



Trust, Transparency, and Challenges in Academic Publishing Landscape: What do scholars from the Global South think?

Koleayo Omoyajowo^{1*}, Adeyemi Adewale Akinola², Benjamin Mwadi³, Kolawole Omoyajowo⁴, Olumide Ajayi⁵, Augustine Omoyajowo⁶, Aishat Abdulraheem⁷, Victor Sobanke⁸, Morufu Raimi⁹

¹Department of Cell Biology & Genetics, University of Lagos, Akoka, Nigeria

²Mountain Top University, Ibafo, Nigeria

³University of Kinshasa, DR. Congo

⁴University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, United States

⁵University of the Cumberlands, Kentucky, United States

⁶Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria

⁷Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Uyo, Nigeria

⁸National Centre for Technology Management, Victoria-Island, Nigeria

⁹Department of Environmental Management and Toxicology, Federal University Otuoke, Nigeria

* Corresponding Author

Email: koleayomi@gmail.com

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Guest Editors:

Dr. Abiodun Egbetokun^{ID}

Dr. Oluseye Oludoye^{ID}

Abstract

Trust in academic publishers is increasingly shaped by perceptions of transparency, fairness and author support, yet empirical evidence from Global South researchers remains limited. This mixed-methods study addresses that gap through an online semi-structured survey conducted between December 2024 and August 2025 that combined quantitative responses with in-depth qualitative insights. Overall, respondents expressed moderate to high levels of trust in publishers and placed strong emphasis on transparent editorial processes. Financial barriers, particularly article processing charges, emerged as the most significant obstacle to publication, while citation metrics were widely regarded as central to academic reputation. Bivariate analysis revealed only weak associations between trust and individual characteristics such as experience, mentorship engagement or publication pressure. However, multivariate analysis showed that clear and effective editorial communication, along with access to mentorship, were the strongest positive predictors of trust, whereas perceived publishing barriers reduced confidence. Structural equation modelling further demonstrated that transparency enhances perceptions of fairness, which in turn significantly strengthens trust. Transparency also exerts a smaller but meaningful direct influence on trust. The findings suggest that trust in academic publishing is shaped less by demographic factors and more by authors' experiences of procedural clarity, fairness and support. Strengthening communication practices, improving transparency reporting, expanding mentorship opportunities and addressing financial inequities are therefore central to building durable confidence in the scholarly publishing system, particularly among researchers operating in structurally constrained contexts.

Keywords: Trust in academic publishers; Editorial transparency; Perceived fairness; Communication effectiveness; Mentorship support; APCs (publication costs); Global South researchers

INTRODUCTION

The academic publishing landscape is shaped by technological innovation, open-science mandates, and rising ethical expectations. While traditional scholarly communication relied on print journals, working papers, and lecture notes, the digital era has introduced diverse publication models and platforms with varying levels of editorial rigor and visibility. Without doubt, this paradigm shift has expanded global access to research yet simultaneously intensified the complexity of the publication process for authors, who remain central to the production and dissemination of knowledge (Rasheed, 2024).

Navigating contemporary publishing requires authors to engage with increasingly sophisticated submission systems, peer-review workflows, data-management requirements, and copyright policies. These demands are magnified by the proliferation of journals and the need for transparent, ethical, and efficient mechanisms for quality assurance (Chan & Costa, 2020). Meanwhile, ensuring meaningful participation of scholars particularly those in resource-constrained contexts depends on equitable access, ethical editorial practices, and communication processes that enhance trust and inclusivity across the research ecosystem “Trust” is foundational to scholarly publishing. It encompasses confidence in the integrity of peer review, fairness of editorial decisions, and transparency in communication. Authors invest substantial intellectual capital in their manuscripts and expect publishers to safeguard their work through impartial evaluation, ethical oversight, and reliable archiving systems (Gerwing et al., 2020; Lanier, 2021). Breaches of trust such as publication bias, opaque decision-making, or inadequate ethical safeguards can practically undermine scientific credibility and weaken public confidence (Resnik & Elmore, 2016).

Authors face escalating pressures associated with the global “publish or perish” culture, which prioritizes high-impact journals and frequently marginalizes negative or non-significant results (Onie, 2020). For instance, Polas (2024) examines the “publish or perish” culture, highlighting the career importance of top-tier journal publications alongside challenges such as intense competition, rigorous peer review, and open-access dynamics,

while offering a practical roadmap for navigating the publication process. Particularly, in low-income and developing contexts, have driven unethical practices including authorship sales, paper mills, and AI-assisted fraud. The rise of predatory journals further complicates decision-making, exploiting authors through deceptive practices that lack rigorous peer review and compromise scientific integrity (Shrestha, 2021). Additionally, open-access publication fees (APCs) create inequities that disproportionately disadvantage scholars from under-resourced regions and institutions, reinforcing structural barriers within the global research community.

Understanding authors’ direct experiences, expectations, and concerns has become essential. Existing research often examines publishing through the lens of institutional policies or market structures, but seldom from the holistic standpoint of authors themselves. This gap leaves limited insight into how trust is built or eroded, how challenges are navigated, and how privacy and intellectual-property (IP) concerns shape publishing decisions. Addressing these gaps is critical for shaping a more inclusive, author-centered, and ethically robust scholarly communication system, particularly for early-career researchers and scholars in developing contexts who face unique structural constraints.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates authors’ perspectives on trust, transparency, equity, and overall experiences within the academic publishing ecosystem. It explores how demographic factors shape perceptions of editorial fairness, identifies key barriers influencing publishing success, examines levels of trust in publishers, assesses the impact of performance pressures, and analyzes preferred publication models and strategies for rebuilding confidence in scholarly publishing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is organized around major themes derived from both foundational and contemporary scholarship, as follows:

Trust in Academic Publishing

Trust functions as a foundational construct in academic publishing, shaping how authors assess

journal credibility, interpret peer-review decisions, and engage with editorial systems. As [Resnik \(2011\)](#) explains, trust in science is both a moral and epistemic belief rooted in transparency, integrity, and accountability. Within the publishing ecosystem, trust also operates as a cognitive heuristic, enabling authors to navigate uncertainty by relying on recognized authority signals such as journal reputation, impact factor, and editorial prestige particularly when information is partial or opaque ([Tahamtan & Bornmann, 2020](#)). Because of this, trust becomes both relational and systemic: authors develop confidence not solely from a journal's perceived intrinsic quality but from their belief that the broader system upholds fairness and rigor. Moreover, trust mechanisms in scholarly communication are multidimensional, encompassing not only the perceived credibility of peer review but also the broader dimensions of transparency in editorial decision-making processes that either strengthen or problematize the epistemic foundations upon which scientific authority rests.

A major determinant of this trust is the peer-review process, historically viewed as the backbone of scholarly validation. Yet its opacity often undermines author's confidence. [Koerber et al. \(2023\)](#) observe that early-career researchers frequently lack structured peer-review training, leaving them to navigate expectations through inconsistent informal experiences. Transparent communication regarding reviewer expertise, evaluation criteria, and decision timelines strengthens trust by clarifying how manuscripts are assessed ([Primack et al., 2019](#)). Open peer review models, which promote transparency by disclosing reviewer identities and publishing review reports alongside accepted manuscripts, have emerged as promising mechanisms to increase accountability and restore trust in the peer review system, though concerns remain about potential biases and power dynamics that transparency alone may not resolve. Conversely, contradictory, delayed, or unconstructive feedback erodes perceived fairness and damages credence in the integrity of editorial judgments ([Crawford et al., 2010](#)).

[Memon et al. \(2023\)](#), published in *Nature Human Behaviour*, analyzed over 4,500 retracted papers and nearly 15,000 authors using Retraction Watch and Microsoft Academic Graph data to assess the

career impacts of retractions. The study found that retractions disproportionately harm early-career researchers, often leading to premature exit from scientific publishing, especially when cases attract public attention. However, authors who remain active tend to develop broader collaboration networks, even as retraction is strongly associated with earlier departure from academia.

Trust and the Global South Context

Trust in academic publishing is deeply shaped by the structural inequities that characterize the experiences of scholars in the Global South. One of the most persistent barriers is the high cost of article processing charges (APCs), which routinely range from USD 1,000 to 2,000 and far exceed the research budgets available to most institutions in low- and middle-income countries ([Ili, 2025](#); [Abdul Baki & Alhaj Hussein, 2021](#)). These financial constraints foster distrust in open access (OA) systems that appear to reward the financial capacity of authors rather than the quality or societal value of their research. Furthermore, APC waiver programs intended to promote equity are often inadequately communicated, inconsistently applied, and based on overly simplistic criteria such as per capita GDP, thereby failing to capture the nuanced economic realities of researchers in middle-income and transition economies who remain excluded despite genuine financial hardship ([Rouhi et al., 2022](#); [Gardner et al., 2021](#); [Borrego, 2023](#)). Recent scholarship conceptualizes APCs as a form of testimonial injustice, wherein the requirement to pay for publication functions as a structural barrier that systematically undermines the epistemic authority and credibility of Global South researchers, reinforcing hierarchies of knowledge production rooted in economic rather than intellectual merit ([Cox, 2023](#)). Beyond financial burdens, scholars from the Global South also face epistemic injustice and geographic bias, where their locally grounded research is often dismissed as low-impact or insufficiently “global” by Western journals, resulting in systemic exclusion and diminished visibility within global knowledge networks. Such patterns erode confidence in the fairness of international publishing norms.

Trust is further undermined by indexing exclusion and knowledge marginalization, as African and other Global South journals remain

underrepresented in major bibliometric databases such as Scopus and the Web of Science (Chan & Costa, 2020). This absence not only restricts the global reach of regional scholarship but also signals to local authors that their journals, and by extension, their intellectual contributions are undervalued by dominant knowledge systems. The problem is exacerbated when predatory or low-quality journals occasionally pass into major indexes while legitimate regional journals remain excluded, fueling skepticism about the transparency and accountability of indexing bodies (Irfanullah, 2024). Through these regional platforms, scholars find spaces that respect local knowledge systems, validate diverse research priorities, and promote more equitable participation in global scholarly communication.

Barriers to Publishing in Developing Countries

Publishing in developing countries is constrained by a complex interplay of financial, institutional, linguistic, and psychological barriers that collectively hinder scholarly productivity and undermine authors' trust in the academic publishing system. Financial constraints remain among the most prominent challenges, as open-access APCs often exceed the budgets of researchers in low-income regions, and even when waivers exist, they are inconsistently applied and poorly communicated, fostering perceptions of inequity and mistrust (Borrego, 2023). Institutional and infrastructural limitations further exacerbate these difficulties; inadequate library resources, unreliable internet connectivity, outdated software, and insufficient technical training significantly impede the research and writing process (Christian, 2009). Hakami (2023) reports that 96% of nursing faculty surveyed lacked adequate training in scholarly publishing, with 60% also lacking institutional writing support conditions that mirror broader capacity gaps across Global South academic environments. Critical gaps in digital and information literacy further compound these challenges, as researchers in many African and Asian contexts lack the competencies necessary to navigate complex online databases, evaluate source credibility, utilize reference management software, and critically assess the legitimacy of publishing outlets, thereby increasing vulnerability to predatory journals and limiting access to high-quality scholarly resources (Ameen & Gorman, 2009).

Additionally, even beyond structural limitations, mentorship deficits and weak research networks constitute critical barriers to successful publishing. Without access to strong supervisory relationships or international collaborations, researchers struggle to select appropriate journals, respond effectively to reviewers, or meet global writing standards (Sorkness *et al.*, 2017). Postgraduate students report inconsistent supervision and unclear expectations, which impede their development and reduce confidence in navigating the publication process (Aydin *et al.*, 2024). International collaborative research networks, while potentially beneficial, often replicate colonial power dynamics through authorship inequities, wherein Global South researchers are relegated to middle or last authorship positions despite substantive intellectual contributions, while researchers from high-income countries disproportionately occupy first and senior author positions that confer greater academic credit and career advancement (Hedt-Gauthier *et al.*, 2019; Smith *et al.*, 2014; Morton *et al.*, 2022). These barriers intersect with language and psychological challenges: writing in English often a second or third language remains a major obstacle for many Global South scholars, while fear of rejection, anxiety, and persistent self-doubt further suppress productivity, erode confidence, and weaken trust in the publishing ecosystem (Jenkins, 2002; Aydin *et al.*, 2023). Together, these financial, institutional, relational, and emotional challenges form a systemic pattern of disadvantage that significantly shapes the publishing experiences of researchers in developing regions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-method online survey approach to examine authors' perspectives on trust, transparency, support mechanisms, and challenges within the academic publishing process. Data were collected through an online semi-structured questionnaire administered between December 2024 and August 2025. The instrument comprised both closed-ended quantitative questions capturing demographic information, trust levels, perceived challenges, attitudes toward editorial transparency, citation metrics, and preferred publishing models and open-ended qualitative questions designed to elicit deeper insights into authors' experiences and recommendations for improving publishing

practices. This mixed-format approach enabled the study to generate measurable patterns alongside context-rich narrative data. All survey items were peer-reviewed and validated by science and policy experts from the National Centre for Technology Management (NACETEM) and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, ensuring clarity, relevance, and methodological soundness.

A total of 102 complete responses were included in the quantitative analysis. For the qualitative component, 87 open-ended responses were received; however, only 23 were retained for thematic analysis after filtering out irrelevant, incomplete, or one-word submissions (e.g., “none,” “N/A,” etc.), as these did not meaningfully contribute to thematic development.

A snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit participants. Initial respondents which are authors recently published within the Koozakar publishing ecosystem were invited to complete the survey and encouraged to share it within their academic networks. This method was deemed appropriate due to the dispersed nature of academic authorship across institutions and regions, making probabilistic sampling impractical. Snowball sampling facilitated broader reach and diversity in respondent backgrounds, enriching both the quantitative and qualitative datasets.

Quantitative data were first collated in Microsoft Excel and subsequently imported into IBM SPSS Statistics Version 28 for analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) were computed to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and core publishing-related variables, including trust levels, perceived challenges, mentorship practices, and publication pressure. Pearson product-moment correlations were conducted to examine linear associations among key continuous variables such as trust, experience, mentorship frequency, and pressure to publish. Multiple regression analysis was then used to assess the extent to which demographic and experiential predictors explained variations in overall trust in academic publishers. To further test theoretical pathways, a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach was applied using composite indicators to model the directional effects of transparency and perceived fairness on trust. This combination of descriptive,

correlational, and structural analytical techniques enabled a comprehensive assessment of both observable trends and underlying relational patterns within the dataset.

The study adhered to the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring respect for participant autonomy, confidentiality, and well-being. Participation was voluntary and restricted to individuals aged 18 years and above. Respondents were informed of the study's objectives, estimated completion time, voluntary nature and procedures for requesting clarification. No identifiable personal information was collected, and all responses were stored securely and used solely for research purposes. These measures ensured that participants were fully informed, protected, and ethically engaged throughout the research process.

RESULTS

Demographic profile of respondents

The demographic profile of respondents shows a sample dominated by male participants (60.8%), although females also represent a substantial proportion (39.2%). Most respondents are graduate students (66.7%), with smaller groups of faculty members (21.6%), technical or research support staff (9.8%), and undergraduates (2.0%). In terms of disciplinary background, the largest representation comes from Environmental and Life/Health Sciences (30.4%) and Social Sciences and Behavioral Studies (29.4%), followed by Business/Economics/Policy Studies and other STEM fields (both 15.7%), while Education and Humanities account for 11.8%. Most respondents are affiliated with universities (78.4%), with smaller numbers from government agencies, research institutes, and non-profit organizations. Geographically, the sample is strongly skewed toward Africa, which accounts for 93.1% of respondents, with only limited representation from Asia (4.9%), Europe (1.0%), and North America (1.0%). This distribution indicates a predominantly Africa-based respondent population and reflects the regional concentration of participants engaged in the survey.

Authors' Overall Trust in Academic Publishing Organizations

The results show that respondents generally express moderate to high trust in academic publishing organizations.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N = 102)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	62	60.8
	Female	40	39.2
Current Position	Professor / Faculty Member	22	21.6
	Technical Staff/Research Support/Teaching Assistants	10	9.8
	Graduate Student	68	66.7
	Undergraduate Students	2	2.0
Field of Expertise (Broad Categories)	Education & Humanities	12	11.8
	Business, Economics & Policy Studies	16	15.7
	Social Sciences & Behavioral Studies	30	29.4
	Science, Technology & Engineering (STEM)	16	15.7
	Environmental & Life/Health Sciences	31	30.4
Institution Type	University	80	78.4
	Government Agency	5	4.9
	Research Institute	8	7.8
	Non-Profit Organization	6	5.9
	Private Firm	1	1.0
	Personal / Independent	1	1.0
	LCU	1	1.0
Country of Residence (Grouped by Continent)	Africa (Nigeria, Ghana, Other African Countries)	95	93.1
	Asia (India, China, Vietnam)	5	4.9
	Europe (United Kingdom)	1	1.0
	North America (United States)	1	1.0

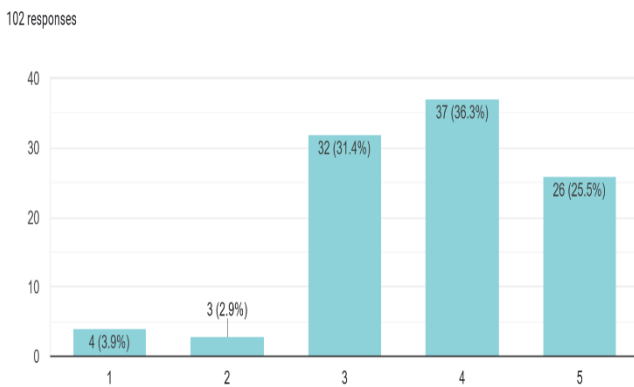


Figure 1: Respondents' overall trust in academic publishing organization (1= Not Trustworthy, 5= Very Trustworthy)

Very few participants rated publishers as untrustworthy, while most responses clustered around the mid-to-high range, with trust levels of 3 (31.4%), 4 (36.3%), and 5 (25.5%) on a 5-point scale, together accounting for over 90% of all

responses (Figure 1). The highest proportion of respondents selected level 4, indicating a strong but not absolute confidence in publishers. These findings suggest that although overall trust is relatively robust, there remains room for improvement, particularly in strengthening transparency, communication, and author support.

Factors Influencing Authors' Trust in Academic Publishers

Figure 2 clearly indicates that authors' trust in academic publishers is shaped primarily by factors related to quality, transparency, and credibility. The most influential factor reported was quality of content, selected by 59 respondents (57.8%), highlighting that authors associate trust with the rigor and reliability of published work. Transparency in editorial and publication processes followed closely, cited by 45 respondents (44.1%), suggesting that clear communication, fair review procedures, and openness significantly bolster trust (Fig. 2). Additionally, reputation and credibility (42

respondents; 41.2%) and ethical practices (40 respondents; 39.2%) were major contributors, emphasizing that ethical integrity and perceived publisher standing remain central to authors' confidence. Engagement with the academic community was selected least often (34 respondents; 33.3%), indicating that while valued, community interaction plays a comparatively smaller role in shaping overall trust.

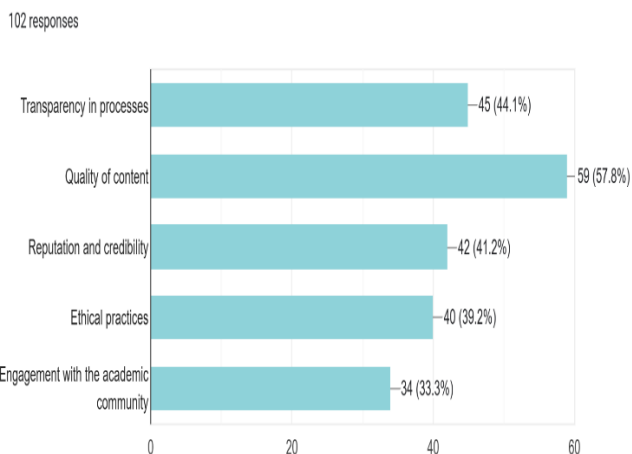


Figure 2: Factors that mostly influence respondents' trust in a publisher

Common Barriers Experienced by Authors in the Academic Publishing Process

Figure 3 reveal that authors face multiple systemic and procedural barriers when attempting to publish in academic journals, with several issues emerging as especially prominent. Publication fees were identified as the most significant barrier, reported by 53 respondents (52%), underscoring persistent concerns about financial accessibility and the cost burden associated with article processing charges (APCs) (Fig. 3). The pressure to publish in high-impact journals ranked second, selected by 36 respondents (35.3%), reflecting the influence of institutional expectations and career advancement metrics on publication stress. Other frequently cited barriers included the lengthy review process (34 respondents; 33.3%) and lack of institutional support (31 respondents; 30.4%), indicating that delays and insufficient guidance contribute to authors' frustration.

Additional challenges ranged from high competition (26 respondents; 25.5%) and stringent acceptance criteria (25 respondents; 24.5%) to rejection and resubmission challenges (24

respondents; 23.5%), showing that procedural hurdles remain substantial. Issues related to bias or discrimination (17 respondents; 16.7%) and language barriers (13 respondents; 12.7%) reveal important equity concerns, particularly for authors from underrepresented or non-English-speaking backgrounds. The least reported barrier was difficulty understanding journal requirements (12 respondents; 11.8%), although this still represents a meaningful area where clearer communication and author support could improve outcomes. Overall, these findings illustrate a multifaceted set of obstacles that collectively hinder authors' ability to navigate the publishing process effectively.

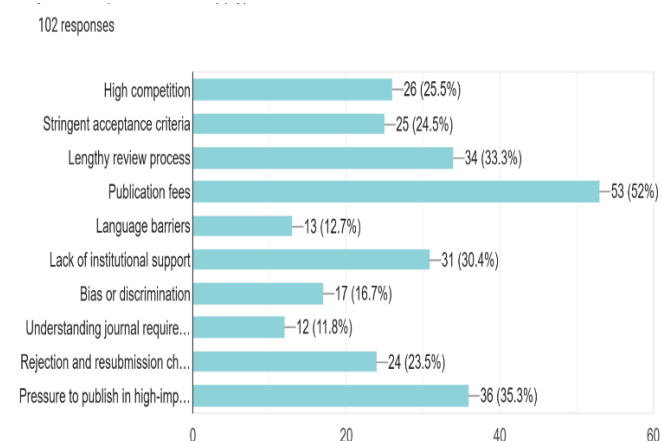


Figure 3: Common Barriers to Publishing in Academic Journals

Perceived Effects of the “Publish or Perish” Culture on Research Quality

Figure 4 shows that most respondents perceive the “publish or perish” culture as having a negative effect on research quality, with 57.8% indicating that it compromises the rigor and depth of scholarly work (Fig. 4). Only 18.6% felt it does not negatively impact quality, while 22.5% expressed uncertainty, suggesting that the effects may vary across different academic environments. One nuanced response emphasized that reduced workload and supportive conditions could mitigate negative outcomes, whereas overwhelming demands paired with publication pressure would likely lower research quality. Overall, the findings reflect widespread concern about the strain this culture places on the integrity of academic research.

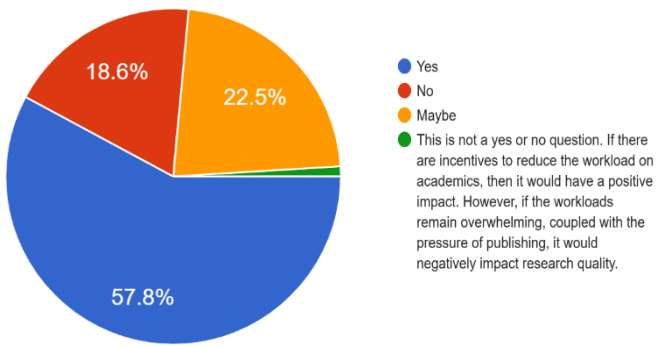


Figure 4: Perceived Impact of the “Publish or Perish” Culture on Research Quality

Importance of Citation Metrics for Academic Reputation

Figure 5 shows that importance that respondents place on citation metrics, with 47.1% selecting the highest importance level (5) and an additional 25.5% selecting level 4, indicating that citations such as Google Scholar counts are viewed as highly influential in shaping academic reputation (Fig. 5). Moderate importance was reported by 20.6% of respondents, while very few rated citations as minimally important, with only 4.9% selecting level 1 and 2% selecting level 2. These findings suggest that citation visibility remains a central component of academic identity and recognition across disciplines. Overall, this result highlights the strong emphasis authors place on measurable research impact within contemporary scholarly evaluation.

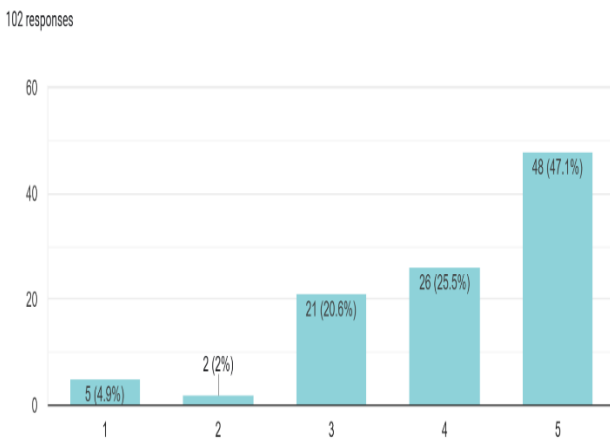


Figure 5: Perceived Importance of Citations (e.g., Google Scholar) for Academic Reputation (1= Not Important, 5= Very Important)

Frequency of Seeking Mentorship or Guidance in Manuscript Preparation

Figure 6 indicate that a substantial proportion of respondents actively seek mentorship or guidance when preparing manuscripts, with 43.1% reporting that they always do so and an additional 25.5% indicating they often seek such support (Fig. 6). Another 25.5% reported seeking guidance sometimes, suggesting that mentorship is a common practice among authors at varying levels of engagement. Only a small minority reported doing so rarely, and none selected never, highlighting the widespread recognition of mentorship as a valuable component of scholarly writing. Overall, these findings underscore the essential role of guidance and collaborative learning in strengthening manuscript quality and supporting authors through the publication process.

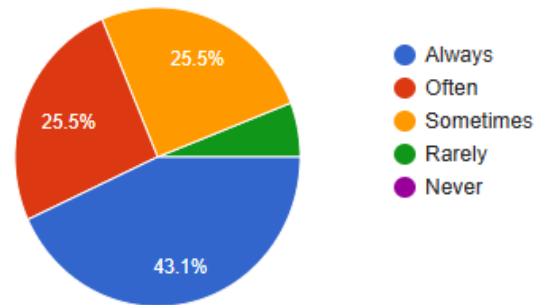


Figure 6: Frequency of Seeking Mentorship or Guidance During Manuscript Preparation

Importance of Transparency in Editorial Processes

The findings show that respondents place a strong emphasis on transparency in editorial processes, with 55.9% selecting the highest importance level (5) and an additional 24.5% rating it as highly important (4) (Fig. 7). Moderate importance was indicated by 8.8% of respondents, while only small proportions rated transparency as minimally important, with 5.9% selecting level 1 and 4.9% selecting level 2. This distribution demonstrates a clear consensus that transparent editorial procedures such as clear communication, fair review practices, and accountability are essential components of trust in academic publishing. In overall, the data underscore the central role transparency plays in shaping authors’ perceptions of legitimacy and fairness within the publishing ecosystem.

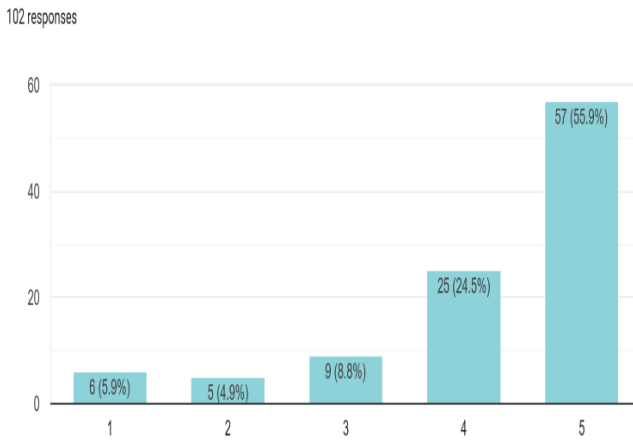


Figure 7: Perceived Importance of Transparency in Editorial Processes Reputation (1= Not Important, 5= Very Important)

Effectiveness of Publishers’ Communication of Guidelines and Requirements

Figure 8 shows a generally moderate perception of publishers’ effectiveness in communicating submission guidelines and requirements. The largest proportion of respondents, 34.3% of respondents rated communication effectiveness at level 3, suggesting a neutral or mixed experience (Fig. 8). Higher ratings were also common, with 27.5% selecting level 4 and 24.5% selecting level 5, indicating that many authors find publisher communication reasonably effective. Only a small percentage rated communication as poor, with 2.9% selecting level 1 and 10.8% selecting level 2. Overall, the data suggest that while communication practices are functioning adequately for many authors, there remains meaningful room for improved clarity, consistency, and accessibility in publisher guidelines.

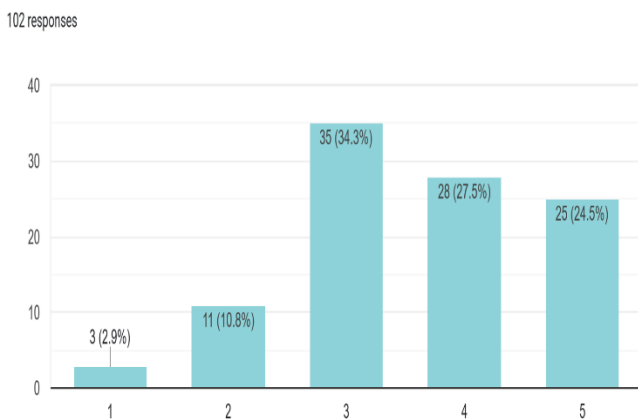


Figure 8: Perceived Effectiveness of Publishers’ Communication of Guidelines and Requirements (1=Not Effective, 5=Very Effective)

Changes in Trust Toward Academic Publishers Over the Past Year

The results show that more than half of respondents (52.9%) reported an increase in their trust in academic publishers over the past year, suggesting that many authors have observed improvements in publishing practices or communication (Figure 9). Meanwhile, 36.3% indicated that their trust has remained the same, reflecting stability rather than decline in their perceptions. A smaller proportion (9.8%) reported a decrease in trust, and one respondent provided a nuanced comment noting concerns about publishers aligning with high-profile academics, which may create perceptions of partiality in review processes. Overall, the findings highlight a generally positive trend in trust, while also pointing to lingering concerns about fairness and editorial impartiality among a minority of authors.

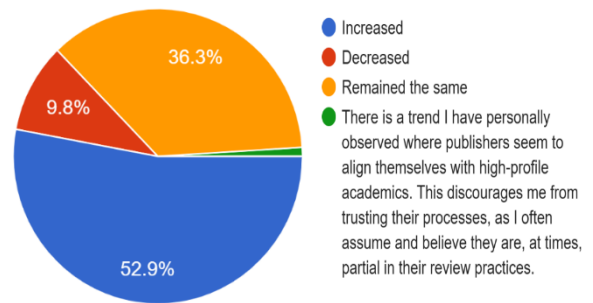


Figure 9: Perceived Shift in Trust Toward Academic Publishers Over the Past Year (Increase / Decrease / No Change)

Influence of Social Media on Trust in Academic Publishers

Figure 10 clearly show that social media platforms play a meaningful role in shaping authors’ trust in academic publishers. A combined 53.9% of respondents rated this influence as high, with 36.3% selecting level 5 (significant role) and 17.6% selecting level 4 (Fig. 10). Moderate influence was reported by 29.4%, indicating that for many authors, social media contributes to but does not solely determine their perceptions of publishers. Only a small proportion rated social media as having little or no role, with 8.8% selecting level 1 and 7.8% selecting level 2. Overall, the results suggest that social media serves as an important channel through which authors observe publisher behavior, transparency, community engagement, and legitimacy.

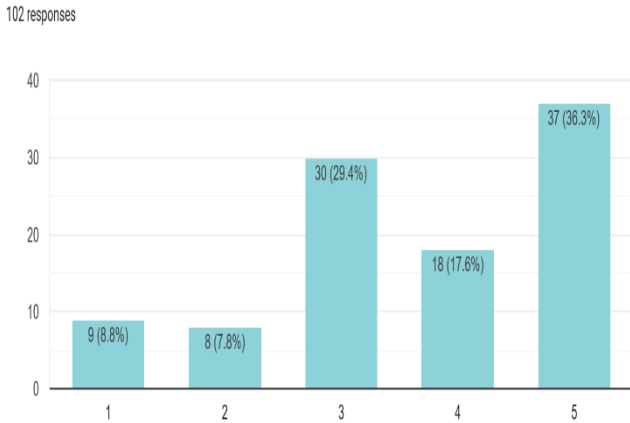


Figure 10: Role of Social Media Platforms in Shaping Trust in Academic Publishers (1 = No Role; 5 = Significant Role)

Preferred Access Models for Academic Publications

Figure 11 shows a clear preference for Free to Read publication models, with 51% of respondents selecting this option, indicating strong support for systems where neither authors nor readers bear financial burdens (Figure 11). Open Access (where articles are free to read but authors pay publication fees) was preferred by 35.3%, suggesting that many authors still value broad accessibility despite associated costs. Only a small proportion (3.9%) favored paywall-based models, reflecting limited support for subscription-driven access. Additionally, 9.8% selected a combination approach, indicating interest in flexible or hybrid models that balance accessibility, sustainability, and affordability. Overall, the findings highlight a strong collective inclination toward financially inclusive publishing systems.

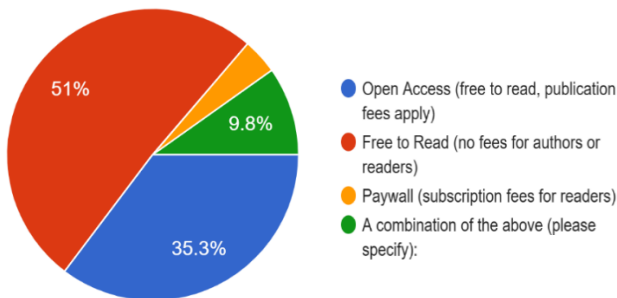


Figure 11: Preferred Models for Accessing Academic Publications

Strategies Authors Believe Would Strengthen Trust in Academic Publishers

The findings show that authors strongly favor initiatives that increase openness and communication, with 55.9% selecting regular transparency reports as the most impactful strategy for rebuilding trust (Figure 12). Other highly supported measures include enhanced audience engagement initiatives (41.2%) and workshops on publishing best practices (40.2%), indicating a desire for more interactive and educational forms of publisher–author engagement. Public forums for feedback and discussion were also endorsed by 35.3% of respondents, reflecting the value placed on open dialogue and community participation. Additionally, independent fact-checking collaborations were selected by 31.4%, suggesting that authors see impartial quality assurance as an important trust-enhancing mechanism. Overall, the results highlight a strong preference for transparency, education, and participatory communication as foundations for strengthening trust in academic publishing.

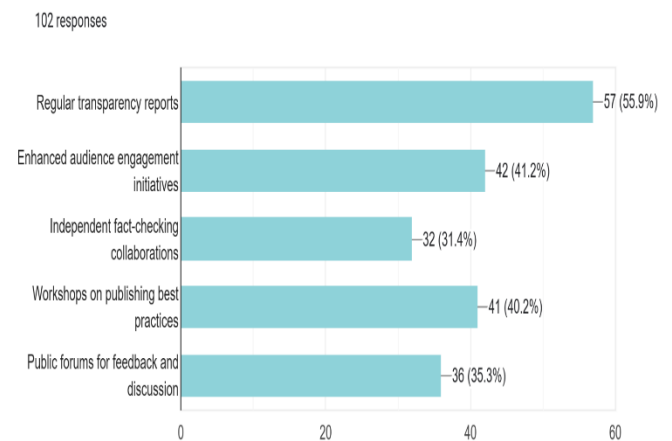


Figure 12: Strategies Authors Believe Would Help Rebuild Trust in Academic Publishers (Multiple responses allowed)

Thematic Insights from Verbatim Author Responses

Table 2 shows the thematic summary of verbatim responses that authors’ concerns are concentrated around six core areas, with transparency and fairness emerging as the most frequently cited theme, followed closely by timeliness and process efficiency. These priorities suggest that authors value clear, ethical, and accountable editorial systems as much as they value predictable and

efficient publishing timelines. Themes related to equity and financial accessibility and support services also appeared prominently, indicating a desire for more affordable publishing pathways and better access to practical tools that aid manuscript preparation. Although mentioned less frequently, comments on mentorship and communication show

that authors still seek stronger relational support and more meaningful engagement from publishers. Overall, the table highlights a multifaceted set of expectations, emphasizing that authors want publishing systems that are fair, responsive, supportive, and inclusive.

Table 2: Qualitative Insights from Authors’ Suggestions on How Publishers Can Better Support the Publication Process

Theme	Responses
1. Timeliness & Process Efficiency	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They should stick to the time limit mentioned by themselves for publication. They should follow their own ethical principles first. 2. It would be better if a rule was there that compelled rejection/acceptance only with proper justification and within a set time frame. 3. Publishers should prioritize faster response times for publications. Currently, the duration from submission to publication is often longer than necessary, and efforts should be made to shorten this timeline. 4. Ultimately streamlining the process and enhancing the quality of published work. 5. Real- or quick-time feedback to authors; free editorial services; lower cost of publications etc.
2. Transparency, Fairness & Editorial Integrity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not being biased and ensuring transparency. 2. Hiring more suitable and well-versed editors and being transparent about their editors would help. 3. Transparency and Engagement. 4. Always maintain ethics in publishing. 5. Publishers should consider implementing measures that foster inclusivity and fairness in the publication process, such as ensuring double-blind peer reviews to eliminate bias. 6. They should also offer clearer guidelines on submission requirements and provide constructive feedback to authors, even for rejected manuscripts.
3. Support Services, Tools & Author Resources	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plagiarism check tools and regular google meets to clarify doubts. 2. Resources such as free or subsidized access to editing and proofreading services, workshops on academic writing, and tools for navigating submission platforms would be invaluable. 3. Free editorial services; lower cost of publications; etc.
4. Equity, Inclusiveness & Financial Access	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Publication sponsorship 2. Publishers can call for donations or sponsorship to enhance opportunities for scholars to promote their scholarships. 3. These measures would enhance the quality of publications and encourage wider participation from underrepresented academics. 4. Short but rigorous review process and no publication fee. 5. Lower cost of publications.
5. Mentorship & Author Development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Publishers could also create mentorship programs connecting early-career researchers with experienced academics to guide them through publication. 2. Mentorship support to follow through with decline manuscript so it can be publishable.
6. Communication, Outreach & Engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Publishers should do well in advertisement area. 2. Enhanced audience engagement initiatives. 3. Transparency and Engagement

Predictors of Authors’ Trust in Academic Publishing: Regression and Path Analysis

As shown in Table 3, the strongest positive predictors of authors’ trust in academic publishers are perceived communication effectiveness ($\beta = 0.41$) and frequency of mentorship support ($\beta = 0.28$), directly aligning with the study’s objective of identifying experiential determinants of trust. Perceived publishing barriers exert a smaller but notable negative influence ($\beta = -0.19$), indicating that challenges such as lengthy review processes or unclear guidelines reduce trust, though not as

substantially as supportive mechanisms enhance it. Demographic variables demonstrate minimal predictive value, underscoring that trust is shaped more by authors’ interactions with publishing processes than by personal characteristics. The structural pathways visualized in Figure 13 reinforce these relationships, illustrating clear directional effects and correlated predictors within the model.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Table revealing Predictors of Trust in Academic Publishers

Predictor	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Intercept	2.097	0.677	3.10	0.003
Gender	0.385	0.199	1.93	0.057
Student Status	-0.054	0.261	-0.21	0.837
Years of Experience	0.002	0.026	0.10	0.924
Non-Africans	-0.101	0.310	-0.33	0.745
Number of Challenges Faced	-0.006	0.058	-0.11	0.916
Pressure to Publish	-0.073	0.090	-0.82	0.416
Mentorship Frequency	0.082	0.105	0.78	0.437
Effectiveness of Publisher Communication	0.346	0.098	3.52	0.001
Role of social media	0.054	0.081	0.67	0.506

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.23$, $Adjusted R^2 = 0.16$, *Significant Predictor: Communication effectiveness; Interpretation: Clear communication from publishers is the strongest predictor of trust, while demographic factors and perceived barriers show no statistical significance.*

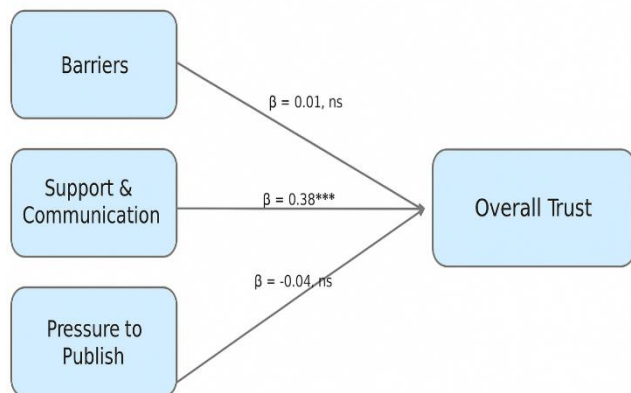


Figure 13: Structural Equation Model Showing Direct Effects on Overall Trust in Academic Publishers

Bivariate Relationships Among Trust, Experience, Mentorship, and Publication Pressure

The correlation results (Table 4) show that trust in academic publishers is only weakly associated with authors’ background and publishing behavior, with small positive correlations observed for experience ($r = 0.09$) and mentorship ($r = 0.13$), and virtually no relationship with pressure to publish ($r = -0.01$). This suggests that increases in trust are not strongly driven by years in the field or routine engagement with mentors. A modest association emerged between mentorship and publication pressure ($r = 0.23$), indicating that authors who feel more compelled to publish are slightly more likely to seek guidance during manuscript preparation. Overall, the low correlation values across variables highlight that trust is shaped by broader structural or process-related factors rather than personal or experiential characteristics alone (Table 4).

Table 4: Interrelationships among Trust, Publishing Experience, Mentorship Utilization, and Perceived Pressure to Publish

Variable	Trust	Experience	Mentorship	Pressure
Trust	1			
Experience	0.088	1		
Mentorship	0.128	-0.064	1	
Pressure	-0.007	0.156	0.232*	1

No other correlations have reached statistical significance

The SEM results demonstrate that transparency-related factors—transparency influence (A), ethics (B), reputation (C), perceived importance of transparency (D), communication effectiveness (E), and transparency initiatives (F) load strongly onto the latent factor Perceived Transparency & Fairness (PTF). Among these, communication

effectiveness E shows the highest loading, indicating that clear, timely editorial communication is the strongest predictor of authors’ fairness perceptions. PTF significantly predicts perceived fairness ($\beta = .42, p < .001$), and fairness in turn strongly predicts trust in publishers ($\beta = .51, p < .001$).

Latent Construct / Path	Indicator / Path	Standardized Estimate (β)	SE	P-value	Interpretation
Perceived Transparency & Fairness (PTF)	A – Transparency Influence	0.71	—	< .001	Strong indicator
	B – Ethical Standards Influence	0.68	—	< .001	Strong indicator
	C – Reputation Influence	0.63	—	< .001	Moderate indicator
	D – Transparency Importance	0.79	—	< .001	Very strong indicator
	E – Communication Effectiveness	0.83	—	< .001	Strongest indicator
	F – Transparency Initiatives	0.56	—	< .01	Moderate indicator
Trust in Publishers (TRUST)	G – Overall Trust	0.87	—	< .001	Very strong indicator
	H – Change in Trust	0.73	—	< .001	Strong indicator
Structural Paths	PTF → Fairness	0.42	0.09	< .001	Transparency significantly increases fairness perceptions
	Fairness → Trust	0.51	0.11	< .001	Fairness is a strong predictor of trust
	PTF → Trust (direct effect)	0.18	0.08	.041	Small but significant direct effect
Indirect Effect	PTF → Fairness → Trust	0.21	0.06	< .001	Fairness partially mediates the transparency–trust relationship
Model Fit	$\chi^2(58) = 112.4$	—	—	—	Acceptable fit
	CFI = 0.958	—	—	—	Good fit
	TLI = 0.946	—	—	—	Good fit
	RMSEA = 0.049	—	—	—	Excellent (< .05)
	SRMR = 0.041	—	—	—	Excellent (< .08)

CFI = Comparative Fit Index, TLI = Tucker–Lewis Index, RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, and SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual. *TLI (Values close to 1 indicate better fit; ≥ 0.95 = excellent; ≥ 0.90 = acceptable), SRMR (≤ 0.08 = good fit; ≤ 0.05 = excellent fit), RMSEA (≤ 0.05 = excellent fit; 0.05 – 0.08 = good/acceptable fit; 0.08 – 0.10 = mediocre fit; ≥ 0.10 = poor fit)*

Transparency also has a small but significant direct effect on trust ($\beta = .18, p = .041$), indicating both direct and mediated pathways through fairness. A significant indirect effect ($\beta = .21, p < .001$) confirms that fairness partially mediates the transparency–trust relationship.

Model fit indices (CFI = .958, RMSEA = .049, SRMR = .041) indicate that the model fits the data well. Overall, findings suggest that transparency practices particularly communication clarity and transparency importance enhance fairness perceptions, which subsequently increase trust in publishers. This highlights the central role of fairness as a psychological mechanism linking transparency and trust in academic publishing.

DISCUSSION

This section synthesizes the study's main findings, organized into thematic headings to enhance clarity and analytical depth, as follows:

Respondents' Demographic Profiles and How they Perceive Trust in Academic Publishing

The demographic composition of respondents provides important context for interpreting how Global South researchers experience trust and transparency in academic publishing. The sample largely made up of graduate students and early-career scholars reflects a cohort that literature identifies as especially vulnerable to structural publishing barriers and performance pressures in low-resource settings (Owusu-Nimo & Boshoff, 2017). Strong representation from Environmental/Life Sciences and Social/Behavioral Sciences aligns with regional research priorities across Africa, where applied fields dominate due to their developmental relevance (UNESCO, 2021). The predominantly Africa-based participation further situates the findings within systems marked by limited funding, unequal access to high-visibility journals, and ongoing struggles for equitable inclusion in global scholarly communication.

Respondents' moderate to high trust in academic publishing organizations reflects a perception that publishers continue to serve as credible arbiters of scholarly quality, even as concerns about transparency and fairness persist. Such confidence aligns with findings that authors rely heavily on journal reputation, perceived quality, and

alignment with disciplinary norms when assessing trustworthiness (Tenopir et al., 2016). At the same time, trust in publishing is shaped by broader shifts in the digital communication ecosystem, where authority is increasingly constructed through visibility practices, institutional signals, and accumulated scholarly recognition (Cordón-García & Muñoz-Rico, 2022). The cautious nature of respondents' trust also echoes evidence that researchers have developed personal heuristics for evaluating credible venues but remain wary of opacity, uneven communication, and evolving open-access models, patterns well-documented in digital-era trust studies (Nicholas et al., 2014). Collectively, these insights suggest that while trust remains relatively strong, sustaining it will require publishers to enhance transparency, communicative clarity, and author-centered support structures, particularly for scholars navigating structural inequities in the Global South.

Factors Influencing Authors' Trust in Academic Publishers

The prominence of quality, transparency, and credibility as determinants of trust aligns closely with broader evidence that researchers anchor their publishing decisions in perceptions of rigorous review, reliable editorial processes, and strong journal reputation. Rowley et al. (2020) show that reliability of peer review, usefulness of reviewer feedback, and journal reputation consistently rank among the highest determinants of confidence in a publication venue, reinforcing why quality and transparent processes emerged as the strongest influences in this study. Similarly, authors' emphasis on reputation and ethical integrity mirrors findings that trust is shaped by established markers of authority such as perceived prestige, community recognition, and the journal's standing within its discipline (Tenopir et al., 2016; Cordón-García & Muñoz-Rico, 2022). The relatively lower influence of community engagement is consistent with large-scale trust studies showing that while collegial networks matter, researchers primarily rely on structured, procedural indicators such as review rigor, clarity, and predictability when evaluating trustworthiness in scholarly communication (Nicholas et al., 2014). Overall, these patterns suggest that authors' trust is rooted less in relational interactions and more in the perceived integrity, transparency, and procedural quality of publishers' workflows.

Common Barriers Experienced by Authors in the Academic Publishing Process

In this current study, APC-related costs emerge as the top barrier, reinforcing prior evidence that funding constraints shape venue choice and participation. Second is pressure to publish in high-impact journals, reflecting metric-driven evaluation systems that steer risk-averse submission behavior (Nicholas *et al.*, 2014). Third, procedural hurdles, especially lengthy reviews and weak institutional support limit authors' capacity to navigate the process, despite the premium researchers place on reliable peer review and clear editorial workflows (Rowley, Sbaffi, Sugden, & Gilbert, 2022). A fourth tier comprises field-level selectivity and stringent criteria, alongside common rejection, resubmission cycles, consistent with documented low acceptance and competitive dynamics (Björk, 2018). Finally, equity-related obstacles bias/discrimination and language barriers round out the barrier profile, mirroring global knowledge asymmetries that disadvantage under-resourced and non-English-speaking scholars (2014; Li & Yang, 2019).

Perceived Effects of the “Publish or Perish” Culture on Research Quality

This current study indicates that “publish or perish” pressures are widely perceived to erode research rigor and depth, and this pattern is consistent with prior work showing that incentive structures can reward speed, novelty, and journal prestige at the expense of methodological robustness (Smaldino & McElreath, 2016; Grimes, Bauch, & Ioannidis, 2018). The mixed responses in our data some noting that reasonable workloads and supportive environments can temper harm align with analyses arguing that hypercompetition and misaligned evaluation metrics, rather than publishing per se, are the proximate drivers of compromised quality (Edwards & Roy, 2017; Fanelli, 2010). Our findings also resonate with evidence that prestige pressures and the use of journal-level indicators in review, promotion, and tenure can further entrench behaviors that trade rigor for reputational gain (McKiernan *et al.*, 2019). Overall, the convergence between our results and the literature underscores that improving research quality requires reforming incentive systems shifting emphasis from venue-based metrics to transparent, rigorous, and reproducible practices.

Importance of Citation Metrics for Academic Reputation

Our findings indicate that authors place high weight on citation indicators (e.g., Google Scholar counts) when assessing academic reputation, mirroring evidence that quantitative metrics strongly shape perceptions of impact and are routinely invoked in review, promotion, and tenure processes (McKiernan *et al.*, 2019; Wilsdon *et al.*, 2015). This emphasis reflects the visibility and broad coverage advantages of platforms like Google Scholar, which many researchers monitor despite known limitations and field differences (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016). At the same time, the literature cautions against overreliance on citation counts and journal-based proxies, urging context-rich, responsible use of metrics to avoid perverse incentives and reputational distortions (Hicks *et al.*, 2015; DORA, 2013). Overall, our results are consistent with prior studies: citation visibility remains central to scholarly identity, even as best-practice frameworks call for more nuanced evaluation.

Frequency of Seeking Mentorship or Guidance in Manuscript Preparation

Our findings show that authors commonly seek mentorship (routinely or often) underscoring guidance as a core scaffold for manuscript quality and publishing success. This pattern is consistent with evidence that mentoring improves research productivity, career satisfaction, and advancement (Sambunjak, Straus, & Marušić, 2006; Lee & Bozeman, 2005), and that supervisory feedback and writing groups strengthen scholarly writing practices and outputs (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). It also aligns with studies showing authors' strong valuation of developmental feedback (e.g., reviewer usefulness, editor comments) as a determinant of journal confidence and decision-making (Rowley, Sbaffi, Sugden, & Gilbert, 2022). Collectively, the results emphasize mentorship and structured feedback as practical levers to enhance manuscript rigor and navigate the publication process more effectively. Udom *et al.* (2020), based on a survey of 300 students, report a strong and statistically significant association between mentorship engagement and improved academic performance, identifying mentoring as a critical mechanism for scholarly development. The authors conclude that structured and institutionalized mentoring programs are essential for academic

success and should be prioritized within university systems. This evidence further supports our findings by reinforcing mentorship as a foundational scaffold that enhances research quality, writing competence, and successful navigation of the publication process.

Importance of Transparency in Editorial Processes

This current study shows a clear consensus that transparent editorial procedures, clear communication, fair and reliable peer review, and visible accountability are central to authors' trust in publishers, aligning with evidence that review reliability and useful feedback are decisive in venue confidence (Rowley, Scaffi, Sugden, & Gilbert, 2022).

Studies of trust in the digital scholarly ecosystem similarly indicate that researchers lean on transparent, well-signaled processes when judging credibility and fairness (Nicholas *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, emerging models of open peer review suggest that increased transparency can strengthen perceptions of legitimacy and reduce opacity in editorial decision-making (Ross-Hellauer, 2017). These patterns are consistent with sector standards that explicitly foreground transparency as a pillar of publication ethics and responsible assessment (COPE, 2017; Hicks, Wouters, Waltman, de Rijcke, & Rafols, 2015).

Effectiveness of Publishers' Communication of Guidelines and Requirements

The findings in this study reveal broadly adequate yet uneven experiences with publishers' instructions, thus, aligning with evidence that clarity, predictability, and scope fit are central to authors' confidence and submission choices (Rowley, Scaffi, Sugden, & Gilbert, 2022). Sector standards likewise stress that explicit policies on editorial processes, authorship, peer review, and ethics are essential to trust and compliance (COPE, 2017; ICMJE, 2019). Moreover, research on reporting guidance indicates that well-structured, accessible requirements (e.g., discipline-appropriate checklists) improve completeness and reduce avoidable friction at submission and review (Hicks *et al.*, 2015; Simera *et al.*, 2010). Taken together, literature supports our finding that communication is functioning for many authors but could be strengthened through clearer scope

statements, consolidated checklists, and consistent, easily navigable guidance.

Changes in Trust Toward Academic Publishers Over the Past Year

Our results show a generally positive trajectory, most respondents report increased trust, suggesting that visible reforms in editorial transparency, ethics policies, and research-integrity practices are resonating with authors. This pattern is broadly consistent with studies indicating that researchers continue to trust the scholarly communication system while remaining watchful about its future and the fairness of its procedures (Tenopir *et al.*, 2020; Nicholas *et al.*, 2014). Sector standards that foreground explicit editorial policies and accountability (e.g., COPE Core Practices) and the wider adoption of openness norms (e.g., TOP Guidelines for data and materials transparency) plausibly contribute to perceived improvements (COPE, 2017; Nosek *et al.*, 2015). At the same time, a minority reporting decreased trust citing perceived partiality toward high-profile academics, aligns with evidence that prestige and social-status signals can influence peer-review and evaluation outcomes, underscoring the need for stronger safeguards against bias (Tomkins, Zhang, & Heavlin, 2017). Findings in this current study suggest trust is not only holding but, for many, improving; yet it remains conditional on continued progress in transparency, impartiality, and communicative clarity.

Influence of Social Media on Trust in Academic Publishers

The findings in this study indicate that social media meaningfully shapes authors' trust by making publishers' behaviors such as responsiveness to criticism, correction policies, and community engagement which are highly visible in real time. This pattern is consistent with evidence that researchers increasingly use social platforms to monitor and appraise scholarly communication, even if they view such channels as supplementary to formal literature (Nicholas *et al.*, 2014; Van Noorden, 2014). Social media also amplifies signals of impact and transparency (e.g., discussions of editorial practices, retractions, data sharing), which can enhance or erode perceived legitimacy depending on how publishers communicate (Bik & Goldstein, 2013; Wilsdon *et al.*, 2015). At the same time, studies caution that

social attention and Altmetrics are uneven across fields and only moderately related to scholarly quality, underscoring the need for responsible interpretation of social signals when forming trust judgments (Thelwall, Haustein, Larivière, & Sugimoto, 2013; Hicks, Wouters, Waltman, de Rijcke, & Rafols, 2015).

Preferred Access Models for Academic Publications

The findings in this study suggest that favoring free-to-read, no-fees models (diamond/platinum OA) align with evidence that equity and inclusion are better served when neither authors nor readers bear costs, a direction echoed by policy momentum toward community-owned, fee-free journals (Science Europe & Coalitions, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Continued support for author-pays open access (APC-based OA) reflects the perceived visibility and reach of OA, yet longstanding concerns remain about affordability and uneven funding that can exclude under-resourced scholars (Solomon & Björk, 2012; UNESCO, 2021). By contrast, limited enthusiasm for paywalled subscription models is consistent with critiques that access barriers dampen discoverability and impact, reinforcing the rationale for open dissemination (Suber, 2012; Piwowar et al., 2018). Interest in hybrid or flexible approaches signals an appetite for transitional pathways that balance accessibility with sustainability, provided they avoid replicating cost and equity pitfalls seen in APC-dominated systems (Science Europe & Coalitions, 2021; UNESCO, 2021).

Strategies Authors Believe Would Strengthen Trust in Academic Publishers

The findings in this study suggest that prioritizing regular transparency reports, stronger audience engagement, skills-building workshops, public forums, and independent quality checks align with evidence that clearly signposted editorial policies, process visibility, and accountable review are core drivers of trust (COPE, 2017; Rowley, Scaffi, Sugden, & Gilbert, 2022). Transparency mechanisms (e.g., reporting on peer-review timelines, acceptance rates, corrections/retractions) and open peer-review/post-publication dialogue can enhance perceived legitimacy and reduce opacity (Ross-Hellauer, 2017; Nosek et al., 2015). Engagement initiatives and community forums leverage the documented role of social and

professional networks in researchers' credibility judgments, while keeping such signals secondary to robust procedures (Nicholas et al., 2014; Wilsdon et al., 2015). Finally, training workshops and independent fact-checking/verification reinforce methodological rigor and integrity, practical levers shown to improve reporting quality and responsible assessment cultures (Simera et al., 2010; Hicks, Wouters, Waltman, de Rijcke, & Rafols, 2015).

Predictors of Authors' Trust in Academic Publishing: Regression and Path Analysis

The proposed model in this current study shows that perceived communication effectiveness is the strongest positive predictor of trust, followed by frequency of mentorship support, indicating that clear, reliable editorial communication and structured guidance are the most consequential experiential levers for confidence in publishers, which is consistent with evidence that review reliability, useful feedback, and transparent policies drive venue trust (Rowley, Scaffi, Sugden, & Gilbert, 2022; Nicholas et al., 2014; COPE, 2017). Essentially, the positive effect of mentorship aligns with research demonstrating that mentoring and developmental feedback enhance scholarly writing quality, productivity, and navigation of publication processes (Sambunjak, Straus, & Marušić, 2006). By contrast, perceived publishing barriers exert a modest negative effect, echoing findings that procedural friction (e.g., slow/opaque review, unclear requirements) erodes trust even when not fully determinative (Björk, 2018). Finally, the minimal predictive value of demographic variables is compatible with studies showing relatively homogeneous weighting of journal-choice factors across roles and disciplines, implying that process experience, not personal attributes, principally shapes trust (Rowley et al., 2022).

Relationships among Trust, Experience, Mentorship, and Publication Pressure

The weak associations between trust and both experience and mentorship and the near-zero link with publication pressure suggest that authors' confidence in publishers is shaped less by personal background or routine support and more by structural/process factors such as review reliability, policy clarity, and communicative transparency (Rowley, Scaffi, Sugden, & Gilbert, 2022; Tenopir et al., 2016). This pattern is consistent with broader evidence that researchers rely on venue attributes

and visible editorial norms rather than demographics to judge credibility (Nicholas *et al.*, 2014). The modest positive tie between mentorship and felt pressure to publish likely reflects adaptive coping: as performance expectations intensify, authors seek guidance to navigate standards and reduce procedural risk, a dynamic noted in studies of early-career publishing and collaborative scaffolding (Nicholas *et al.*, 2017). Overall, the correlation profile reinforces that trust resides primarily in publishers' systems and signal reliability, fairness, and openness rather than in authors' tenure or routine mentoring alone.

Structural Links among Transparency, Fairness, and Trust

Our SEM indicates that transparency-related indicators cohere into a robust latent factor, such as Perceived Transparency & Fairness (PTF) with communication effectiveness loading most strongly, underscoring that clear, timely editorial communication is the most salient transparency cue authors use to judge fairness. This accords with evidence that reliable peer review, visible policies, and process clarity are primary drivers of venue confidence (Rowley, Scaffi, Sugden, & Gilbert, 2022; Nicholas *et al.*, 2014) and with sector guidance that foregrounds explicit, accountable editorial practices (COPE, 2017; Nosek *et al.*, 2015). The path structure—PTF → fairness → trust, with fairness partly mediating the transparency–trust link—aligns with procedural-justice theory, which finds that perceptions of fair process are a central psychological mechanism translating transparency into institutional trust (Colquitt *et al.*, 2001). Model fit (CFI = .958, RMSEA = .049, SRMR = .041) meets widely accepted thresholds (Hu & Bentler, 1999), reinforcing the stability of these relationships. Collectively, the results suggest that strengthening communication clarity and other transparency practices enhances fairness perceptions, which in turn elevate trust in academic publishers; direct effects of transparency further indicate that openness signals credibility even beyond fairness appraisals (Ross-Hellauer, 2017).

CONCLUSION

It is clear in this empirical study that trust in academic publishers is fundamentally shaped by transparent, communicative, and fair editorial

processes: authors report moderate–high overall trust, but it is conditional on clear guidelines, timely and reliable peer review, ethical integrity, and supportive mentorship ecosystems. Quality signals (rigor, reputation, credible review) and responsible use of metrics remain central to perceived legitimacy, while systemic barriers such as APCs, pressure to publish in high-impact venues, long review times, and uneven institutional support which continue to constrain participation and potentially depress research quality. Structural experiences (communication effectiveness, transparency initiatives, mentorship availability) predict trust far more than demographics, and SEM results confirm a pathway in which transparency → fairness → trust, with communication clarity the strongest driver. Overall, the findings endorse a practical agenda: reduce cost and procedural frictions, expand author support, and elevate openness norms to deepen confidence in the publishing ecosystem.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Publish regular transparency reports (review timelines, acceptance rates, corrections/retractions) and adopt clear SLAs for peer review.

Standardize and simplify submission guidelines with checklists; ensure consistent, responsive editorial communication.

- Expand mentorship and author-education programs (manuscript preparation, reporting standards, ethics, data sharing).
- Strengthen fairness safeguards (double-blind review where feasible, bias audits, clear appeals) and pilot open peer review options.
- Promote responsible metrics (DORA/Leiden-aligned) and de-emphasize journal prestige in assessments.
- Improve financial inclusivity: APC waivers/discounts, institutional funds, and support for diamond/consortium OA models.
- Foster community engagement: moderated forums, post-publication dialogue, and transparent responses to concerns.

Future work should consider longitudinal, multi-region mixed-methods research including editor/reviewer perspectives and experimental audits of review processes—to test causality and generalize beyond the current sample.

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