ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF REVIEWER CONDUCT ON PUBLICATION OUTCOMES: TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE PUBLICATION ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract
Inconsistencies in reviewers' behaviour persist and continue to raise concerns about the fairness, transparency, and efficiency of the peer-review process, impacting publication. However, there is little empirical research to account for the connection between certain aspects of reviewer behaviour and publication. Based on the Dual-Process Theory, the study examined ethical issues of reviewers'

conduct on publication, regarding their mood, availability/, and feedback quality. The quantitative descriptive-correlational research approach was used, with data gathered from 310 participants (including authors, reviewers, editors, and publishers) who completed the five-point Likert-scale questionnaire. Descriptive statistics and Pearson's product-moment correlation were used to analyse the data via SPSS. Reviewer mood was marginally but significantly correlated with manuscript evaluation ($r = 0.177$, $p = 0.002$); reviewer availability and responsiveness were positively correlated with timely publication ($r = 0.246$, $p = 0.000$). The quality of reviewer feedback had a moderate positive relationship with publication outcomes ($r = 0.377$, $p = 0.000$), which was the highest observed relationship. The study results show that reviewer conduct influences the process of manuscript evaluation, evaluation timeliness, and the effectiveness of reviewing. The study therefore recommends structuring reviewer roles to fit reviewer schedules, regular editorial oversight, and rewards for timely and constructive reviews.

Keywords: Peer Review; Scholarly Publishing; Feedback Quality; Ethics; Academic Integrity; Editorial Decision-Making.

Introduction

Research publishing is widely recognised as one of the foundations of academic advancement, serving as a mechanism for disseminating, validating, and evolving knowledge. It is one of the ways researchers disseminate their results, establish a reputation, and contribute to the collective intellectual foundation of their disciplines. In most academic settings, publication history is a critical determinant in recruitment, promotion, and budgetary decisions (Iyer, 2025). Therefore, successful research dissemination and background are essential for individual career progression and institutional reputation. Peer review is considered fundamental to these endeavours and achievements, as submitted manuscripts are evaluated by professionals to assess validity, originality, and methodological rigour (Sizo et al., 2025).

Accordingly, peer review is considered one of the pillars of quality assurance in academic publishing, albeit reliant on human factors. The reviewing process hinges on the voluntary contributions of researchers who balance reviewing with their teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities (Ramírez-Márquez & José, 2025). This competing responsibility can impact reviewers' promptness in taking on tasks, finishing assignments, and delivering comments. Within this context, reviewers' emotional state can influence the consistency and usefulness of reviews. Thus, reviewer conduct is an integral part of the human element in peer review, which can have an impact not only on the integrity of the review process, but also on the efficiency of the publication outcome. In this context, the study analysed the ethical issues that arise from reviewers' behaviour in the publication process, specifically their mood, availability and responsiveness, and the quality of their feedback. These dimensions are therefore important to ensure fairness, accountability and sustainability in academic publishing.

Literature

Conceptual Clarification

Reviewer Mood and Manuscripts Evaluation

Reviewer's mood has become an important behavioural factor in the evaluation of scholarly manuscripts. While peer review should be a neutral process, reviewers' emotional states may influence their interpretation of evidence, judgment, and recommendations to authors. Brunet and Müller (2023) noted that reviewers are expected to regulate their emotions during manuscript evaluation in line with norms that define scholarly

professionalism, including attentiveness, respect, and clarity. However, reviewers' cognitive state has been found to affect their assessments, with key indicators such as lack of clarity, constructiveness, consistency, and fairness (Allen, 2025). Since cognitive functioning is related to emotional state, reviewers who are fatigued or frustrated while reviewing may not give the same evaluation, even if they have the necessary subject knowledge. This perspective is supported by Li et al. (2025), who found that reviewers who felt stressed, burned out or emotionally exhausted were more likely to give incoherent and impractical feedback. Taken together, these findings suggest that reviewer mood affects the quality and consistency of manuscript review, impacting the overall effectiveness of the peer-review process.

Reviewer Availability, Responsiveness, and Timely Publication

The time taken for reviewers to respond to a review invitation and accept or submit a review report is an important factor for editorial decision and publication. Morley et al. (2025) found that in most fields, fewer than 35.71% of initial review requests were accepted, and that over 60% of journal editors found it harder to find reviewers. The shortage has been attributed to increased research, teaching, and administrative duties, which reduce the time devoted to voluntary peer review activities. Moreover, the role of a reviewer is commonly unpaid or not formally recognised as a measure of academic milestones, further decreasing reviewers' willingness to accept review requests and to provide timely feedback (Kumar, 2024). Similarly, Lotoski et al. (2025) noted that, due to the centralisation of review duties among a small number of active reviewers, there is an imbalance in workload and a higher risk of delayed reviews. This affirms that reviewer availability and responsiveness significantly affect the efficiency of editorial processes and timely publication.

Clarity of Reviewer Feedback and Publication Outcomes

Clarity of reviewers' feedback is an important factor in determining publication success, as it affects the quality and outcome of the work. In contrast to clear and consistent comments, vague or inconsistent comments can make it difficult for authors to understand what changes are needed. Research reveals that most reviewers' comments are too general, lack structure, and are not sufficiently detailed and constructive, affecting how authors respond to those comments (Lim & Carmen, 2024). Ma et al. (2026) found that reviewers' comments are more effective when they are succinct, directly related to the study purpose, and have specific explanations for improving the manuscript. A recent study reveals that variations in tone, directness, disciplinary terminology, and the mix of criticism and constructive comments influence authors' understanding (Brandmo & Siv, 2025). Therefore, reviewers' comments are instrumental for manuscript revisions, aiding the editorial decision-making process and increasing the chances of good publication outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Dual-Process Theory

The study is anchored in the Dual-Process Theory, which describes human judgment and decision-making as two complementary cognitive systems: *System 1 (rapid, intuitive, and emotion-driven) and System 2 (slow, analytical, and reasoning)* (Vadagam, 2025). In the context of this study, reviewers who process information mainly in a System 2 fashion tend to be more objective, comprehensive, and well-reasoned. However, when a reviewer is in a bad mood, experiencing stress, fatigue, time pressure, or facing other professional demands, they may be more likely to use System 1 processing, which can lead to faster decisions, shallower analysis, and less structured feedback (Qudrat-Ullah, 2025). Thus, reviewers might fail to consider methodological weaknesses and give negative and inconsistent feedback. Although

relevant, Dual-Process Theory has been criticised for splitting intuitive and analytical thinking into two separate systems; in complex decision-making, experts use both ways of thinking, not one or the other (El Ouarzadi & Charaf, 2025). Also, the relationship between intuition and analysis is more complex than the theory suggests, especially in specialised tasks that require a lot of expertise (Norman et al., 2024). However, the theory is useful in this study because it explains the cognitive and affective processes of reviewers that affect evaluative judgements, the quality of feedback, and publishing outcomes in the peer-review system.

Statement of Problem

The peer review system faces practical challenges that compromise the efficiency and equity of research publication. Reports show that the academic publishing ecosystem currently generates a substantial volume of new research relative to the number of submissions. In 2023, over 10 million papers were submitted globally, yet only 2.6 million articles were published (ZipDo Education Reports, 2026). The protracted evaluation procedure is a concern; the average peer review duration for most journals is approximately 10.2 weeks, with nearly one-third of reviews exceeding 12 weeks or more (ZipDo Education Reports, 2026). The study indicates that a significant portion of submissions is rejected without clear reasons, with only a small portion undergoing assessment; the rest are either desk-rejected or not subjected to a comprehensive review. The elevated rejection rates do not solely originate in the quality control system but also in workload management strategies within the editorial processes. Reviewers and editors frequently face significant time constraints while managing multiple submissions alongside their teaching, administrative, and research responsibilities. In this context, preliminary rejection serves as a gatekeeping mechanism to reduce cognitive and logistical burdens. While this may enhance efficiency and expedite response times, it also raises worries that potentially valuable papers are excluded due to capacity limitations rather than their intellectual merit.

Another operational concern is reviewers' involvement, as data indicate a decline in reviewer responsiveness in recent years. Reports show that the acceptance rate by reviewers declined to below 40% in 2024-2025, compared with over 56% acceptance rate in 2020, and review completion rates similarly decreased during this period (Morley et al., 2025; Bharti et al., 2026). This trend indicates an escalation in strain on the conventional reviewer model and a significant risk of bottlenecks in the editorial process. In addition to these concerns, there are emerging inconsistencies in the quality of review input. While peer review aims to provide constructive criticism to authors, the input often varies in specificity, depth, and clarity. Research on academic feedback systems indicates an increase in vague and nonspecific recommendations, which complicates the revision process (Zhang et al., 2025). Despite these challenges, limited empirical research has jointly examined reviewer mood, availability, responsiveness, and feedback quality in relation to publication outcomes. This study therefore examined the ethical implications of reviewer conduct on publication outcomes towards a sustainable publication environment, with an aim for transparency, accountability, and procedural equity.

Purpose/Objectives

The following precise objectives guide the study:

1. Investigate how reviewer mood influences the evaluation of submitted manuscripts.
2. Assess the influence of reviewer availability and responsiveness on timely publication.
3. Examine how the clarity of reviewer feedback affects publication outcomes.

Research Questions

1. What is the influence of reviewer mood on the evaluation of submitted manuscripts?
2. What is the impact of reviewer availability and responsiveness on timely publication?
3. What is the influence of clear reviewer feedback on publication outcomes?

Hypotheses

H1: Reviewers' mood is positively correlated with manuscript evaluation

H2: Reviewer Availability and Responsiveness are positively correlated with Timely Publication

H3: The Clarity of Reviewer Feedback is positively associated with Publication Outcomes

Methods

The quantitative descriptive-correlational survey design was used to numerically study the relationships between the variables. Six hundred (600) individuals were randomly selected from 10 academic, research, and professional scholarly online platforms (members comprised researchers, undergraduate and postgraduate students, journal editors, and reviewers). A structured questionnaire was used to gather data that contained statements related to the constructs of the study on a five-point Likert scale, from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Data obtained were analysed using SPSS; means and standard deviations were used to summarise the study variables; Pearson's Product Moment correlation was applied at the 5% level of significance to test the hypotheses and the direction and strength of relations among the study variables. Importantly, the KMO measure with an acceptable value of ≥0.60 and Bartlett's Test with $p < 0.05$ were used to test the instrument's validity. Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) was used to determine the reliability. The results are presented below:

Table 1. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.678
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	68.954
	df	3
	Sig.	0.000

The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was 0.678, and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($p = 0.000$), indicating that the variables were sufficiently correlated to support factor analysis.

Table 2. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.803	3

	Cronbach's Alpha
Reviewer Mood and Manuscripts Evaluation	0.793
Reviewer Availability, Responsiveness and Timely Publication	0.732
Clarity of Reviewer Feedback and Publication Outcome	0.886

Cronbach's alpha for the overall instrument was 0.803; all individual alphas were high, indicating that the constructs had acceptable internal consistency; hence, the instrument was suitable and reliable for the study.

RESULTS

The results are reported in two parts: descriptive statistics (Means and Standard Deviations), and PPMC exploring the relationships between the study variables to test the hypotheses. The total number of valid entries received and analysed was 310 out of the total of 600 (comprising 22 reviewers, 63 editors/publishers, and 225 authors).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Reviewers' opinions on 'Reviewer Mood and Manuscript Evaluation'		
Statements	**Mean**	**Std. D.**
My mood at the time of the review influences the evaluation of manuscripts	4.36	1.049
Stress or workload pressure affects the tone of my review comments	4.36	0.848
I provide less detailed and constructive feedback when not in a positive frame of mind	3.18	1.893
External factors, such as deadlines or personal commitments, affect my judgment during review	4.45	0.510
Lack of payment or minimal compensation reduces my motivation to review manuscripts	3.86	1.356
Editors/Publishers' opinions on 'Reviewer Availability, Responsiveness, and Timely Publication'		
Statements	**Mean**	**Std. D.**
Difficulty in securing available reviewers contributes to delays in the journal's publication timeline	4.02	1.225
The time reviewers take to accept or decline invitations affects the speed of editorial processing	3.81	1.281
Extended reviewer turnaround times significantly influence overall manuscript decision timelines	4.05	1.113
A limited pool of active reviewers increases delays in the review process	3.84	1.370
Frequent reviewer withdrawals or non-responses contribute to prolonged editorial decision times	4.44	0.838
Authors' opinions on 'Reviewer Feedback and Publication Outcomes'		
Statements	**Mean**	**Std. D.**
Reviewer comments that do not specify the sections or issues to correct make revisions difficult	4.03	1.206
Vague feedback delays the timely resubmission of manuscripts	3.95	1.175
Short revision deadlines reduce the quality of corrections	3.91	1.070
Overly technical and complex reviewer feedback hinders understanding of the required changes	3.88	1.151
Contradictory peer review comments reduce clarity in successfully addressing the required corrections.	3.88	1.075

The ratings of the reviewers ranged between M = 3.18 and 4.45, meaning that external factors, state of mind, stress/workload pressure, and compensation were seen to affect reviewers' judgement and motivation, with the highest rating being for external factors. Response ratings by Editors/Publishers varied from M = 3.81 to 4.44, which means that withdrawal and failure to respond to invitations by reviewers had the highest rating. Other issues include the difficulty in obtaining reviewers and the lack of expertise among reviewers,

which were also common concerns, and availability and responsiveness as operational issues that impact the efficiency of publication. The ratings of the Authors varied from M = 3.88 to 4.03; the highest ratings were given to the sections for which comments were not clear and did not indicate the need to correct anything. Likewise, ambiguous, overly technical, and contradictory feedback was significant, suggesting that it is crucial for the reviewer to be able to provide clear, coherent feedback for improved manuscript revisions.

Test of Hypotheses

Table 4 Pearson Correlation Analysis of Reviewer Behaviour and Publication Outcomes

		1	2	3
Reviewer Mood and Manuscripts Evaluation	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.177 0.002		
Reviewer Availability, Responsiveness and Timely Publication	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)		0.246 0.000	
Clarity of Reviewer Feedback and Publication Outcomes	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)			0.377 0.000
Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)				

H1: Reviewers' mood is positively correlated with manuscript evaluation

The results show that reviewers' mood and manuscript evaluation were positively associated and statistically significant ($r = 0.177$, $p = 0.002$). The positive correlation suggests that reviewers' positive mood was associated with more positive evaluations of the manuscript. Even though the magnitude of the relationship was low, the probability value was less than 0.05, indicating that the relationship is significant and unlikely to be due to chance. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected, and the alternative hypothesis accepted, indicating a significant relationship between reviewer mood and manuscript evaluation.

H2: Reviewer Availability and Responsiveness are positively correlated with Timely Publication

The finding revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between reviewer availability, responsiveness, and timely publication ($r = 0.246$, $p < 0.001$). The positive coefficient indicates that the higher the availability of reviewers and the more quickly they responded, the timelier the publication was. The relationship was statistically significant, but not strong. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted, which agreed with the proposition that there is a significant relationship between reviewer availability and responsiveness to timely publication.

H3: The Clarity of Reviewer Feedback is positively associated with Publication Outcomes

The results showed a positive correlation between the clarity of reviewer comments and publication outcomes ($r = 0.377$, $p < 0.001$). Compared with the other correlations tested, the correlation coefficient indicates a moderate positive relationship between clearer reviewer comments and a more favourable publication outcome. The probability value was less than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant relationship. As such, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted, indicating a significant association between the clarity of reviewer feedback and publication outcomes.

Discussion

The correlation of reviewers' mood and manuscript assessment indicates that cognition and emotion play a role in the peer review process. Peer review is emotional labour, as Brunet and Müller (2023) asserted, meaning that reviewers' emotions are integral to the review process. Similarly, Li et al. (2025) showed that stress and emotional exhaustion can lead to less coherence and usefulness of evaluations. This is consistent with the current findings, which indicate that when reviewing, reviewers' emotional state can cause judgments that vary. But it is not to be taken as the only deciding factor when considering publication; however, it is a contextual factor that might impact the uniformity and quality of assessment. Also, how quickly reviewers respond and their availability are more directly tied to the continuity of the publication process. Increasing difficulty in obtaining reviewers in the expected time frame was reported by Morley et al. (2025), and delays were linked to academics' competing workload by Kumar (2024). The current finding builds on this issue by correlating reviewer availability with timely publication; manuscripts may be ready but delayed due to reviewers' scarcity or slow returns. A stronger recruitment of reviewers and the recognition of reviewing as a valid academic work can help increase the responsiveness and decrease editorial bottlenecks. Additionally, the correlation between feedback clarity and publication outcomes demonstrates the educational power of peer review. Some variation in the clarity and effectiveness of reviewers' comments was noted by Lim and Carmen (2024) and Ma et al. (2026). Their study indicated that clearly communicated feedback made review easier and faster. Conversely, vague comments may require repeated clarification and prolong revision. Reviewer communication should consequently be evaluated not merely by whether a report is submitted, but by whether its content provides actionable guidance that facilitates meaningful manuscript improvement and supports a more efficient publication process.

Conclusion

This study focused on the relationship between reviewers' behaviour and publication outcomes in scholarly publishing, revealing positive correlations between the variables. The results support Dual-Process Theory, which suggests that evaluative judgements are mediated by the interplay of intuitive (emotion-driven) and deliberate (analytical) processing. The theory offers a reasonable explanation for the relationships among reviewers' emotional state, responsiveness, and the clarity of their feedback, as well as differences in manuscript evaluations and publication outcomes. Overall, the study indicates that reviewers' behaviour extends beyond technical skills to include cognitive and behavioural factors that affect the quality, uniformity, and effectiveness of the peer-review process. Implementing such measures to increase reviewers' involvement promptly and to provide clear, constructive feedback can, therefore, enhance the effectiveness, fairness, and credibility of scholarly publishing.

Recommendations

From the results, the study recommends that;

1. Journal publishers and editors should adopt structured systems to ensure proper management; enquire about reviewers' workload before assigning manuscripts. This will help ensure balanced distribution of manuscript review and enhance review outcomes.
2. Editorial offices should improve the management of the review process by setting definite time limits for reviewers to respond and submit reviews, using automated reminders, and promptly reassigning manuscripts to other reviewers if they fail to

respond within the stipulated time. These will make reviewers more responsive, minimising unnecessary publication delays.

3. Publishers should establish formal processes to recognise reviewers who consistently provide timely, high-quality reviews. Certificates, awards, or acknowledgement can be given annually. This can improve reviewers' motivation, increase the likelihood of continued participation in the peer review process, and enhance the overall effectiveness of the process.

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