

Reviewing Peer Review: A Case Study of the Current Challenges in the Peer-Review Process of Academic Publishing in Kenya

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Abstract

The growing demand for academic publishing has led publishers to engage in unethical practices, resulting in predatory publishing. This lack of transparency in the peer-review process undermines scientific integrity and public trust in research. However, specific challenges faced by academic publishing landscape in Kenya remain largely unexamined. In the literature reviewed, the peer-review process is often criticized for opacity and also for limited stakeholder participation. This study explored the challenges and opportunities for improving transparency and accountability in the peer-review process among journal publishers in Kenya. A case study research design was employed to enable in-depth, contextual analysis of issues. The target population comprised 14 members of the editorial board at the International Journal of Professional Practice. Responses were collected through a structured online questionnaire. A total of 12 responses were received, yielding an 86% response rate. Findings revealed mixed perception of transparency in the peer-review process, with more than half of the respondent's expressing dissatisfaction or strong dissatisfaction with current practices. While 58% of respondents agreed conflict-of-interest management is effective, a significant minority raised concerns about gaps in policy implementation. Review delays emerged as a unanimous challenge, with respondents identifying them as a critical issue. Other concerns included poor review quality, editorial and reviewer bias, lack of reviewer accountability, and non-transparent reviewer selection. The study concludes that while existing peer-review structures provide foundation for quality control, significant improvements are needed to enhance trust and credibility in the process. Recommendations include strengthening transparency by publishing reviewer reports, improving accountability mechanisms, and addressing systemic issues, such as delays and reviewer workloads. These findings have direct implications for editorial policy and practice, underscoring the urgent need for Kenyan journals to adopt transparent review models, enforce stricter conflict-of-interest disclosures, and implement robust accountability mechanisms to enhance the credibility and efficiency of scholarly publishing.

Keywords: *Peer-review process, Academic publishing, Kenya, Editorial board perceptions, Transparency*

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1.0 Introduction

The phrase “publish or perish” is widely recognized in academic and research circles, reflecting the intense pressure scholars face to publish regularly. Researchers often publish continuously for reasons such as career growth and job stability (van Dalen, 2021). This demand to rapidly generate and disseminate scholarly work has only intensified over time. For early-career researchers, this has become a major challenge when seeking growth and recognition in academia (Khalifa & Albadawy, 2024). The rising competition among scientists is a common reality in universities. It significantly affects research evaluations, accreditation processes, and the allocation of research funding, affecting both institutions and individual researchers alike. The struggle is especially intense when it comes to grants, which have become highly competitive and often provide the only pathway for early-career professionals to remain in the field (van Dalen, 2021). For many, sustaining a research career comes down to “funding or famine,” with success in securing funds closely tied to the strength of one’s publication record.

The pressure comes from several sources, with competition for funding being common among them. In many fields, researchers need to secure funding to support their research, and funding agencies often prioritize researchers with more peer-reviewed journal publications (Heckman & Moktan, 2020). Researchers and academics are also pushed to publish more frequently to meet promotion and tenure requirements. Many universities require faculty to demonstrate a certain level of scholarly productivity in order to be promoted or granted tenure. As Heckman and Moktan (2020) point out, the number of papers

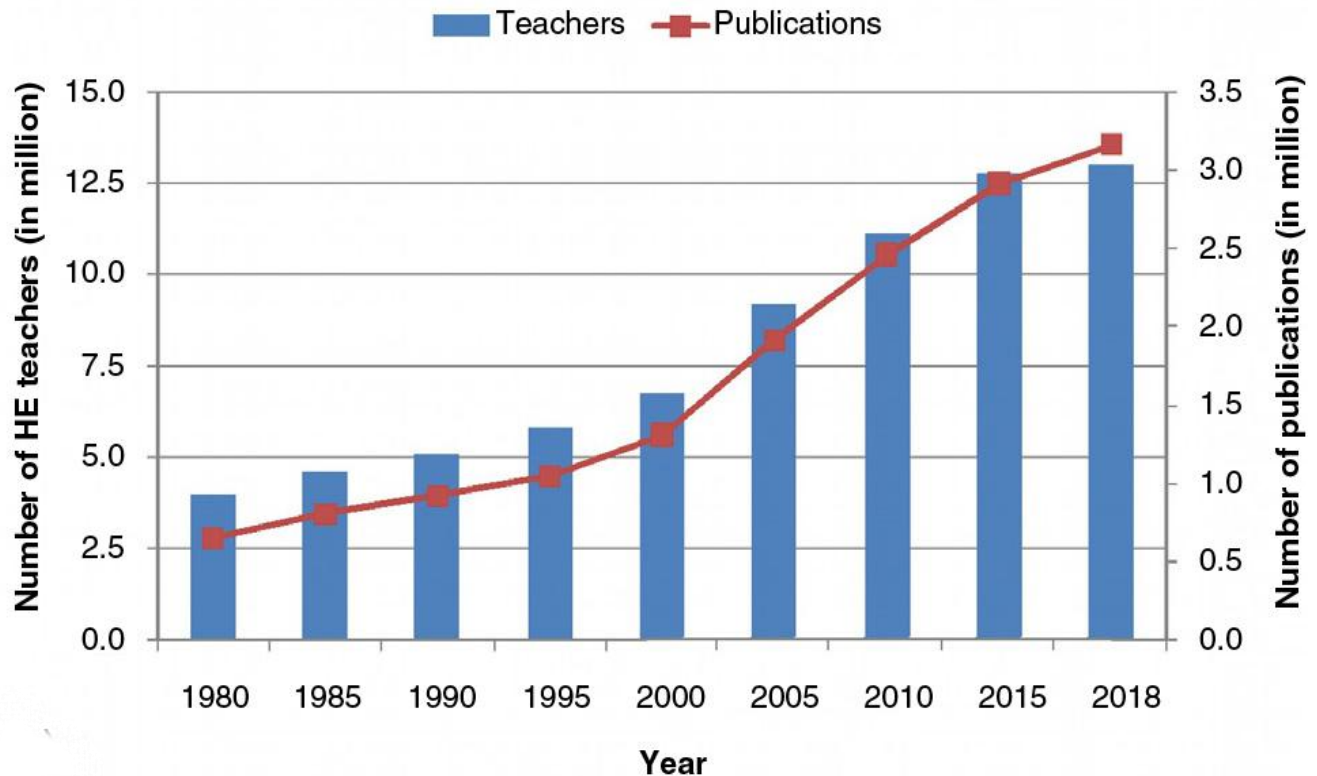
published in the “top 5” journals is often a key metric for assessing productivity in economics departments. Prestige and reputation are also forces driving this trend. In some fields, researchers are judged by the impact and visibility of their work, often measured by the number and quality of their publications. Mustafa et al. (2023) cite numerous metrics, including the H-Index, i10-Index, and altimetric, to measure this type of productivity.

“The study underscores the pressing need for both structural and cultural reforms in the peer-review process to balance efficiency, fairness, and trustworthiness”

Mackey et al. (2019) indicated that, on average, research output increases by 8–9% annually, driven by an ever-increasing number of manuscripts for publication. Research from 2018 indicates that the total collection of peer-reviewed scientific and scholarly articles published since the first journals appeared in 1665 reached approximately 50 million by the end of 2016. This figure highlights the massive scale of the global scientific record established over more than three and a half centuries of academic publishing. This number has been increasing more rapidly in recent years. In yet another publication, To and Yu (2020) demonstrated that the number of publications globally had grown from 0.65 million in 1980 to 3.16 million per year in 2018, based on data from Scopus.

Figure 1

Growth in the number of publications between 1980 and 2018.



In a more recent study, Hanson et al. (2024) reported that the total number of scientific and scholarly articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science increased by about 46% between 2016 and 2022, representing an average annual growth of 5.6% over the period.

In the Kenyan context, research on the specific challenges of the peer review process has been limited. Chilimo et al. (2017) in their study on open access publishing in Kenya identified several challenges that publishers face in the country. These included a lack of guidance on the credibility of journals, the cost of article processing charges, and a lack of mechanisms for accrediting local journals, which consequently exposes local publishers to unscrupulous predatory publishers.

Statement of the Problem

To ensure public trust in the scientific process, it is crucial to identify and address ongoing challenges in the publishing industry and to provide consumers of research data with reliable indicators that the content has undergone rigorous peer review and verification by industry peers. Mackey et al. (2019) noted that a lack of transparency and limited avenues to verify the credibility of the peer-review process raise concerns about research reproducibility, academic integrity, and the prevention of the publication of falsified data and fraud. While formal research on this topic within Kenya is limited, several local researchers have highlighted similar issues. In their assessment of open access publishing in Kenya, Chilimo et al. (2017) identified challenges, including a lack of guidance on where

to publish and constant exposure to unscrupulous and predatory publishers for authors.

Research Objective

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the current challenges faced in the peer review process of academic publishing among journal publishers in Kenya.

2.0 Materials and Methods

The study adopted a case-study research design, conducting an in-depth, contextual analysis of the current challenges facing the International Journal of Professional Practice (IJPP) in its peer-review process.

Target Population and Sampling

Data were collected from a target population of 14 members of the editorial board at the International Journal of Professional Practice (IJPP). In this case study, conducting the study at IJPP was a purposive choice that allowed the researcher to undertake a focused, in-depth investigation of the peer-review process within the specific organizational context. It also allowed the researcher to conduct a census rather than a sample, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings for this specific case.

Because the target population was small and finite, applying the finite population correction (FPC) factor to obtain a sample from the population yielded the same number (14).

Given:

$$n = \frac{n_0 N}{n_0 + (N - 1)}$$

Equation 1: Population sampling formula

Where:

(n) is the sample size

(n₀) is the estimated sample size

(N) is the population

An initial sample size n₀ is estimated using the standard formula for proportions.

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 * P * (1 - p)}{E^2}$$

Assuming a 95% confidence level (Z = 1.96), an estimated proportion of 0.5 (for maximum variability), and a 5% margin of error (E = 0.05):

$$n_0 = \frac{1.96^2 * 0.5 * (1 - 0.5)}{0.05^2} = 384.16$$

Using the finite population correction formula:

$$n = \frac{384.16 * 14}{384.16 + (14 - 1)} = 13.54$$

Sample size = 14 (census)

Bove (2009) indicated that when the population is small, and the sample is a major fraction of the population, the sample size n should be greater than 5 percent of the sampled population. This is determined by the Finite Population Correction (FPC) factor, as shown in the calculations above.

Data Collection

An online questionnaire was designed, and a link to it was sent to members of the editorial board. The advantages of online questionnaires include flexibility, the convenience of answering questions from any location at any time, and online support during data analysis (Murithi, 2022). On the other hand, disadvantages include limited or no contact with the researcher, making it difficult to consult the researcher when respondents' questions are ambiguous.

Structured, closed-ended questions were used in the questionnaire to ease filling and analysis. Both descriptive and textual data from the questionnaire's qualitative components were

analyzed. The results are organized and displayed in tables, using totals, frequencies, percentages, charts, graphs, and narrative summaries.

Ethical Considerations

The data collection tool, the questionnaire, informed respondents of the research purpose so they could make an informed decision before participating. Participants' identities were also kept anonymous. Respondents were not required to provide any personal information, such as their names, emails, or phone numbers, on the questionnaires. They were also informed that participation in the study was entirely voluntary. The researcher obtained official permits and relevant ethical clearance from NACOSTI (National Commission for Science and

Technology) and Kenya Methodist University to collect the data.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The collected data were analyzed, and the findings were presented as percentages in tables and graphs for visualization. The analysis was structured around the study's objective and organized into response rate, demographic characteristics, convenience of m-shopping applications, and consumer m-shopping behavior.

Response Rate

The study aimed to collect data from 14 members of the International Journal of Professional Practice's editorial board. The response rate is shown in the table below, at 86%.

Table 1

Response rate

Sample size (n)	Responses	Response rate
14	12	85.71%

A response rate of 86% indicates that only 2 individuals did not respond, making the study's findings more likely to capture the editorial board's opinions and perspectives accurately. The 2 non-respondents represent only a small possibility of bias, and this is unlikely to distort the study's findings.

Perceived Journal Transparency

Respondents were required to indicate their perceived level of transparency among publishers and reviewers toward authors and feedback to the academic community in Kenya. Their responses are shown in the table below.

Table 2

Responses to perceived journal transparency

Perceived satisfaction	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative %
Very satisfied	1	8.33	8.33
Satisfied	4	33.33	41.66
Neutral	2	16.66	58.33
Dissatisfied	3	25.00	83.33
Very dissatisfied	2	16.66	100

The results show mixed responses, with 4 of 12 satisfied, 3 dissatisfied, 2 very dissatisfied, 2 neutral, and 1 satisfied. In summary, more than half of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction

or strong dissatisfaction. This indicates a substantial concern about the transparency of the peer review process among journal publishers in Kenya.

Management of Conflict of Interest

When asked how effectively conflict of interest (COI) is managed by journal publishers in Kenya,

7 respondents said it was effective, 3 said it was ineffective, and 2 chose to be neutral. None of the respondents chose "very effective" or "very ineffective," as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3

Responses to the perceived effectiveness of the management of conflicts of interest.

Perceived effectiveness	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative %
Very effective	0	0	0
Effective	7	58.33	58.33
Neutral	2	16.66	75.00
Ineffective	3	25.00	100.00
Very ineffective	0	0	100

The data indicate that a majority of respondents felt that COIs are managed effectively (58%), though a significant minority disagreed (25%).

The split responses suggest that while the publisher has COI policies effectively in place, some respondents identified gaps. Overall, these results underscore existing concerns in academic publishing about COI management.

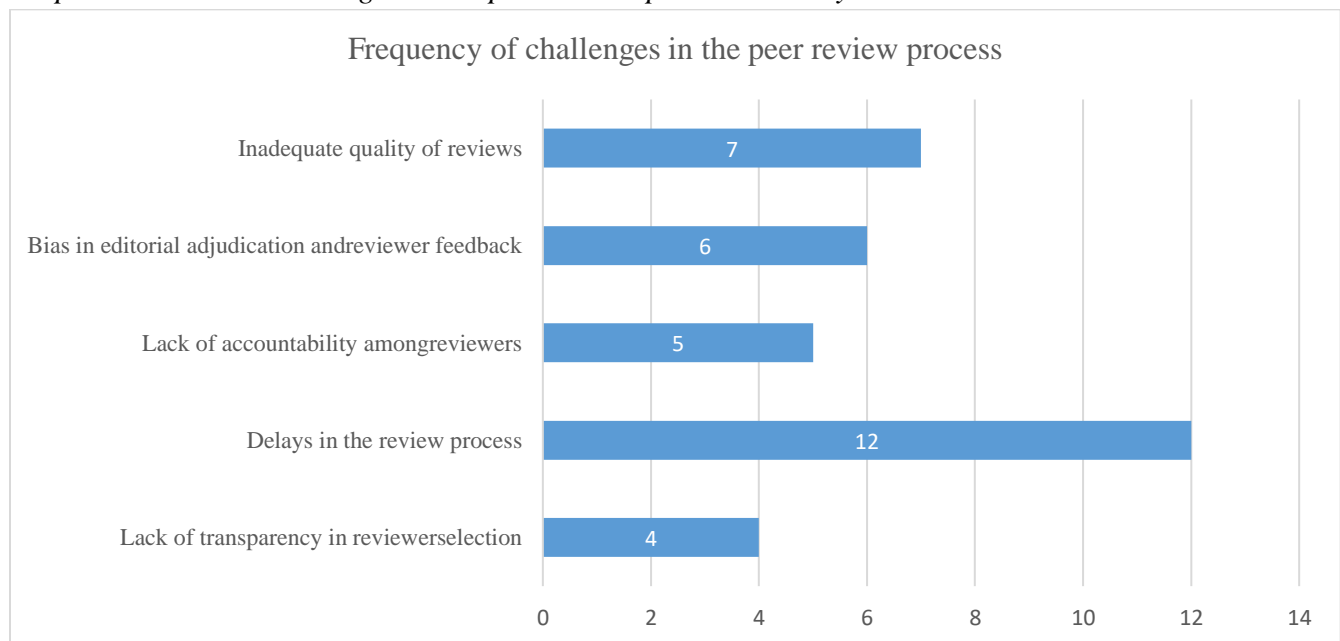
Strengthening COI disclosure and handling could improve trust in the peer review process.

Challenges in the Peer-Review Process

To identify challenges in the peer review process, respondents were required to select multiple challenges they have experienced. Their responses are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Responses to select challenges in the peer review process in Kenya



As shown in Figure 2, all respondents (12) cited review delays, making it a unanimous concern. This is consistent with broader findings that journal review often suffers long delays due to reviewer recruitment bottlenecks and reviewer workloads. Poor review quality was identified as a challenge by 7 (58%) respondents, and editorial or reviewer bias by 6 (50%). Five (42%) noted a lack of reviewer accountability, and four (33%) noted non-transparent reviewer selection as a problem they have experienced. These findings suggest calls for greater oversight and transparency, as making review processes more transparent (e.g., publishing reviewer reports) may promote accountability and mitigate bias.

4.0 Conclusion

The findings on perceived journal transparency highlight a notable concern. Although a third of respondents reported satisfaction, more than half expressed dissatisfaction or strong dissatisfaction. This indicates that many stakeholders remain unconvinced about the fairness and openness of the peer-review process in Kenyan journals. Such dissatisfaction points to a systemic challenge in which authors and editors may perceive reviewer feedback and publishing practices as opaque or insufficiently accountable.

Regarding conflict-of-interest management, the results suggest moderate confidence, with most respondents acknowledging effectiveness but a significant minority flagging gaps. Combined with unanimous concern about review delays and high levels of dissatisfaction with review quality, bias, and lack of accountability, the findings reveal a system under pressure. These challenges underscore the need for reforms to improve transparency, strengthen conflict-of-interest policies, and enhance the efficiency and integrity

of peer-review processes to restore confidence in scholarly publishing.

The unanimous concern about review delays shows that inefficiency is not merely an occasional problem but a systemic one that consistently affects all stakeholders. This suggests that delays are likely the most urgent issue requiring intervention, perhaps through better reviewer recruitment strategies, time-bound review policies, or incentives for timely reviews.

Similarly, the split views on conflict-of-interest management, coupled with dissatisfaction with transparency, point to a broader trust deficit in the publishing ecosystem. Although most respondents acknowledged that COIs are managed effectively, the presence of a vocal minority who identify gaps suggests that existing policies may not be enforced or communicated consistently.

Finally, the prevalence of challenges such as poor review quality, reviewer bias, and a lack of accountability suggests that transparency alone may not be sufficient. Systemic reforms in reviewer training, evaluation, and monitoring are equally necessary. Overall, the study underscores the pressing need for both structural and cultural reforms in the peer-review process to balance efficiency, fairness, and trustworthiness.

5.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings, this paper's first recommendation is to address review delays, which were unanimously cited as a major challenge. Journals could adopt stricter timelines for reviewers, expand their reviewer pools through targeted recruitment, and introduce incentives or recognition systems to encourage timely reviews. Leveraging digital tools such as automated reminders and AI-assisted reviewer

matching could also ease bottlenecks and improve efficiency.

Second, the paper recommends strengthening transparency to rebuild trust in the peer-review process in Kenya. Journals could publish reviewer reports (with or without anonymity), disclose reviewer selection criteria, and provide clearer channels for author feedback. Such practices would not only help mitigate perceptions of bias but also enhance accountability and the quality of reviews. Lastly, the management of conflicts of interest requires consistent enforcement and

improved communication. Journals could implement standardized COI disclosure forms, impose stricter penalties for non-disclosure, and ensure editorial independence in their decision-making processes. Providing training for both reviewers and editors on COI and bias can also reinforce fairness and credibility in the process. In conclusion, if these recommendations are adopted and implemented, they can make peer review more transparent, timely, and trustworthy within Kenyan research institutions.

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