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Research Article

Unmasking Deceptive Scholarship: A Comparative Altmetric Analysis of Non-cloned and Cloned Journals

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ABSTRACT

The present study employed an altmetric approach to compare the web attention and social media engagement of non-cloned and cloned journals. The primary objective was to assess whether social media metrics could distinguish between legitimate and hijacked journals. Altmetric Explorer was used to track social media engagement of 194 non-cloned journals and their cloned counterparts identified from the UGC Consortium for Academics and Research Ethics (UGC-CARE) List. The altmetric data were further analysed using Jamovi version 2.6.44 and MS Excel. The study found that, unlike 78 non-cloned journals, only three cloned journals had social media engagement. In contrast to non-cloned journals, which received online attention across 16 platforms, the cloned journals received mentions on only three platforms. The Mann-Whitney test revealed a significant difference in Dimension Citation (DC) and Altmetric Attention Score (AAS) between the cloned and non-cloned journals. Moreover, Gini coefficients were 0.63 for cloned and 0.71 for non-cloned journals, indicating inequality in AAS between the two groups. A weak positive correlation between AAS and DC was observed for non-cloned journals (rho=0.08, p<0.001), whereas a strong positive correlation was noticed for cloned journals (rho=0.75, p<0.001). The study's findings imply that altmetrics can be an essential tool for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate journals by highlighting distinct patterns of social media engagement and scholarly impact.

Keywords: Cloned journals, Hijacked journals, Predatory publishing, Legitimate journals, UGC-CARE List, Altmetrics.

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INTRODUCTION

Scholarly publishing is essential in disseminating new knowledge and promoting scientific progress (Madden *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, publishing allows researchers to establish their reputation, thereby aiding in career advancement (Sánchez-García *et al.*, 2024). The pressure on researchers to publish for their career progression has increased the avenues for the growth of deceptive publishers and their journals (Demir, 2018; Leducq *et al.*, 2023). Predatory publishers were identified in 52 countries worldwide, with researchers from 146 countries publishing their articles in them (Demir, 2018). Scholarly awareness of such journals is very low (Chandra and Dasgupta, 2024; Schira and Hurst, 2024), especially among those at early stages, who tend to select low-impact journals, journals with similar topics, and local journals for publication (Çakir *et al.*, 2024) to advance their careers (Johann *et al.*, 2024). Previous research reported several reasons for publishing in such journals, which include the pressure to publish in peer-reviewed and Scopus-indexed journals, the "publish or perish" policy, the availability of cheap open-access options, a lack of awareness, the ease of publication with no peer review, and the need for rapid publication (Khedkar *et al.*, 2022).

Another type of scam that emerged in academic publishing is the hijacking or cloning of journals, in which fraudulent websites mimic legitimate scholarly journals by typically replicating their names, ISSNs, and other identifying features to mislead authors (Dadkhah and Borchardt, 2016). While predatory journals are intent on financial gain through APCs, cloned journals deceive via identity theft (Benkar, 2019). Nonetheless, cloned journals attract more articles than predatory journals do (Khedkar *et al.*, 2022). Articles in predatory and clone journals were found to be indexed in scientific databases (Dadkhah *et al.*, 2016; Duc *et al.*, 2020; Macháček and Srholec, 2022; Maroulakos *et al.*, 2025). Highly developed hijacked journals, capable of infiltrating major databases, such as Scopus and Web of Science, are termed "advanced clones" (Khosravi and Menon, 2021). The indexing of such bogus articles in major citation databases enables the citations in clinical trials, patents, policy documents, and reputable scientific journals, thereby influencing decision-makers, especially in the health and economic sectors (Brandts *et al.*, 2022;

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Dadkhah, Maliszewski, and Teixeira, 2016). This will erode the trust of scholarly communication and contaminate the academic record by disseminating unverified or fabricated research (Beall, 2016).

Researchers have developed various methods to identify predatory journals (Abalkina, 2021; Asadi *et al*., 2016; Beall, 2016, 2017; Dora and Kampa, 2023). These include Cabell's blacklist, Beall's list and checklists such as Think. Check. Submit (Strinzel *et al*., 2019). In response, the UGC has established the CARE initiative to address the issue of cloned journals and has produced a detailed but now-discontinued list (Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics, 2025). This initiative promotes high-quality research, upholds ethical standards, and enhances journal credibility by identifying and removing duplicate or cloned journals, thereby protecting the reputation of Indian academia (Parray *et al*., 2024).

Many researchers investigated the novelty of traditional metric indicators and other scholarly parameters, such as the citations per article, total number of citations, citation ratio, self-citation, APCs per article, and indexing status, for identifying and separating cloned journals from legitimate ones (Bjork *et al*., 2020; Frandsen, 2017; Maroulakos *et al*., 2025; Moussa, 2021; Nwagwu and Ojemeni, 2015; Oermann *et al*., 2020). They reported that the majority of such journals have minimal scientific impact, as evidenced by few or no citations, high APCs, fake indexing details, or seasonal indexing in major databases (Elmore and Weston, 2020). Thus, classic metric indicators, such as low citation counts, can be used to identify deceptive articles (Bjork *et al*., 2020). However, since citations take years to accumulate after publication, identifying such journals using classic metric indicators will not be practical for the scholarly community (Sud and Thelwall, 2014). Moreover, predatory articles are being cited by legitimate journals, too (Frandsen, 2017; Nwagwu and Ojemeni, 2015; Oermann *et al*., 2019). As a solution, the research community is now recommending newly emerging social media metrics, also called altmetrics, for quick impact measurement that considers online social discussions. Altmetrics consider mentions on social media, policy documents, clinical guidelines, news sources and other web platforms, providing an immediate perspective of scholarly impact (Priem *et al*., 2012). The novelty of altmetrics in identifying predatory journals has been studied, and it has been found that altmetric indicators can serve as a good proxy for identifying predatory journals (Al-Moghrabi *et al*., 2023; Chen and Wang, 2022; Vysakh and Muneesa, 2025). Since cloned journals differ from predatory journals, the extent to which altmetric indicators can help the research community distinguish between cloned and hijacked journals warrants investigation. Thus, the present investigation aims to bridge this research gap by exploring the following research questions.

Research Questions

RQ1: Is there any difference in the AAS and DC between cloned and non-cloned journals?

RQ2: Is there any difference in the source-wise mentions for the cloned and non-cloned journals?

RQ3: Is there any inequality in the distribution of AAS of cloned and non-cloned journals?

RQ4: What is the correlation between AAS and DC for the cloned and non-cloned journals?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Predatory publishers pose a challenge to scholarly publications by prioritising profit over academic integrity, publishing low-quality research without honest peer review (Eriksson and Helgesson, 2017). They exploit the open-access by mimicking legitimate journal websites and target new scholars with charges for poor-quality articles (Beall, 2012). Cloned or hijacked journals also deceive authors by copying metadata from reputable journals (Parray *et al*., 2024). Researchers have studied predatory publishing practices, their impact on science, and methods for identifying these journals globally (Abalkina, 2021; Beall, 2017; Kumar, 2022; Naqvi, 2023; Rorke *et al*., 2024).

Dadkhah *et al*. (2021) developed PedCheck, an online, open-source tool that analyses Reddit posts related to predatory journals, updating researchers about issues such as spam emails from predatory journals and concerns about the trustworthiness of their published results. Dora and Kampa (2023) developed a checklist to identify predatory publishers. Elmore and Weston (2020) listed strategies for avoiding publishing in predatory journals. They suggested checking for APCs on journal websites, open peer review, editorial board details, grammatical errors, dubious contacts, inconsistencies, and also advising the use of trusted resources, such as DOAJ, SJR, ThinkCheckSubmit.org, JCR, COPE: Committee on Publication Ethics, and Cabell's Whitelist and Blacklist.

Many studies have assessed the scientific quality of predatory publications by measuring citation metrics and their impact (Bjork *et al*., 2020; Frandsen, 2017; Moussa, 2021; Nwagwu and Ojemeni, 2015; Oermann *et al*., 2019, 2020; Frandsen, 2017) reviewed citations from 2013 to 2016 in 124 journals. He found 1,295 citations, or fewer than 10 citations per year over four years, and concluded that predatory journals attract both amateur and experienced authors. Using Scopus, Oermann *et al*., (2019) analysed citation patterns in nursing journals on Beall's list. They found 141 non-predatory journals cited articles in predatory journals 814 times. Oermann *et al*., (2016) confirmed that predatory journals continue to publish new articles, even after some have ceased publication. Björk *et al*., (2020) tracked citations of articles in deceptive journals using Google Scholar from

2014 to 2019. They found that 56% of predatory articles lacked citations and suggested that these journals have little scientific impact. Many orthodontic research outputs were published in deceptive journals, and many are indexed in scholarly databases, posing a risk to clinical practice and academic communication (Maroulakos *et al*., 2025). Moussa (2021) examined 10 predatory marketing journals of Nigerian publishers on Beall's list. Of the 1,246 articles, the average citation count was 8.776, indicating an increase in citations for predatory journals and their infiltration into mainstream marketing literature. The study also found that reputable SCI-indexed journals in Computer Science, Information Management, and Business cited articles from predatory journals.

The social impact of predatory journals is under-researched among the scientometrics community. Chen and Wang (2022) evaluated the usefulness of altmetrics for detecting deceptive journals and found that these journals had almost no presence on social media, with very poor AAS. They suggested that this can serve as a possible indicator of deceptive journals, along with other potential indicators. It was reported that no significant correlation was found between the total number of articles with AAS and the total number of articles with citations in deceptive Journals. Al-Moghrabi *et al*. (2023) investigated the online attention received by the predatory dental journals when compared to legitimate journals, deduced that 1,742 posts related to dental publications were found on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, 7.44% of posts were regarding predatory articles, and highlighted the online attention received by predatory articles, which risks the sharing of unreliable and misleading information. The study also reported that articles from predatory dental journals were found to be invading reputable databases, such as PubMed. Vysakh and Muneesa (2025) examined the social media engagement of deceptive journals in Beall's List using altmetric indicators. They found that these deceptive journals were present on 18 altmetric sources, with the highest activity on Mendeley, and also reported that English-speaking countries discuss deceptive journals more on social media. The study also highlighted that most predatory journals are open-access and easily attract authors through spam emails. The study reported a weak positive but significant correlation between DC and AAS.

The review of past studies found that although predatory journals have been extensively researched, nothing is known about cloned journals, particularly their altmetric performance. Thus, the present study was conducted to bridge this research gap.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative, altmetrics-based approach. To conduct the study, the researchers need a list of cloned and non-cloned journals along with their altmetric data. Many sources and databases can be used for identifying predatory and cloned journals. However, for the present study, the investigators used the UGC-CARE List as it is an officially curated list (Parray *et al*., 2024) and it is free to access; no previous studies have examined it, especially in relation to altmetrics. To ascertain their societal impact, the Altmetric Explorer, a service offered by Altmetric.com, was used. The data for the present study were collected in two phases in October 2025. In the first phase, the list of cloned and non-cloned journals in UGC-CARE was accessed, which included 80 Group I and 114 Group II print journals, totalling 194 non-cloned journals, along with their corresponding cloned journals as of October 16, 2025 (Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics, 2025).

In the second phase, each cloned and non-cloned journal was searched separately in the Altmetric Explorer by using the advanced search feature. No search refinement, such as language, output type, open-access type, or publication date, was applied when searching the journals. Seventy-eight non-cloned journals and three cloned journals were found to be indexed and tracked by the Explorer. Thus, altmetric data for the tracked non-cloned and cloned journals were exported as separate CSV files for analysis, including 3,182 research outputs from non-cloned journals and 5 from cloned journals. To address the research questions, Spearman's correlation was used to examine the relationship between DC and AAS because the data were skewed for both hijacked and legitimate journals. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to analyse differences in altmetrics and citations between these journals using Jamovi version 2.6.44. In addition, MS Excel was used to calculate the degree of inequality in the distribution of AAS among the journals using the Gini Coefficient and to plot the Lorenz Curve to represent the same graphically. Gini Coefficient (G) for AAS distribution was calculated using Equation (1): (where each article *i,* the cumulative proportion of research outputs is X_i, and the cumulative proportion of AAS is Y_i).

$$G = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^{N}(Y_i - Y_{i-1})(X_i + X_{i-1})$$

Equation 1. Mathematical formula for calculating the Gini Coefficient.

RESULTS

Publication trends of research outputs for non-cloned and cloned journals along with AAS and DC

Table 1 shows the yearly distribution of research outputs by open access (OA) type and status, along with their total AAS and DC for the cloned and non-cloned journals. A total of 3,187 articles were indexed in Altmetric.com between 1885 and 2025; 3,182 (99.8%) articles appeared in the non-cloned journals, and only 5 (0.2%) articles appeared in cloned journals. In non-cloned journals, 1,441 articles (45.3%) were identified as open access, while 1,741 (54.7%) were closed access. Gold OA (1149 or 79.7%) was the most preferred OA type, followed by Green (128 or 9%),

Table 1: Publication trends of research outputs for non-cloned and cloned journals along with AAS and DC.

Year of Publication	Non-cloned Journals									Cloned Journals								
	N	OA Status		OA Type				AAS	DC	N	OA Status		OA Type				AAS	DC
		Open	Closed	Gold	Green	Hybrid	Bronze				Open	Closed	Gold	Green	Hybrid	Bronze		
1885-1899	23	0	23	0	0	0	0	65	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1900-1925	33	0	33	0	0	0	0	90	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1926-1950	37	0	37	0	0	0	0	104	66	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1951-1975	72	0	72	0	0	0	0	257	335	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1976-2000	217	3	214	0	2	1	0	810	3498	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2001-2025	2800	1438	1362	1149	126	80	83	12555	37766	5	1	4	0	0	1	0	7	1
Total	3182	1441	1741	1149	128	81	83	13881	41681	5	1	4	0	0	1	0	7	1

Hybrid (81 or 5.6%), and Bronze (83 or 5.7%). The data clearly reveal a transition from closed to open-access publishing, mainly after 2000. The period from 1885 to 1975 saw the publication of research outputs that were entirely closed-access. The popularity of Gold OA indicates that most authors favour journals that provide instant visibility and accessibility for their research outputs. The highest total AAS (12555) and total citations (37766) were recorded for research outputs published from 2001 to 2025. This clearly suggests that the shift of scholarly communication to digital platforms increased research visibility. In contrast, Altmetric Explorer tracked only five research outputs published in cloned journals: 4 closed and one hybrid OA, indicating their insignificant role in credible academic publishing.

Source-wise mention for non-cloned and cloned journals

Table 2 reveals a striking variation in attention gained by non-cloned and cloned journals. Non-cloned journals received more social engagement from 16 diverse altmetric sources than cloned journals did. Non-cloned journals received the highest attention in Mendeley, with 93827 readers (90.5%), followed by the X platform, which garnered 6583 tweets (6.34%). Wikipedia gained 1325 mentions (1.3%). The social media platforms such as Blue Sky and Facebook received 235 (0.22%) and 234 (0.22%) mentions, respectively. Blogs received only 140 (0.14%) mentions. The fewest mentions of non-cloned journals were on Reddit, with 3 (0.002%). The non-cloned journals had 744 mentions (0.72%) in News, and 316 (0.30%) mentions in Policy documents, whereas cloned journals had only one mention each in News and Policy documents. The Mendeley readership counts for cloned journals was only 9 (81.8%). This suggested that cloned journals had almost no social media engagement.

Altmetric and citation difference between non-cloned and cloned journals

The Mann-Whitney U Test was applied to the AAS and DC to assess differences in altmetrics and citations between the non-cloned and cloned journals. As shown in Table 3, citation differences exist between the research outputs of cloned and non-cloned journals. Citation difference between the cloned journals and non-cloned journals is statistically significant, $p=0.01$, which is less than the threshold value, i.e., .05. The effect size of -0.631 confirms that cloned journals have lower citation counts than non-cloned journals. The altmetric difference between cloned and non-cloned journals was statistically insignificant ($p=0.26$; $p>0.05$). However, the effect size of -0.281 suggests a slight tendency for cloned journals to have lower AAS than non-cloned journals.

Altmetric inequality between non-cloned and cloned journals

The Lorenz Curve and Gini Coefficient were used to show inequality and skewness in the distribution of AAS, and the Mann-Whitney U Test was used to examine whether cloned and non-cloned journals differ in their AAS and DC. The Lorenz curve graphically represents the distribution of AAS, and the Gini Coefficient measures the degree of inequality, i.e., the area between the line of equality and the Lorenz curve. Figure 1 illustrates the Lorenz Curve of the distribution of AAS of cloned and non-cloned journals. The unequal distribution of AAS among research outputs is clearly depicted in the Figure. The Lorenz curve for non-cloned journals shows a strongly skewed distribution of AAS. This is reflected in the high Gini coefficient of 0.71, indicating substantial inequality in the distribution of online attention. In contrast, the Lorenz curve of cloned journals shows moderate inequality, with a skewed distribution of AAS, yielding a Gini coefficient of 0.63.

Correlation between AAS and DC for non-cloned and cloned journals

The Spearman's correlation test was conducted between AAS and DC for research outputs published in non-cloned and cloned journals. Figure 2 shows the correlation matrix (Courtney, 2023) for cloned and non-cloned journals. The correlation coefficient was 0.08 (rho=0.08, $p<0.001$), indicating a significant, but weak positive correlation between AAS and DC for non-cloned journals. For cloned journals, the results show a strong positive correlation between AAS and DC, with a correlation coefficient (rho) of 0.75 ($p<0.001$).

DISCUSSION

To the researchers' knowledge, this is the first investigation to examine the novelty of altmetrics in distinguishing between hijacked and legitimate journals, using the UGC-CARE list. The study highlights the significance of using altmetrics to distinguish between cloned and non-cloned publishers based on their social engagement patterns and web attention. The study reported interesting findings that justify the novelty of social media metrics as a good proxy for identifying cloned journals. The study first reported the lower social visibility of hijacked journals compared to legitimate ones. Only three of the sampled cloned journals were tracked on social media, and they had lower social and scientific impact, as measured by altmetric score and citations (RQ1). The main reason for this could be the lack of DOIs or other identifiers for the cloned journals, as reported in previous studies (Duc *et al*., 2020). The likelihood that cloned articles are cited is very low, as the academic community refuses to cite them in their manuscripts (Merga, 2024). The source-wise intake of both legitimate and cloned journals differed significantly, as genuine journals were tracked on almost all social media platforms. The lower intake of cloned journals differentiates itself from genuine journals (Chen and Wang, 2022) (RQ2). However, cloned articles appeared in the news and policy. This indicates that misinformation in cloned articles may misguide researchers, policymakers, and clinicians, harm society and undermine the credibility of research (Naqvi, 2023). Compared to cloned articles, non-cloned articles were mainly shared on Mendeley and Twitter, due to their importance in scholarly communication beyond citation-based metrics and their ability to attract a wide range of readers (Basumatary and Kumar Verma, 2023; Erfanmanesh, 2017; Hammarfelt, 2014; Sedighi, 2020).

The study sought to statistically determine differences in social media attention and citation between cloned and non-cloned journals. It was revealed that there is a significant difference in altmetrics and citations between these journals (RQ1). In line with previous studies, this study corroborated that genuine journals dominate in both social and scientific visibility, as measured by altmetric scores and citations (Al-Moghrabi *et al*.,

Table 2: Source-wise mention for non-cloned and cloned journals.

Mention sources	Total mentions of non-cloned journals	Total mentions of cloned journals
Number of Mendeley Readers	93827 (90.5%)	9 (81.8%)
X	6583 (6.34%)	0 (0)
Wikipedia	1325 (1.3%)	0 (0)
News	744 (0.72%)	1 (9.1%)
Policy	316 (0.30%)	1 (9.1%)
Blue sky	235 (0.22%)	0 (0)
Facebook	234 (0.22%)	0 (0)
Patent	211 (0.20%)	0 (0)
Blog	140 (0.14%)	0 (0)
Video	26 (0.02%)	0 (0)
Clinical guidelines	16 (0.01%)	0 (0)
Google+	13 (0.01%)	0 (0)
Q&A	9 (0.01%)	0 (0)
F1000	5 (0.004%)	0 (0)
Peer Review	4 (0.004%)	0 (0)
Reddit	3 (0.002%)	0 (0)
Total	103691 (100%)	(100%)

Table 3: Altmetric and citation difference between non-cloned and cloned journals.

Table 3A: Independent Sample *t*-test.

95% Confidence Interval								
		Statistic	p	Mean difference	Lower	Upper		Effect Size
AAS	Mann-Whitney U	5718	0.265	1.000	-1.000	3.00	Rank biserial correlation	-0.281
DC	Mann-Whitney U	2939	0.013	3.00	2.18e-5	13.0	Rank biserial correlation	-0.631

Table 3B: Group Descriptives.

	Group	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE
AAS	Non-cloned	3182	4.36	2.00	18.9	0.335
	Cloned	5	1.40	0.00	1.95	0.872
DC	Non-cloned	3182	13.1	4.00	32.5	0.576
	Cloned	5	0.200	0.00	0.447	0.200

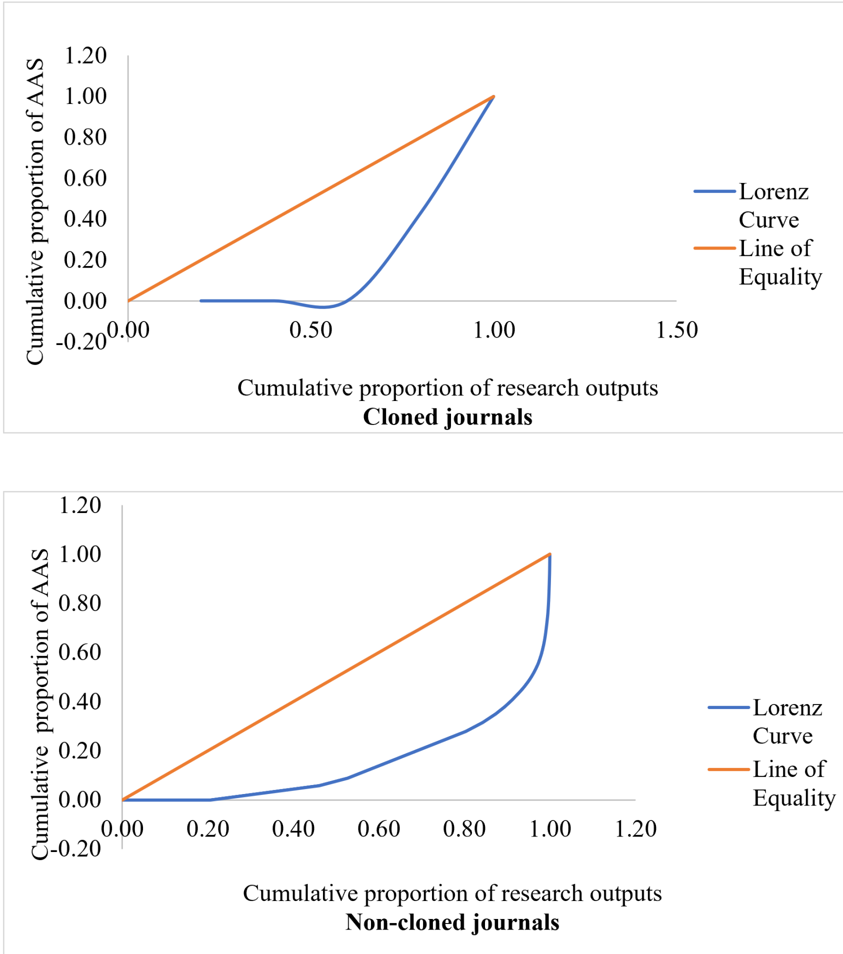

Figure 1: Lorenz Curve of inequality in AAS between non-cloned and cloned journals.

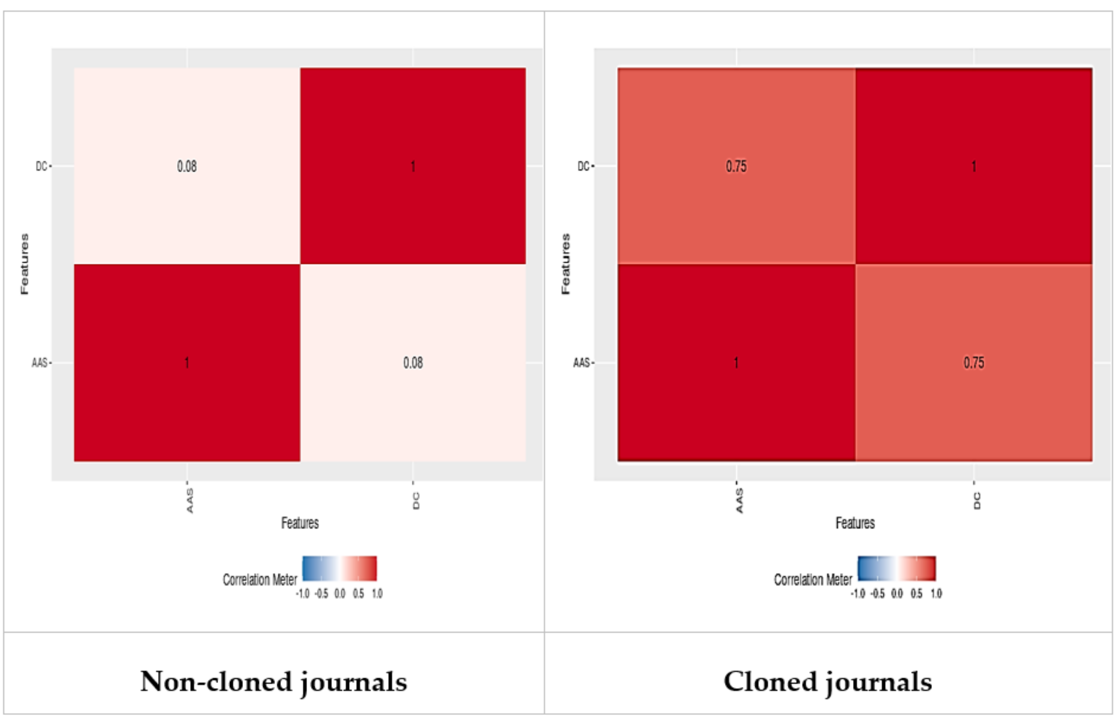

Figure 2: Correlation between AAS and DC for non-cloned and cloned journals.

2023; Bjork *et al*., 2020; Chen and Wang, 2022; Nwagwu and Ojemeni, 2015; Vysakh and Muneesa, 2025). The findings from the Lorenz curve and Gini coefficient analyses reinforced the skewed distribution of altmetric attention across research outputs in both journals. It also indicated that the majority of research outputs received minimal or no online engagement, and only a small proportion contributed to the overall AAS (RQ3). The inequality in AAS among research outputs mirrors the findings of Yang and Qi (2021), which suggested that this may be due to the Mathew Effect (Katchanov *et al*., 2023). Research outputs that have already gained attention tend to attract even more online attention over time, while those with low online visibility remain unnoticed. This results in an unequal distribution of AAS among research outputs.

Finally, the study revealed a significant, but weak positive correlation between AAS and DC for non-cloned journals. In contrast, cloned journals showed a significantly strong positive correlation between the two metrics (RQ4). The prior study on questionable journals indicated that excessive self-citations, coercive citations, citation stacking, and low diversity of altmetric sources result in an artificially high correlation between the AAS and DC, despite genuine impact (Bornmann and Haunschild, 2018; Costas *et al*., 2015; Kulczycki *et al*., 2021).

CONCLUSION

The study's findings highlight the use of altmetrics to distinguish cloned from non-cloned journals, as the former exhibit limited online visibility, weaker social media engagement, and minimal scholarly attention. These altmetric patterns indicate questionable dissemination practices and distinguish them from those of legitimate journals with authentic research impact. Moreover, tracking altmetrics will definitely help researchers and academic institutions identify cloned journals that lack online attention. Thus, this study provides the authors and researchers with insights into the dangers of publishing in cloned journals. In summary, the study finds that the scholarly community can use altmetrics to distinguish between non-cloned and cloned journals.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAS: Altmetric Attention Score; **APCs:** Article Processing Charges; **CARE:** Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics; **DC:** Dimensions Citations; **DOAJ:** Directory of Open Access Journals; **DOI:** Digital Object Identifier; **F1000:** Faculty of 1000; **G:** Gini Coefficient; **ISSN:** International Standard Serial Number; **JCR:** Journal Citation Reports; **OA:** Open Access; **RQ1:** Research Question 1; **RQ2:** Research Question 2; **RQ3:** Research Question 3; **RQ4:** Research Question 4; **SCI:** Science Citation Index; **SD:** Standard Deviation; **SE:** Standard Error; **SJR:** SCImago Journal Rank; **UGC:** University Grants Commission.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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