

“Please Submit Your Paper...”: Move Analysis of Predatory ‘Spamvitation’ Emails sent to a Malaysian Academic

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the rhetorical moves of predatory and spam emails sent to a Malaysian academic soliciting academic articles. The data of this study comprised of 50 emails that were analyzed through move analysis. Findings indicated that the emails had five obligatory moves, which were stating the purpose, defining the scope, establishing credentials, building rapport, offering incentives, and expressing urgency. These moves were found to leverage and exploit on the pressures faced by Malaysian academics, especially in terms of having to produce high output. Aside from the obligatory moves, the analysis also identified language features such as those that intend to flatter the vanity of the recipient and to seemingly establish personal rapport. Based on the findings, it is recommended that clear guidance and instruction be provided to Malaysian academics when engaged in writing and publishing their research work. It may also be necessary for institutions to rethink institutional goals, so as to not pressure academics to engage in activities that may threaten the integrity of scholarly work and research ethics.

Keywords: Move analysis, Spam, Predatory publishers, Pressure to publish

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The publication expectation for academics working in Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) – both public and private – is not new; in fact, this expectation is becoming greater. This mainly stems from Malaysian HEIs’ participation in global rankings (Chang & Abdullah, 2021), which requires academics to publish (or perish) (Abu Kassim *et al.*, 2024). This pressure has been felt by academics across all disciplinary fields, as seen through the increase in publications among research universities in Malaysia (Mohd Sarjidan & Md Kasim, 2023), as well as the proliferation of collaborative research and publication among Malaysian academics from different disciplinary backgrounds (Abu Kassim *et al.*, 2024).

For the Malaysian academic, publishing does not only indicate a contribution to their field, it also guarantees an upward professional trajectory and a positive impact on their institution’s standing. This may be seen in the assessment and criteria of MyRA (Malaysian Research Assessment), where emphasis is placed

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upon the number of publications in indexed journals, proceedings, or even books, along with their citation count (Goh *et al.*, 2021; see also Holland *et al.*, 2016).

The competitive circumstances, however, have been leveraged by predatory entities. This has been reported in different HEIs around the world, where unsolicited emails, or spams, are frequently sent to academics and researchers with the promise of quick and cheap (or free) publication (see Sureda-Negre *et al.*, 2022). Soler and Wang (2023) discuss this as a ‘symptom of multiple vulnerabilities in academia’ and should be tackled through a better understanding of the factors that have allowed for such predation to take place. A strategic way to accomplish this is through the analysis of spam communication. To this end, this study will examine the moves of spam emails as a means to understand the rhetorical strategies employed by predatory entities, and to shed light on the type of pressure experienced by academics in Malaysia.

1.1 Objective and Research Question

The objective of this study is to examine the rhetorical moves found in predatory and spam emails sent to a Malaysian academic. The research question that this study aims to address is: What are the rhetorical moves found in predatory and spam emails sent to a Malaysian academic soliciting for manuscripts?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Anxious Academic: Pressure to Publish

‘Publish or perish’ may be an overused phrase among academics as this has been an ongoing struggle affecting many in HEIs. Given the changes shaping research and the broader university environment, the motivation to publish has changed over time. To publish is no longer a number game; it now matters where one publishes and even with whom one co-authors a paper (Mills & Inouye, 2021). Furthermore, due to the emergence of performance indices at the local and international arenas, the purpose of research has also shifted from contributing to the betterment of society to personal and institutional gains (Golhasany & Harvey, 2022; Holland *et al.*, 2016). The pressure to publish may affect new or junior academic members. Having just entered a competitive field, they may be expected to meet and deliver publication output within a short span of time. Even for seasoned academics, the competitive and marketization of academia has resulted in less time for mentoring newer staff given the overt focus on sustaining one’s self (Loveday, 2018). The urgency to publish has been further compounded by the precarity of university lecturers, many of whom often find themselves retained as contract employees without any stable long-term employment guarantee (Kahn *et al.*, 2024; Loveday, 2018). As a result, junior academics may find the publication process stressful, especially if they work in isolation and are not provided with provided with appropriate professional support. This would potentially lead to academic and ethical misconduct, as the push to publish may be stronger than maintaining the integrity of research (Mutongoza, 2023).

Recognizing these circumstances, a group of journals occupying a ‘grey area’ has emerged. The legitimacy of these journals appear ambiguous as they may engage in some peer-review process and may even be indexed; however, there may be other practices that may cast doubt over the journal, such as the imposition of a fee for registration, submission, or publication, and even editorial processes (Mills & Inouye, 2021; McKenzie *et al.*, 2021). Besides the emergence of dubious journals, research fields are also affected,

especially in terms of being stagnant in their research growth and innovation. This is because the pressure to publish may compel researchers to only do work on safe and familiar research topics and methodological paradigms. Doing or proposing something novel or different would result in an unnecessarily extended period of time for review and revision, which would not be advantageous in today’s climate where output needs to be disseminated quickly. This would have other ripple effects, such as the exclusivity of certain journals becoming more entrenched in their inclusivity, which would diminish the opportunities for academics and researchers from the global south or developing contexts to publish (Coulthard & Keller, 2016; Holland *et al.*, 2016), or to even contribute in editorial efforts (e.g., Manan *et al.*, 2023; Noyola-Pérez *et al.*, 2023). The emergence of predatory journals have also widened the rift between native and non-native English speaker researchers, as the latter is unfairly or unknowingly marginalized due to non-standard or peculiar language use or writing style (Soler, 2021; Catala, 2022).

2.2 Spamvitation: Predatory Solicitation of Academic Articles

The term ‘spamvitation’ was introduced by di Gennaro and Ekiert (2023) to refer to “spam email [...] containing invitations to submit manuscripts to publish with potentially predatory publishers” (p. 98). Such predatory and spam invitations are intended to attract and deceive new researchers to send their manuscripts (Tomlinson, 2023). These emails are not just soliciting articles, they may also promote fake conferences and offer editorial positions (McKenzie *et al.*, 2021). The emails would also contain information such as claims about being indexed or having impact factors (Moher & Srivastava, 2015; Rajakumar, 2025; Cohoon, 2024). There would also be references to common and conventional publication processes such as peer review (Sureda-Negre *et al.*, 2022). More perceptive academics may detect the dubiousness of these emails, especially since they are typically sent without any regard for the researcher’s disciplinary field or expertise; nonetheless, those who are pressured to publish may become a victim of such predation (Rajakumar, 2025).

Predatory and spam emails soliciting academic articles have been studied by various researchers (e.g., di Gennaro & Ekiert, 2023; Sureda-Negre *et al.*, 2022; Tomlinson, 2023). From these studies, various language features and rhetorical moves have been identified. In terms of language use, these emails often use exaggerated politeness and flattery, as well as hedges. Some examples include the opening or address to the recipient with phrases such as, “Dear esteemed researcher” (di Gennaro & Ekiert, 2023). This may be followed by a reference or mention of the recipient’s recent work, as a way to create a personalized communication strategy (Tomlinson, 2023). Another language feature of these emails is the use of words that convey a sense of urgency. This may be seen through the mention of ‘urgent submissions’ or ‘tight deadlines’ (Moher & Srivastava, 2015; Cohoon, 2024); at the same time, a quick turnaround is promised, which, unfortunately indicates minimal or the lack of any peer review processes (di Gennaro & Ekiert, 2023). The emails may also provide information about the journal’s scope, which is often very broad. Moreover, there would be claims about the impact and visibility of the journal through promises about a wide and international readership (di Gennaro & Ekiert, 2023; Fauzi *et al.*, 2025).

The language used in spamvitations and the subsequent information or meaning conveyed reflect the activities and processes pertinent to a discourse community. In the professional setting, moves may reflect the discourse activities and processes pertinent to the academic community. In the professional setting, these discourse moves signify “a semantic and functional unit of a text with specific communicative purposes” (Park *et al.*, 2021, p. 138). Thus, based on language and meaning identified from existing literature on predatory and spam emails, some rhetorical moves that may be common are as follows:

Table 1 Different moves identified and described by related research

| Move | Description | Example |
|--|---|---|
| Expressing appreciation (Tomlinson, 2023) | Flattering the author and/or their work | “Dear respected Professor”; “Your outstanding research” |
| Establishing credibility (di Gennaro & Ekiert (2023) | Mentioning indexing, impact factor, and affiliations | “Indexed in Google Scholar and Crossref” |
| Making an offer (Sureda-Negre <i>et al.</i> , 2022) | Invitation to submit an article or even to join editorial board | “We invite you to submit” |
| Promising an advantage (di Gennaro & Ekiert, 2023) | Emphasizing fast publication, DOI assignment, or visibility | “Fast publication”; “wide readership” |
| Imposing urgency (Moher & Srivastava, 2015) | Imposing tight deadlines but with guaranteed positive outcomes | “Submit today”; “Submit tomorrow” |

The moves mentioned in Table 1 are also reflected in the study of di Gennaro and Ekiert (2023), who proposed the following move structure found in spamvitations.

Table 2 Structure of moves of spamvitations proposed by di Gennaro and Ekiert (2023, pp. 104-107)

| Move | Description |
|-----------------------------|---|
| 1. Stating the purpose | The introduction of a publishing opportunity in relation to the recipient and their area of expertise. This is to directly exploit the recipient’s vanity or sense of self-worth. |
| 2. Defining the scope | The provision of information about possible topics or areas of research publishable with the journal. This is for the recipient to determine if the journal is relevant. |
| 3. Establishing credentials | The provision of more details about the journal such as indexing claims and editorial board members. There may also be references to publications of the journal being of high standards. |
| 4. Building rapport | A direct address to the recipient, including a salutation and claims of the impact that the recipient has had on the field. |
| 5. Offering incentives | Offering incentives to the recipient through the guaranteed positive outcomes. |

3.0 THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to examine the moves of spamvitations, or predatory and spam emails to identify and understand their rhetorical moves. Furthermore, this study intended to shed light on the type of pressure experienced by academics in Malaysia. As is with previous related studies that have examined the predatory and spam emails, this study employed a qualitative discourse analysis approach in the sampling and subsequent analysis. In particular, this study was guided by that of McKenzie *et al.* (2021), who studied predatory emails sent to a surgeon and that of Tomlinson (2023), who examined spam emails sent to an academic over the course of eight years.

3.1 Participant

There was one case participant involved in this study, such as the studies of McKenzie *et al.* (2021) and Tomlinson (2023). The case participant is the researcher of this current study. Briefly, the researcher is an early mid-career academic who had worked at universities across the Asian region, and had published works

in the fields of English language teaching and applied linguistics. Similar to the experiences of the participants in McKenzie *et al.* (2021) and Tomlinson (2023), the case participant in this study also received predatory and spam emails regularly. Currently, the case participant is working at a public university in Malaysia.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study comprised of 50 predatory and spam emails that were soliciting articles from the case participant. These emails were received over the last fifty days. The emails were saved as text documents, and were coded according to the principles of move analysis, as explained and demonstrated by Upton and Cohen (2009) and Van Herck *et al.* (2022). The coding framework used was that proposed by di Gennaro and Ekiert (2023), which is illustrated in Table 2. The process began with a careful reading of the data (emails), followed by assigning the main communicative functions of text segments. The text was segmented based on the interpretation of communicative function, introduction of new topics (new information), and visual cues (such as indentation and paragraphing). A sentence may contain more than one move, and a move may be spread across several sentences. This coding process was repeated several times and was checked by a colleague who is an expert in genre analysis. The frequency of moves was calculated and their ratio (percentage) was also determined. The data was then understood based on the assumption that if a move frequently occurred (>60%), they would be considered a common or obligatory. Meanwhile if a move occurs less than this, it would be considered optional (Van Herck *et al.*, 2022).

4.0 FINDINGS

Results of the coding are presented in Table 3. The moves proposed by di Gennaro and Ekiert (2023), Move 1 to Move 5, all had a frequency of >60%. Move 1 had the highest and progressively decreased. From the process of coding, a move discussed by Moher and Srivastava (2015) was also included. This was because its frequency of occurrence was rather high. It appeared in 43 instances across the 50 emails that were analyzed. Examples of these moves are presented after Table 3.

Table 3 Frequency and ratio of moves in the sample

| Move | Brief Description | Frequency (out of 50 samples) | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|--|-------------------------------|------------|
| 1. Stating the purpose | Invitation or announcement to submit paper | 50/50 | 100% |
| 2. Defining the scope | Mentioning of topics or fields covered by the journal | 48/50 | 96% |
| 3. Establishing credentials | Journal claims about indexing, impact factor, (rigorous) peer review process, etc. | 47/50 | 94% |
| 4. Building rapport | Offering personalized greeting and mentioning recipient’s past publications | 44/50 | 88% |
| 5. Offering incentives | Promising fast publications, discounted or waived fees (APCs) | 36/50 | 78% |
| 6. Expressing urgency | Announcing a deadline or time pressure for the recipient to submit a paper | 43/50 | 86% |

4.1 Move 1 – Stating the Purpose

The first move performs the function of inviting the recipient for a submission to be sent to the journal. The first move may appear to identify the sender/journal through the use of pronouns such as “we”, and a positive evaluation of the request for submission through the use of adjectives such as “pleased” and “thrilled”. The recipient is also directly identified in this move, through the use of pronouns such as “you” and “your”.

“We are pleased to invite you to submit your...”

“We are thrilled to announce the successful completion of the current issue...”

“The [name of journal] is inviting you to submit you...”

“We are pleased to invite you to submit your original research paper for publication in the April 2025 issue of the [name of journal].”

“This is a sincere invitation from the Editorial office of [name of journal].”

4.2 Move 2 – Defining the Scope

In the second move, the communicative intent is to explain the parameters of the submission. This typically involved the listing of diverse fields that are accepted by the journal (see example in Figure 1). While defining the scope of field would typically involve narrowing the possible areas or topics for submission, predatory and spam emails would instead present a long list, such as that shown in the examples below. Of note is how the areas listed do not belong to the same broad field, which is not helpful in defining the scope of the journal.

“The [name of journal] is a journal that accepts high-quality research articles in various fields of Education.”

“[Name of journal] covers linguistics, psychology, sociology, computer science, political science, law, epistemology, biology, arts, history, physics, mathematics, and geography, etc.”

“Areas Covered: Assessment, Testing and Applied Measurement, Digital Education, Digital Learning Innovations, Educational Psychology, Higher Education, Language...”

“Research Areas: Social Science, Arts, Economics, Law, Psychology, Education, Political Science, Management, Religion...”

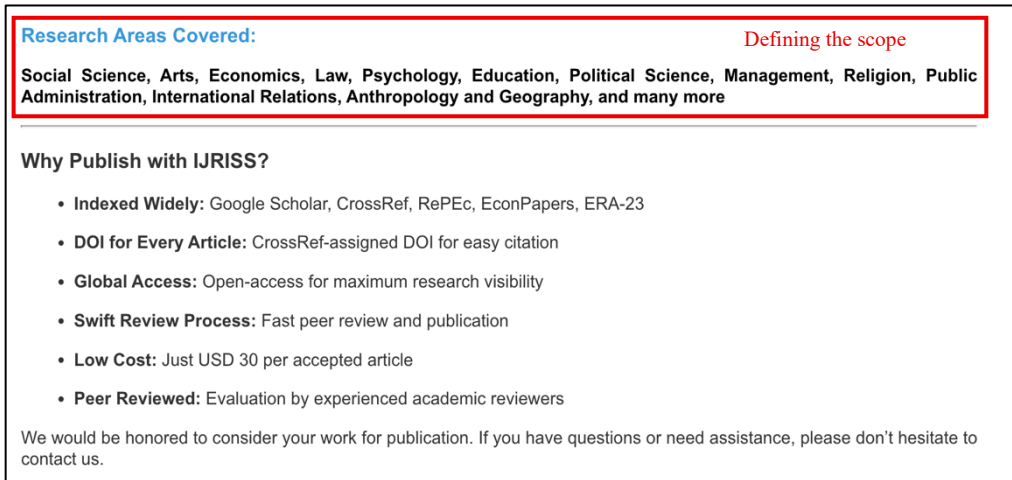


Figure 1 Screenshot of ‘defining the scope’ move indicated in the red box

4.3 Move 3 – Establishing Credentials

The intent of the third move is to establish credentials of the journal by highlighting its standards or reputation. This was achieved either by making claims about its peer review process, or its indexing achievements (see example in Figure 2). It is interesting to note that unlike the discussion of di Gennaro and Ekiert (2023), there were no links or associations made to noteworthy editorial members.

- “Our rigorous double-blind peer review process guarantees the highest academic standards.”
- “Indexing/Abstracted: Google Scholar, Crossref, REPEC, EconPapers, and more”
- “Indexing/Abstracted: [Name of journal] is indexed and abstracted by Google Scholar, Crossref, IDEAs, Australian Research Council, REPEC, EconPapers, and other prominent databases.”
- “The prestigious journal [name of journal], with an Impact Factor of 3 and indexed in SSCI and Scopus (Q1)...”
- “Rigorous Peer-Review Process: We ensure quality and originality with a peer-review process conducted by experts who evaluate the papers based on merit, methodological soundness, and relevance to social science.”

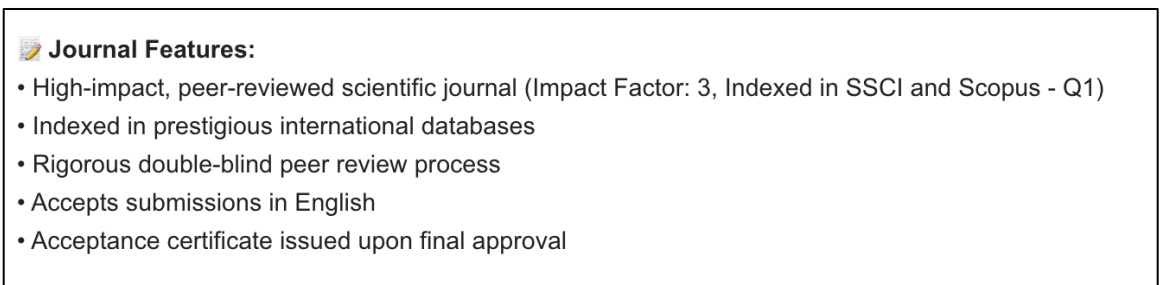


Figure 2 Screenshot of credentials listed as ‘Journal Features’ in a spamvitation

4.4 Move 4 – Building Rapport

In the move of building rapport, the intent is to directly address the recipient and their recent scholarly work. This was often accompanied by flattery, such as the journal being “highly impressed” with the work of the recipient and that the recipient’s work would ‘further social science’ (see example in Figure 3). Building rapport was also achieved by even extending an invitation for the recipient to join the editorial board, which gives the impression that the journal has knowledge of the recipient’s work or professional and editorial experience.

“We appreciate your contribution to furthering social science and are looking forward to receiving your submission to the [name of journal] April issue.”

“Having reviewed your recent work, I was highly impressed by its quality and relevance to our journal’s scope.”

“It is learnt that you have a paper titled [title of researcher’s article], and the topic of the paper has impressed us a lot.”

“Should you be interested in joining our editorial board, please feel free to send your application letter and CV to us.”

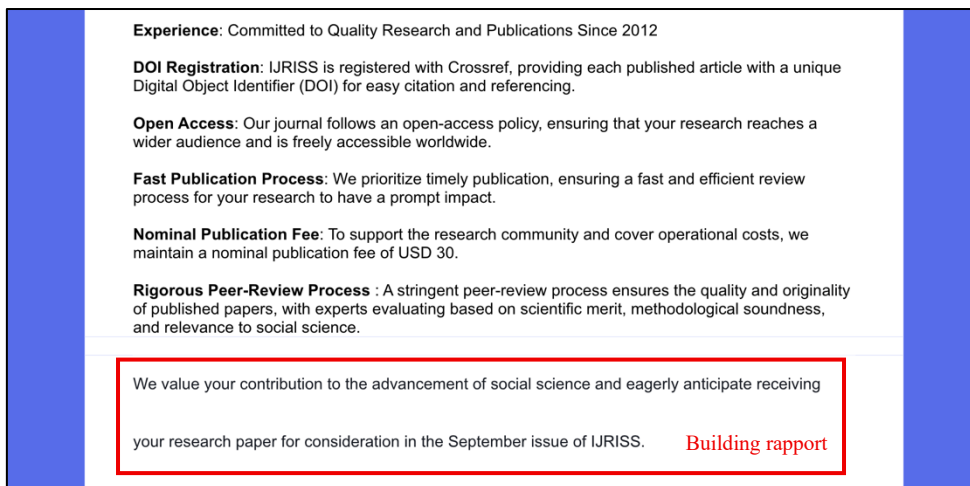


Figure 3 Screenshot of ‘building rapport’ move in a spamvitation

4.5 Move 5 – Offering Incentives

Predatory and spam emails also promise incentives to those who submit their manuscripts. This was done by leveraging on the prospects of citations gained as a result of articles published in an open access journal and a fast yet rigorous peer review process. The incentives offered in the sample emails touch upon the anxieties faced by academics in the current climate, where their performance is not only measured by the number of publication output, but by the citation impact (Holland *et al.*, 2016; Loveday, 2018).

“Open Access: Our journal adheres to the open access policy, and thus wider and open availability will be provided to your research within the global range.”

“✓ Fast & Rigorous Peer-Review – A swift and high-quality review process to ensure scientific merit.”

“Fast Publication Process: Prioritizing timely publication, we strive for a swift and efficient review and publication process to give your research a prompt impact.”

“Open Access : Our journal follows an open-access policy, ensuring that your research reaches a wider audience and is freely accessible worldwide”

4.6 Move 6 – Expressing Urgency

As mentioned, the move of ‘Expressing Urgency’ was identified and explained by Moher and Srivastava (2015) but not in the study of Gennaro and Ekiert (2023). Based on the findings from this study, this move was found to be distinct, and as such, was included. The communicative intent of this move is to impress upon the recipient of spamvitations the immediate action needed, which is, to submit an article to the journal. This move may be characterized by the mention of a deadline, which may be the day the email was sent or a specific date. This move may also be viewed as a call-to-action that the recipient may respond to.

“Submission Deadline: Today”

“Submission Deadline: Tomorrow”

“Submission Deadline: 22nd April”

“The submission deadline is 31th May 2025.”

“In way to meet our publication deadline of April 25th, we would greatly appreciate a timely submission.”

5.0 DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine the moves of predatory and spam emails – spamvitations – sent to a Malaysian academic. The purpose was to identify and understand rhetorical strategies used by predatory entities, and to shed light on the type of pressure experiences by academics in Malaysia. Findings indicated that the moves proposed by di Gennaro and Ekiert (2023) were prevalent across the sample, and a move that was discussed by Moher and Srivastava (2015), ‘Expressing urgency’ was also found to be common. This particular move may be noteworthy to Malaysian academics given the push to have many papers published in a year (Cheah, 2024). Overall, the findings indicate is that all the moves proposed by di Gennaro and Ekiert (2023) are obligatory and can be expected when receiving predatory and spam emails soliciting article submissions.

Beyond the moves identified and analyzed, the findings of this study also illustrate that spamvitations are rampant in the Malaysian context. That such emails are being sent indicates that many are sending their research work to these journals. In fact, Malaysian news in 2023 and 2024 reported on a Nature publication that highlighted the alarmingly high number of retractions of academic articles, for which Malaysia had placed within the top ten (e.g., Tariqur Rahman, 2023). This issue has also been ongoing, as discussed by Cheah (2024), in that academic dishonesty and plagiarism has been committed by Malaysian academics. Moreover, Cheah (2024) states that this issue is pervasive and is difficult to address, due to underreporting

and lenient punishments. When left unresolved, the issue of academic integrity will be at stake. This would affect new and younger academics, as they may not receive clear or supportive guidance on best practices and ethics in publishing or even in doing research. What is being observed here, then, is the consequence of the marketization of research, where academic work has now transformed into competition rather than collaboration that brings any positive social impact (Peters *et al.*, 2021).

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study set out to identify and analyze rhetorical moves found in predatory and spam emails, which di Gennaro and Ekiert (2023) term ‘spamvitations’. Using move analysis, this study found that the five rhetorical moves proposed by di Gennaro and Ekiert (2023) were obligatory, as well as the move imposing urgency (Cohoon, 2024). Besides these moves, there were also other language features worth noting, such as the use of flattery and exaggeration to appeal to the vanity of the recipient, and personal rapport through the use of pronouns to establish rapport. All in all, the findings of this study contributed to our growing understanding of how predatory journals operate and exploit the anxieties experienced by academics, especially those who are under pressure to produce. In the context of Malaysia, this may be a serious threat that could undermine the integrity and trustworthiness of researchers.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are made. First, clearer institutional guidelines on the process of writing and publishing should be introduced. This should also include advice on how journals should be selected. Having this support in place would help academics maintain ethical and best practices. It would also deter them from participating in fraudulent academic activities. Second, institutional key performance indices should be reevaluated. Academics should not be pressured to publish more; instead, they should be encouraged and incentivised to produce work that improves society as a whole. Along these lines, there should also be a reconfiguration of research processes. For instance, rather than pressuring academics to publish with great immediacy, institutions should promote and recognize research that is conceived and done over an optimal and appropriate length of time. Finally, for future studies, researchers should examine the perceptions of academics at different stages of their professional career towards spamvitations. Case studies would also be valuable, especially if they are able to highlight the experiences of intentionally or unintentionally submitting and publishing papers with predatory journals.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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