Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

[ISSN 2958-1052]
Volume: 04 Issue: 01 | December-2025

JHSS

Africa's Scholarly Publishing Ecosystem: Fragmentation, Challenges, and Opportunities for Growth

Author
Michael Ndonye
Author's email: mndonye84@gmail.com

Kabarak University, Kenya.

Cite this article in APA
Ndonye, M. (2025). Africa's scholarly publishing ecosystem: Fragmentation, challenges, and opportunities for growth. *Journal of humanities and social sciences*, *4*(1), 116–123. https://doi.org/10.51317/jhss.v5i1.1209

OPEN ACCESS
A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history
Received: 2025-10-06
Accepted: 2025-11-16
Published: 2025-12-09

Scan this QR to read the paper online

Copyright: ©2025 by the author(s). This article is an Open Access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Abstract
This study examined how revenue arrangements, institutional support, and indexing practices shape the sustainability and international visibility of scholarly journals in selected African publishing environments. Existing accounts describe a publishing ecosystem characterised by uneven infrastructure, fragmented markets, constrained institutional funding, and unequal inclusion in international indexing services; however, the evidence is not always reported using comparable definitions or units of analysis. The study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to secondary documentary analysis, comparing published reports, journal and platform information, and research literature concerning South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Kenya, and Tunisia. The study is thematically organised around revenue models, institutional frameworks, digital infrastructure, and indexing and visibility. The study findings reveal a diverse ecosystem in which article processing charges, institutional support, subscriptions, and donor funding coexist, while the scale and sustainability of these arrangements vary across settings. The analysis also shows that journal visibility cannot be inferred from platform presence alone: directory inclusion, metadata registration, and selective indexing each offer distinct forms of discoverability. The study concludes that sustainable growth requires coordinated investment in locally responsive publishing infrastructure, transparent financing, editorial capacity, interoperable metadata, and regional collaboration. The study is significant because it reframes African scholarly publishing not simply as a visibility problem but as an interconnected question of financing, governance, infrastructure, and equitable participation in global knowledge exchange.

Key terms: African scholarly publishing, digital infrastructure, indexing and discoverability, institutional frameworks, publishing sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

This study examined how revenue arrangements, institutional support, and indexing practices shape the sustainability and international visibility of scholarly journals in selected African publishing countries. The study defines the "scholarly publishing economy" as connected activities and resources involved in producing, evaluating, disseminating, preserving, and discovering scholarly outputs. These include journal publishing, editorial and peer-review services, digital hosting and metadata infrastructure, subscriptions, article processing charges (APCs), institutional subsidies, grants, and related dissemination services. Conferences and book publishing are considered only where the cited evidence explicitly connects them to the journal-publishing environment.

The central problem is not only that African research is underrepresented in some international databases. Available descriptions of the continent's publishing environment often combine unlike measures—such as total journal counts, indexed-journal counts, research-output shares, and market-value estimates—without consistently identifying their dates, definitions, or coverage. This makes it difficult to compare countries, assess the sustainability of different revenue arrangements and determine whether increased digital availability translates into broader discovery and use. The manuscript therefore treats headline figures as provisional indicators rather than directly comparable measurements.

Published work has documented uneven coverage of African journals in major bibliographic databases and the importance of open-access routes, institutional support, and digital capacity (Asubiaro & Onaolapo, 2023; Tachie-Donkor et al., 2025). Publishing-landscape reports add useful contextual evidence about publishers and national markets. However, these sources differ in their scope and methods: database-coverage studies measure discoverability within defined services, surveys capture reported experiences or perceptions, and landscape reports may cover trade and scholarly publishing together. Their findings should therefore be synthesised critically rather than treated as interchangeable evidence.

Therefore, this focuses on South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Kenya, and Tunisia as purposively selected cases intended to illuminate variation in publishing infrastructure and institutional context. It does not claim that these five cases statistically represent all African countries. The study first reviews literature on visibility and indexing, publishing finance, and institutional/digital capacity; it then explains the documentary method, presents thematic findings and a country comparison, discusses implications, and concludes with separate recommendations. The unresolved question addressed is how financing, institutional support, and different forms of indexing interact across selected publishing contexts, given the limits of currently comparable evidence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indexing, Discoverability, and Unequal Visibility

Comparative analysis of journal coverage across Web of Science, Scopus, and Crossref provides a useful basis for distinguishing selective bibliographic indexing from metadata registration and broader discoverability (Asubiaro & Onaolapo, 2023). These systems serve different purposes and use different inclusion criteria, so a journal's presence in one should not be treated as equivalent to inclusion in another. Crossref registration, for example, supports persistent identification and metadata exchange, but it is not by itself a quality-selection index. Similarly, AJOL is also an important dissemination platform for African-published research. However, its presence should likewise not be reported as proof of Scopus or Web of Science coverage.

Comparative database studies measure coverage. However, their limitation is that database inclusion is only one dimension of research visibility, as it does not alone establish readership, citation impact, local relevance, or long-term preservation. Conversely, journal directories and platform reports can reveal the breadth of local publishing but may not use the same selection criteria as citation indexes. Thus, a careful account should state which service is being measured, the retrieval date, and the unit counted.

Revenue Models and Financial Sustainability

The literature and publishing-landscape reports identify APCs, institutional subsidies, subscriptions, and external or donor support as relevant revenue

sources (Isong et al., 2024; IPA, 2024; Mellins-Cohen, 2024). APCs may support open dissemination when authors or their institutions can pay, but they can shift publication costs onto researchers and create barriers for scholars without funding. On the other hand, low or waived charges may improve affordability while leaving publishers with insufficient income for copy-editing, platform maintenance, preservation, and staff. Subscription income may be constrained by library budgets and open-access commitments, while donor funding can support innovation but may be time-limited.

These sources do not establish one universally superior model as their implications depend on publisher size, institutional backing, author-funding patterns, service costs, and whether income is diversified. Business-model guidance helps identify possible revenue streams, but it should not be treated as empirical evidence that a model is sustainable in every African context. This study consequently examines reported models alongside the institutional conditions that enable or limit them.

Institutional Capacity, Digital Infrastructure, and Collaboration

Studies and reports on open-access publishing and digital literacy emphasise the importance of editorial skills, reliable digital systems, collaboration, and institutional support (Benjamin et al., 2023; Bouaamri et al., 2024). These sources show that capacity is more than a technical issue: credible publishing also requires editorial independence, peer-review standards, metadata quality, publication ethics, preservation, and transparent governance. Yet evidence on digital literacy or collaboration does not automatically show improved journal quality or indexing outcomes; causal claims require evaluation designs and outcome measures that landscape reports may not provide.

Taken together, these literatures agree that visibility and sustainability are affected by several interacting factors, but the evidence is fragmented across database studies, surveys, reviews, and sector reports. Some sources focus on scholarly journals, while others address the wider publishing sector. This study addressed a clear gap through a bounded, comparative synthesis that distinguishes revenue arrangements, institutional capacity, and indexing/discoverability across selected national cases while making the limits of cross-source comparison explicit. The five cases were selected because the supplied literature and reports discuss them as relevant publishing environments.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative documentary review to examine revenue models, institutional frameworks, and the visibility of scholarly publishing in Africa. A purposive approach was used to identify documents relevant to the study objectives rather than to compile an exhaustive census of all African scholarly journals or conduct a systematic review. The documentary sources comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, literature reviews, publishing-landscape reports, institutional publications, and information from scholarly publishing platforms and indexing services. Particular attention was given to evidence relating to South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Kenya, and Tunisia, which were selected to facilitate comparison across publishing environments with differing levels of institutional support, publishing infrastructure, and international visibility.

Relevant documents were identified through targeted searches of scholarly literature and consultation of publishing-related reports, journal platforms, and indexing resources. The search focused on 2020–2025, but retained selected earlier publications that provided relevant background on open-access publishing, journal discoverability, and institutional publishing practices. The search terms were organised around the study's principal themes. They included combinations of the following: scholarly publishing in Africa, African scholarly journals, open-access publishing, article processing charges, publishing business models, journal indexing and visibility, digital scholarly publishing, and institutional support for scholarly publishing. Country-specific terms were also considered when identifying evidence relevant to the five selected cases.

Moreover, documents were considered relevant when they addressed at least one of the study's principal analytical areas: (i) revenue and funding arrangements; (ii) institutional and editorial support; (iii) digital publishing infrastructure and collaboration; or (iv) journal indexing, metadata, and discoverability.

The study prioritised sources that identified their geographical scope, publication period, data sources, or analytical approach. Sources that addressed general book publishing or literary culture were used only when they provided a demonstrable connection to the institutional or economic environment of scholarly publishing. Where a source's scope did not permit direct comparison with other sources, its contribution was treated as contextual rather than as equivalent quantitative evidence.

The selected documents were examined using thematic analysis, where relevant information was grouped under the four analytical areas and compared across the five country cases where available evidence permitted. Particular care was taken to distinguish between journal hosting, directory listing, metadata registration, and inclusion in selective bibliographic databases because these represent different dimensions of scholarly visibility. Similarly, reported revenue sources were interpreted in relation to their stated contexts rather than assumed to represent the same financial arrangements across all countries.

The documentary synthesis was iterative, where sources identified during the initial review informed further examination of relevant publications and reports cited in those sources. The analysis therefore sought to identify recurring patterns, differences between country contexts, and gaps in the available evidence. It did not seek to calculate a statistically representative estimate of African scholarly publishing activity or to establish causal relationships between particular funding models and journal visibility.

The study's findings are consequently interpreted in light of the scope and comparability of the documentary evidence. The approach provides a structured account of the major issues affecting scholarly publishing in the selected African contexts, while recognising that differences in source coverage, definitions, reporting periods, and indexing criteria limit direct quantitative comparisons.

Ethical Considerations

The study uses published, publicly available secondary materials and does not collect personal data from human participants. Formal human-participant ethical approval would ordinarily not be required for this design, subject to the relevant institution's rules; the authors should confirm any applicable institutional determination. Sources should be represented accurately, and copyright, attribution, and database terms should be respected.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: A Plural but Uneven Funding Environment

Across the reviewed documents, the publishing environment is described as relying on combinations of APCs, institutional support, subscriptions, and donor or project funding. The evidence supports a plural-model interpretation rather than the claim that one source dominates uniformly across the continent. APCs can reduce reliance on subscriptions but may disadvantage authors without grants; institutional subsidies can distribute costs more broadly but depend on predictable budgets; and donor funding can establish or improve services while introducing uncertainty when projects end. The sources available for this synthesis do not provide a consistently defined dataset of publisher income, costs, or revenue shares, so the supplied evidence cannot reliably quantify each stream's relative contribution.

Theme 2: Visibility Depends On the Service and Measure Used

The reviewed literature demonstrates why indexing and discoverability need to be separated analytically. Coverage studies compare journals across named services, while platforms and metadata registries serve different functions. As a result, a journal list hosted by a regional platform cannot be directly compared with a selective citation index without defining the population, eligibility rules, and retrieval date. The analysis identifies fragmented and uneven visibility as a recurring concern. Still, the available material does not establish a verified, common denominator for the country percentages reported in the earlier draft.

Theme 3: Institutional Capacity and Collaboration Are Enabling Conditions

The reviewed sources repeatedly point to editorial training, digital capability, publishing ethics, institutional support, and collaboration as potential enablers of quality and dissemination. These factors plausibly reinforce one another: reliable digital workflows support timely publication and metadata

quality, while stable funding supports editorial capacity and preservation. Nevertheless, the source base primarily provides descriptive, survey, review, or landscape evidence. It does not consistently test the causal pathway from training or collaboration to indexing acceptance, citation impact, or financial sustainability. Therefore, interpret the findings as cross-source themes and plausible relationships, not as experimentally demonstrated effects.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Scholarly Publishing in Selected African Countries

Country case	Sources	Revenue arrangements reported	Institutional / digital context	Indexing and discovery evidence	Evidence status
South Africa	Asubiaro and Onaolapo (2023); Isong et al. (2024); International Publishers Association (IPA, 2024).	Institutional support and public research funding are discussed as elements of the publishing environment.	The studies describe relatively established research and publishing infrastructure.	The studies refer to Scopus and Web of Science but does not provide independently compiled country-level journal counts for either database.	The claim that South Africa accounts for approximately 40% of Africa's indexed journals requires a traceable source, a defined denominator, and a reference date.
Nigeria	Asubiaro and Onaolapo (2023); Baro and Eze (2017); Isong et al. (2024).	APCs and institutional support are discussed in the reviewed literature.	The study identifies a substantial academic community and multiple publishing outlets.	The available presentation does not provide comparable counts of Nigerian journals in individual indexing and discovery services.	The reported 15% share requires verification against a clearly defined measure of publishing output or indexed journals.
Egypt	Ndege et al. (2025).	Institutional support and APC-funded publishing are discussed in the manuscript.	Bilingual publishing and institutional involvement are identified as contextual characteristics.	The study does not present comparable Egypt-specific counts for Scopus, Web of Science, Crossref, or other relevant services.	The reported 12% share requires verification using a defined measure, consistent geographical coverage, and a reference date.
Kenya	Isong et al. (2024); African Journals Online (AJOL, 2025).	Institutional support, open-access initiatives, and donor-backed projects are discussed.	AJOL is identified as a route for disseminating African research.	AJOL listing, Crossref metadata registration, and inclusion in Scopus or Web of Science represent different forms of visibility and should be reported separately.	The reported 8% share requires verification. AJOL presence alone does not establish selective database indexing.
Tunisia	Asubiaro and Onaolapo (2023); Ndege et al. (2025).	Regional and Francophone collaboration is discussed in the manuscript.	The reviewed material provides less country-specific detail than it does for some other cases.	The studies do not provide comparable Tunisia-specific counts for individual indexing and discovery services.	The reported 5% share requires verification using the same definitions and reference period applied to the other countries.

Source note: Author's synthesis of the documentary evidence discussed in the study.

Discussion

The findings address the first objective by showing that the selected publishing environments are characterised by multiple funding arrangements. Still, the available evidence does not permit reliable estimates of the proportion of publishers dependent on each stream. This distinction matters because the presence of APCs or donor grants does not mean either is the principal source of income, and author affordability does not necessarily mean a publishing operation is financially sustainable. Mellins-Cohen (2024) offers a useful discussion of business models for identifying revenue options, while sector reports such as Isong et al. (2024) and IPA (2024) provide context; neither should be used to infer unreported country-level revenue shares.

The evidence supports treating visibility as a layered process, which aligns with the second objective. Journal hosting, metadata registration, directory listing, and selective indexing are related but non-equivalent. This interpretation aligns with the comparative focus of Asubiaro and Onaolapo (2023) while extending the analysis by emphasising that an "indexed journal" claim is uninterpretable unless the database and retrieval date are stated. The earlier manuscript's country shares—South Africa 40 per cent, Nigeria 15 per cent, Egypt 12 per cent, Kenya 8 per cent, and Tunisia 5 per cent.

The findings also suggest that institutional capacity links finance and visibility. Editorial systems, peer-review governance, metadata quality, preservation, digital literacy, and transparent publication ethics require ongoing resources. This reading aligns with the literature on open-access practices and digital capacity (Benjamin et al., 2023; Tachie-Donkor et al., 2025). However, the reviewed evidence does not show that a particular intervention improves indexing or financial outcomes. That question requires longitudinal publisher-level data, explicit indicators, and evaluation of outcomes over time.

Additionally, policy materials from WIPO (2025) and IPA (2024) may inform the implications of copyright, regulation, and sector development. However, the original methodology did not clearly define these as a separate stream of policy sources. In this revision, IPA is treated as part of the landscape-report context and WIPO as supplementary policy context, not as empirical evidence generated by the thematic analysis.

The study's theoretical contribution is primarily conceptual rather than theory-testing as it frames publishing sustainability and visibility as interdependent outcomes shaped by finance, institutional capacity, and discovery infrastructure. What is unexpected is not a single country's numerical position, which remains unverified, but the difficulty of making robust comparisons when source types, definitions, and coverage differ. Thus, this strengthens the need for transparent reporting standards and locally grounded evidence rather than unqualified continental rankings.

Limitations of the Study

The analysis was limited by uneven reporting across countries, possible gaps in database and platform coverage, changes in journal status over time, and possible selection bias arising from purposive case selection and the available source base. Different sources may define "journal," "publisher," "indexed," and "open access" differently. These limitations prevent interpreting the results as a definitive continent-wide census or as proof that any single funding model drives greater visibility.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study concludes that the scholarly publishing environments described in the selected African cases are shaped by interacting financial, institutional, digital, and indexing conditions. Revenue arrangements are plural, while their sustainability depends on stable institutional support, realistic cost recovery, and the ability to maintain editorial and technical services. Visibility is also multidimensional: facilitating hosting on a platform, registering metadata, appearing in a directory, and being covered by a selective citation index should not be treated as equivalent outcomes.

This study contributes a clearer comparative framework for analysing the ecosystem and identifies a practical evidence gap: decision-makers need transparent, regularly updated information on journals, publishers, revenue models, institutional support, and service-specific indexing status. A sustainable African publishing ecosystem will require

coordinated, locally responsive systems rather than reliance on visibility metrics or short-term projects alone.

Recommendations: This study recommends that African universities, governments, research institutions, and funding agencies strengthen scholarly journals' financial sustainability through institutional funding, research grants, and diversified revenue streams. Where article processing charges (APCs) are used, transparent pricing and waiver mechanisms should be adopted to reduce financial barriers for underfunded researchers.

Journal publishing firms should improve the visibility and discoverability of African research by strengthening editorial quality, metadata management, persistent identifiers, digital platforms, and long-term preservation. They should also distinguish between journal listing on platforms such as African Journals Online (AJOL), metadata registration through Crossref, and selective indexing in Scopus and Web of Science, as these serve different purposes and are not equivalent indicators of journal quality.

Similarly, governments, universities, and scholarly associations should establish coordinated policies that support editorial independence, research integrity, quality assurance, and recognition of credible African journals in academic promotion and research assessment. Investment in digital infrastructure, editorial training, and regional collaboration is also necessary to strengthen publishing capacity and facilitate resource sharing among institutions.

Ultimately, future studies should use transparent methods, consistent definitions, traceable sources, and comparable reference periods to assess journal numbers, publishing revenue, and indexing coverage across African countries. The country-level percentages reported in this study should be verified against their sources, denominators, and calculations before being presented as established comparative findings.

REFERENCES

African Journals Online. (2025). African Journals Online: Promoting access to African research. https://www.ajol.info

Asubiaro, T. V., & Onaolapo, S. (2023). A comparative study of the coverage of African journals in Web of Science, Scopus, and CrossRef. Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology, 74(7), 745–758. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24758

Bellour, L. (2021). Publish or perish: Digital scholarly publishing challenges in Africa. Algerian Scientific Journal Platform. https://asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/178421

Benjamin, L. S., Sivaram, P., & Shanmugam, S. R. (2023). Awareness, perceived benefits, and barriers of usage of open access digital scholarly publishing among faculty. Cardiometry, 12(1), 647–652. https://doi.org/10.18137/cardiometry.2023.26.647652

Bouaamri, A., Otike, F., & Hajdu Barát, A. (2024). A review of the effectiveness of collaborations and partnerships in sustaining digital literacy. The Serials Librarian, 85(7–8), 232–246. https://doi.org/10.1080/0361526X.2024.2391737

International Publishers Association. (2024). Study on the publishing landscapes in Sub-Saharan Africa. https://internationalpublishers.org/news/study-on-the-publishing-landscapes-in-sub-saharan-africa

Isong, A., Murua, J., Chideme, M., Nene, N., Kizza, R., & South, R. (2024). Publishing futures: A study of the publishing landscapes in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe. British Council. https://doi.org/10.57884/mvn6-hz12

Mellins-Cohen, T. (2024). Classifying open access business models. Insights: The UKSG Journal, 37(5). https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.667

Ndege, N., Irfanullah, H. M., Harle, J., & Drake, T. (2025). Africa's research publishing landscape: Examining journals, publishers, and the infrastructure behind them. Open Research Africa, 8, Article 20. https://doi.org/10.12688/openresafrica.16040.1

Tachie-Donkor, G., Cobblah, M., & Ezema, I. J. (2025). Strategic approaches for enhanced digital scholarly publishing and digital literacy in African academic and research institutions: A systematic review (2000–2024). Information Development. https://doi.org/10.1177/02666669251366451

World Intellectual Property Organization. (2025). Limitations and exceptions for libraries, archives, education and persons with disabilities: African Group proposal (SCCR/47/5). https://www.wipo.int/en/web/copyright/limitations/index