“Open access and without fees”: Arab university professors’ views on the journal access types

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Abstract

Purpose – Due to the high expense of obtaining and accessing scientific research, readers with diverse financial abilities are not offered equal opportunities. This study investigates the preferences for journal access types among Arab university academics and explores the implications of publishing research articles in open access vs closed access journals in low- and lower-middle income countries.

Design/methodology/approach – An online survey and an in-person focus group consisting of 74 scholars from Arab institutions throughout the Arab World were conducted.

Findings – Findings show that most professors at Arab universities favour open access publication without author fees. The results also show that this method of publishing research will help these nations advance by giving all citizens equal access to information and providing researchers with a good opportunity to be read and cited, which contributes to the overall progress of science.

Originality/value – This topic has not been investigated yet, and it is of great importance to university professors and stakeholders in higher education institutions in the Arab world.

Keywords Open access, Journal, Closed access, Publication fees

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The world of academic publishing has undergone a dramatic upheaval in the last two decades as a result of the open access movement. The efforts of the United States House Appropriations Committee and the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee to make all research openly accessible have been significant (Willinsky, 2006). Open access research refers to the free online availability of research publications for anyone to lawfully read, use and distribute with acknowledgement to the author (Suber, 2012). In contrast, closed access journals, also known as subscription-based journals, limit access to their content to individuals who have paid a fee or signed up for a subscription (Prosser, 2003). These subscriptions can be prohibitively expensive, making it difficult for researchers in low or lower-middle-income countries or institutions without access to these resources to conduct research (Fitzgerald and Jiang, 2020).

There are several types of open access journals, including gold open access, green open access and diamond open access. In the gold open access model, articles that have been approved for publication in a journal undergo a traditional peer-review process before being made freely available online. To recoup the expenses of publication, authors may be charged article processing fees (APCs). The majority of gold open access journals also adhere to strict peer-review procedures, making them a reliable source for scientific research (van der Heyden and van Veen, 2017). When an article or a pre-publication version of the manuscript is made freely accessible online at a place other than the publisher’s website, this is known as “green open access” (Harnad et al., 2004). Laakso’s analysis showed that the term “green” in this context refers...
to publishers granting the “green light” for publicly accessible versions of article contents to be uploaded. Green open access, also known as self-archiving, can increase the visibility and impact of research articles, particularly in fields where preprints are common (Laakso, 2013). The diamond open access model involves funding agencies, universities, or other organisations covering the costs associated with publication, rather than readers or authors. Articles are made freely available to readers without any subscription or paywall restrictions. Diamond open access has the advantage of removing financial barriers to accessing scientific research, making it freely available to anyone who wants to read it (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2013).

Considering the restricted access to research materials in many Arab countries, Arab readers face a number of difficulties, since these nations are considered low or lower-middle-income and neither the reader nor the institution can provide access to these publications. Hence, only those who can pay for it will have access to information. As Kirsop and Chan (2005) note in their study, developing nations are disadvantaged because access to research data is often tied to financial resources. Therefore, the purpose of analysing the views of university professors was not only to improve their conditions, but also to improve the present condition Arab readers face owing to limited access to research and a lack of funding supplied by academic institutions, namely universities. In addition, policymakers and university administrators in the Arab area will gain insight from this study’s results on how to increase access to research resources and support open access publication.

Due to the growing popularity of open access publishing, researchers’ perspectives on various forms of journal access remain a subject of significant interest (Eysenbach, 2006; Shuva and Taisir, 2016; Fitzgerald and Jiang, 2020). This interest is particularly relevant to Arab university professors, given the limited access to research resources in many countries in the Arab region. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the perceptions of Arab university professors on different types of journal access, adding to the existing literature on the topic.

To the best of our knowledge, no prior study has specifically addressed the research questions in the context of Arab university professors. To achieve the study’s objectives, we developed the following research questions based on the detailed perspectives of seventy-four Arab university professors from different nationalities:

**RQ1.** Which type of journal access do Arab university professors prefer, and why?

**RQ2.** What are the views of Arab university professors on relevant issues to open vs closed access including research incentives, university regulations and compensation policies, promotion requirements, local and international research collaboration, journal quality, institutional journals and other issues?

**RQ3.** What are the implications of publishing research papers in open access versus closed access journals?

The comprehensive scope of this paper, which goes beyond simply investigating faculty members’ preferences for open vs closed access, addresses a range of crucial factors that collectively contribute to the overall landscape of academic publishing. Each aspect we have covered plays a significant role in shaping scholarly research, its dissemination and the academic environment as a whole. Here’s how these issues are important to examine:

1. **Faculty publishing experience (Table 1):** Understanding faculty members’ experiences in publishing is essential to gauge the challenges and opportunities they face. This can reveal insights into the practical aspects of academic publishing, such as submission processes, peer review experiences and the time taken to publish.

2. **Research incentives by universities:** Investigating research incentives provided by universities sheds light on how institutions motivate and reward faculty for their
scholarly efforts. This can impact faculty members' motivation to engage in research and publish their work.

(3) *University regulations and compensation policies:* Universities often have specific regulations regarding faculty publications and compensation policies. Analysing these policies can help uncover the institutional framework that governs academic publishing and its alignment with faculty interests and motivations.

(4) *Promotion requirements:* Faculty promotions are often tied to research productivity and publication. Examining promotion requirements provides insights into how institutions value research output and its role in career advancement.

(5) *Collaboration patterns:* Exploring local and international collaboration among researchers highlights the global nature of academic research. Collaborations can enhance the quality and impact of research and contribute to the growth of knowledge.

(6) *Perception of journal quality and predatory journals:* Faculty perceptions of journal quality and predatory practices influence where they choose to publish. Addressing these perceptions contributes to discussions about the credibility and trustworthiness of research outlets.

(7) *Institutional journals:* Understanding the journals affiliated with institutions reveals their focus areas and contributions to various fields. This can showcase the strengths and specialisations of universities.

(8) *Seminars and training sessions:* Seminars and training sessions focused on publication and citations reflect institutional efforts to enhance faculty members' research skills. These initiatives can help improve the overall quality of research output.

(9) *Relevant issues:* Providing space for faculty to highlight additional relevant issues encourages a broader discussion of challenges and opportunities in academic publishing. This could include emerging trends, technological advancements, or ethical considerations.

The paper’s comprehensive approach contributes to a holistic understanding of the academic publishing ecosystem. By examining a range of interconnected issues, this research adds depth to the dialogue surrounding faculty engagement with scholarly publishing. This broader perspective acknowledges the multifaceted nature of academic work and its impact on individual researchers, institutions and the advancement of knowledge within the academic community.

2. Studies on types of journals access

There is a plethora of literature on the topic of open-access vs closed-access journals (see Shuva and Taisir, 2016; Fitzgerald and Jiang, 2020; Swan and Brown, 2004; Park and Qin, 2007). Because of its significance in the academic world, empirical investigations were conducted to learn more about academics’ perspectives and about journal access. While some

<table>
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<th>No.</th>
<th>Type of access</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Open access without fees from both authors and readers</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Open access without fees from authors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Closed access with fees from readers</td>
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*Source(s): Authors’ own work*

Table 1. The main types of journals access according to fees
scholars have highlighted the problems involved with open access, the majority expressed a preference for open-access publications. After reviewing the relevant literature, we found that most of the findings imply a lack of awareness towards open access publishing (Shuva and Taisir, 2016; Fitzgerald and Jiang, 2020; Swan and Brown, 2004; Park and Qin, 2007). According to these studies, open access (OA) publishing has emerged as a potential solution to the limitations of traditional scholarly publishing models, such as restricted access and high costs. However, the adoption and implementation of open access vary across different regions and disciplines.

According to a study by Swan and Brown in (2004), which surveyed authors to investigate their awareness and perceptions of open access publishing, awareness of open access journals among those who had not published in them was quite high, while awareness of self-archiving was less common. Authors who had published in open access journals cited the principle of free access as the most important reason for publishing in that way, and their main concerns were grants and impact. In contrast, authors who had not published in open access journals attributed this to their unfamiliarity with such journals. The study also found that a significant number of authors had self-archived their traditional journal articles and that almost twice as many would do so if required to. These findings suggest that there is potential for increased adoption and implementation of open access publishing among scholars and that education and awareness-building efforts could be effective in promoting open access (Swan and Brown, 2004). The findings suggest that there is a need for continued efforts to promote open access and increase awareness among scholars, particularly with regards to self-archiving. Further research is needed to explore the barriers and facilitators to open access adoption and implementation among scholars.

The rise of open access publishing has disrupted the traditional model of scholarly publishing by offering free and unrestricted access to research. However, there are concerns regarding the quality and credibility of research published in open-access journals, particularly in the context of predatory publishing practises. Therefore, it is important to understand the factors that influence scholars’ decisions to publish in open access journals, as well as the potential risks and benefits of doing so (Park and Qin, 2007).

The increasing number of scholarly articles in predatory journals, largely motivated by financial incentives, threatens the integrity of the peer review process. The aforementioned phenomenon, which is especially evident in developing countries, poses a significant risk to the quality of research and the standing of academic institutions. Balehegn (2017) conducted a study that offers solutions to researchers and institutions in order to identify and prevent involvement with predatory journals. This study aims to assist librarians and publication officers in effectively addressing the issue of predatory publishing. According to Balehegn (2017), the implementation of these measures has the potential to uphold the truthfulness of scholarly research and enhance the reputation of academic institutions.

Park and Qin (2007) aimed to explore the factors that influence scholars’ decisions to publish in open access journals. Using online surveys, the study found that scholars who valued broader dissemination of their research were more likely to publish in open access journals. Additionally, scholars who had received funding from sources that required open access publishing were also more likely to do so. However, concerns regarding the quality and credibility of open-access journals were cited as potential barriers to open-access publishing. The study also discussed the issue of predatory publishing practises in the context of open access publishing. Predatory publishers are entities that exploit the open access model by charging authors exorbitant fees without providing adequate peer review or editorial services, leading to the publication of low-quality or even fraudulent research. The study highlighted the need for scholars to be aware of and avoid predatory publishers when considering open access publishing. Overall, the study provides important insights into the factors that influence scholars’ decisions to publish in open access journals, as well as the
potential risks and benefits of doing so. Findings suggest that increased awareness and education efforts regarding open access publishing and predatory practices could help scholars make informed decisions about publishing their research (Park and Qin, 2007).

In the context of Bangladesh, there is limited research on the awareness, perceptions and use of open access journals among faculty members, who are key stakeholders in the scholarly communication process. Understanding their attitudes towards open access can provide valuable insights into the potential of open access to transform the scholarly communication landscape. Shuva and Taisir (2016) employed online surveys to investigate Bangladeshi faculty members’ awareness, perceptions and use of open access journals. The study found that the majority of the faculty members who participated in this study, i.e. 133 (66.5%), use both subscription-based journals and open access journals for their research and lecture preparation. Out of the 201 respondents, 42 (21%) indicated that they only used open access journals, and 15 (7.5%) used subscription-based journals only. These findings highlight the need for increased awareness and education about open access, as well as for incentives that encourage faculty members to publish in open access journals (Shuva and Taisir, 2016).

Additionally, the study briefly discussed the issues of predatory open access journals, which can undermine the credibility of scholarly research. The prevalence of such journals underscores the importance of promoting high-quality open access publishing and ensuring that researchers have access to reliable resources for identifying reputable open access journals. As such, the paper suggested that libraries can play a critical role as centres for open access publications, helping faculty members and researchers choose the right journals for their research (Shuva and Taisir, 2016).

Access to scholarly research is a critical issue that can create inequities for readers with varying resources. While traditional subscription-based models of scholarly publishing restrict access to those who can afford to pay for access, open access (OA) publishing offers an avenue for addressing this inequity by providing free and unrestricted access to scholarly research. However, the adoption and implementation of open access vary across different disciplines and regions, and little is known about scholars’ awareness and perceptions of open access.

One recent study by Fitzgerald and Jiang (2020) employed a survey of scholars to investigate their awareness and perceptions of open access. The study found that the benefits of open access include increased readership and citations, a broader reach for published studies, the protection of author rights and the advancement of one’s professional standing. These findings highlight the potential of open access to address the inequity of access to scholarly research, as well as the need for increased awareness and education around open access publishing.

The study also analysed the data according to scholars’ rank and discipline and found significant differences between disciplines in terms of their adoption and implementation of open access. This suggests that disciplinary norms and practises play a critical role in shaping scholars’ attitudes towards open access and that disciplinary-specific strategies may be necessary to promote open access adoption and implementation (Fitzgerald and Jiang, 2020). Overall, the study provides valuable insights into scholars’ awareness and perceptions of open access, highlighting the potential of open access to address the inequity of access to scholarly research and the need for increased awareness and education around open access publishing. The study’s findings also underscore the importance of considering disciplinary-specific strategies for promoting open access adoption and implementation.

Another study at the University of South Florida examines open access citation advantage, using Scopus and Open Access Button for a five-year span across seven departments. Findings show a substantial citation advantage in most departments, emphasising the need for broader research. It counters misconceptions about Open Access
quality and informs academic libraries’ outreach by understanding faculty publication patterns (Boczar and Schmidt, 2022). The observed citation advantage shown in this study may serve as an incentive for researchers to choose open access publishing, therefore amplifying the exposure and influence of their research.

There is lack of scholarly literature that provides comprehensive understanding of the open access preferences among Arab teachers, particularly in lower-income settings. This research aims to explore the preferred means of journal access among individuals, as well as the underlying rationales for their preferences, and their viewpoints about open access vs restricted access. In this study, we investigate many factors including incentives, institutional compliance, cooperation, journal quality and dissemination impacts. This study contributes to the advancement of knowledge on the dynamics of open access in the academic landscape of the Arab region.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

The participants who took part in this study were 74 teaching staff from different universities in Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Libya, Tunisia and Algeria. They were all academic staff with PhDs holding different positions (lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors and professors) stratified based on their number of publication (those who published at least 10 research papers in Scopus-indexed journals were sampled). Originally, the survey was sent to 102 participants; however, only 74 participants responded to rank the three choices in Table 1. The reason for conducting focus groups is to generate ideas and come up with synthesis and anti-synthesis. The fact that the sample includes university professors from more than one Arab country is meant to be comprehensive and representative of their views on the question of journal access type.

With respect to the participants who took part in the focus-group discussion, 35 out of the 74 professors sampled in this study agreed to participate in a focus-group discussion. They were divided into six groups and were interviewed either in-person or online. The first three groups were met in person, and the last three groups were met online. The first group included five female professors who work in Jordan. Table 1 provides a detailed description of the focused groups. The professors were asked questions about the main types of journal access according to fees, as shown in the following table.

3.2 Data elicitation tools

3.2.1 Survey. The objective of the online survey was to determine which types of access participants deemed most significant when rating forms of journal access according to fees. According to Lefever et al. (2007), the benefit of online data gathering techniques such as web-based surveys is that they provide access to a broad and geographically dispersed audience. In addition, these tools are time- and cost-efficient for the researcher (Wright, 2005), since they provide researchers with excellent opportunities to effectively collect information via the Internet. Participants were asked to rate the importance of the primary forms of journal access on the basis of expenses, as indicated in Table 1. In addition to the rating question, the survey also included open ended questions in which the respondents were asked to describe their experience in publishing in these journal (see Table 1), comment on research incentives provided by their universities, describe their university’s regulations concerning publications and compensation policies, shed light on their promotion requirements, discuss whether they locally and internationally collaborate with other researchers, describe their perception of low-quality journals and predatory ones, provide names of journals published by their
institutions, provide the names of seminars and training sessions provided by their institutions regarding publication and increasing the number of citations, and finally at the end they were asked to add information about relevant issues if any. Table 2 below provides more details about the participants who responded to the survey.

3.2.2 Focus groups. The data were collected using a qualitative data elicitation tool, i.e. online and face-to-face focus-group discussions. Focus-group discussion is a qualitative data elicitation technique used to collect information from a purposefully chosen group of participants as opposed to a statistically representative sample of the whole population (Nyumba et al., 2018). The rationale behind choosing a qualitative data elicitation tool is to generate new insights and hypotheses that can be further explored in future research. Qualitative data collection methods are used when the researchers seek to collect data from individuals or groups about their experiences, opinions and perceptions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Discussions like these foster intriguing debate and provide greater insight into the researched issue since participants are given more freedom to voice their opinions on the topic at hand and to interact with the interviewer and the other participants (see Altakhaineh and Remache, 2022). This study used six focus groups to analyse the implications of publishing in closed vs open access journals based on the preferences of Arab university academics. The themes discussed in the focus-group discussions were similar to the ones we enquired about in the online survey in order to triangulate our data. Triangulating the data collected from the online survey (Hussein, 2009) is the goal of these discussions in an effort to reduce subjectivity. Each session lasted for a full hour. It was decided to record and transcribe the sessions for further analysis. The data generated by these discussions was analysed through thematic analysis.

Six focus groups were conducted with 35 researchers, as follows (see Table 3).

The study’s validity and reliability had been verified by the use of methodological triangulation. Triangulation, as posited by Thurmond (2001), refers to the amalgamation of a minimum of two or more theoretical frameworks, methodological strategies, sources of data, researchers, or techniques of data analysis. Data collection included the use of two distinct methodologies, namely an online survey and focused group discussions. The use of several methodologies to examine academics’ perspectives on journal access validates the results and enhances the comprehensiveness of the data, hence facilitating a more nuanced interpretation of the findings by the researchers. In addition, to test the agreement between the three researchers’ thematic analyses, Cohen Kappa was employed to measure inter-rater reliability and the score was 0.82, which is excellent.

The following section presents the results and provides a discussion followed by implications.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of professors from each country</th>
<th>Average number of publications</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>KSA</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>74</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Table 2. Participants who responded to the online survey
4. Results and discussion

To provide answers to the target research questions, we first present the results of the online survey displayed in Table 4.

These results suggest that the teaching staff participants viewed open access as a valuable option for journal publications and placed significant importance on removing financial barriers for both authors and readers. These findings can contribute to ongoing discussions surrounding the importance of open access in the academic community in the Arab world and could potentially guide future policies and practices for academic institutions, i.e. universities The below excerpts are derived from the responses provided by participants in relation to the elements under investigation in this study.

(1) Faculty publishing experience: “In my experience, the peer review process in open access journals has been more transparent, allowing for constructive feedback that improved my research paper. Closed access journals, on the other hand, often have a longer and more rigid review process.”

(2) Research incentives by universities: “At my university in Egypt, research incentives are limited to recognition and potential career advancement. However, I’ve heard from colleagues in the UAE that they receive additional financial incentives and grants for publishing in high-impact open access journals.”

(3) University regulations and compensation policies: “In Saudi Arabia, our university has a clear policy that outlines compensation for faculty publication fees. This policy has motivated many of us to publish in reputable journals without worrying about the financial burden.”

(4) Promotion requirements: “In Lebanon, achieving a certain number of publications is a critical factor in the promotion process. We need to publish in Q1 and Q2 journals.”

(5) Collaboration patterns: “Collaboration is highly encouraged in my university in Jordan. Through international partnerships, I’ve had the chance to co-author papers with researchers from Europe and Asia, which has enriched the quality and scope of my research.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Five professors, working in Jordan [five females]</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Five professors, working in Jordan [five males]</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>Four professors, working in Jordan, four males</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>Eight professors, working in Palestine, Egypt, Morocco, Syria and Saudi Arabia [five males and three females]</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 5</td>
<td>Seven professors, working in Iraq, Libya, Lebanon and Algeria [three males and four females]</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 6</td>
<td>Six professors, working in the UAE, Iraq, Tunisia and Egypt [six males]</td>
<td>Online</td>
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Source(s): Authors’ own work

Table 3.
Description of the focus groups

<table>
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<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Type of access</th>
<th>Percentage%</th>
<th>Importance rank</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Open access without fees from both authors and readers</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Open access without fees from authors</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Closed access with fees from readers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Table 4.
The results of the online survey
Perception of journal quality and predatory journals: “In Tunisia, there’s a growing concern about predatory journals. Many researchers here are cautious and prefer established open access journals that have a reputable track record.”

Institutional journals: “At my university in Algeria, we do not have a specialised journal that publishes our work but in Jordan and other countries like Egypt and Iraq they do.”

Seminars and training sessions: “In Algeria, our university does not regularly host seminars and workshops on effective publication strategies and citation management. They just want us to publish and increase our citations but they do not help us.”

Relevant issues: “In Morocco, there’s a need for more awareness about the ethical considerations of academic publishing, especially among early-career researchers. It would be beneficial if institutions organised seminars on responsible authorship and avoiding plagiarism.”

To answer the second part of the first research questions, thirty-five participants were interviewed using the focus group discussions to explore why they ranked the type of access this way. The reasons that encouraged those participants who prefer open access without fees from both authors and readers were providing equal access to knowledge and increasing the research impact of researchers’ work. One of the participants during the focus group discussions remarked that:

Transitioning to open access should be seen as a humanitarian movement to promote equitable access to information for everyone, which is particularly important in low or lower-middle-income nations where it would be difficult for a student to pay to acquire access to an article.

The professor’s answer implies that Arab university professors are willing to move developing countries forward by advancing science in such countries. This quote shows the potential social and economic advantages of open access publishing in the context of the attitudes of Arab university academics about different forms of journal access. According to the participant, open access publishing is a humanitarian movement with the goal of making information available to all people regardless of their background or economic situation. The effect of open access publication on students in low or lower-middle-income countries who may have trouble affording access to academic journals is also highlighted in the quote.

The professor’s remark further complicates the matter by implying that his choice for open journal access reflects his readiness to assist research in poor nations. This finding implies that not all academics value open access publication for the same reasons. Some may be motivated more by the potential effect of their work in developing countries, while others may be motivated by the desire to increase equality and access to information.

The academics’ aim to increase the influence of their research publications is another factor behind their preference for this journal access type over others. One participant stated that “I would want for as many people as possible to read and reference the study that I have conducted. When it is freely available to the public, the number of citations will rise.” According to the participant, open access publishing has the potential to boost a research paper’s citation count. An article’s reach and influence may grow when it is made publicly accessible online so that more scholars can read and reference it. Academics who care about the significance of their work and want to advance their careers should pay close attention to this.

The second group, which preferred open access without fees from the author, was also driven by similar reasons concerning the citation rates and giving equal access to knowledge. One participant states that ‘I’m hesitant to submit my study using an author-pays approach
since I don’t believe it should be my duty. I believe it is the job of the institution with which I am affiliated.”

The author-pays model may not be preferred by certain Arab academics in the context of open access publication. According to the participant’s remark, she is hesitant to publish her research paper via the author-pays model, which requires the author to pay a charge to make their work publicly available. The participant goes on to say that she does not consider it her responsibility to pay for open access publications. She feels it is instead the obligation of the institution with which she is affiliated, such as their university or academic institution. As a result, some academics may prefer institutional financing to encourage open access publication rather than individual authors footing the expense.

Participants who indicated a preference for closed-access journal publication with reader fees noted that they are interested in making knowledge widely available for students but are concerned about issues such as the peer review process, copyrights and impact factors. One respondent said, “I absolutely want my students to have access to all the material they need, but I am cautious to publish my articles in such journals as most of them are of low quality and not peer reviewed.” The copyrights and journal impact factor concern another professor, who says, “I will be more than delighted to increase the influence and visibility of my research, but I am also concerned about copyrights and the journal’s impact factor.” The responses from professors demonstrate their misunderstanding of open access publication. This is evident in a study by Mammo and Ngulube (2015), who surveyed and interviewed academics in Ethiopia and found that many still had questions about key concepts like copyrights and impact factors. Nevertheless, Prosser (2003) stresses that when a journal switches from closed to open access publication, its impact factor will increase (Prosser, 2003). The author-pay model is another problem that worries Arab academics and encourages them to avoid open-access publication. Our personal prediction is that this is because universities in the Arab world are simply lacking in funds to support their academics. One participant argues that “the institution should pay and provide free access to students, so why should I pay to have my study published?” This is not unique to the Arab world. In fact, Mischo and Schlembach (2011) found that most US professors never publish in open access journals because of concerns about the author-pays model in a study that explored open access practise and views.

Based on the above qualitative analysis of the participants’ responses, it can be suggested that publishing papers in open-access journals is preferred by the majority of the participants for many reasons. The most important one is increased visibility; open-access journals are available to all researchers, giving the ability to reach a wider audience (see Fitzgerald and Jiang, 2020). This wider audience also means a higher number of citations, which positively impacts the international impact of the research and, in turn, university international ranking (see Altakhaineh and Zibin, 2021). Open-access journals may also promote collaboration between researchers leading to more innovation.

However, publishing research studies in such journals may also have its drawbacks. Certain open-access journals may charge authors high publication fees that may not be refundable by the university to which the researcher is affiliated. Some universities refund the author for the published research based on the journal in which the study is published, but only if the research is published in journals indexed in Scopus (only Q1 and Q2) or if it is published in a journal indexed in Web of Science. Otherwise, the author may not get any funding for retrieving author fees, which discourages researchers from submitting their work to such journals (cf. Swan and Brown, 2004). In addition, some open-access journals may not follow the same quality control standards as those followed by traditional high-impact journals, suggesting that some open-access journals may publish articles that are not rigorously reviewed (cf. Park and Qin, 2007). Moreover, some researchers may consider closed-access journals as having more prestige compared to open-access
journals, which may have a negative effect on these authors’ research impact in the long run. Finally, some researchers fall into the trap of predatory open access journals, which can be attributed to the pressure on academics to publish their work in high-impact journals to secure tenure and funding. A large number of researchers in low and lower-middle-income countries such as Jordan are particularly vulnerable to these predatory publishers, as they may not have access to the financial resources necessary to identify and publish in reputable journals.

Some universities may also play a role in the choice between open-access vs closed-access journals. Some participants reported that their universities have a compulsory condition for promotion from one rank to another, such as from Assistant Professor to Associate professor, namely, publishing papers in closed-access journals. In other words, a faculty member may not be promoted unless they have papers published in closed-access journals. This takes us to the advantages of publishing papers in closed-access journals as reported by the participants. The most important one is prestige, followed by rigorous peer review, which ensures the publication of high-quality articles. The fact that these journals do not require publication fees, which means signing a copyright agreement with the journal, encourages researchers to publish their works in these journals. However, their limited access can be regarded as a disadvantage since their availability is restricted by subscription or at least paying for access and given that the examined sample was from low or lower-middle income countries, paying subscription is regarded as a financial burden. In addition to their limited access, they may also cause a limited readership and, by extension, limited impact of one’s research (cf. Fitzgerald and Jiang, 2020). Limited collaboration is also another downside of closed-access journals, as researchers are less encouraged to collaborate with others. Some closed-access journals provide the option of publishing one work as “open-access” for a rather expensive fee which is again not funded by many universities in Arab countries.

On the basis of the above discussion, this study has a number of implications:

(1) Universities in the Arab World need to encourage researchers to publish their work in open-access journals by providing incentives for researchers who publish their work in high-ranking open-access journals, preferably without author fees. Universities should also refund the authors who pay author fees to publish their research in reputable open-access journals with author fees. By publishing in open-access academic journals, research findings can have more impact and can inform the curriculum, contributing to the quality of education by bringing new knowledge into the classroom.

(2) Encouraging different schools/colleges at the universities in the Arabic world to have academic journals of their own. This is because having academic journals at a university can improve its international ranking, particularly in the QS and Times rankings (Altakhaineh and Zibin, 2021). Universities also need to facilitate the launch of these journals by providing funds, promoting the journal on various websites and facilitating the assembly of editorial boards through collaborating with other universities locally and internationally. Thus, researchers can find a venue to publish their work without fees. Such journals that exist in the Arab world are Jordan Journal for History and Archaeology published by the University of Jordan, Arab Journal of Mathematical Sciences published by the American University of Beirut, Journal of King Saud University – Science published by King Saud University in Saudi Arabia, and Journal of Human Sciences published by the University of Bahrain.

(3) Encouraging open-access with author fees journals to give full waiver or at least a 50% discount to researchers who are primarily affiliated with universities from lower-middle income countries as defined by the World Bank. Examples of such journals are Cogent Arts and Humanities and International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES).
Raising researchers’ awareness of the dangers of predatory open-access journals through holding specialised workshops and seminars that aim to help researchers identify predatory open-access journals, untrusted publishers and hijacked journals (cf. Shuva and Taisir, 2016). These seminars can also help researchers identify unsolicited emails requesting submissions, and show them how to check for information on a journal’s website about its editorial and peer-review process. Furthermore, such workshops can train researchers on how to consult directories of reputable journals, such as Scopus and Web of Science, and how to validate the journal’s indexation and abstracting.

Nonetheless, the results of this study provide valuable insights for future research initiatives focused on examining the advantages and effects of open access publishing in certain academic fields and departments within Arab institutions. These studies would aim to evaluate the potential impact of open access on enhancing educational quality and facilitating equal access to information, therefore providing a fair chance for individuals to gain knowledge.

5. Conclusion
This research looked at Arab university professors’ perspectives on journal access types and how they affect reading and academia in the Middle East. The research found that Arab university professors favour open access publications without author fees, based on a survey conducted online with 74 Arab university professors and focus-group discourse. The study’s implications for open-access publication include improving educational quality by making information freely accessible to readers and raising the impact and citations of research articles. As a result, Arab institutions will be encouraged to launch their own journals. Furthermore, shifting to open access could improve researchers’ awareness of predatory publications. The findings further highlight the importance of open access regulations and initiatives, as well as the need of providing equitable opportunities for scientific information dissemination. More study is needed to address other issues of journal access, such as the peer review process.

References


Further reading

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