

Yellow Triangles and ‘Minor Problems’: Three Cases of Interface-Mediated, Normalized Quiet Exclusion

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of minimal warning symbols and verification cues in academic submission and account-creation interfaces.

Although these indicators are often presented as neutral administrative features related to verification, moderation, or affiliation status, they may also function as visible signals through which institutional legitimacy becomes represented within platform workflows.

Drawing on three interface-level cases involving institutional verification prompts, yellow warning triangles, and institutional email recommendations, the article analyzes how scholarly platforms encode distinctions between institutionally recognized and non-recognized participation states. Across these cases, participation often remains technically possible, yet users may encounter differentiated workflow pathways involving warning markers, modal confirmations, verification prompts, or procedural escalation.

The article proposes the concept of interface-mediated legitimacy signaling to describe how institutional trust assumptions become embedded within user experience design prior to editorial evaluation itself. Rather than arguing for systemic exclusion or measurable publication disadvantage, the paper adopts an exploratory sociotechnical approach focused on observable interaction patterns within scholarly infrastructures.

The paper argues that seemingly minor interface details, including warning icons, institutional matching systems, and euphemistic administrative wording, can contribute to the procedural encoding of institutional status within digital scientific platforms.

1 Introduction

Digital scholarly platforms increasingly govern participation through interface design rather than through explicit prohibitions alone (Gillespie, 2018; Bowker & Star, 2000). Submission systems, account creation workflows, and verification procedures frequently incorporate subtle visual and procedural signals that distinguish between standard and non-standard users. These signals may include warning icons, verification prompts, institutional matching systems, or additional confirmation steps. Although often presented as neutral administrative features, such elements participate in broader infrastructures of classification, verification, and trust allocation embedded within digital systems (Star, 1999; Power, 1997; Lampland & Star, 2009).

This article examines three interface-level cases of legitimacy signaling observed during academic platform interactions: yellow warning triangles associated with “unverified” institutional status, and exclusionary account-creation messages framed as “minor problems.” In both cases, the systems rely on lightweight visual and linguistic mechanisms rather than overtly hostile language. Yet these mechanisms nevertheless structure participation through differentiated friction, heightened visibility of anomaly, and procedural interruption.

Importantly, the analyzed submission workflow is not limited to a single journal-specific interface, but is embedded within a large-scale editorial management infrastructure used across numerous scholarly

journals and publishers. The observations therefore concern infrastructural interaction patterns rather than isolated editorial decisions.

The analysis focuses particularly on the treatment of independent or unaffiliated researchers within scholarly infrastructures. Existing bibliometric work suggests that independent researchers remain active contributors within scientific publishing despite operating outside traditional institutional environments (Lund et al., 2023). In one case analyzed here, entering “Independent” as an institutional affiliation triggers a progressive sequence of warning signals: an “Unverified Institution” marker, a modal interruption requesting explicit confirmation, and a persistent yellow warning triangle attached to the author identity within the submission workflow. In another case, the use of a non-institutional email address produces account denial framed through euphemistic administrative language under the heading “Minor Problem.”

Rather than interpreting these systems as explicit discrimination, the article proposes the concept of interface-mediated legitimacy signaling. Under this framework, participation remains technically possible in some cases, but increasingly differentiated through micro-signals embedded within user experience design. These signals do not merely communicate information. They also visually encode institutional verification states within the interaction workflow itself.

The present article does not attempt to measure large-scale behavioral outcomes or platform-wide exclusion rates. Instead, it focuses on the descriptive analysis of interface-level legitimacy signaling mechanisms observable during scholarly platform interactions. The approach is therefore exploratory and situated at the level of sociotechnical interface analysis rather than population-level behavioral inference (Suchman, 2007; Gillespie, 2018).

The article argues that seemingly minor interface details, including color-coded warning icons, modal confirmations, institutional verification prompts, and euphemistic administrative wording, can function as forms of soft gatekeeping within contemporary scholarly platforms. Through these mechanisms, legitimacy becomes encoded not only in editorial decisions or formal policy, but directly within the interactional structure of the interface itself.

2 Methods

This study uses a qualitative interface-analysis approach focused on legitimacy signaling during academic platform interactions. The analysis is based on direct observation and documentation of submission and account-creation workflows encountered while interacting with scholarly publishing systems.

Screenshots were collected sequentially during real submission procedures involving independent researcher status and non-institutional identifiers. Particular attention was given to moments where the interface introduced visual or procedural differentiation relative to standard institutional workflows. Captured elements included warning icons, modal interruptions, account restrictions, institutional verification prompts, color changes, wording, and persistent status markers.

The analysis followed the chronological progression of the user experience rather than isolated screenshots alone. For each interface event, the following dimensions were documented:

trigger condition, exact wording, visual properties (color, iconography, position, persistence), timing within the workflow, continuation possibilities, procedural consequences, and relation to institutional identity markers.

The study does not attempt to infer hidden intentions on the part of platform operators. Instead, the analysis focuses on observable interface behavior and its plausible interactional effects. Particular attention is given to how lightweight UX elements may shape perceptions of legitimacy, anomaly, verification status, and institutional normality.

The objective of the study is not to establish causal effects on submission success, editorial outcomes, or user retention. Rather, the analysis documents how legitimacy-related distinctions become materially encoded within interface workflows through visual and procedural cues. The approach is exploratory and interpretive, situated at the level of interface interaction rather than population-level behavioral measurement.

The present observations do not establish psychological effects, editorial bias, or publication disadvantages associated with these interface mechanisms. The analysis is limited to the descriptive examination of how institutional status becomes represented and operationalized within platform workflows.

The paper adopts a descriptive sociotechnical framework centered on interface-mediated legitimacy signaling. Within this framework, warning cues and procedural interruptions are treated not merely as informational artifacts, but as symbolic and procedural mechanisms embedded within platform governance systems.

To organize the observations, the article distinguishes between several levels of interface friction: soft signaling (e.g., non-blocking warning icons), soft procedural restriction (e.g., verification prompts or modal confirmations), and hard procedural exclusion (e.g., inability to create an account).

The screenshots are analyzed both individually and as part of a progressive sequence of legitimacy differentiation occurring throughout the submission workflow.

3 Case Description

The first case concerns the submission workflow of a scholarly editorial platform in which the author entered “Independent” as institutional affiliation information. The platform technically allowed the entry to proceed, but progressively introduced multiple warning and verification signals throughout the submission process.

The first signal appeared directly beneath the institution field after the entry of the term “Independent.” A yellow warning triangle accompanied by the red text “Unverified Institution” was displayed immediately below the input field, as shown in Figure 1. At the same time, the interface suggested that the user “Start typing to display potentially matching institutions,” implicitly indicating that legitimate institutional identities were expected to exist within the platform’s predefined institutional database.

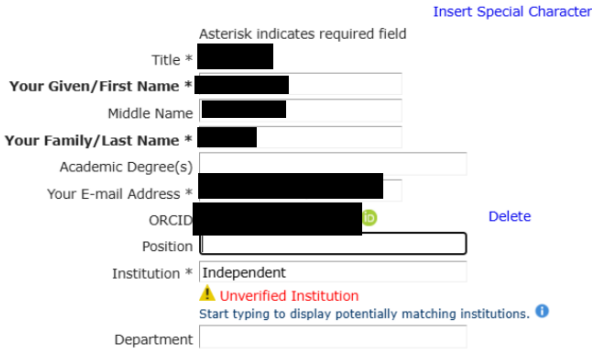


Figure 1: Enter Caption

Several interface properties are notable. The warning symbol itself was visually small, yet highly salient due to its color contrast and placement directly adjacent to institutional identity information. The warning appeared precisely at the moment of institutional entry validation, linking the author’s self-description to a visible verification state within the system.

The workflow then escalated from passive signaling to active interruption. Upon continuing the submission process, the system generated a modal warning window stating:

“The Institution could not be identified by the system. Proceed with this Institution anyway?”

This step introduced several additional features of legitimacy signaling, see Figure 2. First, the issue was framed impersonally and bureaucratically, as a system identification problem rather than an explicit judgment concerning the author. In addition, the wording “Proceed anyway” positioned continuation as an exceptional action requiring conscious confirmation. Finally, the modal structure interrupted workflow continuity and forced the user to acknowledge the warning before proceeding further.

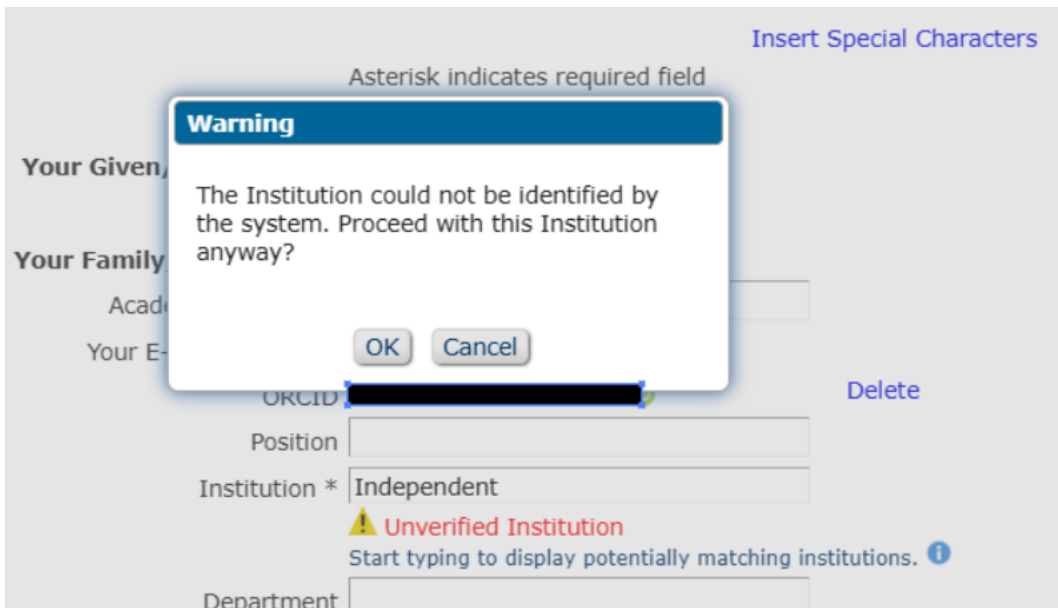


Figure 2: Modal confirmation request following institution verification failure.

Finally, after confirmation, the yellow warning triangle remained persistently attached to the author identity within the main author list view of the submission interface. The warning therefore ceased to function as a temporary validation aid and instead became a durable visual marker associated with the author profile itself, as shown in Figure 3.

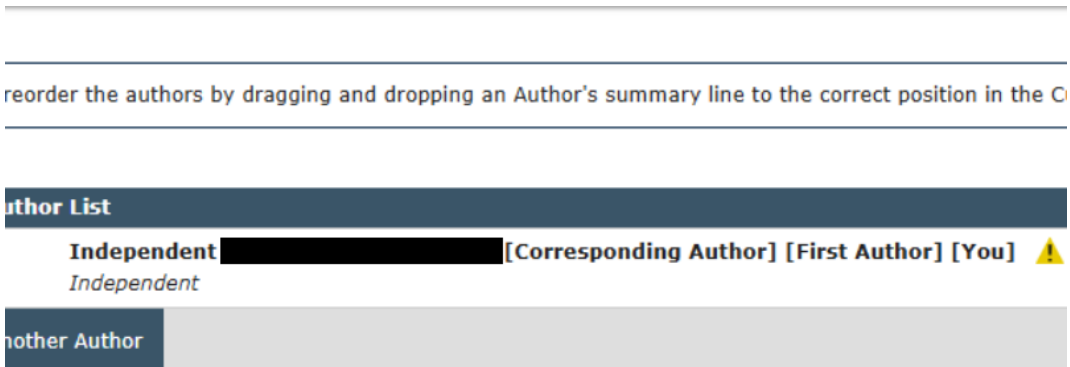


Figure 3: Persistent warning triangle attached to author identity within submission workflow.

The sequence as a whole demonstrates a progressive form of interface-mediated legitimacy differentiation:

institution entry → warning emergence → modal interruption → persistent warning marker

Importantly, the system never formally prohibited submission. Participation technically remained possible throughout the workflow. However, the interface repeatedly reclassified the author as institutionally atypical through escalating visual and procedural cues. The resulting experience was not one of direct exclusion, but of continuous differentiation from the platform's implied institutional norm.

4 Case 2: “Minor Problem” and Hard Procedural Exclusion

The second case concerns an account-creation workflow in which the use of a non-institutional email address resulted in immediate account denial. Unlike the previous case, where participation remained technically possible despite escalating warning signals, this workflow culminated in explicit procedural exclusion.

After entering a personal email address, the interface generated a large red notification panel titled “Minor Problem.” The message stated that the provided email address “cannot be used to register a new account” and explained that “new users are required to provide an institutional email address.” An example institutional domain (“@penn.edu”) was provided as a model of acceptable identity verification, see Figure 4.

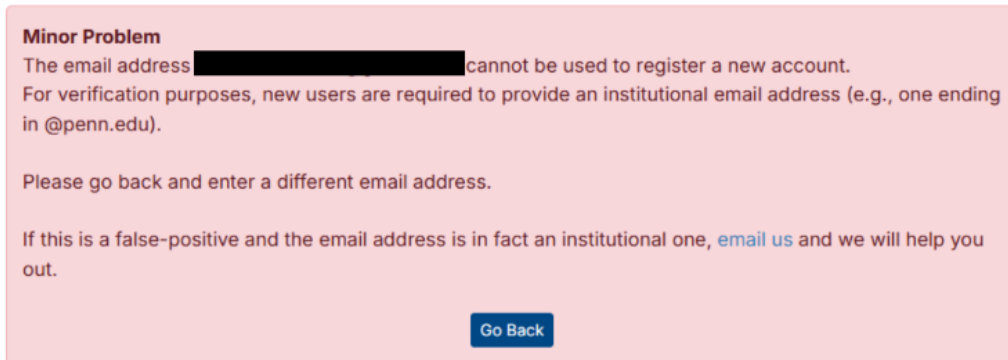


Figure 4: A Minor Problem on aspredicted.org

Several aspects of the interface are analytically significant. First, the title “Minor Problem” strongly minimized the practical consequence of the interaction. Although the workflow effectively blocked account creation, the wording framed the event as a small administrative irregularity rather than a structural access restriction.

Second, the explanation relied on procedural and security-oriented language. The requirement was justified “for verification purposes,” thereby presenting institutional affiliation as a technical necessity rather than a social or organizational legitimacy criterion. The interface therefore translated institutional filtering into the language of neutral system administration.

Third, the message avoided directly excluding independent researchers at the linguistic level. The workflow did not state that unaffiliated researchers were unwelcome. Instead, exclusion emerged indirectly through infrastructure requirements tied to institutional email verification. This distinction is important because it allowed the platform to maintain a rhetorically open posture while nevertheless enforcing a structurally restrictive access condition.

The interface also included a “false-positive” clause inviting users to contact support if the rejected email address was “in fact an institutional one.” This wording reinforced the assumption that legitimate users would normally possess institutionally recognized email identities. The possibility of a genuinely independent researcher was not directly integrated into the system’s normative model of participation.

Compared to the first case, the interaction followed a different legitimacy trajectory:

non-institutional identity → warning state → procedural denial → conditional support appeal

The case therefore illustrates a transition from soft legitimacy signaling toward hard procedural exclusion. Nevertheless, the interaction retained a softened bureaucratic tone throughout the process. The interface combined restrictive functionality with administratively neutral wording, thereby minimizing the perceived severity of the exclusion while preserving the underlying institutional boundary.

5 Case 3: Institutional Preference Without Formal Restriction

The third case concerns an account-creation interface in which the use of a personal email address remained technically permitted, yet was immediately accompanied by a recommendation encouraging institutional affiliation. Unlike the previous cases, the workflow did not produce direct denial, modal interruption, or persistent warning markers. Instead, the interface introduced a softer form of legitimacy signaling embedded within ordinary onboarding guidance, as shown in Figure 5.

After entering a non-institutional email address, the interface displayed a message positioned directly beneath the email field stating:

“Please use an institutional email address.”

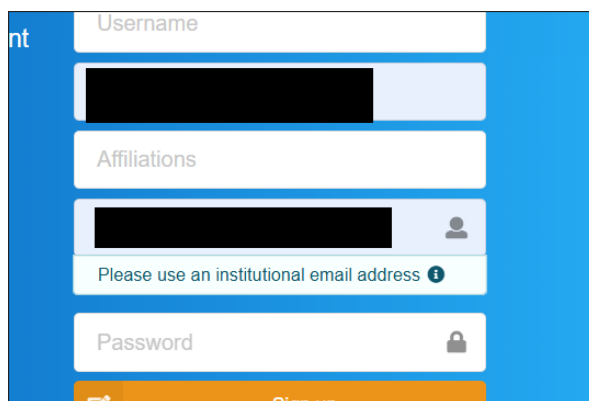


Figure 5: Recommendation encouraging institutional email usage during account creation.

Several characteristics of the interaction are analytically significant. First, the workflow remained fully accessible. The user was not blocked from continuing registration, and no explicit restriction or denial was communicated. The interface therefore maintained a technically permissive structure.

Second, however, the wording established a visible normative distinction between institutional and non-institutional participation. The message did not state that institutional email was mandatory, yet it nevertheless identified institutional affiliation as the preferred configuration within the system. Participation using a personal email address was therefore positioned as acceptable but suboptimal.

The placement and timing of the message were also important. The recommendation appeared immediately during account creation, before any scientific content, protocol, or submission entered the system. Institutional verification thus emerged as an infrastructural concern prior to epistemic evaluation. The signal functioned less as content moderation than as anticipatory trust classification embedded within onboarding itself.

Unlike the stronger warning patterns observed in the previous cases, this interaction relied primarily on normative suggestion rather than procedural escalation. The interface did not classify the user as “unverified,” request explicit confirmation, or impose visible friction. Instead, the system subtly encoded institutional affiliation as the default or expected form of participation.

The sequence can therefore be summarized as:

non-institutional email → institutional recommendation → permissive continuation

This case illustrates a weaker but highly normalized form of interface-mediated legitimacy signaling. Rather than operating through overt restriction, the interface established institutional affiliation as the implicit infrastructural norm while preserving formal openness. The resulting differentiation remained lightweight, administratively defensible, and visually minimal, yet still embedded institutional trust assumptions directly into the interaction workflow.

6 Discussion

The three cases analyzed in this article illustrate different forms of interface-mediated legitimacy signaling within scholarly platforms. Although the observed systems differed in severity, both relied on lightweight visual and linguistic mechanisms to distinguish between institutionally recognized and non-recognized forms of participation.

In the first case, the submission workflow remained technically open, yet progressively marked the author as atypical through escalating warning cues. Yellow triangles, “Unverified Institution” labels, modal confirmations, and persistent warning markers transformed independent status into a visible state of procedural anomaly. In the second case, participation was no longer merely differentiated but directly restricted through institutional email requirements. However, the exclusion was still framed through bureaucratically softened language such as “Minor Problem” and “for verification purposes.”

These observations suggest that contemporary scholarly infrastructures increasingly govern participation through gradients of friction rather than exclusively through explicit acceptance or rejection. Interface design allows platforms to modulate legitimacy continuously, ranging from mild signaling and verification requests to hard procedural exclusion. This creates a continuum of institutional differentiation embedded directly within user experience.

The findings also highlight the importance of temporal placement within workflows. In the first case, legitimacy warnings appeared late in the submission process, after substantial procedural investment by the user. This timing may plausibly increase the visibility and interactional prominence of the signal. A small yellow triangle placed at the point of final validation may carry substantially greater interactional weight than a similar signal presented during initial onboarding.

More broadly, the cases demonstrate how interfaces can encode institutional norms without requiring overtly exclusionary language. The systems did not explicitly state that independent researchers lacked legitimacy. Instead, legitimacy was indirectly operationalized through institutional databases, email-domain verification, warning markers, and exception-handling procedures. As a result, the distinction between “normal” and “atypical” participation emerged procedurally rather than declaratively.

The concept of interface-mediated, normalized quiet exclusion refers to forms of procedural differentiation embedded within ordinary platform workflows, where participation remains formally possible but institutionally atypical users encounter persistent verification states, warning cues, or non-standard interaction pathways.

The article does not argue that such systems necessarily reflect deliberate hostility toward independent researchers. Many of the observed mechanisms can plausibly be justified in terms of spam prevention, fraud reduction, identity verification, or workflow standardization. However, even administratively rational systems may still contribute to differentiated interaction pathways.

The present observations should not be interpreted as proof of systemic discrimination or generalized exclusion across scholarly platforms. The cases instead illustrate how legitimacy signaling may emerge through localized interface mechanisms embedded within submission workflows.

Despite these limitations, the documented cases remain analytically relevant because they reveal observable interface structures through which institutional legitimacy becomes visually and procedurally differentiated.

The mechanisms described in this article should not be interpreted exclusively as exclusionary devices. Scholarly platforms operate under substantial constraints related to spam prevention, identity verification, fraudulent submissions, editorial workload management, and database standardization. Institutional affiliation matching and email-domain verification may therefore serve operational and security functions that are independent of any explicit attempt to disadvantage independent researchers.

The present analysis does not argue that such systems are inherently unjustified. Rather, it examines how administratively rational verification mechanisms may nonetheless produce differentiated experiential effects at the interface level. The same interface element may simultaneously function as a legitimate verification tool and as a socially meaningful legitimacy signal.

The concept of quiet exclusion proposed here therefore does not refer exclusively to explicit denial of access. Rather, it describes situations in which participation remains formally possible while becoming increasingly differentiated through procedural friction, warning visibility, exception states, or legitimacy signaling embedded within interface design. In this sense, scholarly platforms may govern institutional trust not only through editorial policy, but through the micro-interactions of the submission workflow itself.

7 Conclusion

This article examined three interface-level cases of legitimacy signaling within scholarly platforms: the progressive use of yellow warning triangles associated with “unverified” institutional status, and the exclusionary use of institutional email requirements framed as a “Minor Problem.” Although differing in

severity, both cases demonstrate how academic platforms can structure participation through lightweight visual and procedural mechanisms embedded directly within user experience design.

The analysis showed that legitimacy signaling may operate progressively rather than categorically. In one workflow, independent participation remained technically possible but was repeatedly marked through warning icons, modal confirmations, and persistent status indicators. In the other, participation was procedurally denied while simultaneously framed through administratively softened language. Together, these cases illustrate how scholarly infrastructures may combine formal openness with differentiated experiential pathways depending on institutional status.

More broadly, the article argues that interface elements should not be treated as merely cosmetic or informational. Warning triangles, verification prompts, institutional matching systems, and euphemistic administrative wording can function as sociotechnical mechanisms that structure the representation and procedural handling of institutional status.

Although the present article analyzes only a small number of interaction sequences, the relevance of the observations is amplified by the infrastructural scale of the underlying submission systems, which are reused across many journals and publishing environments. The paper therefore focuses less on journal-specific policy and more on recurrent interaction patterns embedded within shared scholarly platform architectures.

The concept of interface-mediated, normalized quiet exclusion, proposed here highlights the importance of studying not only formal access policies, but also the micro-structures of interaction through which platforms organize institutional normality. As scholarly communication becomes increasingly platform-dependent, questions of legitimacy may be encoded less through explicit statements and more through subtle forms of procedural friction embedded within the interface itself.

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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