The Quiet Exclusion of Independent Researchers

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Abstract

Scientific exclusion is typically understood as the result of explicit rejection. However, exclusion can also occur without any clear decision. This paper introduces the concept of quiet exclusion to describe situations in which access is restricted through entry barriers, delays, non-response, or non-progressive evaluation processes. In such cases, interaction occurs, but does not lead to a state transition. No rejection is issued, yet participation does not occur. Quiet exclusion is therefore defined not by the absence of activity, but by the absence of progression.

The paper further identifies a related transition from quiet to loud exclusion. A process may first stall through silence, unresolved validation, or procedural interruption, then later shift into explicit exclusion based on criteria that were not visible at the initial point of entry.

Drawing on documented cases across platforms and journal workflows, including Zenodo, ResearchGate, bioRxiv, and submission systems, the analysis shows that exclusion can arise at multiple stages, from registration to evaluation. These mechanisms differ in form but converge in outcome: progression is interrupted, while the status of the participant remains unclear or is clarified only after the fact.

The paper proposes a process-based model of access defined by entry, progression, completion and persistence. Within this framework, openness is not a binary condition, but a process. In functionally open systems, progression should not depend on hidden affiliation signals or shifting criteria. Making explicit when submissions are not evaluated, and under which conditions exclusion applies, would reduce ambiguity and clarify the status of the process.

Introduction

Scientific exclusion is typically understood as explicit rejection. However, exclusion can also occur without any decision being issued. Systems may appear open and accessible, yet participation does not take place. No rejection is communicated, and no progression occurs. The process remains incomplete. This paper defines this mechanism as quiet exclusion.

Quiet exclusion refers to situations in which access to scientific systems is restricted not through formal denial, but through opaque validation procedures, prolonged non-response, stalled progression, or implicit legitimacy requirements. In such cases, the individual is neither accepted nor rejected, but remains suspended in a procedural state without resolution. For independent researchers, this dynamic may be particularly visible when legitimacy cues, such as institutional affiliation, modulate access without operating as explicit gates.

The analysis further identifies a transition from quiet to loud exclusion. Processes may initially stall through silence or unresolved validation, then later shift into explicit rejection based on criteria that were not visible at the point of entry. This retrospective clarification transforms an initially ambiguous process into a formal denial.

Drawing on documented cases involving Zenodo, ResearchGate, arXiv, and the journal Human Factors, the study shows that exclusion emerges as a distributed process across registration systems, validation procedures, editorial workflows, and legitimacy heuristics. Rather than resulting from a single identifiable decision, it arises from the accumulation of procedural frictions that interrupt progression toward evaluation.

These dynamics are sustained by ordinary operational conditions, including limited support responsiveness, implicit norms of legitimacy, and weak accountability in validation processes. The interaction

between automated systems and human non-response stabilizes a form of exclusion that is decentralized, persistent, and difficult to attribute to any single actor.

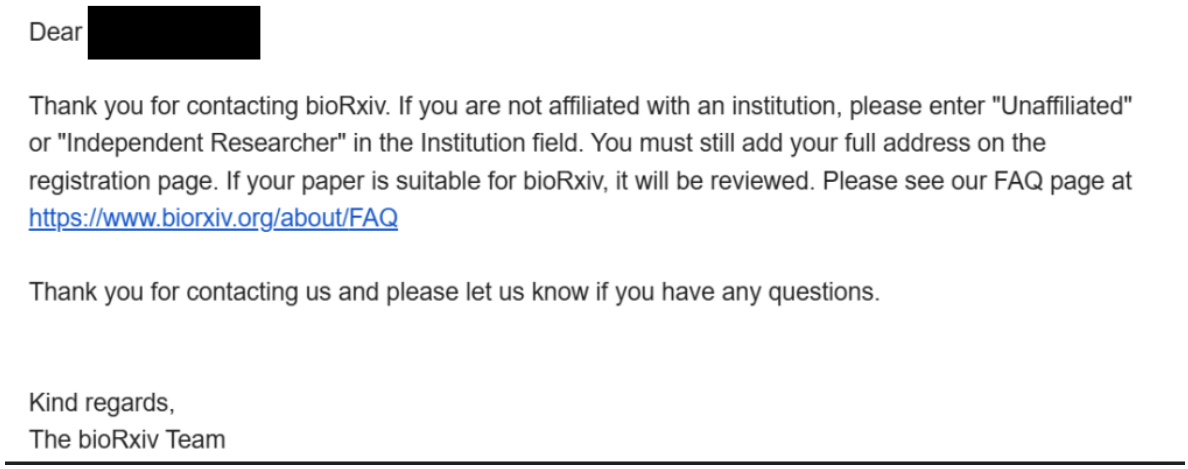
By constraining participation without immediate rejection, quiet exclusion introduces systematic biases in knowledge production, particularly for non-institutional researchers. Openness, in such systems, exists at the level of form but not at the level of process, where progression and completion remain conditionally blocked.

This framework extends prior work on cumulative advantage and inequality in science (e.g., Merton's Matthew effect), by shifting the focus from outcome disparities to process-level interruptions. It also relates to existing critiques of peer review as a selective and opaque process (Smith, 2006; Tennant et al., 2017), but differs in focusing on cases where evaluation is never initiated.

More broadly, the analysis connects to work on platform governance and algorithmic filtering (Gillespie, 2014; Pasquale, 2015), where access and visibility are shaped by implicit and often non-transparent criteria.

Formal Openness vs. Process-Level Constraints

Platform communications explicitly state that independent authors are permitted to submit manuscripts, as shown in Figure 1, reinforcing the formal openness of the system.


Dear [redacted]

Thank you for contacting bioRxiv. If you are not affiliated with an institution, please enter "Unaffiliated" or "Independent Researcher" in the Institution field. You must still add your full address on the registration page. If your paper is suitable for bioRxiv, it will be reviewed. Please see our FAQ page at https://www.biorxiv.org/about/FAQ

Thank you for contacting us and please let us know if you have any questions.

Kind regards,
The bioRxiv Team

Figure 1: Excerpt from bioRxiv support indicating that unaffiliated authors can submit using the designation "Independent Researcher

This confirms formal openness at the policy level. However, formal permission does not guarantee effective access in practice.

Observed Mechanism: Implicit Filtering of Independent Profiles

Single-author papers using non-institutional email addresses (e.g., @gmail) are not formally prohibited in scientific publishing. However, they are extremely rare among accepted papers, especially in established journals. This gap suggests that exclusion does not rely on explicit rules, but on how submissions are handled in practice. Manuscripts without institutional affiliation or coauthors may be treated as less credible, harder to evaluate, or more uncertain to position within existing research. As a result, these submissions are less likely to progress through the evaluation process. They are not explicitly rejected, but they often fail to move forward. When evaluation systems are opaque, this lack of progression appears as silence. Authors may interpret it as a negative judgment, even though no clear evaluation has taken place. The model predicts that progression probability is not determined by content quality alone, but is influenced by early legitimacy signals. Submissions using non-institutional email addresses or independent authorship are expected to be less likely to move from entry to progression stages.

Although this prediction is conceptually clear, direct testing in real submission environments is not feasible, since identical manuscripts cannot normally be submitted under different identity conditions. Indirect tests using controlled or simulated evaluation designs would therefore be needed. Within the process model (Access = Entry × Progression × Completion × Persistence), this effect corresponds to a change in the progression component driven by legitimacy signals rather than content.

> Institutions claim to seek novel ideas, yet their filtering mechanisms systematically exclude the profiles most likely to produce them outside established frameworks. Independent researchers are not rejected because their ideas are necessarily wrong, but because they do not match expected credibility signals, such as affiliation, publication history, or disciplinary alignment. The result is a structural paradox: novelty is encouraged in principle while the conditions that allow it to emerge are constrained in practice.

Methodological note

This paper adopts a case-based analytical approach to examine access processes in open science platforms. The analysis draws on three complementary types of material: Documented first-person interactions: records of submission attempts, platform responses, and account actions, including rejection messages, automated classifications, support requests, and instances of non-response.

Platform-level observable structures: publicly accessible rules, submission conditions, and interface-level constraints shaping entry, evaluation, and dissemination. Process-level interpretation: reconstruction of access as a sequence of stages (entry, progression, completion), used to identify where and how participation is interrupted.

The objective is not to evaluate individual decisions, but to characterize process patterns that can produce exclusion without explicit rejection. The case studies are not intended to be exhaustive or statistically representative. Rather, they function as analytical probes to identify shared mechanisms across heterogeneous contexts. Where available, supporting materials (e.g., screenshots, structured records) are included to document specific interactions.

These materials are illustrative and do not imply general prevalence. By focusing on processes rather than isolated decisions, this approach identifies low-visibility barriers emerging from the organization and operation of access systems. Each case study is structured as follows: context, sequence of events, observed mechanism, and interpretation

While the cases are presented in a structured form for analytical clarity, real-world interactions are often less clearly segmented. Boundaries between entry, progression, completion, and persistence may overlap, and multiple mechanisms can operate simultaneously within a single interaction. The stage-based mapping should therefore be read as an interpretive abstraction rather than a literal decomposition of events.

Human Factors Journal Submission (Response Loop Without Progression)

After resubmission, the manuscript is returned without advancement, as shown in Figure 2.

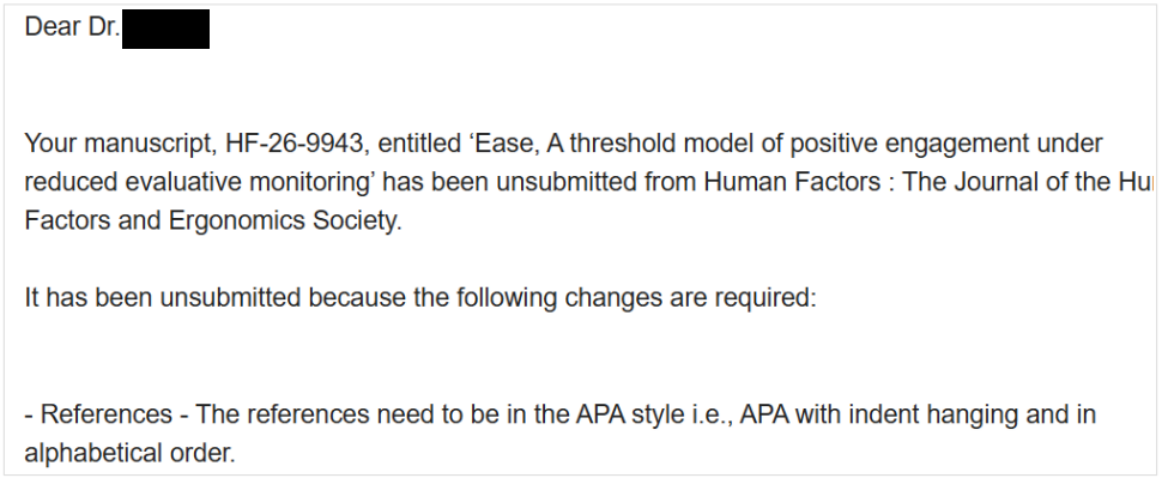


Figure 2: The system returns the manuscript repeatedly without progressing toward evaluation

Interaction is maintained, but no state transition occurs. The "independent researcher" category remains visible in the interface, even three months after the observed access restrictions, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Affiliation field displaying "independent researcher" marked with a warning icon. Openness is signaled, yet progression remains blocked.

Process Mapping (Entry → Progression → Completion → Persistence)

Entry
Validated. The manuscript passes initial screening and receives a specific, actionable editorial request

(APA formatting).

Progression
Blocked. Following resubmission, the system maintains interaction but returns to the same request state without advancing toward peer review.

Completion
Not reached. No editorial decision (acceptance or rejection) is issued.

Persistence
Maintained. The submission remains visible in the system without status resolution.

Context

An independent researcher submitted a manuscript to *Human Factors*. Following the initial submission, the journal returned the manuscript with a specific and actionable request to reformat the references according to APA guidelines, including alphabetical order and hanging indentation. This indicates that the submission passed the entry stage and could, in principle, progress further, conditional on minor formatting corrections.

Sequence of Events

Initial submission
Entry is accepted into the system.

Editorial request
A precise and actionable correction is issued, indicating eligibility for progression.

Resubmission
The requested changes are implemented.

Post-correction phase
The system reissues the same request without advancing state. Progression does not occur.

Observed Mechanism

The interaction forms a non-transition loop at the progression stage. After resubmission, the manuscript is repeatedly returned with the same editorial request, without any modification of the stated requirements. Each response reiterates the need for APA formatting corrections, despite prior compliance with these instructions.

Notably, the responses occur at regular intervals (approximately every 8 hours), and each iteration reproduces the same minimal instruction without introducing new evaluation criteria or acknowledging the implemented changes. The content of the request remains unchanged across cycles.

This results in a stable loop: submission $\rightarrow$ identical request $\rightarrow$ compliance $\rightarrow$ identical request. Interaction is maintained and appears active, yet no progression toward peer review or evaluation occurs. The system does not escalate, revise, or resolve the request, and no transition to a new processing state is observed.

Alternative explanations cannot be fully excluded (e.g., non-adaptive automation, workflow misconfiguration, or prioritization heuristics). However, the persistence and regularity of the observed pattern are consistent with a failure of state transition at the progression stage.

Observed Outcome

- Repeated return to an identical editorial request despite compliance
- No introduction of new evaluation criteria across iterations
- Regular response intervals (approximately 8 hours) without progression
- No transition to peer review, acceptance, or rejection
- No resolution of submission status

Interpretation

This case shows a breakdown of progression following successful entry. The initial editorial request indicates that the manuscript entered a valid processing pathway. After compliance, however, no transition occurs toward evaluation. The process remains active in form but inactive in function, maintaining the system in a persistent intermediate state.

Relation to Quiet Exclusion

This configuration represents quiet exclusion at the progression stage. Exclusion emerges not through rejection, but through the absence of state transition. The system remains formally open while functionally preventing progression.

Key Insight

Exclusion can occur after successful entry through failure of progression. A system does not need to reject a submission to exclude it; it only needs to prevent transition between states.

Editorial Response Discontinuity

Following an initial inquiry regarding submission eligibility for independent researchers, the editorial office responded within minutes with a generic reference to submission guidelines. A follow-up message explicitly requested clarification on whether independent researchers are considered for review and whether institutional affiliation is required. No response was received after this clarification.

Similar patterns were observed across additional journal inquiries. General questions were sometimes acknowledged, but follow-up requests targeting explicit access conditions frequently did not receive a response within the observed timeframe. This suggests a discontinuity in responsiveness: engagement is maintained at a general level, while clarification of underlying validation criteria does not occur. Such selective responsiveness contributes to the stability of quiet exclusion by preserving interaction without resolving decision rules.

Case Study 2. ResearchGate Registration

This case illustrates a failure at the entry stage of the access process. Entry is available at the interface level, but cannot be completed due to downstream verification constraints.

Process Mapping (Entry → Progression → Completion → Persistence)

Entry
Blocked. Initial registration steps are accessible, but identity verification prevents entry as a validated participant.

Progression
Not reached. The user cannot enter the system as a validated participant.

Completion
Not applicable.

Persistence
Not applicable. Access is never established.

Empirical Indicators

The platform presents multiple registration categories at the same level, including "Academic or Student" and "Independent Researcher," creating the appearance of equivalent entry pathways. During registration, users may leave the institutional affiliation field blank, suggesting that such affiliation is optional.

However, this apparent openness is qualified during verification. A message indicates: "You haven't provided your institutional email. Signing up with a personal email requires extra steps for us to verify

that you're a researcher, your institutional email gives you instant access." Verification then depends on authorship confirmation through pre-indexed publications.

When no matching publications are found, the system states: "Sorry, we couldn't verify that you are a researcher from the information you provided. We therefore require you to enter your institutional email address. . . ".

Thus, the interface presents an independent access route at the level of form, while access in practice remains dependent on institutional or already-recognized academic signals. Independence is therefore recognized at the level of interface, but not at the level of verification, see Appendix B.

Sequence of Events

Initial registration
An entry pathway appears open, including an "Independent Researcher" option.

Institutional information request
Institutional affiliation is requested but can be skipped.

Email verification step
A non-institutional email triggers additional verification requirements.

Authorship verification
The system attempts to match the user with indexed publications.

Verification failure
Entry is denied unless institutional credentials are provided.

Observed Mechanism

This case reveals a conditional entry barrier. Entry is not directly denied. Instead, the system allows partial progression through registration steps while deferring validation requirements. The "skip" option functions as a nominal pathway that does not lead to successful entry. Verification constraints are reintroduced at a later stage, producing a delayed entry failure.

Observed Outcome

- No successful account creation
- No validated researcher status
- No alternative verification pathway
- Entry remains incomplete

Interpretation

This case shows a misalignment between interface-level access and underlying process constraints. The presence of an "Independent Researcher" category suggests open entry. However, downstream verification mechanisms depend on institutional affiliation or pre-indexed publications. Entry is therefore not blocked at the initial step, but at the validation stage.

Relation to Quiet Exclusion

This configuration represents quiet exclusion at the entry stage. The system permits initial interaction and presents requirements as optional, yet enforces constraints at the verification stage. Exclusion is not expressed as rejection, but as the inability to complete entry.

Key Insight

Entry can fail through conditional verification mechanisms. A system does not need to deny access explicitly. It can allow partial entry while leaving completion dependent on implicit legitimacy signals.

Case Study 3. Automated Restriction and Non-Response Following Active Use on Zenodo

These 3 cases document a post-entry access failure following a period of successful platform use, as shown in Appendix C. The accounts were created successfully, records were uploaded, and ordinary platform functions such as document updates and versioning were used over several weeks. Access was then interrupted by an automated restriction without prior warning or detailed justification, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Account restriction following active platform use.

Sequence of Events

Entry
The account is created successfully and documents are uploaded.

Sustained use
The platform supports ordinary research activity, including uploads, updates, and versioning over several weeks.

Automated restriction
The account is flagged and restricted without prior warning or detailed explanation.

Attempted recovery
A support request is submitted through the available recovery channel.

Non-response
No substantive response is received within the observed period. Access remains restricted.

Process Mapping (Entry → Progression → Completion → Persistence)

Entry
Validated. Account creation and initial upload are successful.

Progression
Achieved, then disrupted. The system supports sustained activity before restriction.

Completion
Interrupted. Ongoing dissemination and updating cannot continue after restriction.

Persistence
Failed. Previously accessible material no longer remains reliably available through the original account pathway.

Observed Mechanism

The observed mechanism is not denial at the point of entry, but interruption after successful participation. The system permits account creation and sustained use, then imposes restriction through an automated or semi-automated classification process. Once restriction occurs, restoration depends on a support pathway whose responsiveness is external to the user. If that pathway does not produce resolution, the restriction becomes a stable access state.

Observed Outcome

Restriction without explanation, followed by non-response, converts a recoverable moderation event into a stable exclusion state.

Asymmetric Moderation and Conditional Restoration

The platform acknowledges that moderation processes may produce misclassifications, as shown in Figure 5.

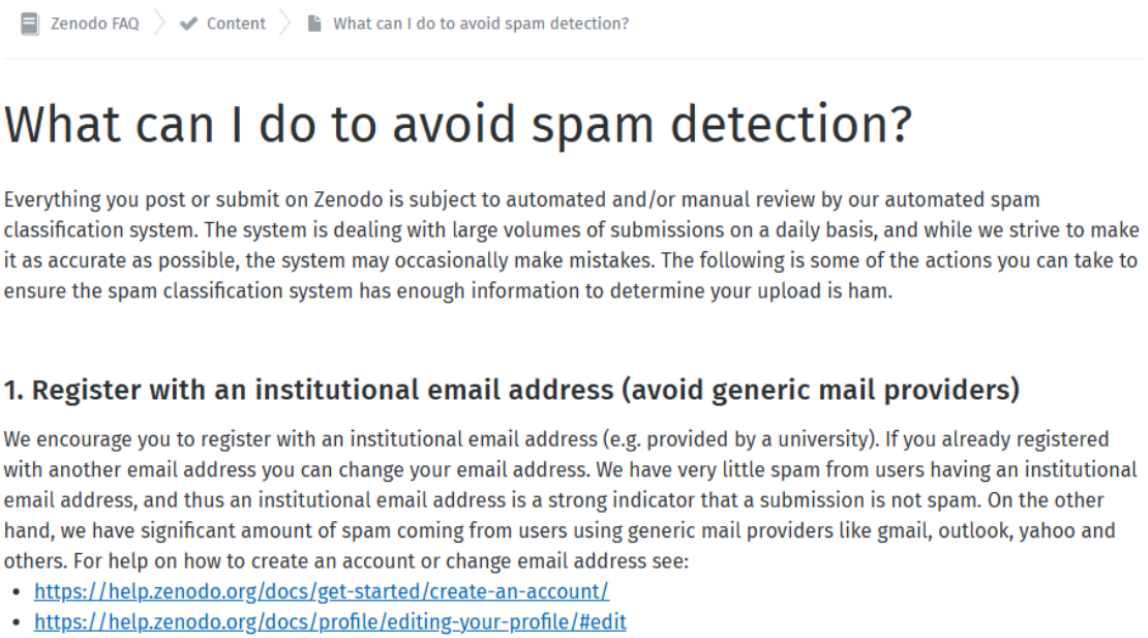


Figure 5: Platform statement acknowledging possible misclassification and associating institutional signals with reduced spam risk.

This creates an asymmetric moderation structure. Restriction can occur immediately, automatically, and at account level, while correction depends on user-initiated contact and manual review. Enforcement therefore precedes verification, whereas restoration depends on delayed and uncertain response. The system can explicitly recognize the possibility of false positives while still providing no guaranteed timeframe or effective recovery pathway. Under these conditions, misclassification is not merely an error; it becomes a possible mode of exclusion.

Relation to Quiet Exclusion

This case represents quiet exclusion after access has already been granted. Participation begins, records are uploaded, and ordinary platform activity occurs. Exclusion emerges later, not through refusal of entry, but through interruption and failed restoration. The process remains formally recoverable, but functionally unresolved.

Classification Ambiguity

The case also illustrates how legitimate research behavior can overlap with heuristic filtering criteria. A corpus produced by a single independent author may involve repeated uploads, identical authorship, versioned records, and thematically related documents. These features can resemble signals used by spam or abuse-detection systems, even when they arise from ordinary research activity, see figure 6.

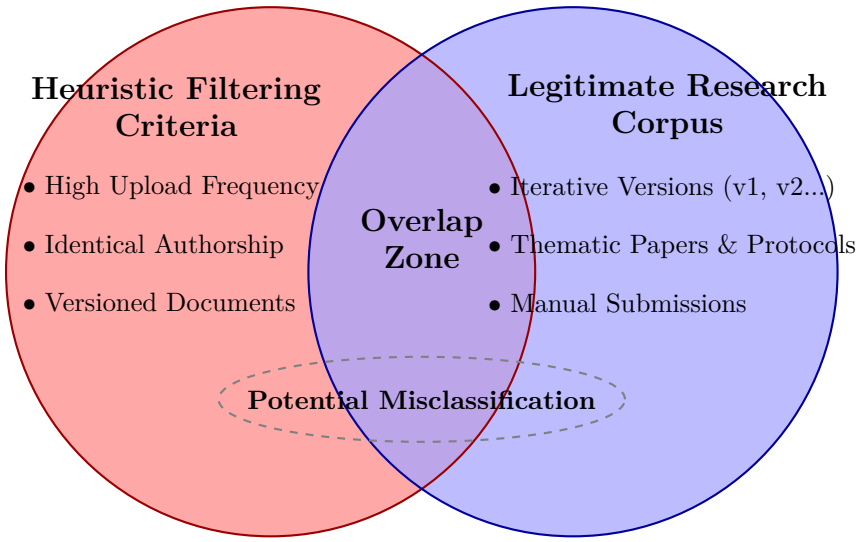


Figure 6: Overlap between heuristic filtering criteria and characteristics of legitimate research corpora, illustrating how classification ambiguity can arise from overlap rather than separation.

Key Convergences Across cases, the observed disruptions map onto the persistence component of the access model (Access = Entry × Progression × Completion × Persistence). In each instance, entry is successfully achieved and participation occurs through active dissemination. However, access subsequently collapses through post-entry restriction, removal of previously available records (including DOI-linked content), and absence of effective recovery pathways. This sequence results in a failure of persistence, producing a stable exclusion state despite prior integration into the system.

Multiple independently documented public cases exhibit the same structural pattern, including Zenodo GitHub issues #2599 and #2596, as shown in figure 7.

The convergence reported here reflects shared structural features rather than identical underlying causes. Different systems may produce similar patterns through distinct mechanisms; the present analysis therefore focuses on observable outcomes at the process level rather than attributing a single causal explanation.

	Case A	Case B	Case C
Independent researcher	✓	✓	✓
Post-entry restriction	✓	✓	✓
Removal of records	✓	✓	✓
No effective support response	✓	✓	✓

Figure 7: Convergent structural features across independently documented Zenodo cases. All cases involve independent researchers and exhibit post-entry restriction, removal of records, and absence of effective support response.

Key Insight

Exclusion can occur after successful participation when restriction is immediate but recovery is uncertain. A system does not need to block entry in order to exclude; it can grant access, interrupt it, and fail to restore it.

Case Study 4. Pre-Review Filtering in Informal Scientific Exchange

This case illustrates a failure of entry under conditions of apparent interaction. Interaction is established, but access to evaluation remains conditional on prior validation, as shown in Figure 8.

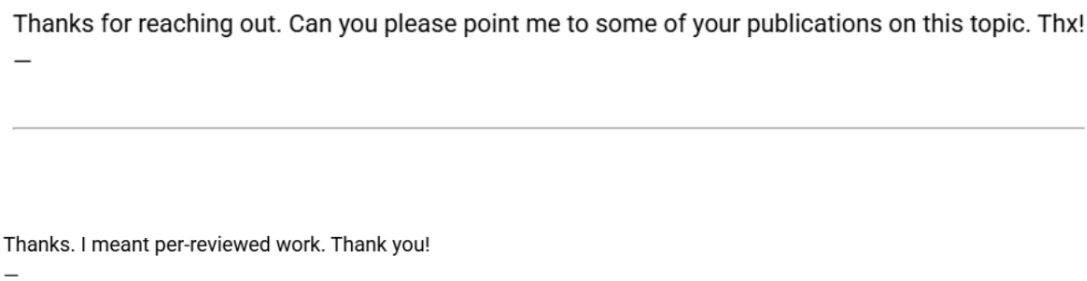


Figure 8: Response limiting consideration to peer-reviewed work.

Sequence of Events

Initial contact
A theoretical framework is presented with a request for feedback.

Request for publications
Publications on the topic are requested, indicating conditional openness.

Submission of materials
Non-peer-reviewed documents and a corpus page are provided.

Clarification of requirement
Only peer-reviewed work is specified as acceptable input.

Termination of interaction
No further evaluation or engagement occurs.

Process Mapping (Entry → Progression → Completion → Persistence)

Entry
Blocked. Interaction is established, but access to evaluation is conditioned on prior peer-reviewed publications.

Progression
Not reached. The submitted material is not evaluated.

Completion
Not applicable.

Persistence
Not applicable. Evaluation is never initiated.

Observed Mechanism

This case illustrates a pre-review filtering mechanism in which access to evaluation depends on prior validation within the same evaluative system. The requirement for peer-reviewed work operates as an upstream condition that precedes any assessment of the submitted content.

Observed Outcome

Evaluation is not initiated. Interaction remains formally open but produces no state transition.

Key Insight

Evaluation can be structurally prevented by upstream legitimacy requirements. A system does not need to reject a contribution explicitly; it can require prior validation as a condition for engagement, resulting in the non-initiation of evaluation.

Cross-Platform Variants of Access Filtering Mechanisms

Access Conditions Across Preprint Platforms

Preprint platforms are commonly described as open infrastructures enabling rapid and broad dissemination of scientific work. However, access conditions vary across platforms and reveal distinct forms of entry regulation that can differentially affect unaffiliated contributors.

On *arXiv*, submission access is mediated through an endorsement system in certain subject areas. New authors must be endorsed by an established contributor before they are allowed to submit. This mechanism is explicit and formally documented, making the entry barrier visible. However, it introduces dependence on existing network connections, which may disadvantage researchers without prior integration into academic networks.

Platforms such as *PsyArXiv* and other repositories based on the Open Science Framework operate under a more permissive model, allowing submissions without formal endorsement requirements. While these platforms may introduce less visible forms of regulation during or after submission, Figure 9 illustrates a contrasting form of exclusion, where access is explicitly denied through predefined content criteria rather than emerging from procedural opacity.

bioRxiv represents an intermediate configuration. While institutional affiliation is not strictly required, submissions are subject to editorial screening and identity verification.

As shown in appendix A, access barriers across scientific platforms form a continuum, ranging from explicit requirements (e.g., endorsement or credential checks) to increasingly implicit and opaque forms of selection, culminating in editorial discretion.

The following example documents a case of explicit access restriction based on platform policy enforcement.

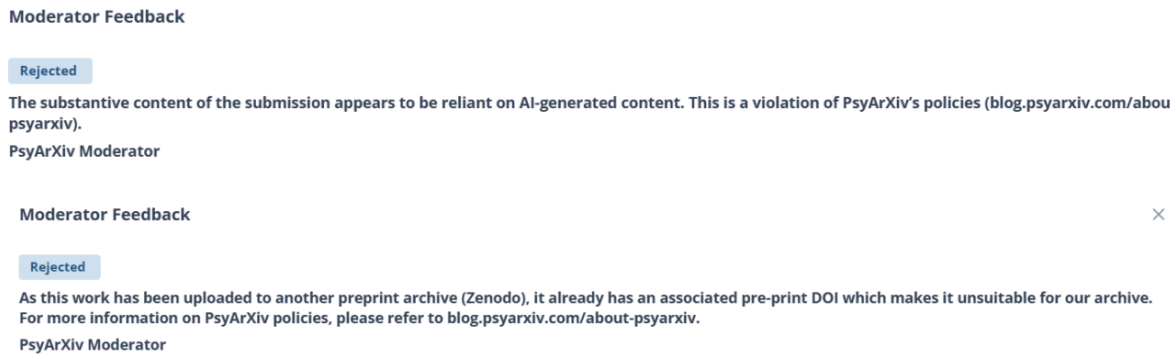


Figure 9: Moderator feedback indicating rejection based on AI-generated content. A secondary justification refers to a preprint hosted on another platform, but the link was not accessible at the time, introducing a nonverifiable condition.

This work, currently under review, was submitted to PsyArXiv (earlier version, v1), and the following response was received, see Figure 10

Figure 10: Moderator feedback indicating rejection based on AI-generated content. A secondary justification refers to a preprint hosted on another platform, but the link was not accessible at the time, introducing a non-verifiable condition.

Across these platforms, multiple mechanisms are used to regulate access: explicit social validation through endorsement systems, editorial and identity-based screening, automated or semi-automated filtering processes, and variations in moderation and support responsiveness. Despite these differences, a common pattern emerges. Access is not uniformly open but conditioned by forms of validation that often depend on prior integration into the scientific system. As a result, independent researchers may face higher uncertainty, additional verification requirements, or prolonged nonresponse compared to institutionally affiliated users. In some cases, submissions may also be deprioritized or rejected based on perceived authorship concerns related to large language models. This introduces a distinct form of attribution-based exclusion, where decisions are influenced by assumptions about how the work was produced rather than by its content or procedural status. This mode differs from process-based exclusion. While process-based exclusion operates through disruption of entry, progression, or completion, attribution-based exclusion operates at the level of perceived legitimacy of authorship, independently of the procedural flow. These mechanisms can be summarized into four distinct categories, as shown in Figure 11

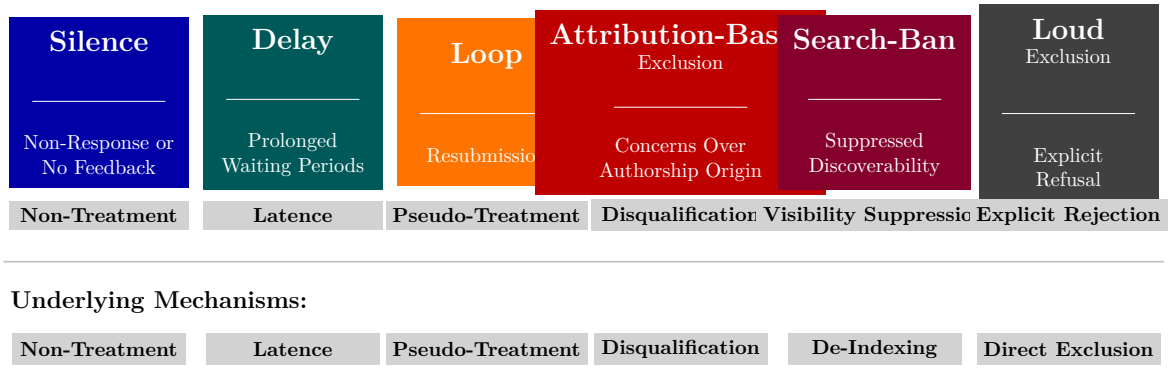


Figure 11: Modes of quiet and loud exclusion in research-access systems.

These mechanisms differ in form but share a common property: participation is initiated, but does not reach completion. At the entry stage, access may be restricted through eligibility criteria that prevent submission before any form of evaluation takes place. As shown in Figure 12, exclusion here is explicit and rule-based, rather than emerging from delayed or opaque processes. Beyond observable process-level barriers, quiet exclusion also operates through internalized mechanisms that reshape how individuals interpret and respond to uncertainty

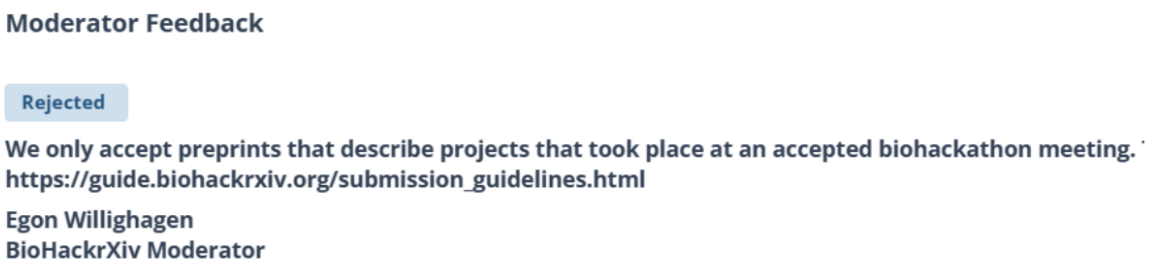


Figure 12: Access restricted to predefined participation conditions, independent of content evaluation, illustrating a loud form of exclusion.

BOX 1 Internalized Exclusion and Self-Disqualification

In addition to observable barriers, asymmetries in research environments give rise to internalized mechanisms that shape participation. Institutional settings distribute evaluative functions across a range of actors and processes, from supervision to peer review, and provide access to resources that facilitate interpretation and adjustment. This distribution reduces the extent to which individuals must independently resolve uncertainty, as evaluative load is partially absorbed by the surrounding infrastructure. In contrast, independent researchers often operate in isolation, without access to iterative feedback, institutional validation signals, or collaborative calibration. As a result, evaluative processes become internalized and continuous. Quiet exclusion amplifies this condition by withholding explicit decisions and providing only ambiguous or delayed feedback. In the absence of clear external judgment, uncertainty is internally resolved, often as self-disqualification. Under these conditions, ordinary imperfections may acquire disproportionate interpretive weight. Minor deviations from expected norms can be perceived as critical failures, particularly in the absence of explicit feedback. This produces an asymmetry in which perceived errors exceed their actual causal impact on outcomes. Where institutional contexts diffuse evaluation across multiple actors, independent authors are more likely to internalize it, resulting in sustained self-monitoring under conditions of uncertainty and weak structure. This internalization contributes to the stability of quiet exclusion mechanisms. Because exclusion is interpreted as self-disqualification rather than system-level failure, it generates limited contestation and low external visibility. The absence of explicit rejection not only prevents appeal but also shifts explanatory responsibility toward the individual, reinforcing the persistence of the system without requiring active enforcement. People can tolerate rejection more easily than indefinite procedural silence. At least rejection admits that a gate exists.

Informal Norms and Social Signaling

Social signaling mechanisms may also generate anticipatory exclusion, as shown in Figure 13. Individuals navigating scientific spaces internalize expected audience reactions and adjust their behavior accordingly. When independence is associated with low status or fringe positioning, contributors may withdraw, delay submission, or alter how their work is presented. No rejection is required. Expectation alone reduces participation before evaluation begins.

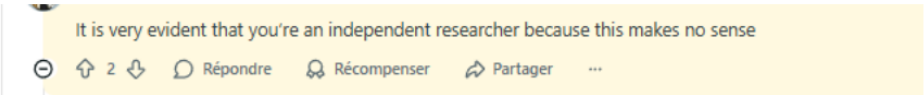


Figure 13: Illustrative example of status-based dismissal in public online discussion. The example is not treated as systematic evidence, but as a visible instance of a recurring pattern in which independent researcher identity is used as a proxy for low legitimacy, independently of the content under discussion.

From Isolated Events to Systemic Pattern

Although each instance may appear explainable in isolation, their recurrence across distinct platforms indicates convergence toward a common process. Similar access limitations persist across institutional contexts, suggesting that these outcomes arise from shared structural conditions rather than platform-specific anomalies. Quiet exclusion thus emerges as a cross-system phenomenon shaped by recurring configurations of validation, response dynamics, and decision-making under uncertainty. When access is constrained, some researchers develop informal strategies to navigate system requirements, revealing how barriers can be negotiated rather than removed.

Box 2. Informal Adaptation and System Circumvention

In response to access barriers on scientific platforms, some contributors report adopting informal strategies to navigate validation requirements. These behaviors are typically described as reactive adjustments to opaque or unresponsive access mechanisms rather than primary intentions.

In some cases, affiliation fields may be completed in ways that satisfy platform expectations without clearly reflecting institutional belonging. While such practices are difficult to quantify systematically, their reported occurrence suggests that validation systems may rely on signals that are only imperfectly aligned with research quality.

These adaptations reveal a structural tension within ostensibly open platforms. While access is formally available, effective entry conditions may incentivize alignment with expected legitimacy signals. As a result, participation may depend not only on the intrinsic value of contributions but also on the ability to interpret and satisfy implicit system expectations.

Importantly, these strategies do not eliminate exclusion but redistribute it. Individuals unwilling or unable to engage in such adaptations may remain blocked, while others gain access through partial compliance. This produces an uneven participation landscape shaped by both formal criteria and informal navigational capacity.

From a systemic perspective, the presence of such adaptations indicates that barriers are both active and perceived as negotiable. This negotiability does not imply openness, but rather reflects a misalignment between declared accessibility and operational constraints.

Human-Mediated Exclusion in Journal Submission Processes

The dynamics observed in platform access extend beyond account creation and automated validation. Similar patterns emerge in journal submission processes, where human decision-making governs progression. Beyond formal criteria such as editorial scope or formatting requirements, independent researchers may encounter exclusion through desk rejection, non-response, or implicit credibility filtering. As with platform-based mechanisms, these outcomes are not accompanied by explicit justification. Figure 16. Adaptation enables entry, while non-adaptation leads to exclusion at the entry stage. In some cases, submissions are neither formally reviewed nor clearly rejected, but receive minimal engagement or standardized responses that do not provide actionable feedback. This produces an indeterminate status, in which the author cannot distinguish between content-based rejection and exclusion linked to perceived legitimacy. Editorial evaluation often relies on heuristics such as institutional affiliation, prior publication history, or recognizable academic signals. While these heuristics support efficiency, they can also function as implicit filters, particularly at early stages of review, disadvantageous to researchers who lack these markers. This suggests that quiet exclusion is not confined to automated systems but extends into humanmediated evaluation environments. Structural criteria and informal legitimacy assessments combine to form a layered filtering process, where access may be constrained without explicit policy-level exclusion. As a result, independent author may face cumulative barriers across both platforms and journals, with each stage introducing uncertainty, opacity, and a reduced likelihood of integration into formal scientific communication channels. Human and automated systems differ in form, but converge in producing exclusion through low-visibility filtering mechanisms. Quiet exclusion does not require exceptional cases, it becomes most visible when ordinary participation disappears without trace.

Box 3. Ordinary Participation, Invisible Exclusion

What makes quiet exclusion particularly difficult to perceive is that it often becomes visible only through ordinary human situations. The issue is not limited to ambitious cases or to individuals at the margins of institutional science. It can affect people who appear entirely unremarkable, working alone with modest aims, limited visibility, and no claim to exceptional status.

This ordinariness makes the phenomenon more striking. A person may produce a small number of documents, openly acknowledge the limits of their work, and seek only to share it through standard scientific channels.

Yet even this minimal form of participation can be interrupted by silent bans, non-response, or filtering rules tied to institutional markers such as email domain. In such cases, exclusion does not take the form of a dramatic rejection, but something quieter and, for that reason, more severe: a person engaged in ordinary scientific activity is rendered invisible without ever being explicitly recognized or addressed as such.

Process Model of Scientific Access

Scientific participation is typically described in terms of discrete outcomes, most notably acceptance or rejection. However, access to scientific communication is more accurately understood as a process unfolding across multiple stages. Participation may be constrained before any final decision is reached, or disrupted after initial dissemination.

We define access as a process composed of four necessary components:

$$\text{Access} = \text{Entry} \times \text{Progression} \times \text{Completion} \times \text{Persistence}$$

Entry refers to the ability to access a platform or initiate participation. Progression refers to movement through validation or evaluation stages. Completion refers to the ability to reach a final decision, whether acceptance or rejection. Persistence refers to the continued availability and stability of a contribution within the scientific record over time.

Because these components are multiplicative, failure at any stage reduces access to zero. Exclusion therefore does not require explicit rejection. It can arise from blocked entry, stalled progression, absence of completion, or loss of persistence after dissemination.

This process can be represented as a sequence of state transitions from entry to completion, extended by a persistence phase (see Figure 14. Access requires both successful completion of this sequence and the continued stability of its outcome.

Quiet exclusion occurs when at least one transition fails or when persistence breaks after initial completion. A process may be initiated, interaction maintained, and even completion reached, yet access can still collapse if the contribution does not remain available.

The defining feature of quiet exclusion is not the absence of interaction, but the failure to sustain state transitions through to persistence. Systems may appear open and functional at the interface level while failing to maintain access at the level of process or record stability.

A critical feature of persistence failures is that they affect materials that have already entered the scientific record. Content may receive initial views or downloads, yet subsequently disappear, interrupting an ongoing process of dissemination. Previously accessible contributions become nonretrievable after partial integration into the attention space of the community. Citability discontinuity refers to a condition in which a scientific contribution transitions from accessible and potentially citable to effectively non-retrievable, despite prior evidence of access, visibility, or engagement. This dynamic extends beyond direct user access and becomes visible in interactions with archival systems, see Figure 15.

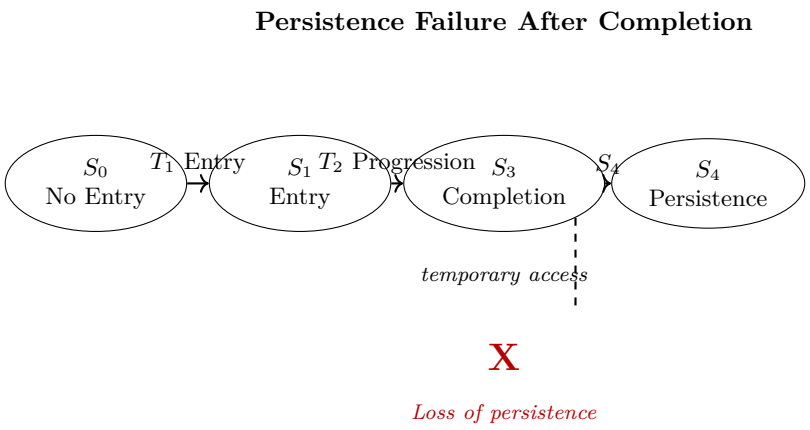


Figure 14: Persistence failure after completion. A contribution may reach completion and become temporarily accessible, while later failing to persist within the scientific record.

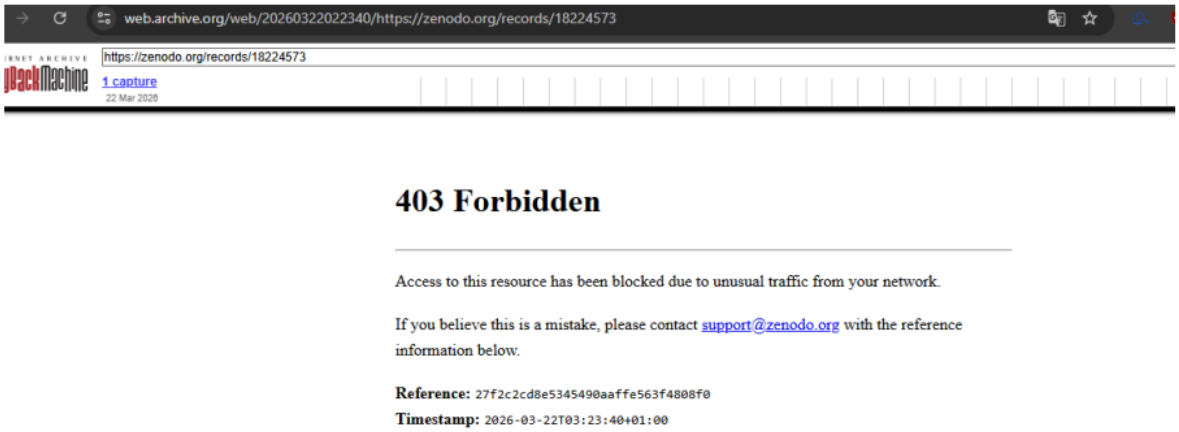


Figure 15: Example of archival-level access restriction. Content remains accessible to individual users but is blocked from automated or proxy-based archiving systems, preventing reliable capture and preservation

Citability discontinuity

A contribution is accessible, then becomes non-retrievable despite prior visibility or engagement. While quiet exclusion prevents participation without rejection, citability discontinuity affects contributions after dissemination by interrupting their persistence in the scientific record. Both mechanisms operate without explicit decision and without clear attribution. Two distinct mechanisms of exclusion can be identified within this framework: process failure and persistence failure, as shown in Figure 16.

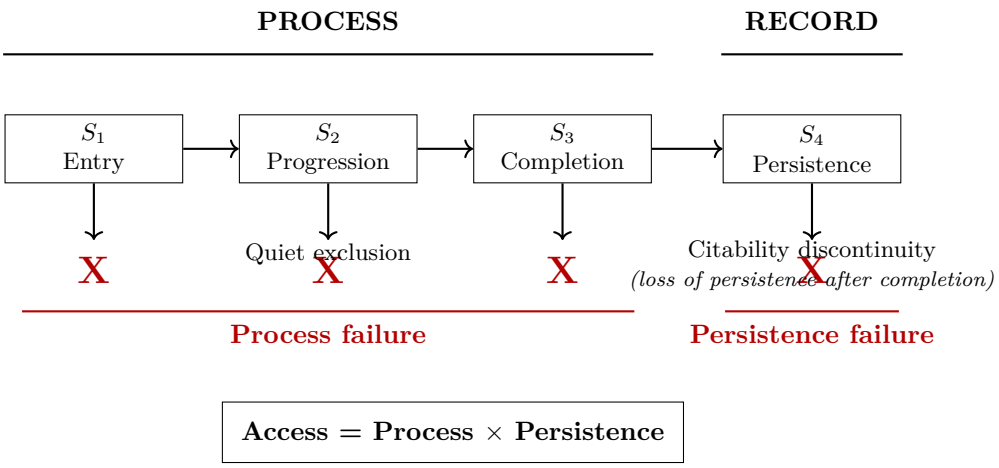


Figure 16: Process and record model of scientific access. Access depends not only on successful progression through entry, progression, and completion, but also on persistence within the scientific record.

Reframing Scientific Openness

This model suggests that openness cannot be evaluated solely by who is allowed to submit or by acceptance rates. Instead, it must be assessed across the full process: the ability to enter, to progress, and to reach a decision. A system that is open at entry but fails at progression or completion remains functionally exclusionary. Access is therefore not determined by acceptance, but by the ability to complete the process. Among the identified mechanisms, delay plays a central role. By maintaining the appearance of ongoing evaluation while preventing timely completion, it enables exclusion without conflict or visibility, reducing the need for explicit rejection while preserving procedural legitimacy. As such, delay constitutes a structurally stable and scalable form of exclusion across both platforms and journal systems. Importantly, these mechanisms do not necessarily result from deliberate intent. They may emerge from routine system dynamics, including workload distribution, prioritization heuristics, and evolving concerns about authorship and legitimacy. However, the absence of intent does not reduce their effects. From the participant's perspective, the outcome remains consistent: limited access, prolonged uncertainty, and eventual disengagement. Figure 20. Process and persistence failures in scientific access. Quiet exclusion prevents participation without rejection. Citability discontinuity removes access after completion despite prior availability. Together, these mechanisms produce exclusion without decision. These processes have direct implications for how scientific openness is evaluated. Openness cannot be inferred solely from the absence of rejection or the existence of submission pathways. It must be assessed by whether participants can enter, progress, and reach completion within a reasonable timeframe. This analysis does not aim to critique specific platforms, but to reveal a general processlevel mechanism that remains invisible in outcome-based models. A system can be open in form and closed in outcome.

Discussion

This study examined access barriers encountered by independent researchers across scientific platforms and publication processes, focusing on exclusion without explicit rejection. The findings are consistent with the existence of quiet exclusion, in which access is constrained through non-response, delayed processing, or implicit validation requirements rather than formal denial. Exclusion may occur at entry, during validation, or after active participation, indicating that barriers are distributed across the full lifecycle of scientific interaction.

A key implication is that exclusion in contemporary scientific systems does not rely solely on explicit gatekeeping. Instead, it can emerge from the interaction between structural requirements and human-mediated processes. Institutional affiliation, email domain, and recognizable academic signals may function as heuristic proxies for legitimacy, shaping whether submissions are processed, prioritized,

or ignored. Access is therefore not determined by content or quality alone, but also by early signals of conformity to institutional norms.

Quiet exclusion differs from traditional rejection in both form and consequence. Explicit rejection provides a defined outcome, along with feedback and potential avenues for revision or appeal. In contrast, quiet exclusion produces indeterminate states: submissions are neither accepted nor rejected, but remain suspended in prolonged uncertainty. While both mechanisms may result in access denial, they differ in visibility, traceability, and accountability.

The recurrence of similar patterns across platforms, preprint systems, and journal workflowssuggests that these dynamics may reflect structural features rather than isolated incidents. They appear to arise from the organization of scientific infrastructures, including distributed validation, limited support responsiveness, and implicit norms of legitimacy. Within such systems,non-response can operate as a low-cost filtering mechanism, or function as one under certain conditions.

Some reports indicate that contributors adapt to these conditions by attempting to reproduce expected signals of legitimacy, suggesting that access barriers may be actively navigated rather than simply encountered. This introduces an additional asymmetry: individuals able or willing to align with system expectations may gain access, while others remain excluded. participation may therefore depend in part on the ability to interpret and satisfy implicit criteria.

These findings have broader implications for the narrative of open science. While access to scientific content has expanded significantly, access to authorship and participation remains uneven. Quiet exclusion challenges the assumption that openness in access to knowledge implies openness in contribution.

Several limitations should be noted. The analysis relies in part on case-based observations and qualitative evidence, which do not capture the full variability of platform behaviors. Online reports may be subject to selection bias and may overrepresent salient or negative experiences. Platform-specific policies and workflows also vary, limiting generalization.

Future research could extend this work by systematically measuring response times, validation outcomes, and access probabilities across different researcher profiles, including variations in affiliation, email domain, and publication history. Further investigation into platform governance, moderation practices, and support responsiveness would help clarify the mechanisms identified here.

Key Points

- Open systems can produce exclusion without explicit decisions.
- Legitimacy signals act as hidden filters.
- Non-response functions as a scalable form of exclusion.
- Independent researchers face cumulative process friction.

Conclusion

A system does not need to reject in order to exclude; it may only need to fail to complete the process. Quiet exclusion is not the absence of interaction, but interaction without state transition. In such cases, no rejection or decision is issued, yet access may become effectively lost through removal, silence, or unresolved processing.

For independent researchers, these conditions may lead to the interpretation that their work lacks sufficient quality, even when no formal evaluation has taken place. While it is understandable that platforms cannot evaluate all submissions, making explicit when and why evaluation does not occur would reduce ambiguity and help prevent silence from being interpreted as a judgment of quality.

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Appendix A

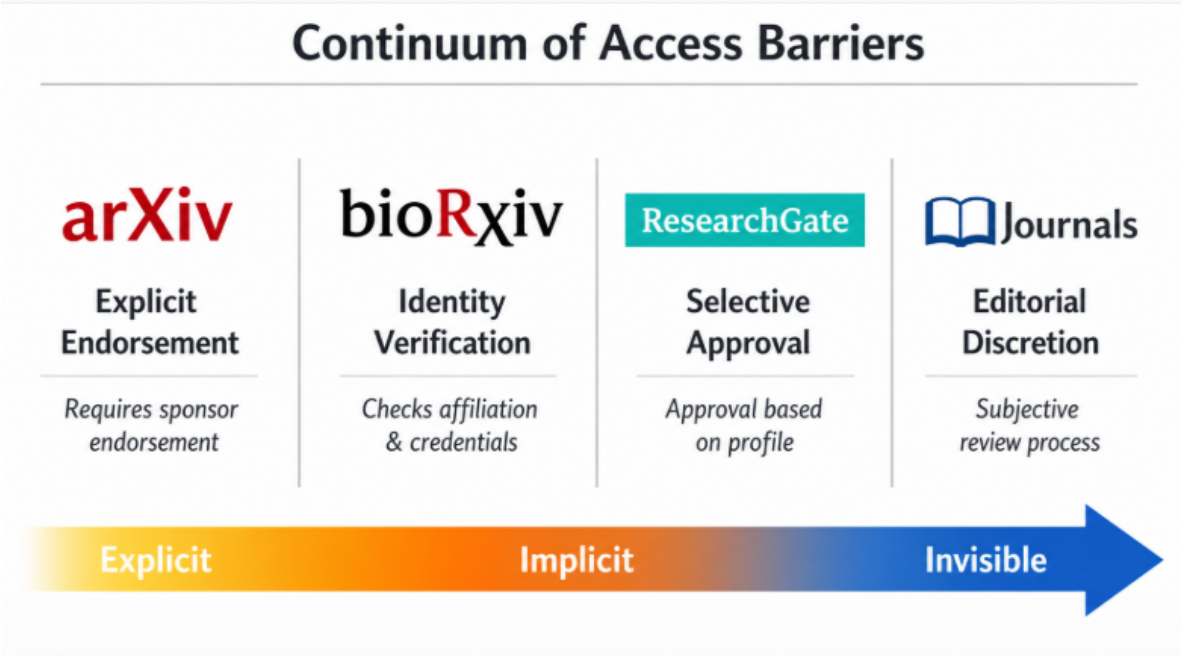

Figure 17: Screenshot showing access restriction on ResearchGate. The platform rejects a personal email address and requires an institutional affiliation to verify researcher status, preventing account validation despite provided information

Appendix B

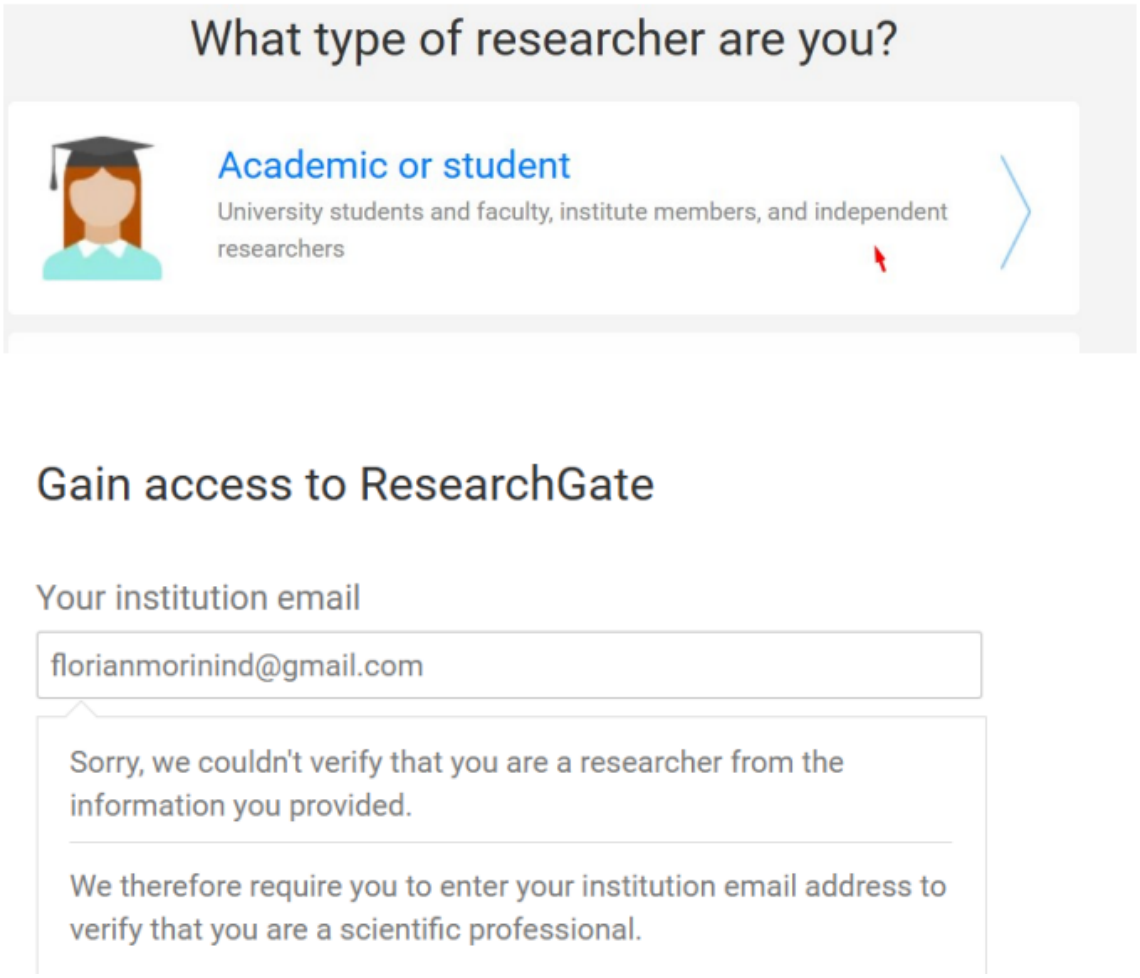

Figure 18: Screenshot showing a discrepancy between interface-level openness and validation constraints. Although "independent researcher" status is presented as a valid category, account validation fails when using a non-institutional email address, requiring institutional affiliation as a condition for entry.

Appendix C

Zenodo Account Restriction – Documented Case

Independent Research Documentation
Author: Florian Morin (Independent Researcher) **Date:** May 1, 2026

Summary

This document presents a structured record of an account restriction on Zenodo. It includes a timeline of events, uploaded materials, correspondence, and a clarification request.

Context

The uploads are part of an independent research corpus focused on joy mechanisms and evaluative load (Z framework).

Timeline

- December 2025 – Initial uploads
- January 2026 – Additional uploads
- February 20, 2026 – Account restriction, support contacted
- May 2026 (+10 weeks) – No response received

Nature of Uploaded Content

Structured research documents including titles, abstracts, references, and versioned entries.

Dissemination Status

- Prior dissemination confirmed
- Approx. total downloads: ∼4000
- Informal academic discussions reported

Observed Outcome

- Account blocked
- Content removed
- Reason: Spam
- No detailed justification provided

Potential Misclassification

The upload pattern may resemble automated or bulk submission behavior.
No responses have been received after approximately 10 weeks.

List of Uploads (Partial Reconstruction)

Title	Date	Identifier
Transient Suppression of ACC Monitoring Enables High-Salience Positive Affect	24/12/2025	Record: https://zenodo.org/records/18048516
Affective Collapse Under Causal Closure	Jan 2026	DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18537408
Ease: Evaluation kills entry, not the state: a threshold model of ease	Jan 2026	DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18224573
Regime-Preserving Methods for Studying Children's Engagement	Jan 2026	DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18235196
Ease Open-State Questionnaire (EOSQ, Draft)	Feb 2026	DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18654831
Lock-in under suspended optimization	Jan 2026	Not available
Positive Affect Contingent On Suspended Optimization	Jan 2026	Not available
Positive Affect as Suspension of Optimization	Jan 2026	Not available