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Predatory Publishing and Research Integrity Crisis: Implications for Sustainable Educational Development in African Higher Education

IYANUOLUWA SAMUEL ADELAKUN, TOGUNLOJU TAIWO
VICTORIA MODUPE BANKOLE
Federal University, Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria

OLUFEMI ADEWALE ADEDOKUN
Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo, Nigeria

Abstract. Predatory publishing has become an increasingly worrying issue in contemporary academia, thereby raising serious concerns about research integrity and the sustainability of higher education, especially in Africa. This study explored the growing research integrity crisis that is associated with predatory publishing and examined its implications for sustainable educational development in African higher education institutions. The study adopted a systematic literature review and conceptual analysis approach, drawing from peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and policy documents published between 2020 and 2026. Guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, relevant studies were identified, screened, and critically analysed to establish current trends, drivers, and consequences of predatory publishing practices within the environment of African higher education. The review revealed that intense pressure to publish, limited research funding, weak institutional monitoring systems, and inadequate awareness of predatory journals have contributed significantly to the increasing patronage of questionable publishers among scholars. The study further found that predatory publishing undermines academic credibility, weakens peer-review processes, reduces the quality of scholarly output, and negatively affects the global visibility of African research and researchers. Beyond its impact on individual researchers, the crisis poses broader challenges to educational quality, institutional reputation, and evidence-based policymaking. The study concludes that strengthening research ethics education, improving institutional regulatory frameworks, and promoting credible regional publishing platforms are essential for safeguarding research integrity and advancing sustainable educational development in African higher education.

Keywords: Predatory publishing; Research integrity; Sustainable educational development; African higher education; Academic ethics; Research quality and Higher education sustainability.

1. Introduction

The expansion of global academic publishing has significantly transformed the production and dissemination of knowledge across higher education institutions. Advances in digital technology, open-access publishing models, and international research collaborations have increased opportunities for scholars to share scientific findings and contribute to intellectual development globally. While this growth has improved research visibility and accessibility, it has also created vulnerabilities within scholarly communication systems, particularly through the emergence and proliferation of predatory journals, which now serve as a poison in the system of academia. Predatory publishing refers to deceptive publishing practices in which journals prioritize financial gain over rigorous peer review, editorial quality, and academic integrity. Recent studies have shown that the increasing commercialization of scholarly publishing continues to threaten the credibility of academic research and the trustworthiness of scientific knowledge production (Tomlinson, 2024; Mills et al., 2021).

The pressure to "publish or perish" has further intensified the challenges within the contemporary world of academics across various institutions in Africa, where promotion, tenure, research funding, and institutional ranking systems are strongly tied to publication output. Consequently, academics are increasingly compelled to publish rapidly, sometimes at the expense of research quality and ethical publishing standards, to keep up with the pressure. This pressure is well pronounced in developing regions where limited research funding, inadequate mentorship, and weak institutional regulatory frameworks are dominant and often expose scholars to questionable publishing outlets. Studies have observed that predatory publishers exploit these structural pressures by offering rapid publication processes, misleading indexing claims, and superficial peer-review systems to vulnerable authors (Tomlinson, 2024; Martinino et al., 2024).

Also, concerns surrounding research integrity have become increasingly significant in African higher education. Although African higher institutions continue to contribute meaningfully to global scholarship, the growing presence of predatory journals threatens the quality, credibility, and international visibility of research outputs from the continent. Existing literature suggests that inadequate awareness of predatory publishing practices, combined with institutional pressure for the productivity of academics, has contributed to the patronage of questionable journals among some scholars in African higher institutions (Jingura et al., 2025). The consequences extend beyond individual researchers, affecting institutional reputation, policy credibility, public trust in academic research, and the broader sustainability of higher education systems.

Research integrity remains another integral instrument that ensures sustainable educational development because credible scholarship informs evidence-based policymaking, innovation, teaching quality, and national development strategies. However, predatory publishing undermines these objectives by encouraging the dissemination of poorly reviewed or unreliable studies. The continuous increase in the commercialization of academic publishing and the weakening of peer-review standards have therefore generated what many scholars now describe as a research integrity crisis within global higher education systems (Mills et al,2025). In Africa, where higher education institutions are already being faced with challenges such as underfunding, inadequate infrastructure, and global competitiveness, the persistence of unethical publishing practices poses additional threats to sustainable educational development in the region.

Despite increasing global attention to predatory publishing, limited studies have critically examined its implications for sustainable educational development within the context of African higher education. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on the identification of predatory journals, with less attention given to their broader institutional and developmental consequences. This gap necessitates a more comprehensive understanding of how predatory publishing contributes to the research integrity crisis and undermines sustainable higher education development across Africa. Against this background, this study examined predatory publishing and the growing research integrity crisis in African higher institutions, with particular attention to their implications for sustainable educational development.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The increasing growth of academic publishing has expanded opportunities for knowledge sharing, research collaboration, and global scholarly visibility. However, this expansion has also encouraged the rapid spread of predatory journals that prioritize financial profit above research quality and academic integrity. Predatory publishers often attract researchers through promises of fast publication, weak or non-existent peer-review processes, fake indexing claims, and misleading impact metrics. These practices have raised serious concerns about the credibility and reliability of scholarly outputs within higher education institutions globally. In African higher education, the problem has become increasingly significant due to growing pressure on academics to publish for promotion, tenure, institutional ranking, and career advancement. In many African higher institutions, publication output is frequently emphasized more than research quality, creating conditions that push some scholars toward questionable publishing outlets. Limited research funding, inadequate mentorship, weak institutional monitoring systems, and insufficient awareness of predatory publishing further increase the vulnerability of academics to deceptive journals.

The commercialization of scholarly publishing has also contributed to the problem by transforming academic publishing into a highly competitive and profit-driven enterprise. As publication charges continue to rise and pressure to publish intensifies, some publishers exploit the desperation of researchers by offering rapid acceptance and minimal editorial scrutiny. Consequently, weak peer-review standards

and the circulation of poorly vetted studies continue to threaten research integrity across higher education institutions. The consequences for African higher institutions are substantial. Predatory publishing undermines academic credibility, weakens the quality of research outputs, damages institutional reputation, and reduces the global visibility of African scholarship. It also affects evidence-based policymaking, teaching quality, and sustainable educational development by promoting unreliable and poorly reviewed knowledge. Despite growing global discussions on predatory publishing, existing studies have focused largely on identifying predatory journals and their operational practices. Limited attention has been given to how predatory publishing affects sustainable educational development within African higher education systems. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by examining the relationship between predatory publishing, research integrity crisis, and sustainable educational development in African higher education.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

Precisely, the study sought to:

- examine the drivers of predatory publishing in African higher institutions.
- analyse the relationship between predatory publishing and the research integrity crisis.
- investigate the implications of predatory publishing for sustainable educational development; and
- propose strategies for strengthening ethical scholarly publishing practices in African higher education institutions.

1.3 Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

- What factors encourage predatory publishing in African higher institutions?
- How does predatory publishing contribute to the research integrity crisis in African higher institutions?
- What are the implications of predatory publishing for sustainable educational development?
- What measures can strengthen research integrity and ethical publishing practices in African higher education institutions?

This study is significant because it contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on research ethics, academic credibility, and sustainable higher education development in Africa. The study further provides useful insights for policymakers, higher institution administrators, researchers, and quality assurance agencies seeking to strengthen institutional research integrity frameworks and promote credible scholarly communication systems across African higher education institutions.

2. Conceptual Clarifications

2.1 Predatory Publishing

Predatory publishing refers to unethical academic publishing practices in which publishers prioritize financial profit over research quality, editorial standards, and credible peer-review processes. These journals often attract researchers through unsolicited emails, promises of rapid publication, misleading impact factors, and false claims of indexing in reputable databases. In many cases, manuscripts are accepted with little or no rigorous review, thereby compromising the quality and credibility of published research (Tomlinson, 2024). The growth of predatory publishing has been linked to the increasing commercialization of scholarly communication and the pressure on academics to publish frequently for promotion, career advancement, and institutional recognition. While digital publishing and open-access models have improved access to knowledge globally, they have also created opportunities for exploitative publishers to operate with minimal accountability. In Africa, limited awareness of predatory journals, inadequate mentorship, and weak institutional monitoring systems have further increased the vulnerability of researchers to deceptive publishing outlets (Mills et al., 2021). As a result, predatory publishing has become a major concern for the credibility of research and the integrity of higher education systems.

2.2 Research Integrity

Research integrity refers to the commitment to honesty, transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct throughout the research process. It involves ensuring that research is conducted, reported, and published in ways that uphold academic standards and public trust. Research integrity covers issues such as proper data management, ethical authorship practices, accurate reporting of findings, avoidance of plagiarism, and adherence to credible peer-review procedures (UNESCO, 2021). In higher education, research integrity is essential because higher institutions depend on credible scholarship to support teaching, innovation, policymaking, and societal

development. However, the increasing spread of predatory journals has raised concerns about weakened peer-review systems, poor editorial practices, and the circulation of unreliable research findings. The growing emphasis on publication output and institutional ranking has also contributed to what many scholars describe as a research integrity crisis within contemporary academia (Mills et al, 2025). Protecting research integrity, therefore, remains critical to maintaining academic credibility and sustaining confidence in higher education institutions.

2.3 Sustainable Educational Development

Sustainable educational development refers to the continuous improvement of educational systems in ways that promote quality learning, credible knowledge production, institutional effectiveness, and long-term social development. The concept is closely associated with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive and quality education as a foundation for sustainable societies (UNESCO, 2025). In higher education, sustainable educational development goes beyond increasing access to higher institutions. It also involves strengthening research quality, promoting ethical scholarship, supporting innovation, and ensuring that academic institutions contribute meaningfully to national and global development (Adelakun, 2020). Sustainable educational development depends largely on the integrity and reliability of academic research because higher institutions play a central role in generating knowledge that informs public policy, economic growth, and social transformation. Consequently, the spread of predatory publishing threatens sustainable educational development by encouraging low-quality research, weakening public trust in scholarship, and undermining the global credibility of academic institutions.

2.4 Higher Education Sustainability

Higher education sustainability refers to the ability of universities and other tertiary institutions to maintain quality teaching, ethical research practices, institutional relevance, and long-term academic competitiveness. Sustainable higher education systems are expected to support responsible knowledge production, innovation, social responsibility, and continuous institutional development (Ankareddy, 2025; Adelakun & Olorunsola, 2024). In the African context, higher education sustainability is influenced by several factors, including research funding, policy support, institutional governance, academic capacity, and international research visibility. The increasing patronage of predatory journals poses a serious challenge to this sustainability because it weakens research quality, damages institutional reputation, and reduces confidence in African scholarship within the global academic community. As African higher institutions continue to compete for recognition, funding, and international collaboration, maintaining credible publishing practices and strong research ethics becomes essential for sustaining higher education development across Africa.

2.5 Theoretical Underpinning

This study is based on Institutional Theory, which explains how institutions influence the behaviour, decisions, and practices of individuals and organizations through established rules, norms, expectations, and reward systems. The theory indicates that people and institutions often act in ways that align with accepted professional standards and organizational pressures to gain legitimacy, recognition, and survival within their environments (Suddaby, 2013). In higher education, African institutions and academics operate within systems where research productivity, publication output, institutional ranking, and funding opportunities are increasingly used to measure academic success.

Institutional Theory is relevant to this study because it helps explain why some academics publish in predatory journals despite growing awareness of unethical publishing practices. In many African institutions, promotion, tenure, research grants, and professional recognition are strongly linked to the number of publications produced by academic staff. As a result, scholars often face significant pressure to publish within limited timeframes. This “publish or perish” culture has fostered an environment where rapid publication is sometimes valued over research quality, originality, and ethical standards. In such conditions, some researchers may resort to predatory journals that promise quick publication with little or no rigorous peer review (Mills et al., 2021).

The theory also clarifies how institutional and structural challenges within African higher education contribute to the growing research integrity crisis. Factors such as limited research funding, weak mentorship systems, restricted access to reputable journals, and inadequate institutional oversight can increase researchers’ vulnerability to deceptive publishers. In the pursuit of global visibility and institutional competitiveness, higher institutions often promote increased publication output to improve rankings and research profiles. While these expectations aim to strengthen academic productivity,

they can unintentionally create situations that encourage unethical publishing behaviour. Institutional Theory further emphasizes the importance of legitimacy in organizational systems. African higher institutions seek credibility through measurable research achievements, citations, collaborations, and international recognition. However, when institutional success is mainly judged by publication numbers rather than the quality and impact of research, ethical scholarly practices may be compromised. Predatory publishers exploit this pressure by offering fast publication processes, false claims of indexing, and minimal editorial scrutiny to attract researchers seeking academic advancement (Tomlinson, 2024).

In the context of this study, Institutional Theory offers a useful framework to understand predatory publishing as more than an individual ethical failure. It highlights how institutional expectations, evaluation systems, and competitive academic environments influence researchers' publishing decisions and contribute to weakened research integrity. Therefore, the theory underscores the need for higher institutions and regulatory bodies to strengthen research ethics policies, improve quality assurance systems, and develop promotion criteria that value credible and impactful scholarship over publication quantity alone. Addressing these institutional pressures is essential for safeguarding research integrity and supporting sustainable educational development in African higher education.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Evolution of Predatory Publishing

The growth of digital technology and open-access publishing has transformed scholarly communication by increasing global access to research and reducing publication limitations. While these developments have improved knowledge dissemination, they have also contributed to the proliferation of predatory publishing. Predatory journals operate primarily for financial profit and often disregard accepted academic standards such as rigorous peer review, editorial transparency, and research ethics. Recent studies indicate that predatory publishers exploit the open-access model by charging publication fees while providing little or no quality control (Tomlinson, 2024; Mills et al., 2021). Over time, predatory publishing has evolved from isolated deceptive practices into a global challenge affecting African higher institutions, researchers, and academic institutions across different regions. Advances in online publishing platforms have allowed predatory journals to imitate legitimate academic outlets through fake impact factors, fabricated editorial boards, and misleading indexing claims. The increasing sophistication of these practices has made it more difficult for inexperienced researchers to distinguish between credible and deceptive journals (Shen & Shah, 2023; Wali et al, 2025).

3.2 Publish-or-Perish Syndrome

The "publish or perish" culture has become one of the major drivers of predatory publishing within contemporary academia. Higher institutions increasingly rely on publication output as a key criterion for promotion, tenure, funding opportunities, and institutional ranking. In order to meet these requirements to ensure their job security, academics often face intense pressure to publish regularly, sometimes within unrealistic timelines. This pressure has created conditions where the quantity of publications is frequently prioritized over research quality and societal relevance. Recent literature suggests that excessive emphasis on publication metrics has contributed to the growing patronage of predatory journals, especially among early-career researchers and academics in developing countries (Mills et al., 2021; Macháček & Srholec, 2021). The promise of rapid publication and minimal editorial scrutiny offered by predatory publishers becomes attractive to scholars struggling to meet institutional performance expectations. In many African higher institutions, where promotion and career progression are strongly linked to publication records, the pressure to publish continues to expose academics to unethical publishing outlets.

3.3 Academic Corruption and Fake Peer Review

Peer review remains one of the most important mechanisms for ensuring research quality and academic credibility. However, the spread of predatory publishing has weakened confidence in the integrity of the peer-review process. Many predatory journals claim to conduct peer review with the bait of accepting manuscripts within a few days or even hours without meaningful editorial assessment before publication. In some cases, fake reviewers, fabricated editorial boards, and manipulated review systems are used to create the appearance of legitimacy (Wittau & Seifert, 2024). The weakening of peer-review standards contributes to broader concerns about academic corruption and unethical scholarly practices. Studies have shown that compromised peer-review systems increase the circulation of poorly conducted or misleading research, thereby undermining public trust in academic scholarship (Mills et al, 2025). Beyond individual misconduct, the problem reflects systemic challenges within higher education where institutional

pressures and commercialization increasingly influence scholarly communication.

3.4 Predatory Journals in Africa

The problem of predatory publishing has become increasingly visible across African higher education institutions. Although African scholars continue to contribute significantly to global knowledge production, limited research funding, inadequate mentorship, and weak institutional regulatory systems have increased researchers' vulnerability to deceptive publishing outlets. Studies have reported growing concerns about the publication of African scholarship in predatory journals, particularly among early-career academics seeking promotion and professional recognition (Jingura et al., 2025). In corroboration, Mills et al. (2021) observed that the African research ecosystem faces unique structural challenges, including limited access to reputable journals, publication costs, and global inequalities in scholarly publishing. These conditions often create opportunities for predatory publishers to target researchers from developing regions. Consequently, the credibility and international visibility of African scholarship may be weakened by the growing circulation of research published in questionable outlets.

3.5 Effects on Educational Quality

Predatory publishing has serious implications for educational quality and the credibility of higher education systems. African higher learning institutions depend on reliable and well-reviewed research to support teaching, curriculum development, innovation, and policymaking. However, when poorly reviewed or unreliable studies are widely circulated through predatory journals, the quality of academic knowledge and evidence-based decision-making becomes compromised (Pulido, 2025; Santos et al, 2026). Recent studies suggest that predatory publishing weakens research standards, damages institutional reputation, and reduces public trust in academic institutions (Zhakata & Gwede, 2026; Tomlinson, 2024). In higher education, this may affect teaching quality, graduate training, and the ability of higher institutions to contribute meaningfully to social and economic development. The long-term effect is a weakened educational system where questionable research outputs increasingly influence academic discourse and institutional evaluation.

3.6 Globalization and Commercialization of Scholarship

Globalization has expanded opportunities for international research collaboration, academic networking, and knowledge dissemination. At the same time, it has contributed to the commercialization of scholarly publishing. Academic publishing has increasingly become a competitive global industry where publication output, citations, and journal rankings are closely tied to institutional prestige and financial investment (Bayanbayeva, 2026; Shrestha, 2020). The commercialization of scholarship has created a publishing environment in which financial interests sometimes overshadow academic quality and ethical responsibility. Mills et al (2025) argued that the growing emphasis on revenue generation within academic publishing poses significant risks to research integrity and scholarly credibility. Predatory publishers exploit this environment by offering fast publication services and presenting themselves as legitimate scholarly outlets. As competition for academic visibility increases globally, researchers in resource-constrained institutions remain particularly vulnerable to exploitative publishing practices.

3.7 Research Integrity and Knowledge Production

Research integrity is fundamental to credible knowledge production and sustainable higher education development. African Higher institutions rely on ethical research practices to generate reliable knowledge that can inform teaching, innovation, public policy, and societal progress. However, predatory publishing threatens research integrity by encouraging the dissemination of low-quality, poorly reviewed, or misleading studies. The growing research integrity crisis has raised concerns about the reliability of academic knowledge within global higher education systems. UNESCO (2021) emphasized that ethical scholarship, transparency, accountability, and rigorous peer review are essential for maintaining public trust in scientific research. When predatory publishing weakens these standards, the credibility of knowledge production becomes compromised. In African higher education, protecting research integrity is particularly important because African higher institutions play a central role in addressing developmental challenges through research, innovation, and evidence-based policymaking.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopted a conceptual and systematic literature review approach to examine the growing problem of predatory publishing and its implications

for research integrity and sustainable educational development in African higher education. The approach was considered suitable because the study relied on existing scholarly evidence to provide a broad and critical understanding of the subject. Rather than generating primary data through surveys or interviews, the study adopts the use of secondary data to synthesize current knowledge, identify major patterns in the literature, and examine how previous studies have discussed predatory publishing within higher education systems.

The review process was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework developed by Page et al. (2021). The PRISMA approach provides a transparent and organized procedure for identifying, screening, selecting, and reviewing relevant literature in systematic review studies. The framework was adopted to ensure consistency, credibility, and clarity throughout the review process. Relevant materials were obtained from reputable academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis Online. The search focused mainly on peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional publications, conference papers, and policy documents published between 2021 and 2026. To retrieve relevant studies, keywords such as "predatory publishing," "research integrity," "publish or perish," "fake peer review," "academic publishing ethics," "sustainable educational development," and "African higher education" were used as search terms during the search process.

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to maintain the quality and relevance of the review. Only English-language studies that directly addressed predatory publishing, research integrity, unethical scholarly practices, or sustainable higher education development were included. Publications that were duplicated, unrelated to the objectives of the study, outside the selected timeframe, or lacking scholarly credibility were excluded from the review. Document analysis served as the primary method of data analysis. The selected studies were carefully examined and organized into major themes based on the objectives of the study. Through thematic analysis, the review identified recurring issues such as pressure to publish, weak peer-review systems, fake indexing claims, commercialization of academic publishing, and the effects of predatory journals on educational quality and institutional credibility. The conceptual review also made it possible to connect these issues to broader concerns about research integrity and sustainable development within African higher education.

The use of systematic review and conceptual analysis strengthened the study by allowing evidence to be drawn from diverse scholarly sources and recent literature. This approach also provided a deeper understanding of the institutional and structural conditions that continue to encourage predatory publishing practices across higher education institutions in Africa.

5. Discussion

Research Question One: What factors encourage predatory publishing in African higher institutions?

Findings:

The findings of this study show that predatory publishing has become a serious challenge to research integrity and sustainable educational development in African higher education. Although academic publishing remains an important measure of scholarly productivity and institutional growth, the increasing pressure on academics to publish has created conditions that encourage continuous engagement with questionable journals. In many cases, researchers are expected to publish frequently for promotion, career advancement, institutional ranking, and access to research opportunities. This pressure has contributed to the growing patronage of predatory journals that promise rapid publication with little or no rigorous peer review.

Research Question Two: How does predatory publishing contribute to the research integrity crisis in African higher institutions?

Findings:

One of the major concerns associated with predatory publishing is its effect on academic credibility. African higher institutions are expected to produce reliable knowledge that can support teaching, innovation, and societal development. However, when research is published in journals that lack proper editorial standards and credible peer-review processes, the quality and trustworthiness of such research become questionable. Predatory journals often prioritize financial profit above scholarly quality, thereby allowing poorly reviewed or misleading studies to enter academic circulation (Chatio et al, 2024; Tomlinson, 2024). This weakens confidence in academic research and affects the credibility of both individual researchers and higher education institutions.

Research Question Three: What are the implications of predatory publishing for sustainable educational development?

Findings:

The study further reveals that predatory publishing can negatively affect higher institutions' rankings and institutional reputation. Globally, higher institutions are increasingly evaluated based on research quality, citation impact, international visibility, and scholarly reputation. Publications in predatory journals rarely receive meaningful academic recognition because many of these journals are not indexed in reputable databases and often lack the research credibility that they claim. As a result, institutions associated with questionable publishing practices may experience reduced global visibility, weaker academic partnerships, and lower competitiveness within international higher education systems. Mills et al. (2021) noted that the growing circulation of research through predatory journals continues to affect the international perception of African scholarship.

Another important issue identified in this study is the influence of predatory publishing on policy decisions and knowledge-based development. Governments, institutions, and policymakers rely heavily on academic research when formulating policies relating to education, health, economic development, and social welfare. When unreliable or poorly reviewed studies become part of academic literature, the quality of evidence available for policymaking becomes compromised. This may result in weak or ineffective policy decisions that fail to address societal challenges adequately. In developing regions, where research is expected to contribute directly to national development, compromised scholarship can have long-term consequences for institutional planning and public trust in higher education.

The findings also indicate that predatory publishing reduces educational quality within African higher institutions. Credible research plays an indispensable role in curriculum development, teaching effectiveness, graduate training, and innovation. However, the increasing availability of low-quality research published through predatory journals threatens academic standards and weakens the culture of critical scholarship within higher education institutions. Students and researchers who rely on unreliable studies may unknowingly reproduce wrong information, thereby affecting the overall quality of learning and research outcomes. The continued weakening of peer-review standards and editorial quality, therefore, contributes significantly to the broader research integrity crisis facing the contemporary academic world (Mills et al, 2025; Amutuhaire, 2022).

The study further shows that predatory publishing poses a direct threat to sustainable educational development and the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and quality education for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2025). Sustainable educational development depends on credible research, ethical scholarship, innovation, and institutional accountability. However, when academic systems become dominated by unethical publishing practices, unreliable and irrelevant research outputs, the ability of African higher institutions to contribute meaningfully to social and economic development of the world becomes weakened. In the African context, where higher education institutions are already faced with challenges relating to funding, infrastructure, and research capacity, the spread of predatory publishing creates additional limitations to the achievement of sustainable growth and global academic competitiveness.

Research Question Four: What measures can strengthen research integrity and ethical publishing practices in African higher education institutions

Findings:

The discussion also reinforces the relevance of Institutional Theory in understanding the persistence of predatory publishing within higher education systems. Institutional pressures linked to publication targets, promotion requirements, funding opportunities, and higher institutions' ranking often shape researchers' publishing decisions. In environments where publication quantity and numbers are prioritized more than research quality, some academics may feel compelled to choose rapid publication regardless of journal credibility. This suggests that predatory publishing is not only an individual ethical problem but also a reflection of broader institutional and structural challenges within higher education. Addressing the problem, therefore, requires stronger institutional policies, improved research ethics education, effective quality assurance systems, and balanced research evaluation frameworks that place greater value on credible and impactful scholarship.

6. Conclusion

Predatory publishing has become a growing concern within African higher education and it has continued

to pose serious challenges to research integrity, academic credibility, and sustainable educational development. The study revealed that increasing pressure on academics to publish for promotion, career advancement, institutional ranking, funding opportunities, and publish-or-perish syndromes has contributed significantly to the increase in patronage of predatory journals. At the same time, weak institutional monitoring systems, poor awareness of credible publishing platforms, fake indexing claims, and the commercialization of scholarly publishing have created conditions that allow unethical publishing practices to thrive.

The study further revealed that the effects of predatory publishing extend beyond individual researchers to affect higher institutions and the wider educational system. The publication of poorly reviewed and unreliable studies weakens confidence in academic research, damages institutional reputation, reduces the global visibility of African scholarship, and affects the credibility of evidence used for policymaking and development planning. The growing spread of questionable research outputs also threatens educational quality by weakening research standards, teaching, innovation, and knowledge production within higher education institutions.

The findings equally suggest that predatory publishing represents not only an ethical problem but also a structural challenge within contemporary academia. The excessive emphasis placed on publication quantity rather than research quality has encouraged a culture in which rapid publication is sometimes prioritized above credible and impactful scholarship. This situation continues to weaken research integrity and the role of African higher institutions in reliable knowledge and societal development. The study, therefore, stresses the urgency of reforming African higher education systems by strengthening research ethics education, improving institutional quality assurance mechanisms, supporting credible regional journals, and sensitizing/awareness programmes of reputable indexing systems as necessary steps toward addressing the crisis. African higher institutions and regulatory bodies must also adopt balanced promotion and research evaluation systems that place greater value on research quality, originality, and societal relevance rather than the number of publications alone.

Finally, sustainable educational development cannot be achieved without credible research and ethical scholarly practices. Protecting research integrity is therefore essential to strengthening higher education institutions and advancing the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which promotes inclusive, equitable, and quality education for sustainable development. (UNESCO, 2025). African higher institutions must therefore continue to strengthen ethical publishing culture and institutional accountability to sustain credible knowledge production and meaningful educational development on the continent.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, there is a clear need for stronger and more coordinated efforts to address predatory publishing and protect research integrity within African higher education. The following recommendations are therefore proposed:

African higher institutions and regulatory bodies should strengthen institutional policies relating to research ethics and scholarly publishing. Many institutions still lack clear and enforceable guidelines on acceptable publishing practices. Developing comprehensive policies that clearly define predatory publishing and outline standards for credible scholarly communication would help guide researchers toward ethical publishing decisions. Institutions should also strengthen internal quality assurance systems to monitor publication practices more effectively.

Research ethics and academic publishing training should become a regular and compulsory part of academic development programs for staff and postgraduate students. Many researchers, particularly early-career academics, are often exposed to predatory journals because of limited awareness and inadequate mentorship. Continuous training on peer review, credible indexing systems, journal selection, citation practices, and publication ethics would help researchers make informed publishing decisions and reduce vulnerability to deceptive publishers.

African higher institutions should intensify awareness programs on predatory publishing and unethical scholarly practices. Academic institutions can organize seminars, workshops, and awareness campaigns that educate researchers on how to identify fake impact factors, misleading indexing claims, suspicious editorial practices, and weak peer-review systems. Access to updated information about reputable journals and recognized indexing databases would further support ethical publishing practices within African higher institutions.

There is an urgent need to reform promotion and research evaluation systems in many African higher education institutions. The excessive emphasis placed

on publication quantity has contributed significantly to the "publish or perish" culture that drives some academics toward questionable journals. Promotion criteria should therefore focus more on research quality, originality, societal impact, innovation, and contribution to knowledge rather than the number of publications alone. Such reforms would encourage responsible scholarship and reduce pressure for rapid publication.

African higher institutions, regulatory agencies, and professional academic bodies should collaborate to identify and blacklist predatory journals and publishers. Publicly available and regularly updated lists of questionable journals would help researchers avoid deceptive publishing outlets and strengthen institutional efforts toward maintaining academic standards.

African governments and African higher institutions should invest more in strengthening credible African academic journals. Many reputable local journals struggle with limited funding, inadequate visibility, and weak publishing infrastructure. Providing financial support, editorial training, digital publishing systems, and opportunities for international indexing would improve the quality and visibility of African scholarship. Strong regional journals can provide researchers with credible and accessible publication platforms while promoting ethical scholarly communication across the continent.

Stronger regional and international research collaborations should be encouraged among African higher institutions and scholars. Collaborative networks can improve mentorship, research quality, funding access, and knowledge sharing while promoting a stronger culture of research integrity. Partnerships among institutions may also support the development of common standards and policies for ethical publishing practices across African higher education systems. Addressing predatory publishing requires collective responsibility from African higher institutions, governments, researchers, and regulatory agencies. Strengthening ethical research culture and institutional accountability remains essential for protecting academic credibility and advancing sustainable educational development in Africa.

8. Explanation of the PRISMA Process used in the Study

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework was adopted to ensure transparency and consistency in the selection of the literature process. Relevant studies were identified from major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis Online. A total of 218 records were initially retrieved. After removing 109 duplicate studies, 109 studies were left for title and abstract screening. 31 studies that were not directly related to predatory publishing, research integrity, sustainable educational development, or African higher education were excluded at this stage. Following the screening process, 78 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Further exclusions were made based on relevance, methodological quality, and publication timeframe. Finally, 23 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the qualitative synthesis for the study. These were done in compliance with PRISMA 2020.

8.1 PRISMA Flow Table for Systematic Literature Review

S/N	Activities	Number of Studies
1	Identification of studies through databases and other sources. Records identified through database searching in Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis Online	Total studies 218
2	Duplicate studies removed	109
3	Studies screened by title and abstract	109
4	Studies excluded after screening Reasons: Irrelevant topic, Outside study scope, and non-peer-reviewed sources	31
5	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	78
6	Full-text articles excluded Reasons: Methodological limitations, Insufficient relevance, and Outside publication timeframe	55
7	Final studies included in the qualitative synthesis	23

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