers, and institutional vulnerabilities associated with predatory journal engagement among early-career researchers in Sierra Leone.

Methods

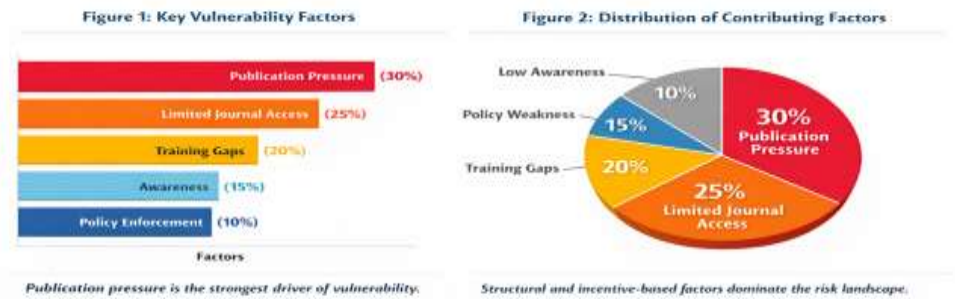
Employing a mixed-method approach, the study combines a structured survey questionnaire consisting of 28 closed- and open-ended questions administered to university lecturers and postgraduate researchers, with semi-structured interview guides developed by the researcher for academic administrators in Sierra Leone. The thematic analysis explores awareness levels; publication pressures; funding constraints; digital literacy gaps; and institutional policy frameworks. Moreover, descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were harnessed to assess patterns of exposure and decision-making drivers. And ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology (EBKUST) Faculty of Social Science Research Unit.

Findings/ Outcomes

Participants included university lecturers, postgraduate researchers, and academic administrators, with representation from both male and female respondents across the participating institutions.

Quantitative results: Survey findings indicate moderate awareness of predatory publishing characteristics (15%) but relatively low levels of effective institutional safeguards, particularly in policy enforcement (10%). The most significant vulnerability factor is publication pressure (30%), followed by limited access to reputable indexed journals (25%) and training gaps in research integrity and publication ethics (20%). Overall, structural and incentive-based factors account for the majority of vulnerability (55% combined for publication pressure and journal access).

Qualitative results: Interview findings reveal that institutional policy frameworks addressing predatory publishing remain weak or largely informal (15%). Respondents emphasized the absence of structured mentorship and training systems (20%), limited editorial guidance, and weak monitoring mechanisms (10%). Furthermore, the three institutions: University of Makeni, Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology, and the University of Sierra Leone have established institutional guidelines for journal selection, peer-review standards, and sanctions related to unethical publishing practices; however, enforcement remains inconsistent and uneven across institutions.



Source: Field data, 2026

Conclusion

The study concludes that predatory publishing in Sierra Leone is driven mainly by weak institutional safeguards, publication pressure, limited access to reputable journals, and inadequate training in research ethics. However, although awareness exists, enforcement of policies remains inconsistent; leaving researchers' vulnerable and compromising research integrity.

Recommendations

Institutions in Sierra Leone as well as others across the world should strengthen journal vetting systems; provide compulsory training in research ethics and publication standards; establish structured mentorship; and improve access to reputable journals. Moreover, stronger enforcement of research integrity policies and regional collaboration are also necessary to reduce predatory publishing risks.

KEY WORDS: Sierra Leone; Predatory Publishing; Research Integrity; Academic Vulnerability; Scholarly Ethics; Governance Frameworks; and Low-Resource Institutions

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.