Research capacity and publishing inequality in Pakistani higher education

Shahid Rafiq
King's College London, UK, and Emerson University Multan, Pakistan
Ayesha Afzal
University College London, UK, and University of Management and Technology, Pakistan
Fariha Gul
University of Management and Technology, Pakistan

This study examines barriers to publishing in high-impact journals as a higher education and research capacity issue in Pakistan. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, our study drew on survey data from 257 social science faculty members in HEC-recognised public universities in South Punjab and semi-structured interviews with 15 participants. Quantitative analysis was used to identify patterns in institutional support, article processing charge (APC) awareness, journal selection confidence, and publication experiences, while qualitative data were analysed thematically to explore lived experiences in greater depth. The findings show that publishing barriers are shaped not only by individual skill gaps but also by unequal institutional and global knowledge infrastructures. Participants reported limited mentoring, weak institutional support, financial exclusion through APCs, difficulty identifying reputable journals, and peer-review processes perceived as dismissive of locally grounded or qualitative research. These findings position publishing access as a research development issue within higher education rather than merely an individual productivity problem. We contribute empirical evidence from an under-researched context and offer implications for universities, policymakers, and journal systems seeking to strengthen equitable research participation in the Global South.

Introduction

Publishing in high-impact academic journals is not just a means of scholarly communication; it is increasingly a key determinant of academic progression, institutional ranking, and international visibility. For social science researchers globally, particularly in developing countries, access to these journals plays a key role in shaping discourse, influencing policy, and gaining recognition. High-impact journals, typically those indexed in the *Journal Citation Reports* (Clarivate, 2026a) with Q1 or Q2 rankings, often serve as gatekeepers to academic legitimacy and career advancement (Zavale & Schneijderberg, 2022). However, the global academic publishing landscape is deeply asymmetrical. Scholars from the Global North, where research funding, training infrastructure, and English-language proficiency are more robust, dominate these journals in both authorship and editorial control (Pailey, 2020). This systemic inequality has led to what Connell (2007) termed the "Northern Theory" problem, where research paradigms, methods, and questions from the Global South are marginalised. As a result, knowledge produced in the Global South, including Pakistan, is often excluded from global scholarly discourse.

In the Pakistani context, the challenges are compounded by underfunded higher education institutions, a lack of institutional APC (article processing charges) support, limited research training, and weak academic writing mentorship. While Pakistan has improved in global research productivity rankings, particularly in the natural sciences, its output in the social sciences remains under-represented in Q1/Q2 journals (Khan & Hussain, 2023). A disproportionate focus on quantity over quality (due to Higher Education Commission (HEC) publication requirements) further incentivises publication in lower-impact or even predatory journals (Raza et al., 2025). This creates a vicious cycle: researchers lack the resources and support to publish in reputable journals, which in turn affects their institutional reputation, funding prospects, and policy influence.

Problem statement

Despite numerous studies documenting general publishing challenges in developing countries, there remains a lack of empirical, context-specific data on the barriers faced by social science researchers in Pakistan. Global studies often treat the Global South as a monolith, overlooking intra-regional disparities in language, funding, and academic culture. Even within Pakistan, most research on publishing focuses on natural sciences, engineering, or general education policy, with little emphasis on social science disciplines, which are often the most vulnerable to editorial gatekeeping and epistemic exclusion. Furthermore, the lack of institutional mechanisms to support early-career researchers in journal selection, navigating peer review, and accessing funding for APCs has not been systematically studied. While anecdotal evidence and practitioner commentary exist, no consolidated academic study has mapped these challenges in Pakistan's social science landscape in relation to high-impact publishing. This paper seeks to fill that gap by empirically exploring these barriers, drawing insights from researchers themselves, and proposing strategic solutions rooted in local needs and global best practices.

Objectives of the study

Our study had three objectives:

1. To identify the major barriers faced by social science researchers in Pakistan when publishing in high-impact journals, particularly in relation to APCs, journal selection, peer review, and institutional support.
2. To examine how researchers experience and interpret these barriers within their institutional and disciplinary contexts.
3. To propose higher education and policy responses that may strengthen equitable research participation and publishing capacity.

Research questions

To achieve the above objectives, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What barriers do social science researchers in Pakistan face when publishing in high-impact journals?

2. How do APCs, peer-review systems, and journal selection practices influence their publication output?
3. What individual, institutional, and policy responses are used or proposed to overcome these challenges?

These questions are designed to produce actionable insights, allowing stakeholders, ranging from researchers to policymakers, to develop targeted interventions.

Significance of the study

Our study is significant for several reasons. It contributes to a growing body of literature that critiques the global inequality of knowledge production, offering a Pakistan-specific case study that can serve as a basis for comparative research across South Asia and the broader Global South. Scholars such as Aksnes et al. (2011) and Pailey (2020) have emphasised the need to disrupt Northern-dominated citation systems and editorial hierarchies, but such efforts require empirical grounding in local academic ecologies. Our study has practical policy implications. Its findings can inform universities, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan, and donor agencies on how to design more equitable publishing infrastructures. This could include APC waivers, in-house editing services, or mentorship networks, all of which have been shown to improve publishing outcomes in other low and middle income countries (LMICs).

In the aftermath of Covid-19, many international journals have revised their open-access models, with increasing APC costs and changes in peer-review timelines. Understanding how Pakistani social science researchers are navigating this post-pandemic publishing economy is essential for ensuring their continued relevance in global knowledge systems. Beyond its Pakistan-specific setting, this study addresses a broader issue in international educational research: how unequal research infrastructures shape who gets to participate in global knowledge production. In many higher education systems, publication is tied to career progression, institutional reputation, and research funding. When access to publishing is constrained by weak mentoring, financial barriers, and epistemic gatekeeping, the result is not only reduced individual productivity but also unequal representation of knowledge in international research. This makes the present study relevant to wider debates on higher education quality, research capacity, and knowledge inequality across the Global South.

Literature review

The landscape of scholarly publishing is increasingly characterised by systemic inequalities that favour well-resourced researchers, predominantly from the Global North. One of the most enduring barriers is the dominance of English-language journals, which disproportionately privilege native English speakers and researchers from Anglophone institutions. This language hierarchy, embedded within the global academic publishing system, marginalises scholars from non-English-speaking regions by reducing their chances of acceptance in prestigious journals, regardless of the quality of their research (Barry, 2023). The preference for standard academic English often leads to manuscript

rejection due to "poor language quality", a critique disproportionately applied to Global South authors (Lillis & Curry, 2015). Another prominent issue is the article processing charge (APC) model, particularly in open-access journals. While open access was originally envisioned as a way to democratise knowledge, the widespread adoption of APCs, often ranging between $1,000 and $5,000, has effectively created a pay-to-publish system that excludes underfunded researchers (Taubert et al., 2021). These charges become especially prohibitive in countries where research funding is limited or non-existent, resulting in publication deserts in many low and middle-income countries (LMICs).

APC-based publishing models may transfer the access barrier from readers to authors, restricting publication opportunities for researchers without adequate institutional or external funding (Zhang et al., 2022). Recent evidence further indicates that APC-based open-access publishing can shift inequality from access to reading towards access to authorship. Researchers in low and middle-income and other non-hegemonic contexts frequently face high publication charges, inconsistent waiver arrangements, and limited institutional funding, which restrict their choice of journals and may reproduce existing inequalities in scholarly participation (Acharjee & Acharjee, 2024; Saloojee & Pettifor, 2024; Terlizzi et al., 2025). The peer-review system, though intended to ensure quality control, also presents challenges. Scholars from LMICs frequently face methodological gatekeeping, a practice wherein research that deviates from Western standards of design or theoretical framing is rejected as lacking rigour (Gatwiri et al., 2025). Even when research is robust and well-written, it may be deemed irrelevant if it does not align with topics perceived as globally significant by Northern editorial boards. These biases in both formal and informal evaluation processes perpetuate the under-representation of Global South voices in high-impact journals (Collyer, 2018). Geographic inequalities also extend to editorial boards and reviewer pools, potentially limiting the contextual expertise available for evaluating locally grounded research and reinforcing the under-representation of researchers from lower-income settings (Offiah et al., 2024).

Social science publishing in LMICs

Social science publishing in LMICs presents a unique set of challenges. Unlike the natural sciences, which often receive more structured funding and infrastructure, social science disciplines in these regions are generally under-prioritised, underfunded, and under-represented in international journals (Alatas, 2003). One key issue is the disciplinary disparity in journal impact and visibility. Many social science journals published in LMICs are not indexed in international citation databases such as *Scopus* (Elsevier, 2026) or *Web of Science* (Clarivate, 2026b), thus limiting their reach and recognition. According to Collyer (2018), this has led to a phenomenon of "academic dependency," wherein Southern scholars seek validation primarily through Northern journals, despite epistemological and contextual mismatches. When comparing social science publishing practices between the Global North and LMICs, clear structural inequalities emerge. Northern institutions often provide in-house editorial services, funding for APCs, and access to publication training programs, all of which are scarce in LMICs (González-Alcaide et al., 2012).

Furthermore, academic incentive structures in the Global North tend to reward collaborative, interdisciplinary publishing, features that remain underdeveloped in the Global South due to rigid institutional cultures and resource constraints. A promising alternative to gaining attention is Diamond Open Access (DOA), wherein journals neither charge readers nor authors, and are often subsidised by academic institutions or non-profit entities. DOA has the potential to equalise access to publishing, especially in the social sciences, where funding is minimal (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2013). However, Diamond Open Access is not automatically sustainable. Its long-term viability depends on stable institutional ownership, public or collective funding, appropriate technical infrastructure, and coordinated policy support rather than continued dependence on unpaid academic labour. Recent studies therefore recommend strengthening institutionally supported, community-driven publishing systems as an alternative to author-pays models (Yoon et al., 2024; Kwanya & Ateka, 2026; Subaveerapandiyan & Biswas, 2026). Another avenue is the strengthening of institutional repositories, which allow universities in LMICs to host and disseminate their own research output. These repositories can enhance visibility and ensure long-term access, although their global reach remains limited compared to indexed journals.

Pakistan-specific studies

The academic publishing ecosystem in Pakistan reflects many of the challenges discussed above, but with added complexities due to institutional, linguistic, and economic constraints. A key barrier identified in local research is the lack of infrastructure and institutional guidance. Faculty members, especially early-career researchers, often operate in environments with little formal support for academic writing, journal selection, or navigating peer review (Ali & Richardson, 2016). In many cases, mentorship is informal or non-existent, and workshops or training programs on publishing in high-impact journals are rare. Access to open-access publishing is also limited by awareness gaps and financial constraints. A study by Haq and Satti (2021) highlighted that while many researchers express interest in open access publishing, few are aware of how to identify reputable OA journals or secure funding for APCs. Compounding this is a strong culture of performance-based publication pressure, driven by the Higher Education Commission (HEC), which often incentivises quantity over quality. This pressure has, in some cases, led to increased submission to predatory journals, where publication is guaranteed for a fee, regardless of scholarly merit (Shah et al., 2024).

Editorial board inequality is another significant issue. Pakistani researchers rarely occupy editorial positions in Q1/Q2 journals, which affects both the visibility of regional research and the likelihood of acceptance for context-specific research. Moreover, language continues to be a substantial hurdle, with most researchers having limited access to professional editing services. Pakistani scholars may also encounter difficulties in meeting the linguistic and rhetorical expectations of international academic publishing, particularly where dominant standards are shaped by Anglophone academic conventions (Barry, 2023; Lillis & Curry, 2015).

Theoretical frameworks

This study draws upon several theoretical frameworks to contextualise the challenges discussed. The first is *knowledge inequality*, a concept popularised by Raewyn Connell (2007), which critiqued the global dominance of Northern theory and advocated for the inclusion of Southern epistemologies. Connell argued that the marginalisation of knowledge produced in the Global South is not simply a byproduct of language or economics, but a structural outcome of colonial legacies in academia. Second, the framework of *academic capitalism* is relevant to understanding how market logics infiltrate academic publishing. Slaughter and Rhoades (2009) described academic capitalism as the shift toward entrepreneurial practices in higher education, including the commodification of research output. The APC model, publishing incentives, and rankings are all symptomatic of this broader neoliberalisation, which disproportionately affects scholars from less-funded environments.

Lastly, this paper employs the concepts of *testimonial and epistemic injustice*, introduced by Fricker (2007). These forms of injustice occur when someone's knowledge or credibility is devalued due to prejudice, such as language bias or geographic origin. In academic publishing, epistemic injustice manifests when Global South researchers are excluded not because of poor quality, but because their work does not align with dominant paradigms or styles. This framework is particularly useful for understanding reviewer and editorial gatekeeping that favours Northern authors.

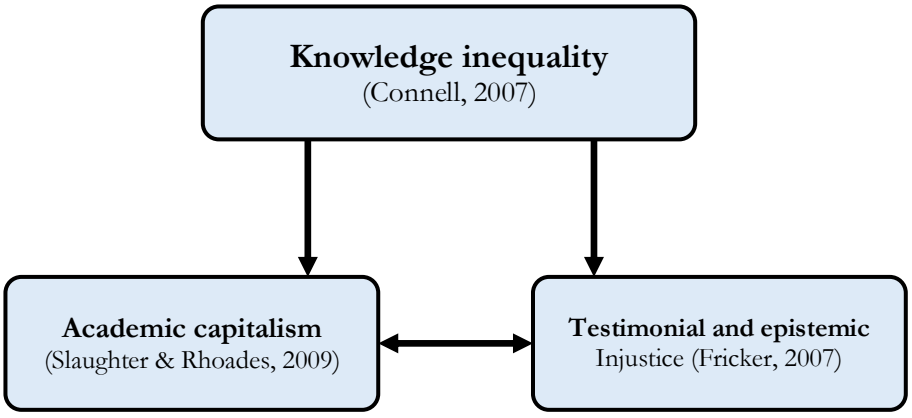

Figure 1: Theoretical framework of the study

Methodology

This study is grounded in the pragmatic research paradigm, a common approach in the social sciences that bridges the gap between positivist and interpretivist philosophies. The pragmatic paradigm focuses on the research problem itself and permits the use of multiple methods, data sources, and perspectives to understand complex phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Pragmatism recognises that no single methodological approach is

sufficient to capture the intricacies of human experiences, in this case, the multifaceted challenges social science researchers in Pakistan face in publishing within high-impact journals. The justification for choosing this paradigm lies in its flexibility and its alignment with the study's dual goals: (1) to quantify the prevalence and distribution of barriers, and (2) to explore detailed lived experiences and strategies through in-depth inquiry.

The pragmatist stance allows the integration of quantitative data (from surveys) to identify trends, and qualitative data (from interviews) to contextualise those trends and uncover deeper insights. This approach is particularly suitable for educational and institutional research where subjective experiences and institutional policies intersect (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011). Furthermore, mixed-methods designs have been widely adopted in social science and higher education research because they enhance both the internal and external validity of the findings (Ivankova et al., 2006).

Research design and method

Our study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, a methodology in which both quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously, analysed separately, and then integrated during interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This approach enables triangulation of findings and provides a comprehensive understanding of the research problem from both macro and micro perspectives. The quantitative method consisted of a structured survey instrument distributed among social science faculty in public-sector universities in South Punjab, Pakistan. The qualitative method involved semi-structured interviews with a purposive subsample of these participants. The combination of these two methods allowed for the measurement of observable patterns (awareness of APCs, journal selection behaviors) and the exploration of subjective experiences related to peer review and institutional support. A mixed-methods approach was necessary because publishing barriers are both structural and experiential. Survey data made it possible to identify the distribution of key constraints across respondents, whereas interview data captured how those constraints were experienced, interpreted, and negotiated in practice. The integration of the two strands therefore provided a more credible account than either method could have produced on its own.

Population and sampling

The target population for this study comprised social science faculty members working in HEC-recognised public sector universities in South Punjab, Pakistan. This regional focus was deliberate to capture the experiences of researchers in less-resourced institutional settings, which are often under-represented in national-level analyses. A stratified sampling technique was used to ensure representation across institutional types and disciplines. The sample was stratified by university and academic rank (lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors). A total of 300 survey responses were targeted, and 257 valid responses were obtained, representing 85.7% of the target sample and providing a substantial dataset for descriptive statistical analysis within the study's scope (Fink, 2024).

Additionally, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive subsample of survey participants who agreed to share deeper insights. Interviewees were selected based on variation in gender, institutional affiliation, and publication experience, to capture a diverse range of perspectives.

Instruments

Two instruments were used for data collection: a structured survey questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The survey instrument (Appendix A) was designed to collect data on the following thematic areas:

- Awareness of article processing charges (APCs) and ability to pay
- Journal selection practices, including criteria and constraints
- Peer review experiences, including rejection reasons and feedback received
- Institutional support, including availability of APC funding, mentorship, or writing workshops

Survey questions were predominantly Likert-scale based, with demographic questions and a publication-output item included to describe the participants and their publishing experience. The instrument was validated through a pilot test with 10 faculty members not included in the final sample, and revisions were made for clarity and relevance.

The interview guide (Appendix B) was constructed to delve into subjective experiences, with open-ended questions focusing on:

- Perceived fairness of peer review processes
- Experiences with editorial bias or methodological gatekeeping
- Institutional barriers to accessing high-impact publishing venues
- Strategies used or desired to overcome publishing barriers

The interviews averaged 40–60 minutes and were conducted via *Zoom* and phone, depending on participant preference and connectivity.

Data collection procedure

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently from November to December 2025. The survey questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide were prepared and administered in English. All interviews were conducted in English; therefore, no translation was required. The survey was administered through *Google Forms* and distributed through official university emails and academic *WhatsApp* groups to maximise participation. Participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form explaining the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and data-handling procedures. Survey respondents who indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview were contacted separately. The semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely through *Zoom* or telephone, depending on participant

preference and Internet connectivity. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for thematic analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned to all interview participants to protect their identities. This mixed approach was chosen to overcome limitations of relying solely on quantitative surveys, which may not capture the depth and complexity of barriers such as epistemic injustice or emotional labor in dealing with repeated rejections (Bryman, 2016).

Data analysis

The quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques in SPSS. Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were used to summarise key variables, including institutional support, APC awareness, journal confidence, and peer-review experience. Further, correlation analysis was performed to explore relationships among these variables. Exploratory factor analysis was used to explore the underlying factor structure of the survey items. The quantitative analysis focused primarily on descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, exploratory factor analysis, and regression modelling to identify patterns in institutional support, publication-related confidence, and perceived barriers. These analyses were used to complement the qualitative findings rather than to claim strong causal relationships among variables.

The qualitative data, gathered through 15 semi-structured interviews, were analysed using manual thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Transcripts were read multiple times to develop initial codes, which were then grouped into broader themes. Both inductive and deductive approaches were used to ensure coverage of both emergent patterns and theory-driven areas. Key themes focused on challenges in peer review, APC-related stress, journal navigation difficulties, and institutional support gaps. Thematic development was done without software, using coding sheets and detailed notes to ensure analytic rigour.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review process of the lead researcher's university before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and no identifying information was recorded or reported. All data were used solely for research purposes and handled in accordance with established ethical guidelines.

Results and findings

Descriptive statistics (see Table 1) revealed that respondents reported moderate levels of institutional support ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.39$) and publishing self-efficacy ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.46$), suggesting variability in perceived institutional and personal readiness. The average publication output was 4.82 ($SD = 3.18$), indicating a wide distribution in research productivity. Awareness of article processing charges (APC) was average ($M = 3.01$), while

journal selection confidence was slightly lower (M = 2.87). Perceived fairness or success in peer review outcomes was also moderate (M = 3.02, SD = 1.43), pointing to overall mixed experiences with publishing processes.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	25%	50%	75%	Max	Missing
Institutional support	2.93	1.39	1	2	3	4	5	0
Publishing self-efficacy	3.02	1.46	1	2	3	4	5	0
Publication output	4.82	3.18	0	2	5	8	10	0
APC awareness	3.01	1.43	1	2	3	4	5	0
Journal confidence	2.87	1.42	1	2	3	4	5	0
Peer review outcome	3.02	1.43	1	2	3	4	5	0

The correlation matrix in Table 2 revealed generally weak associations among key study variables. Institutional support showed negligible correlations with publishing self-efficacy (r = .02), publication output (r = .06), and peer review outcome (r = .03). Similarly, APC awareness exhibited near-zero correlations with most variables, including a slight negative association with publication output (r = –.05). Journal confidence and peer review outcome were also not strongly correlated with any other factors, suggesting that the constructs measured are largely independent and not collinear. These low correlations suggest limited overlap among the measured variables and reduce concerns about multicollinearity in subsequent analyses.

Table 2: Correlation matrix

Variables	Institutional support	Publishing self-efficacy	Publication output	APC awareness	Journal confidence	Peer review outcome
Institutional support	1.00					
Publishing self-efficacy	0.02	1.00				
Publication output	0.06	0.03	1.00			
APC awareness	-0.03	0.01	-0.05	1.00		
Journal confidence	0.01	0.05	0.01	0.00	1.00	
Peer review outcome	0.03	0.02	0.00	0.02	-0.01	1.00

The rotated component matrix in Table 3 revealed a clear three-factor structure aligned with the study's conceptual dimensions. Factor 1 (Support structures) included strong loadings from items such as institutional funding, mentorship access, and digital resources, indicating the importance of organisational backing. Factor 2 (Peer review perception) captured transparency, timeliness, and editorial responsiveness, reflecting how researchers

perceive procedural fairness. Factor 3 (Financial burden) was defined by APC affordability, clarity, and language barriers, highlighting cost-related constraints. The item "Plagiarism guidance" showed moderate cross-loadings but aligned best with institutional support. These results support the grouping of survey items into theoretically meaningful constructs.

Table 3: Rotated component matrix (Varimax, 3-factor solution)

Survey item	Factor 1: Support structures	Factor 2: Peer review perception	Factor 3: Financial burden
Institutional funding support	0.74	0.18	0.21
Mentorship access	0.69	0.15	0.19
Workshop availability	0.67	0.20	0.14
Digital access resources	0.62	0.25	0.21
Peer review transparency	0.14	0.76	0.19
Review timeliness	0.19	0.72	0.20
Editor responsiveness	0.24	0.69	0.16
Journal selection knowledge	0.30	0.63	0.26
APC affordability	0.21	0.15	0.78
APC clarity	0.22	0.23	0.74
Language barrier	0.15	0.34	0.69
Plagiarism guidance	0.55	0.36	0.32

The multiple regression analysis in Table 4 revealed that institutional support significantly predicted publication output (B = 0.166, p = .023), indicating that greater support from institutions is associated with higher publication output suggesting some perceived cost barriers, though not statistically robust. In contrast, APC awareness showed a negative but non-significant relationship with publication output (B = –0.134, p = .084) also suggesting some perceived cost barriers, though not statistically robust. Journal selection difficulty had no meaningful predictive effect (p = .880).

Table 4: Multiple regression coefficients

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Std. error	t	p-value	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
Const	2.775	0.415	6.685	p < .001	1.957	3.592
APC awareness	-0.134	0.077	-1.733	0.084	-0.286	0.018
Journal selection difficulty	0.011	0.074	0.151	0.880	-0.134	0.156
Institutional support	0.166	0.072	2.288	0.023	0.023	0.309

Among the variables examined, institutional support emerged as the only statistically significant predictor of publication output (see Figure 2).

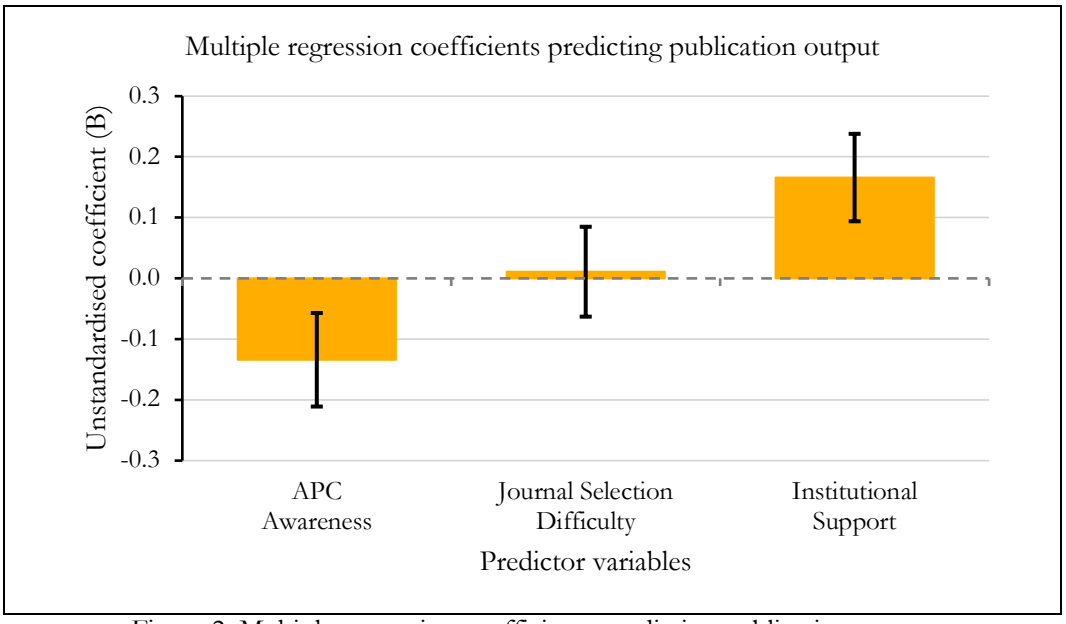

Figure 2: Multiple regression coefficients predicting publication output
Error bars represent ±1 standard error

The hierarchical regression analysis (Table 5) demonstrated very low explanatory power across all models. The demographics-only model accounted for less than 1% of the variance in publication output (R^2 = .009). Adding APC awareness and peer review experience in the second step did not meaningfully improve prediction (ΔR^2 = .001). Inclusion of institutional support in the final model showed a slight increase in R^2 to .02, but the overall predictive strength remained minimal. These results suggest that while institutional support has some effect, the combined predictors explain very little variance in publication outcomes.

Table 5: Hierarchical regression

Model	R^2	Adjusted R^2	ΔR^2
Demographics only (Age, Gender, Rank)	0.009	-0.003	
Demographics + APC awareness + Peer review	0.01	-0.01	0.001
Demographics + APC + Peer review + Institutional support	0.02	-0.004	0.01

Taken together, the quantitative findings suggest that publication barriers are not easily explained by a small set of measurable variables alone. Institutional support showed some positive association with publication-related outcomes, but the overall explanatory power of the regression models remained limited. This indicates that publication challenges are likely shaped by a more complex interaction of institutional conditions, professional networks, disciplinary norms, and individual experiences. For this reason, the qualitative findings are particularly important in explaining how these barriers are experienced in practice.

Thematic analysis: Qualitative findings

A thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to code, organise, and analyse the transcribed semi-structured interviews. The analysis revealed four core themes that reflect the lived experiences and systemic barriers faced by social science researchers in Pakistan. These themes illuminate the multifaceted nature of scholarly publishing challenges in LMIC contexts, particularly in relation to funding, navigation, bias, and institutional support.

Financial barriers to publishing

This theme captures the financial constraints researchers face due to APCs, a lack of institutional funding, and the consequent reliance on personal finances or publication in questionable outlets. Participants consistently expressed that financial gatekeeping significantly narrows their publishing opportunities, regardless of manuscript quality.

One participant stated:

> I had a strong paper accepted, but the journal asked for $1,200. I simply couldn't afford it. I tried to apply for university support, but there's no such system. In the end, I had to withdraw. (Participant 6).

Another explained:

> We're left to choose between paying APCs out-of-pocket or publishing in predatory journals that promise fast acceptance. It's a terrible dilemma, especially when your promotion depends on publications. (Participant 9).

The lack of a structured institutional mechanism to assist with APCs forces many researchers to self-fund or abandon publishing in Q1/Q2 journals altogether. The data also suggest that financial stress is not just a logistical issue, but a psychological barrier, contributing to feelings of exclusion from global scholarly discourse.

Difficulty navigating journal selection

Researchers expressed considerable uncertainty and anxiety regarding how to identify appropriate, high-impact, and ethically reputable journals. Many participants reported unintentional submissions to predatory or low-ranking journals, often due to the absence of formal guidance or training. Early career researchers appeared particularly vulnerable to this confusion.

As one participant reflected:

> During my MPhil, I submitted my work to what I thought was a *Scopus*-indexed journal. I only realised later it was blacklisted. No one taught us how to verify indexing or journal credibility. (Participant 7).

Another shared:

> There's no centralised resource or training for selecting journals. We learn by making mistakes. I've published in places I now regret because I didn't know better. (Participant 10).

This theme underscores the need for capacity-building initiatives, including journal literacy workshops, mentorship for publication planning, and digital literacy for accessing indexing databases. The consequences of these navigation failures are often irreversible, leading to loss of academic credibility and wasted research efforts.

Peer review and epistemic bias

This theme reflects widespread concerns about fairness, cultural sensitivity, and inclusivity of the peer review process, especially in international journals. Researchers voiced frustration with gatekeeping practices that devalue region-specific studies, qualitative methodologies, or topics outside dominant Western paradigms.

One respondent noted:

> I submitted a paper on rural social norms around marriage, and the reviewers dismissed it as lacking international relevance. But these are crucial issues in South Asia. Why must our research be global to be valued? (Participant 12).

Another expressed:

> Reviewer feedback often feels like it comes from a place of unfamiliarity or even disdain. One reviewer said my findings were 'too anecdotal' even though I followed qualitative rigour. It's epistemic injustice (Participant 5).

These narratives align with Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice, where individuals are marginalised not because of the quality of their knowledge, but because of who they are and where they are located. The theme calls for greater sensitivity in editorial processes and for the inclusion of diverse voices on editorial boards.

Institutional gaps in support and mentorship

A recurring frustration was the absence of institutional mechanisms to support researchers in writing, revising, and submitting scholarly work. Unlike well-resourced universities in the Global North, many Pakistani institutions, especially in peripheral regions, lack dedicated research offices, grant-writing centres, or mentorship programs.

One participant described:

> Here, once you write your paper, you're completely on your own. No one helps you choose journals, edit drafts, or respond to reviewers. There's no writing centre, no research office, nothing. (Participant 1).

Another shared:

> Senior faculty rarely mentor juniors on publishing. I struggled with my first submission because no one reviewed my draft or gave feedback. You have to figure everything out by trial and error. (Participant 14).

This theme underscores the dire need for institutional reform, including the establishment of research facilitation units, faculty mentorship schemes, and training in academic writing and publication strategy. Without this foundational support, even the most competent researchers face significant hurdles in disseminating their work effectively.

Table 6 summarises the key themes derived from the thematic analysis of interviews with Pakistani social science researchers. Each theme is supported by specific coding categories that reflect recurring phrases, issues, and experiences shared by participants. The sub-themes help distil detailed barriers such as financial stress, lack of mentorship, peer-review bias, and journal selection confusion, each reinforcing the systemic challenges researchers face in accessing high-impact publication avenues.

Table 6: Themes extracted through thematic analysis

Coding	Sub-themes	Themes
APC costs, out-of-pocket payments, predatory journals, financial stress, lack of funding, psychological burden, journal withdrawals	APC burden, funding absence, psychological exclusion, predatory risk	Financial barriers to publishing
Indexing confusion, journal credibility, predatory traps, lack of training, institutional pressure, publication regret, mentorship gaps	Misguided journal selection, predatory exposure, lack of literacy, inexperience	Difficulty navigating journal selection
Reviewer bias, cultural disregard, rejection of local topics, methodological gatekeeping, Western dominance, anecdotal dismissal, epistemic injustice	Bias against local research, reviewer unfamiliarity, epistemic exclusion, qualitative undervaluing	Peer review and epistemic bias
No research office, no mentoring, submission struggles, self-learning, peer isolation, lack of guidance, trial and error	Lack of support systems, absence of mentorship, institutional neglect, peripheral disadvantage	Institutional gaps in support and mentorship

This structured breakdown highlights the multifaceted nature of these barriers, rooted in both institutional deficiencies and global publishing inequities, as shown in Figure 3.

Discussion

This study shows that barriers to publishing in high-impact journals are not simply individual challenges of writing skill or motivation; they are embedded in the organisation of higher education research systems. For the Pakistani social science faculty in this study, publication difficulties were shaped by the combined effects of weak institutional support, limited mentoring, financial exclusion through APCs, uncertainty in journal selection, and peer-review processes experienced as uneven or dismissive. These findings position publishing access as a question of research capacity and higher-education equity rather than solely academic productivity.

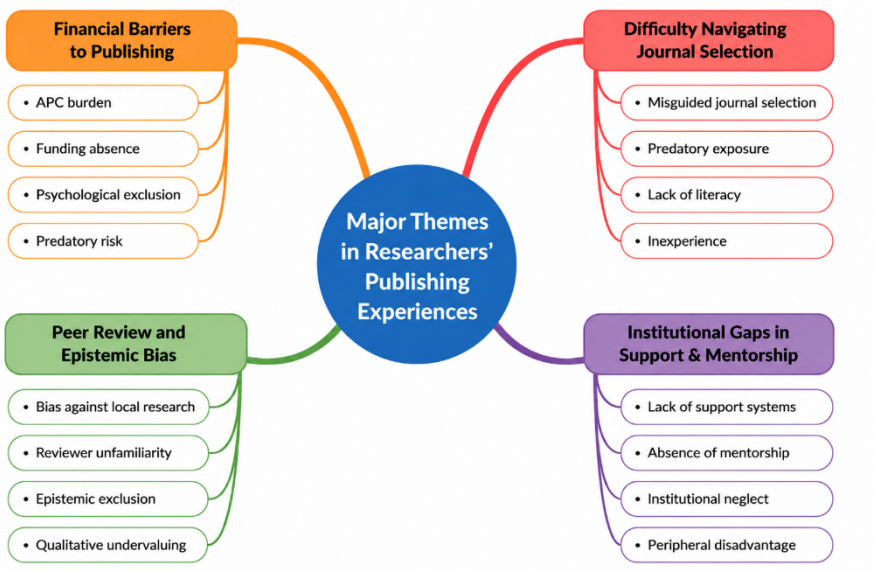

Figure 3: Thematic analysis mind map

Comparison with existing literature

The barriers identified in this study mirror findings from other low and middle-income countries (LMICs). For instance, Owusu-Nimo and Boshoff (2017) reported that African scholars face similar struggles with funding, editorial gatekeeping, and navigating journal quality. Likewise, Das (2015) noted how Indian researchers often avoid high-impact outlets due to high rejection rates and prohibitive APCs. These cross-regional patterns suggest that structural inequality in publishing is not isolated to one nation but reflective of a broader, systemic challenge. These structural pressures are intensified by academic evaluation systems that treat publication as a central requirement for career progression and institutional recognition. Atkinson (2023) described the "need to publish" as a powerful influence on academic behaviour, which corresponds with participants' accounts of promotion-related pressure, questionable journal selection, and vulnerability to predatory publishing. That said, the Pakistani context introduces unique digital and bureaucratic limitations. Unlike some neighbouring countries with centralised journal access systems or open-access mandates, many Pakistani universities lack institutional repositories or support services (Raza et al., 2025; Naz et al., 2022). Furthermore, the regional disparities within Pakistan, especially between urban research hubs and rural campuses, create uneven opportunities for publication, mentorship, and research visibility.

Theoretical implications

The findings of this study reinforce the theoretical framework of academic capitalism, which describes how neoliberal market forces influence scholarly production (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). High-impact publishing increasingly requires not just intellectual labour

but financial capital, aligning with critiques that knowledge dissemination is commodified and exclusionary (Basilio, 2025). This market-driven model disproportionately favours well-funded researchers and institutions in the Global North. Moreover, the study provides empirical support for the concept of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), in which certain voices, especially from the Global South, are dismissed not because of flawed methodology but because of a perceived lack of relevance or authority. Researchers reporting rejection based on the "localness" of their topics highlight how colonial hierarchies of knowledge persist in modern academic gatekeeping. These findings align with Connell's (2007) call to decolonise academic knowledge systems and make space for Southern theory and methodologies.

Implications for higher education

The findings suggest that universities should treat publishing support as part of research development rather than as an individual responsibility left to faculty members. This includes structured mentoring, writing support, journal literacy training, and targeted financial mechanisms for APCs where needed. At a system level, our study highlights the need for more equitable evaluation cultures in higher education, where locally relevant and context-sensitive research is not disadvantaged by narrow assumptions about international relevance. These implications extend beyond Pakistan and speak to wider concerns about unequal participation in global knowledge production.

Limitations of the study

This study is not without limitations. First, while stratified sampling was used, the population was limited to public-sector universities in South Punjab, which may not fully reflect publishing challenges across private institutions or other provinces. Certain disciplines, such as economics or law, which often engage with distinct publication cultures, may also be under-represented in the sample. Second, reliance on online data collection methods may have introduced a digital literacy bias. Faculty without stable Internet access or familiarity with online forms may have been excluded, potentially skewing findings toward more digitally engaged or urban respondents. Future studies should consider mixed-mode data collection to improve representation and reach a broader sample.

Conclusion

This study examined barriers to publishing in high-impact journals among social science researchers in Pakistan as a higher-education research capacity issue. The findings show that publication challenges are shaped by institutional under-support, APC-related financial exclusion, uncertainty in journal selection, and peer-review experiences perceived as epistemically uneven. While these barriers reflect wider global inequalities in knowledge production, they are intensified in under-resourced higher education settings. The study, therefore, argues that improving publication outcomes requires more than individual effort; it requires institutional and systemic reform. By documenting these issues in an

under-researched context, our article contributes to international debates on higher education equity, research development, and unequal participation in global research.

Recommendations

The findings support action at institutional, national, and international levels to address the structural nature of publishing barriers in higher education. At the university level, publishing support should be embedded within structured research development rather than treated as an individual responsibility. This includes strengthening mentoring systems, providing writing and journal literacy support, and fostering collaborative research cultures that recognise diverse forms of research.

At the national level, higher education policy frameworks need to address systemic inequalities that limit participation in global knowledge production. This may involve targeted funding mechanisms to reduce financial barriers such as article processing charges, clearer guidance on identifying credible journals, and evaluation systems that value contextually relevant research rather than relying solely on narrow international metrics.

At the level of journals and publishers, there is a need for more inclusive and transparent practices that reduce barriers for researchers from under-represented contexts. This includes greater transparency in peer review, openness to diverse methodological and epistemological approaches, and reconsideration of financial models that disproportionately disadvantage scholars working in resource-constrained environments.

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Appendix A: Survey questionnaire

Study title

Research capacity and publishing inequality in Pakistani higher education

Participant instructions

This questionnaire examines the experiences of social science faculty members regarding academic publishing, institutional support, article processing charges, journal selection, and peer review. Participation is voluntary. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used only for research purposes. Please select the response that best represents your experience. By completing this questionnaire, you confirm that you voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Section A: Demographic information

A1. Age

Age in completed years: _____

A2. Gender

☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to disclose

A3. Academic Rank

☐ Lecturer ☐ Assistant Professor ☐ Associate Professor ☐ Professor

Section B: Publication output

B1. How many peer-reviewed journal articles have you published?

☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10 or more

Section C: Academic publishing experiences

Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement.

Response meaning

1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly agree.

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
C1	My university provides financial support for publication-related expenses, including article processing charges.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C2	I have access to experienced mentors who guide me in manuscript preparation, journal submission, and revision.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C3	My university provides workshops or training on academic writing and publishing.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C4	I have adequate access to digital databases and resources needed for academic publishing.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C5	Peer-review criteria and editorial decisions are generally clear and transparent.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C6	I usually receive peer-review reports or editorial decisions within a reasonable period.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C7	Journal editors respond clearly and promptly during the submission and review process.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C8	I know how to identify an appropriate and reputable journal for my manuscript.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C9	Article processing charges required by high-impact journals are affordable to me or can be covered by my institution.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C10	I understand article processing charges, waiver policies, discounts, and payment requirements.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C11	Meeting the English-language requirements of international journals is a significant barrier for me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C12	My institution provides clear guidance on plagiarism, similarity requirements, and responsible publication practices.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section D: Publishing self-efficacy

Please indicate your level of confidence in performing each activity.

Response meaning 1=Not at all confident; 2=Slightly confident; 3=Moderately confident; 4=Very confident; 5=Completely confident.

No.	Publishing activity	1	2	3	4	5
D1	Preparing a manuscript according to the requirements of a target journal.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
D2	Selecting an appropriate journal for my manuscript.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
D3	Completing an online journal-submission process.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
D4	Responding to reviewers' comments.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
D5	Revising and resubmitting a manuscript following peer-review feedback.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Appendix B: Interview protocol

Study title

Research capacity and publishing inequality in Pakistani higher education

Estimated duration

40–60 minutes

Opening statement

Thank you for participating in this interview. The purpose of this study is to understand the barriers experienced by Pakistani social science researchers when publishing in high-impact journals. Your participation is voluntary. Your identity and responses will remain confidential. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis.

Consent questions

i. Do you voluntarily agree to participate in this interview?
ii. Do you give permission for the interview to be audio-recorded?
iii. Do you agree that anonymised quotations may be used in the research report?

Interview questions

1. Please describe your overall experience of publishing research in high-impact academic journals.
2. How have article processing charges and other publication costs affected your publishing decisions?
   Probe: Personal payment, university funding, withdrawal of papers, or consideration of predatory journals.
3. What difficulties have you experienced when identifying and selecting an appropriate journal?
   Probe: Indexing, journal credibility, blacklisted journals, and lack of guidance.
4. How would you describe your experiences with journal editors and peer reviewers?
   Probe: Transparency, timeliness, responsiveness, and usefulness of feedback.
5. Have reviewers or editors ever appeared to undervalue your research because it was locally focused, qualitative, or conducted in Pakistan?
   Probe: International relevance, methodological gatekeeping, or lack of contextual understanding.
6. What institutional support and mentorship are available to help you publish your research?
   Probe: APC funding, research offices, workshops, database access, manuscript review, and senior-faculty guidance.
7. What strategies have you used to overcome publishing barriers?
8. What changes should universities, policymakers, journals, and publishers introduce to make academic publishing more equitable?

Closing question

Is there anything else about your publishing experience that you would like to add?

Closing statement

Thank you for sharing your experiences. Your responses will be anonymised and used only for research purposes.

Dr Shahid Rafiq (corresponding author) is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the School of Education, Communication & Society, King's College London, United Kingdom, and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Emerson University, Multan, Pakistan. His research focuses on higher education, teacher education, academic publishing, and research development.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1703-4104
Email: shahid.rafiq@kcl.ac.uk, shahid.rafiq@eum.edu.pk

Dr Ayesha Afzal is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Institute of Education, University College London, United Kingdom, and an Assistant Professor at the University of Management and Technology (UMT), Lahore, Pakistan. Her research focuses on higher education, educational technology, and research capacity development.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8435-6367
Email: a.afzal@ucl.ac.uk, ayeshaafzal@umt.edu.pk

Dr Fariha Gul is an Associate Professor and Senior Research Associate at the Office of Research, Innovation, and Commercialisation (ORIC), University of Management and Technology (UMT), Lahore, Pakistan. Her research interests include entrepreneurship education, educational technology, higher education, innovation, and research commercialisation.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1585-7133
Email: fariha.gul@umt.edu.pk

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