Exploring authors engagement in journals with questionable practices: a case study of OMICS

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ABSTRACT
The paper aims to understand the context and drivers of researchers' decision to submit a manuscript to a journal with questionable practices. Using OMICS as a case study and asking authors for their views, the paper presents their profile, motivations and publishing experiences. The methodology is based on a questionnaire sent by e-mail to all authors of articles in journals published by OMICS (+2200). The authors were asked about (a) the factors that influenced their decision to submit their article; (b) their publishing experience with OMICS; (c) their level of satisfaction; and (d) whether or not they would repeat the experience. A total of 86 responses were collected and 18 e-mails were received. The analysis made it possible to add details to the profiles of authors already identified in the literature, but also allowed new and more nuanced profiles. This research extends our knowledge on the phenomenon of predatory publishing from the authors' feedback and provides a better understanding of the socio-economic, psychosocial and geo-political conditions that drive researchers' decisions to submit their work to a possible, potential, or probable predatory journal. At the same time, it reveals some of the strategies used by OMICS to persuade authors to submit their papers. The findings will help to inform institutional policies that seek to put in place efficient measures to combat predatory publishing.

Keywords: OMICS; Predatory journals; Predatory publishing; Predatory publishers; Scholarly publishing subculture; Cybercrime.

INTRODUCTION

Predatory publishing is a hot topic in the world of scholarly publishing. It emerged in the early 2000s, depicted as a 'pandemic' (Taylor 2021), particularly in the health sector (Moher et al 2017; Allman 2019) and has subsequently been the subject of numerous editorials (Masic 2017; Inouye and Mills 2021). Although initially covered by the press (Kolata 2017; Offord 2018; Jayanth 2019), blog posts (Tao 2020) or opinion pieces (Burgess-Jackson 2020), scientific literature devoted to it is now growing (Petrisor 2016; Cobey et al 2019; Eykens et al 2019; Mills and Inouye 2020; Boukacem-Zeghmouri,

Rakotoary and Bador 2021). Today, theoretical analyses (Allman 2019) can be found alongside empirical studies (Siler et al 2021), whose methodologies are mostly quantitative.

A consensual definition of predatory publishing has been established (Grudniewicz et al 2019 p.211): *"Predatory journals and publishers are entities that prioritize self-interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterized by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publication practices, a lack of transparency, and/or the use of aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation practices"*. It is now a research topic 'legitimised' by a rapidly expanding field of research in different disciplines (Boukacem-Zeghmouri, Rakotoary and Bador 2021; Mertkan, Onurkan and Suphi 2021). But the topic still lacks critical mass (Mertkan, Onurkan and Suphi 2021) and one of the least discussed issues is that of authors profiles, motives and awareness (Vogel 2017; Stöckelová and Vostal 2017; Mills and Inouye 2020; Mertkan, Onurkan and Suphi 2021). This is particularly important, as the growth of predatory journals has been driven by their ability to find researchers to submit manuscripts or serve on their editorial boards (Linacre, Bisaccio and Earle 2019; Downes 2020). So far, literature allows us to understand that the figure of the author in predatory journals is multifaceted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the landscape of scholarly publishing, predatory journals have emerged as a complex issue, ensnaring authors from various backgrounds. This review delves into the realm of predatory publishing, shedding light on the distinct categories of - author as victims; the resigned; the desperate; and the consenting - who unwittingly navigate the treacherous terrain of predatory journals.

Author as a "victim"

Initially, the author base of predatory journals consisted mostly of young and inexperienced researchers (Xia et al. 2015, Ebadi and Zamani 2018; Chambers 2019; Mertkan 2021) from so-called southern countries. This has been contradicted by recent studies showing that early career researchers (ECRs) are also acculturated to prestige and high-quality journals (Nicholas et al 2021; 2023). As evaluation policies evolved, the pool of 'victims' has expanded to include consenting seniors (Jayanth 2019; Perlin, Imasato and Borenstein 2018; Salehi et al. 2020).

Predatory publishing, while global in scope and affecting even western researchers (Kolata 2017; Offord 2018), tends to be concentrated regions with less established scientific publishing industries. Researchers from these areas often face challenges in publishing their work in international journals. These regions include Africa, India, Sri Lanka, China, Pakistan (Nwagwu 2015; Hedding 2019; Vaidyanathan 2019b; Vaidyanathan 2019c) as well as Arab countries (Shehata and Elgllab 2018). Despite substantial financial allocations to research by these countries in the early 2000s (Xia et al 2015), researchers often become victims of predatory practices due to their limited understanding of the scientific publishing ecosystem (Boukacem-Zeghmouri, Leduc and Chalabi 2014). From this perspective, predatory publishing reflects global inequality (Stöckelová and Vostal 2017), which makes researchers from the global South more vulnerable.

Authors often struggle with the selection of reliable journals for their manuscripts due to insufficient access to information (Cohen et al 2019), inadequate training (Kisely 2019), and a lack of a robust scientific publishing culture (Tijdink et al 2016). This challenge can affect

their ability to make informed choices (Strong 2019). Besides, predatory journals develop specific strategies: abusive inclusion of prestigious researchers in editorial boards (Ruiter-Lopez, Lopez-Leon, Forero 2019), use of invented researcher names (Sorokowski et al 2017), pressured and flattering invitations (Petrisor 2016; Lund 2020), announcement of false impact factors (Wilkinson et al 2019) or, more radically, hijacking, part of cybercriminal tools (Lukić et al 2014) which consists in appropriating the identity of a legitimate, well-established journal (Moussa 2021). Predatory journals are well aware of the needs and vulnerabilities of authors, and play on these weaknesses to confuse them (Petrisor 2016; Strong 2019).

The Resigned Author

Previous research has drawn attention to the fact that researchers from the global South, aware of their lack of training and experience (Kisely 2019), feel disadvantaged and therefore do not believe in their chances of being published in international journals (Beigel 2014; Krawczyk and Kulczyski 2021). The fact that their manuscripts are rejected without even a review reinforces this feeling (Salehi et al 2020), resulting in a researcher's social identity being a factor in composing the author base of predatory journals (Kurt 2018).

By explicitly opting out of so-called 'legitimate' journals, researchers could choose to submit their work to journals that are more identified with their geographical areas. This amount to a kind of 'self-publishing' model, which, as Allman (2019) points out, can be seen as a response to a Western capitalist scientific publishing system, that excludes them and therefore fails to convey the universalism of science. This argument resonates with that of Bell (2017), who associates predatory journals with a parody that questions the legitimacy of the established hierarchies of international journals.

The Desperate Author

Research funding policies mentioned above come along with evaluation criteria aligned with international policies and indicators (Omobowale et al 2014; Vaidyanathan 2019a; Wilkinson et al 2019) while training and acculturation to scientific publishing are not always sufficiently developed to support local communities in this shift (Ebadi and Zamani 2018). The pressure of 'publish or perish' is therefore also an incentive to submit manuscripts to predatory journals (Jayanth, 2019, p.2). Researchers, faced with this "symbolic violence" (Ebadi 2018, p.1), lose their critical sense in the rush to publish (Chambers 2019) or succumb to the temptation to take the easy way out (Nwagnu 2015; Demir 2018) to publish quickly and reach a large audience (Petrisor 2016; Shaghaei et al 2018; Wang, Xu and Chen 2021).

The Consenting Author

Studies show that a category of researchers knowingly submits their articles to predatory journals (Kurt 2018; Demir 2018; Vogel 2017). They justify this by the fact that they are satisfied with the services offered, in particular the rapid dissemination of their article in open access journals (Burgess-Jackson 2020; Salehi et al 2020). It has thus been established that experienced researchers are indeed part of the author base of predatory journals consenting to take the risk (Pyne 2017; Shaghaei et al 2018; Eykens 2019; Hedding 2019). However, this consent is based on the justification that the journals are indexed in international databases (Manca et al 2020) and are therefore considered by the institutional policies of the researchers (Demir 2018).

In addition, university tenure and promotion policies do not necessarily address the issue of publishing in predatory journals, leaving this prerogative to university libraries (McQuarrie, Kondra and Lamertz 2020). In this case, the relationship between the author and the predatory journal is therefore based on different but converging interests, leading to the submission of the manuscript (Memon 2019).

Whether the literature presents them as victims (Frandsen 2019) or cynical accomplices (Kolata 2017; Vogel 2017), authors who publish in predatory journals are united by their subordination to the relentless rule of 'publish or perish' (Nielsen and Davison 2020). There is no common understanding among researchers of what predatory journals are (Cobey et al 2019). The representations developed about these journals are therefore multiple, contributing to the confusion between journals (Wang, Xu and Chen 2021).

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS - OMICS AS A CASE

There is still little empirical work that could shed light on the factors influencing authors' decision to submit their papers (Mills 2020). Similarly, authors experiences prior to and during manuscript submission, as well as during and after the publication process, remain poorly documented (Mills 2020). Nevertheless, these stages are crucial for understanding the mechanisms of predation and the reasons why researchers decide to submit a paper. For this purpose, we have chosen a clear example, the predatory publisher OMICS, where the 'diagnosis' of predation has been legally confirmed in the following literature (Kolata 2019; Siler et al 2021; Kulczycki et al 2022; Downes 2023).

OMICS was first identified in Beall's list (Beall 2012). Since 2008, OMICS included thousands of journals and conferences on its website, presented them as indexed titles in international databases, and sent invitations to authors to submit papers or join editorial boards (Masic 2017; Downes 2021; Kulczycki et al 2022). The cumulative number of articles published to date is estimated to be around 69,000 (Siler et al 2021), leading to its characterization as a predatory "mega-publisher" (Manley 2019a). OMICS' dubious status was made official in August 2016, when the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) filed a lawsuit against OMICS (Kolata 2019). It status was further confirmed in 2018, when the US government issued an order requiring OMICS to pay $50.1 million for 'unfair and deceptive practices' (Dyer 2019). This condemnation made OMICS a prime example of a predatory publisher (Downes 2021; Siler et al 2021; Krauskopf and Funk 2021). Its mechanisms are based on developing takeover and rebranding operations for several years, with the aim of appearing legitimate to a research community it is trying to attract or retain. As pointed out by Manley (2019a; Manley 2019b). despite this legal action, OMICS continues to operate with impunity.

OBJECTIVE AND METHOD

The study aims to investigate the level of author engagement with the predatory publisher OMICS by examining its author base. We aim to examine the factors and motivations that led researchers to submit manuscripts to one of its journals, understanding the circumstances and drivers, and gathering their valuable feedback. To this end, the study raises the following research questions:

(a) What is the profile of authors who have published in OMICS?

(b) Which factors came into play in researchers' decisions to publish an article with OMICS?
(c) What are the feedback, experiences and satisfaction level of the authors?
(d) What is the level of knowledge of authors about the phenomenon of predatory publishing and the status of OMICS as a predatory publisher?

The theoretical approach underlying this study (Boltanski Thévenot 1991) allows us to suspend any judgement about the authors and to focus on the social, cultural, political and economic frameworks in which they develop, with the factors that influence their choices and decisions. This approach recognises that authors have the capacity to control their choices and decisions. It also helps to reveal the 'dialogues' in which authors intervene to justify their actions, according to which principles and values.

A questionnaire was used and the choice justified by two reasons. Firstly, due to the extensive size of the OMICS journal community, we aimed to reach as many respondents as possible. Secondly, the findings gathered through the survey will inform the development of a qualitative survey planned for September 2024. The questionnaire (see Appendix) was designed in four parts and consisted of 33 questions. A total of 11 open-ended questions were included in order to collect the authors' responses in their own words, and to get closer to the qualitative approaches preferred for understanding authors' motivations (Kurt 2018). The questionnaire underwent testing before being posted on the Survey Monkey platform. Subsequently, an English-language invitation along with the survey link was dispatched to 2,209 e-mail addresses of potential authors, gathered through web scraping from the OMICS website (https://www.omicsonline.org/). The first invitation to respond to the questionnaire was sent in October 2022. This was followed by four reminders. A final reminder was sent in February 2023 before closing in March.

RESULTS

This section provides insights into the demographic characteristics of the respondents and outlines their experiences with OMICS. A total of 86 complete responses to the questionnaire were collected, representing only about 4 percent of the target population. This low response rate is similar to other equivalent studies (Cohen et al 2019). Of the 2209 e-mails sent, 193 were found to have invalid or non-existent addresses, according to the non-delivery messages received. During the course of the survey we received 18 e-mail responses: 6 researchers claimed to be victims because they never submitted an article to OMICS; 5 other researchers said they did not understand or read English; 4 authors replied by sending a text for publication and the last 3 made a proposal to collaborate to start a journal or join an editorial board.

Respondents' Characteristics

Respondents were mainly male (76 percent), and women representing only a quarter of the total number. Although the 22-35 age range accounts for the largest proportion of responses, with almost a third (27, 9%), age categories are almost equally distributed. The status of respondents is almost equally divided between 3 main categories as shown in Figure 1: PhD students (18, 21%), Professors (17, 20%) and Associate Professors (16, 18,6%). There were also responses from Master students (6, 7%). Responses to the category "Other" were incoherent (ex. Amazon Cloud services) or unclear (ex. independent).

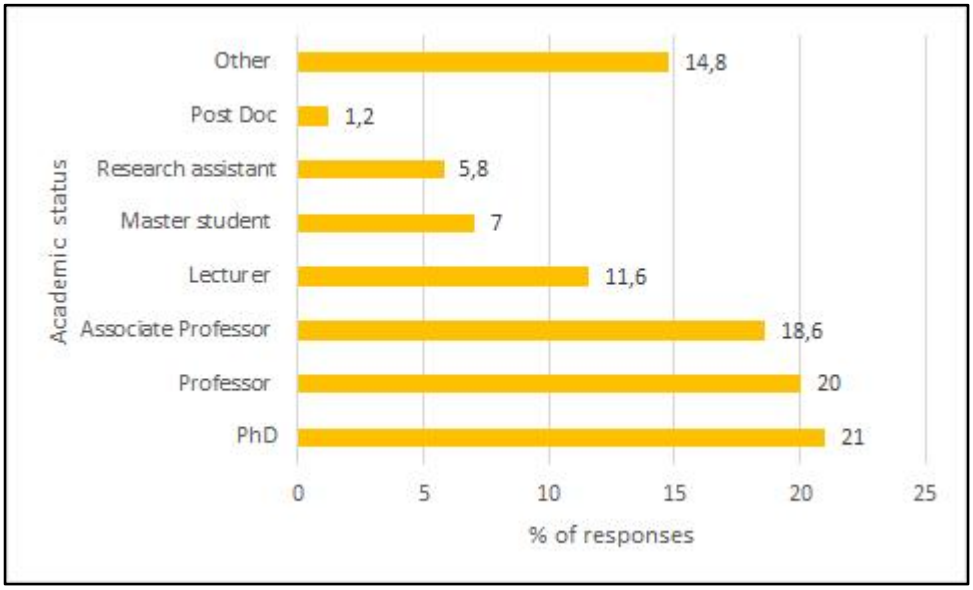

Figure 1: Distribution of Respondents by Academic Status

A majority of respondents (56, 65%) indicated that they had more than 10 years of experience in academia. The large majority worked in the public sector (65, 76%), split between universities (52, 61%) and public research organisations (12, 15%). The geographical distribution of the responses is spread over 31 countries, with 17.5 percent coming from India, 14 percent from Ethiopia, 9.5 percent from Nigeria, 7 percent from the USA. On the long tail, we find countries from Europe (15%), Asia (10%) Africa (11%), Arab countries (12%) and South America (4%). Figure 2 provides additional insights into the fields of specialization, where health emerged as the dominant area of expertise for half of the respondents (43, 49%), followed by biology (16, 19%) and chemistry (7, 8.13%). Other disciplines are under-represented as illustrated in Figure 2.

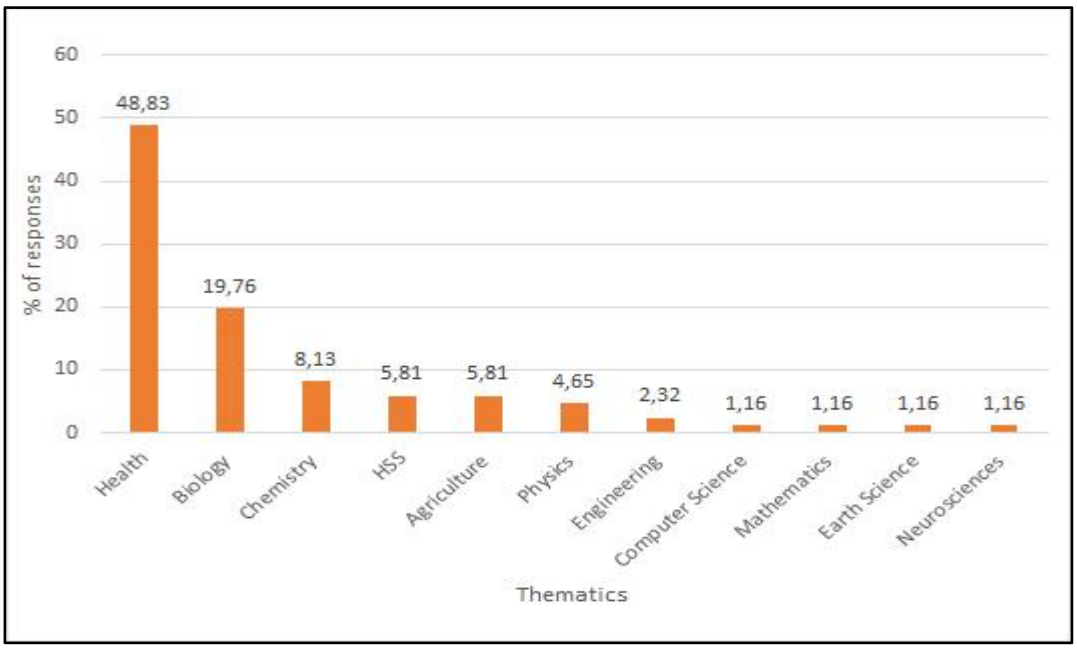

Figure 2: Distribution of Respondents by Research Field

English Language Proficiency and Author Productivity

Open-ended questions were incorporated to assess the English language proficiency of the authors. Responses and e-mails received revealed that a significant majority of respondents exhibited a limited command of English, evident in sentence structure, terminology usage, as well as the accuracy of spelling names and acronyms. This was also apparent in the verbatim responses, which have been intentionally retained in their original form without correction. English language proficiency factor may contribute to explaining the lower response rate observed.

Looking at the productivity of authors, we found that 47 percent of respondents publish between 2 and 4 articles per year. Half of the respondents (43, 49%) publish between 2 and 4 articles per year. The remaining respondents are unevenly distributed between the other categories of production rates. It is worth noting that six respondents (9%) indicated that they publish more than 12 articles per year.

Publishing Experience with OMICS

(a) First contact with an OMICS journal

Knowing how authors came across the journal in which they published their article was important for understanding the first mechanism of researchers' engagement with OMICS. A total of 46 (53%) of respondents first discovered the OMICS journal by searching for a journal title on the Web. Almost a quarter (23%) said that they met the journal through an e-mail invitation to publish. While, 9 percent say that peers introduced them to the journal.

Almost 76 percent of the articles published with OMICS are first-time submissions. However, when asked whether OMICS is a well-known publisher in the respective communities, responses are divided: 35 percent of respondents affirm its recognition, 32 percent claim they do not have knowledge of it, and 27 percent assert it lacks recognition.

When asked to name a publisher comparable to OMICS, answers are equally divided. Authors (44%) say they do not know or do not have an equivalent. The other part of the answers (Table 1) gives different examples, ranging from historic publishers (Elsevier), to databases or platforms (ScienceDirect) to prestigious journals (Nature) or publishers of questionable status (Ommegaonline).

(b) Factors driving decision to submit a manuscript

Authors' decision factors for submitting to OMICS Journals are as follows: (a) Journal's scope (52%); (b) Journal Impact Factor" (34%); (c) Journal's indexing in international databases; (d) Open Access model (30%), and (e) Acceptance rate (18%). A total of 24.4 percent of the respondents mentioned that they had previously submitted their articles to another journal before considering OMICS. Notably, the titles mentioned (see Table 2) predominantly belong to questionable journals.

(c) OMICS journals turnaround time

When asked about OMICS journals turnaround time (TAT), more than half of the respondents (53.5%) indicated that it was between 3 and 8 weeks. Almost 21 percent of respondents indicated that they had published their articles within 2 to 6 months. Almost the same percentage (20%) said they had published their articles in a very short time (3 days to 3 weeks). On the other hand, almost 6 percent of respondents indicated they had published their articles within more than 6 months.

Table 1: Publishers compared to OMICS

Publisher names given by respondents with individual spellings	Name corrected	URL
Wiley	Wiley	https://www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com
Springer	Springer	https://www.springer.com/fr
Open journal of radiology	Scientific Research	https://www.scirp.org
Science alert	Science Alert	https://scialert.net
MDPI	MDPI	https://www.mdpi.com
Elsevier	Elsevier	https://www.elsevier.com/fr-fr
Juniper	Juniper Publishers	https://juniperpublishers.com
Science Group	Science Publishing Group	http://www.sciencepublishinggroup.com/home/index
Ommegaonline	Ommega Online Publishers	https://www.ommegaonline.org
Dove	Dovepress	https://www.dovepress.com
Sage	Sage publishing	https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/home
PLOS one	PLOS	https://plos.org
BMC	BMC	https://www.biomedcentral.com
Hindawi	Hindawi	https://www.hindawi.com
ImedPUP	Insinght Medical Publishing	https://www.imedpub.com
IntechOpen	IntechOpen	https://www.intechopen.com
Benthams	Bentham Science	https://benthamscience.com
Cambridge Scholars Publishing	Cambridge Scholars Publishing	https://www.cambridgescholars.com
Herbert Open Access	Herbert Open Access Journals	https://www.hoajonline.com
Science direct	Elsevier	https://www.sciencedirect.com
Ocimum	Ocimum Scientific Publishers	https://ospopac.com
Open Agriculture	Bentham Open	https://benthamopen.com/TOASJ/home/

Table 2: Journals First Authors Submission before Submitting to an OMICS Journal

Title provided by the respondents	URL found
Journal of Depression and Anxiety	https://www.longdom.org/depression-and-anxiety.html
Journal of Pulmonary and Respiratory Medicine	https://www.hilarispublisher.com/pulmonary-respiratory-medicine.html
Biomedical Engineering and Medical devices	https://www.longdom.org/biomedical-engineering-medical-devices.html
Works on Biotechnology	No Results
Agriculture and Natural Resources	https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/agriculture-and-natural-resources
Neurology India	https://www.neurologyindia.com
Indian Journal of Neurosciences	https://www.ijnonline.org
Epidemeology (Sunnyvale) Open Access	https://www.omicsonline.org/epidemiology-open-access.php
Journal of Pregnancy	https://www.hindawi.com/journals/jp/
Journal of Drug Metabolism and Toxicology	https://www.longdom.org/drug-metabolism-toxicology.html
Journal of Geology and Geophysics	https://www.longdom.org/geology-geosciences.html
Journal of Virology & Mycology	https://www.longdom.org/virology-mycology.html
International j General Medicine and Pharmacy	http://www.iaset.us/journals/international-journals/international-journal-of-general-medicine-and-pharmacy
Journal of Environnemental Analytical Chemistry	https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/geac20/current

(d) Peer review at OMICS

Seventy-six percent of respondents reported that their articles had undergone some form of review or received feedback. Among these, the majority (74%) expressed satisfaction with the feedback received. However, in 12.8 percent of cases, respondents were uncertain about the quality of the feedback. Conversely, in 15 percent of instances,

respondents felt that their articles did not undergo any form of peer review, while 9.3 percent of respondents were unsure whether their articles had received feedback or not.

(e) Article Processing Charges (APCs)

In the case of 64 percent of respondents, their articles were published with an Article Processing Charge (APC). Among these authors, 43.75 percent paid an amount between USD 1-100; 28.2 percent paid an APC between USD 100-500; 9 percent paid between USD 500-1000; and 18.75 percent paid more than USD 1000. For 49 percent of the respondents (which equates to two-thirds of the authors who paid for publication), the APC was covered with their personal funds. Other sources of payment reported included research funds (12.3%) and university funds (10.8%), while the remaining 77 percent stated that they used personal funds, including loans.

(f) Copyright conditions

Inquiries about copyright provisions revealed significant gaps in researchers' knowledge Responses show that only 9 percent of the authors were able to specify which copyright terms they had accepted; 20 percent reported they did not know what it meant; and 6 percent said they had not entered into any such agreement for their articles. The majority of authors (64%) provided inconsistent responses, often citing the journal's title, its field (discipline) or a DOI.

(g) Impact of publishing with OMICS on researchers' careers

While 40 percent of the respondents acknowledged that their OMICS paper played a role in their promotion, a smaller proportion (24%), believed that publishing with OMICS aided in securing tenure. Furthermore, a mere 10.5 percent reported receiving a grant specifically for publishing in an OMICS journal.

(h) Authors' Evaluation of Publishing Experience with OMICS

Survey participants were requested to rate their publishing experience with OMICS on a scale from 0 to 100. The resulting average response score was 64, indicating a generally positive sentiment. However, this average conceals notable variations in individual experiences.

As shown in Figure 3, two categories stand out, with a split in the middle of the ratings allowing us to identify two antagonistic experiences: one clearly negative (one fifth of responses), concentrated in low ratings (0-10), the other positive (four-fifth of the responses) but more spread out in its rating, between 50 and 100. So, there is no "medium" in the ratings showing a "good enough" experience. Besides, 71 percent of the authors reported that they are willing to repeat the experience of publishing in an OMICS journal.

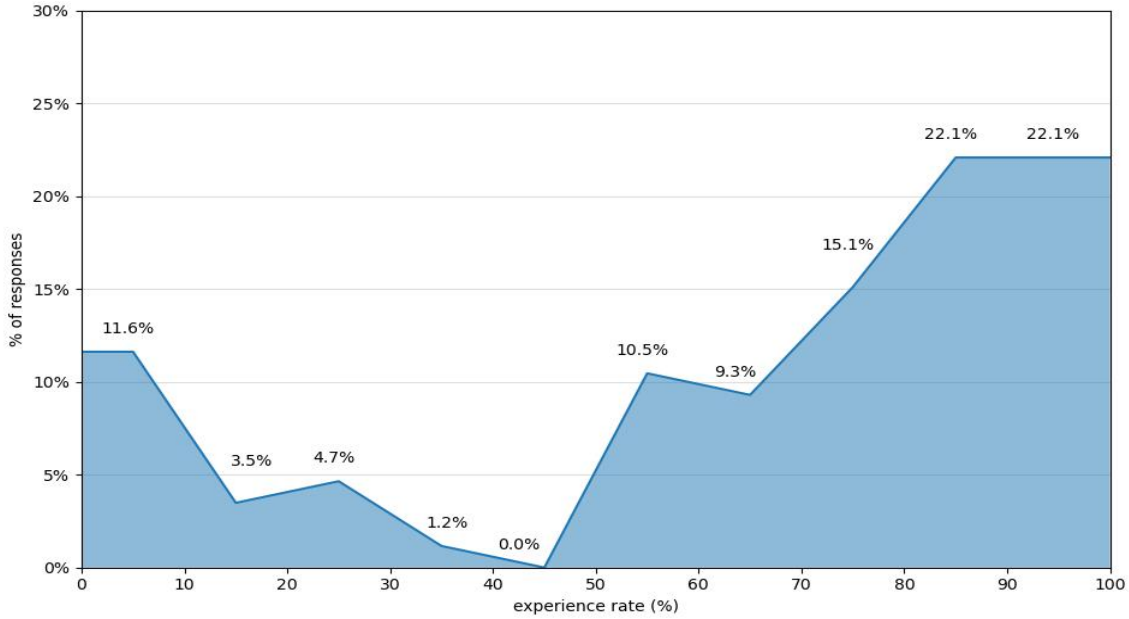

Figure 3: Authors' Rating of Publication Experience with OMICS

Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Questions

Responses to the open-ended questions (No, 12,18, 19, 21, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33) were analysed thematically, according to the elements mentioned by the respondents and whether the publishing experience with OMICS was positive or negative. Thematic analysis is more focused on capturing the variety of arguments put forward by respondents in relation to their experiences, rather than the occurrence frequency of those arguments. This approach is particularly relevant in the case of our survey, which focuses on researchers' feedback, reporting it in their own words and reflecting their view. Verbatim responses are presented, followed by the corresponding country, gender, academic discipline, and academic status, all enclosed in brackets.

(a) A positive publishing experiences

Authors' satisfaction with OMICS is significantly influenced by the ease and swiftness of the publication process, its affordability, and its ability to achieve international indexing and visibility.

Accessibility and Dissemination

Open access appeared almost consistently in the responses, highlighting the importance of its potential to reach a wide audience on the web: *"It was a simple and expedient process. The Open Access nature of the publication greatly facilitated distributing the research results".* (USA, Male, Biology, Full Professor).

Visibility

In connection with the previous argument on open access, authors also valued visibility. They claim that their publication with OMICS brought them with a level of visibility they had never experienced before:

"Because my article reached quite many audience because I got many feedback e-mails from different individuals and journals" (Nigeria, Male, Health, Research Assistant).

"[I have] *20 citations till now. More than 5 thousands read on Researchgate"* (Bangladesh, Male, Physics, PhD student).

A speedy and straightforward experience

Most comments highlighted the speed and ease with which the article was published. The lack of delay and complexity in the publishing process was a strong and recurring argument in the responses:

"Quick, painless publication process" (India, Female, Health, Associate Professor).

"Lack of complexity in uploading the manuscript" (Jordan, Male, Health, Associate Professor).

This is also applicable to the peer review process, with authors expressing a high level of satisfaction: *"Because the fast the manuscript was reviewed and published"* (Brazil, Male, Biophysics, PhD student).

Satisfaction is also based on the existence of direct and regular interaction with OMICS contacts, having received 'prompt response from the journal', via telephone, chat and social networks applications: *"Processing time was quick. Whatsapp communication was excellent"* (South Africa, Male, Social Science, PostDoc).

Free or low charge

Several respondents expressed satisfaction with the low or even free cost of publication, which makes OMICS a competitive publisher, supporting authors from the global South:

"Relatively cheaper and better than others" (Ethiopia, Male, Biology, PhD student).

"Free charge, which help to publish more articles from my countries" (Ethiopia, Male, Agriculture, Associate Professor).

It is even more satisfactory when it is combined with the criteria of speed and ease of publication: *"Fast publication and discount or no fee for developing country"* (Ethiopia, Male, Physics, Associate Professor).

Indexation status and Impact Factor

The authors' responses largely confirmed that they believe they have published their article in an indexed journal with an Impact Factor: *"Compared to my other published articles the impact factor at an OMICS journal was better and above those journals"* (Ethiopia, Male, Chemistry, PhD student).

Respondents' satisfaction is also due to a combination of the above-mentioned arguments: *"Because of highly indexed and fast publishing experiences and sometimes free publication processing fee for open access Journals"* (India, Male, Life Science, Professor).

A passport to enter the academic system

Articles published at OMICS have had a positive impact on the careers of some researchers, who have been granted tenure or have received substantial salary increases: *"Impact of publication from the OMICS journal on my career is my salary increases from the $335 to $425 (…) I have gone career structure from associate researcher position to full researcher due to one publication from OMICS journal* (Pakistan, Male, Biology, Associate Professor).

Consequently, some authors testify to the role that articles published in OMICS may have played in validating a PhD application: *"The published article was a necessary element to obtain the title of habilitated doctor"* (Poland, Female, Health, Associate Professor).

As a result, some authors incorporate OMICS into their publishing strategies with the aim of securing grants: *"I think it is a great achievement for a student to publish his/her article. And I hope this publication will help me to get an international scholarship for higher studies"* (Pakistan, Female, Biotechnology, Master student).

(b) A negative publishing experiences

The lack of publication standards and the perceived high cost of publication are the main reasons for authors' negative experiences with OMICS.

High publishing costs

The argument that APCs are too high was raised several times. According to the authors, the price is even higher when applied to researchers from the global South. *"OMICS publisher should reduce their APC especially for authors from low and middle income countries like Nigeria"* (Nigeria, Male, Health, Lecturer).

Authors' dissatisfaction may also stem from the failure to obtain APC waivers or exemptions in relation to their status as researchers from the global South, or from the fact that the publisher's commitment to apply the waiver was not honoured, as one author's comment suggests: *"OMICS offered free publication but the agreement was not recognized. It was a disappointing experience"* (Chile, Male, Medicine, Associate Professor).

No peer review, no standards

Dissatisfaction also stems from the fact that it was only during the publication process that they realised that peer review was non-existent. This is mainly due to the speed of publication, which does not allow for thorough feedback: *"The paper I published was not in my view peer-reviewed... [and they] messed up in their formatting process"* (South Africa, Male, Humanities, Lecturer).

Authors also discover after publication that their articles do not meet international publishing standards, has not been assigned a DOI, or remain unindexed, as reflected from the following verbatim: *"(...) the complaint is they give less care to article processing and author proofing. They did not even write my name properly in an article that I published from its sister journal of allied academics. That is the reason I discontinued to publish my next articles from their platform"* (India, Male, Psychology, Research Assistant).

How Well is OMICS' Predatory Character Known?

Only 23 percent of respondents indicated that they were aware that OMICS had been ordered by the US federal judiciary to pay over USD 50 million for its "unfair and deceptive" practices: *"I suspected they were a predatory journal but they had big names on the editors board, so would be disappointed if they are"* (Uzbekistan, Male, Biology, PhD student).

Additional findings offer insights into authors' awareness of predatory publishing and the perception of OMICS as a predatory publisher. Responses varied, with some expressing negative views and others holding positive opinions.

(a) Voices from the periphery

The responses indicate that not all authors perceive themselves as victims and some even express skepticism about the predatory nature of the industry. There are instances of authors expressing a degree of solidarity with a publisher that charges them a lower APC compared to legitimate publishers: *"Practically, they take article processing charges that is*

much lower than any so-called established journals. Regarding peer reviewing, I got the best peer reviewing from OMICS. I have also stored in my mail box reviews from so called established journals (…) So, it is totally unfair what happened to OMICS. Filthy, money-oriented, business people are all behind this" (India, Male, Psychology, Research assistant).

The analysis reveals elements consistent with the arguments put forward by previous studies on the geopolitical dimension of predation. They reveal another perspective, that of the periphery, which is outraged by a publishing system that shows little concern for the difficulties faced by the global South:

"How to ensure a minimum of cognitive justice with a system perverted by money, uniformity and single thought. Most young researchers come to terms with this system out of obligation and not out of choice". (Tunisia, Male, Health, PhD student).

"OMICS publishing is very helpful for developing countries where we didn't afford to pay publication fees on highly reputable journals. Thus, better to have the choice to publish a scientific paper to address and share with the world!! OMICS is open access, relatively straight forward and timely. Much less of a hassle and less arrogant than old-school society journals" (Ethiopia, Male, Agriculture, Associate professor).

The situation is particularly sensitive for ECRs who are trying to secure a position: *"The editors of major journals imposes Eurocentric guidelines. A young researcher residing in a developing country does not have the material or institutional capacities to meet the financial criteria of major newspapers. English-speaking journals for some also have this Eurocentric conception which does not accept that we can leave the beaten track. currently I have two articles under review for 2 years already. I note that to be able to publish in English reviews, you have to be sponsored by a big name to legitimize and facilitate"* (Tunisia, Male, Health, PhD student).

(b) A traumatic publishing experiences

Authors who realised the predatory nature of OMICS during the publication process prompted us to analyse their experiences in the context of trauma. These authors provided longer verbatim accounts compared to others, recounting the episodes of fraud they encountered as victims: *"We were contacted and asked to write a review. At no point in the e-mail or correspondence with the author were APC mentioned. Once the article had been accepted we were telephone [and] told to pay 3000 euros for the APC. When we asked for the manuscript to be withdrawn because we had no funds to pay the APC the editors stopped responding to our e-mails. We later found out that the manuscript had been published without our consent. We were then bullied repeatedly by phone calls and e-mails asking for the money. The manuscript was submitted via the editor and not online and all revisions were dealt with in a similar fashion. We never consented to the manuscript being published or to paying the costs"* (UK, Female, Health, PhD student).

In addition to e-mails, which are often used as phishing tools, social networks are also used to identify and contact authors, persuading them to submit articles: *"I was approached by a LinkedIn contact, I didn't do my due diligence, and ended up wasting my article there. When I discovered, I wanted to recall my manuscript. They went ahead to publish it anyway, and blocked me on all avenues I used in reaching them before"* (Nigeria, Male, Biology, Associate Professor).

In some cases, an author who has already paid for the publishing service is harassed into paying a second time for the same published article: *"I paid the agreed amount, and then*

the journal asked me to pay again with double fee 1 year later... with repeated e-mails" (China, Female, Health, Associate Professor).

Certain authors opt not to include their publication with OMICS on their CV, aiming to avoid any association with the publisher. They also seek to prevent any potential accusations of complacency, even if they acknowledge that their work with OMICS may be considered a "waste of manuscript."

"Predatory journal, definitely. No benefit. I even do not mention this in my CV. Simply fraudulent" (Nigeria, Male, Agriculture, Lecturer).

"I am ashamed to even use the article myself. They ignored my request to correct the language they had messed up in it" (South Africa, Male, Humanities, Lecturer).

(c) An emerging subculture

For some authors, OMICS serves as a good tool, which they utilize as a dissemination platform and a self-publishing tool:

"I don't have a career goal, the most important thing for me is to disseminate my research. It is a question of alerting the stakeholders of my country on certain points" (Tunisia, Male, Health, PhD student).

"My career is already established and OMICS publication was sought to promulgate concepts in a journal rapidly" (UK, Male, Health, Professor).

These authors express that they have gained valuable insights from OMICS about the rules and principles of "new options" for open access. They are inclined to submit new papers, viewing the publication process as straightforward, fast, and equivalent to efficient dissemination: *"The exposure to wider scientific world"* (Nigeria, Male, Biology, PhD student).

Similarly, their perception of peer review aligns with the notion that it is a swift and uncomplicated phase in the publishing process, as illustrated by the following quotes:

"I had learned a lot from them such as how present quality product to user" (Ethiopia, Male, Biology, Associate Professor).

"I learned how to give a response for peer reviewers comment and questions" (Ethiopia, Male, Health, Research assistant).

This ease of publishing with OMICS does not seem to ring the alarm bells, and is rather related to the effort they engage in producing their article. Consequently, authors gauge OMICS publishing experience, in a way, the yardstick against which they confront any other publishing experiences: *"I got an experience of hardworking and how the paper is evaluated fairly and professionally"* (Ethiopia, Male, Chemistry, PhD student).

Thus, OMICS indirectly shapes a subculture centered around rapid and straightforward publication, introducing new principles and values that influence researchers' perceptions: *"I have been learned a lot from this publisher (1) how we present our work in understandable form to readers (2) scientific contents (3) grammatical and language issue (4) how help those who need assistance (5) how produce quality product"* (Bangladesh, Male, Physics, PhD student).

The financial aspect of publishing is not a significant concern either. Firstly, the costs remain relatively lower compared to other publishers. Secondly, researchers have devised their own their own tips and tricks: *"If you keep saying I don't want to publish if there is a fee, they will inevitably waive the fee"* (USA, Male, Biology, Full Professor).

DISCUSSION

Our findings concerning the characteristics of authors involved in possible, potential, or probable predatory journals align with several traits previously identified in the existing predatory publishing literature. Firstly, they corroborate that the majority of authors hail from the global South (Xia et al. 2015; Nwagnu 2015), although not exclusively so (Hedding 2019). Secondly, the majority of them work in the health sector, which is known for receiving significant research funding (Moher et al 2017; Allman 2019; Manca et al 2020). Additionally, low English language skills and a lack of training are prevalent characteristics among the authors. (Strong 2019). However, the results also also shed light on two closely related phenomena: on the one hand, the complex environment and conditions in which the decision to submit an article is made by its author; and on the other hand, the predatory mechanisms employed by OMICS. The study therefore allows us to answer our research questions by presenting a more nuanced categorisation of author profiles and their motivations withing the context of predatory publishing:

Fictitious and unwilling authors: our findings confirm the fake nature of authorship at OMICS (Manley 2019a, 2019b; Siler et al 2021). Fictitious and fake authors, fake addresses and unwilling authors are all 'hacking' strategies used by OMICS to inflate its content (Downes 2023) and have long been used by predatory journals, including where reviewers and editors are concerned (Sorokowski et al 2017; Moussa 2021; Siler et al. 2021). The low response rate in our study can also be interpreted as indicative of a dummy author base. Additionally, it is worth noting that some authors whose identities were hacked tend to be senior international researchers, many of whom are either retired or approaching retirement. Their names and affiliations are exploited to instill confidence and persuade potential authors to submit papers.

"Unheard" victims: our results revealed a new category, one with such poor English language skills and so little knowledge of the scientific publishing system that they are unable to understand what happens to their manuscript. These authors already identified in previous studies (Omobowale et al 2014; Kurt 2018; Cohen et al 2019), do not realise that they are victims, do not feel that they are and do not manifest themselves as such. The lack of knowledge of this category of authors ensures that they remain captive victims. Only a sufficient level of English and a minimal knowledge will enable them to reflect on their condition.

Exploited victims: this category represents authors who, as other studies have pointed out (Nielsen and Davison 2020; Cobey et al 2019), are subject to the pressure of the "publish or perish" rule and seek to publish their articles within an anxiety-inducing approach. This is exacerbated by not only their precariousness (Shehata and Elgllab 2018) or their desire to advance their careers (Frandsen 2019), but also by their difficulties in navigating the ever-changing digital information environment. The confusion of these authors, coupled with their isolation, renders them vulnerable targets for predatory journals, that often establish an aura of credibility by flaunting long-awaited indicators of legitimacy, including indexing, impact factors, prestigious editors' names, and esteemed editorial board members (Petrisor 2016). The testimonies provided are very close to those expressed in the literature (Chambers 2019; Masic 2017) and confirm the parallels with cyber criminality (Lukić et al 2014). These authors represent the most vulnerable victims in our study, as they are the most receptive to the OMICS strategies.

Cynical and critical: this category encompasses authors who have knowingly published with OMICS and are willing to do so again in the future. Similar to previous studies (Omobowale 2014; Kurt 2018; Demir 2018; Salehi et al 2020), these authors express satisfaction with the TAT, satisfactory evaluation and reasonable APC rates. They do not belong to a specific age group and therefore includes both junior and senior researchers (Pyne 2017; Shaghaei et al 2018; Eykens 2019; Hedding 2019; Jayanth 2019; Perlin, Imasato and Borenstein 2018; Salehi et al 2020).

Our findings reveal a form of Stockholm syndrome within this category of authors. This syndrome is connected to the intense pressure to publish in international journals, which they believe they may not be eligible for (Beigel 2014) or perceive as inaccessible (Burgess-Jackson 2020; Krawczyk and Kulczyski 2021). They nurture a sense of downgrading already identified in the literature (Mertkan 2021) and confirm the pressure that the "publish or perish" rule represents (Nielsen 2020). They confront it with a form of solidarity towards the predatory journals that they consider ''good enough'' and that provides the possibility to publish quickly and easily in fake forms of international journals (Bell 2017). In this case, publishing in OMICS is seen as a survival strategy in a very competitive and unequal world, rather than an unethical practice (Mertkan 2021; Manca et al 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to get closer to the author base of a questionable publisher, OMICS, in order to better understand the motivations, the drivers and the conditions under which researchers submitting their manuscripts. The results not only provided additional insights into the existing author profiles identified in the literature but also revealed new author profiles. Authors' responses have also provided insights into the environment in which researchers develop, and the complex trade-offs involved in identifying a predatory journal and deciding to submit a manuscript. They highlight the negative effects of the pressure to publish at the expense of quality.

While the predatory nature of OMICS is confirmed, the arguments on which its strategies are based are to some extent legitimised by authors who feel located in 'underworlds' (Stöckelová and Vostal 2017), despised and excluded from the North/Western and international publishing system. Researchers' motivations thus reveal a representation of scholarly publishing that is anchored in a subculture, where ease and speed of dissemination are more important than legitimacy, certification and thus quality control (Petrisor 2016).

Hence, the established definition of predatory journals failed to reach a consensus among all OMICS authors, as it does not account for previously overlooked inequalities, hierarchies, power dynamics, and domination relations between regions considered to be on the "periphery" compared to a so-called "centre" that tends to devalue or even exclude them (Bell 2017; Krawczyk and Kulczyski 2021; Stöckelová and Vostal 2017). Also, a whole section of the author base is developing a traumatic publication experience associated with cybercrime (Lukić et al 2014). This journey, spanning from initial fascination to eventual disappointment and even harassment, presents a concerning trend and can no longer be ignored by institutional policies.

The study showed that some institutions took articles published in predatory journals into account when evaluating researchers' career progress. In doing so, they inadvertently lent

legitimacy to these journals and indirectly incentivized researchers to engage with them. It is crucial for institutions to recognize and actively address the risks posed by predatory journals. More importantly, they should extend support to their researchers by offering training, tools and resources that impart knowledge, values and norms of contemporary scholarly publishing. Additionally, providing scholarly communication skills in local languages can facilitate a more effective assimilation of publishing standards, ensuring researchers' alignment with best practices.

These findings also highlight the importance of exploring predatory publishing from the perspective of an emerging subculture of academic publishing that has its own values and representations. It also helps to better frame the issues of asymmetries and geopolitical inequalities in the current system of scientific knowledge production, as well as the question of its status of legitimacy.

This study is based on a single case study, and as such, our findings, while valuable for comprehending the OMICS publishing experience, may not be readily extrapolated to other publishing encounters involving different questionable publishers. Nevertheless, our findings contribute to a deeper comprehension of the mechanisms through which the predatory process can exploit the specific vulnerabilities within its author base, highlighting the adaptable nature of these vulnerabilities.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

1-Identity

1. How old are you?

⇒ 18-21 years old
⇒ 22-35 years old
⇒ 36-45 years old
⇒ 46-55 years old
⇒ 56-68 years old
⇒ 69 years old and more

2. What is your gender?

⇒ Male
⇒ Female
⇒ Other

3. In which country are you established?

(Drop-down list of countries)

4. What is your research field?

⇒ Biology
⇒ Chemistry
⇒ Computer Science
⇒ Earth Sciences
⇒ Engineering
⇒ Health
⇒ Mathematics
⇒ Physics
⇒ Humanities
⇒ Social Sciences

Other *Write an answer*

5. What is your academic status?

⇒ Master's student
⇒ PhD
⇒ Postdoc
⇒ Lecturer
⇒ Research Assistant
⇒ Associate Professor
⇒ Full Professor

Other *Write an answer*

6. To which institution or type of institution are you attached?

⇒ University
⇒ College
⇒ Public Research Organism
⇒ Private Research Organism

Other *Write an answer*

7. How many years of experience do you have in academia?

⇒ 0-2 years
⇒ 3-6 years
⇒ 7-10 years
⇒ 10 years and more

8. How many article(s) do you publish per year?

⇒ Less than 1 article per year

⇒ 1 article per year, on average
⇒ Between 2 and 4 articles per year
⇒ Between 5 and 8 articles per year
⇒ Between 9 and 12 articles Per year
⇒ More than 12 articles per year

2-Article submission:

9. **You have published a paper in an OMICS Journal, can you tell us how did you came across this journal?**

⇒ By a promotional mail
⇒ By an advertisement on the web
⇒ By an e-mail invitation to submit an article
⇒ By peer recommendation
⇒ By acquaintance recommendation
⇒ Searching for a journal on the internet
Other *Write an answer*

10. **What is/are the criterion(s) that led you to choose this journal?**

⇒ Topic of the journal
⇒ Indexation in international databases
⇒ Impact factor of the journal
⇒ Publication rate
⇒ Open access dissemination
Other *Write an answer*

11. **Has the article you published in OMICS Journal been submitted to any other journal publishers before?**

⇒ Yes
⇒ No

12. **Could you please mention the title(s) of the journal(s) to which you submitted your paper before submitting it to OMICS?**

Write an answer

3-Publication process at OMICS:

13. **Regarding the paper you have published in OMICS journal, how long did the process take from submission to publication?**

⇒ Less than 3 days
⇒ Between 3 days and 1 week
⇒ Between 1 and 3 weeks
⇒ Between 3 weeks and 2 months
⇒ Between 2 and 6 months
⇒ More than 6 months

14. **Did your article receive any feedback from the journal (comments, feedback for corrections, amendments, reviews)?**

⇒ Yes
⇒ No
⇒ Don't know

15. **If so, were you satisfied with the feedback?**

⇒ Yes
⇒ No
⇒ Mixed

If you have anything to add *Write an answer*

16. Did you pay an APC (Article Processing Charges) for publishing the article?

⇒ Yes

⇒ No

17. If you answered yes to question 16, how much was the money amount?

⇒ 0 - 100$

⇒ 100 – 500$

⇒ 500 – 1000$

⇒ 1000$ and more

18. If you answered yes to question 16, then which source funded the APC?

⇒ Research project funds

⇒ University or employer funds

⇒ Your personal funds

Other *Write an answer*

19. What is the license (Creative Commons) under which your article was published?

Write an answer

<u>4-Publication impact:</u>

20. Can you please rate your publishing experience with OMICS' journal?

Scale from 0 to 100

21. Is OMICS a well-known publisher in your community?

⇒ Yes

⇒ No

⇒ Don't know

Any comment? *Write an answer*

22. Did your publication at OMICS help you to obtain a promotion?

⇒ Yes

⇒ No

23. Did your publication at OMICS help to get a financial award?

⇒ Yes

⇒ No

24. Did your publication at OMICS help to get a tenure track?

⇒ Yes

⇒ No

25. How would you describe the impact of your publication at an OMICS journal on your career?

Write an answer

26. Would you repeat the publishing experience at an OMICS journal in the future?

⇒ Yes

⇒ No

27. If your answered Yes, then why?

Write an answer

28. If you answered No, then why?

Write an answer

29. What other publishers could you compare OMICS to?

Write an answer

30. What did you learn from your publishing experience at OMICS?

Write an answer

31. **Did you know that OMICS was ordered to pay $50.1 million by the US federal justice system in compensation for its practices, which were considered "unfair and deceptive", particularly with regard to authors?**

⇒ Yes

⇒ No

32. **Do you have any comments to add, any information or personal feelings on the subject?**

Write an answer

33. **Do you agree to participate in the second step of this study with an interview? If so, could you please provide us with your e-mail address?**

Write an answer