

Information avoidance in academia: A grounded theory study of when and why scholars choose not to seek relevant information

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Abstract

This qualitative study employed constructivist grounded theory to investigate information avoidance behaviors among 25 Nigerian scholars across three universities (October 2025–January 2026). Through interviews, artifact analysis, and reflective diaries, five themes emerged: emotional triggers, cognitive strategies, organizational pressures, discipline-specific patterns (STEM data exclusion vs humanities source avoidance), and consequences (reduced research quality, timeline delays). Results demonstrate that avoidance stems from systemic institutional factors rather than individual shortcomings. Findings indicate that publication metrics and funding constraints create information silos, while disciplinary norms shape avoidance pathways. Recommendations include reforming performance metrics, implementing discipline-specific interventions, and embedding psychological safety in academic culture. This research addresses critical gaps in understanding scholarly information behavior and provides actionable strategies to enhance research integrity and reproducibility in high-pressure academic environments.

Keywords

information avoidance, academic integrity, research reproducibility, publication pressure, disciplinary norms, information literacy interventions

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Introduction

Information avoidance in academia refers to the deliberate or subconscious decision by scholars to bypass, delay, or ignore accessible and relevant scholarly information, despite recognizing its potential value. This phenomenon is increasingly recognized as a critical threat to research quality, decision-making integrity, and knowledge advancement. While scholars are formally trained to seek and evaluate evidence, psychological and contextual pressures frequently lead to selective engagement or complete disengagement from contradictory, complex, or methodologically challenging sources.

Empirical studies across psychology and behavioral economics demonstrate that avoidance is primarily driven by affective and cognitive factors. Prior research indicates that anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and perceived

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cognitive overload significantly increase the likelihood of information disengagement.^{1,2} These drivers are further amplified by environmental conditions, such as digital information fragmentation and disciplinary publication norms, which shape how scholars interact with sources.^{3,4} When the anticipated emotional or temporal cost of processing information outweighs its perceived utility, avoidance emerges as a coping mechanism rather than an information literacy deficit.

Despite growing interest in scholarly information behavior, a critical empirical gap remains: information avoidance is substantially under-theorized in academic contexts. Existing literature predominantly focuses on information seeking, discovery, and evaluation, while avoidance is treated as a peripheral or pathological deviation rather than a systemic response to institutional pressures. Furthermore, studies rarely examine how avoidance manifests across disciplinary boundaries, career stages, or resource-constrained academic ecosystems, particularly in the Global South. This lack of context-specific, theory-building research limits our understanding of how avoidance undermines research reproducibility, peer review integrity, and scholarly knowledge production.

This study directly addresses these gaps by investigating when, why, and how Nigerian scholars avoid relevant information. By examining avoidance as a contextually embedded practice rather than an individual failing, the research contributes a grounded, mid-range theory that clarifies the intersection of emotional triggers, organizational mandates, and disciplinary norms. The findings offer actionable pathways for institutional policy reform, library service redesign, and scholarly development programs aimed at fostering sustainable information engagement.

A constructivist grounded theory approach⁵ is particularly suited to this inquiry, as it allows theory to emerge inductively from participant narratives, artifacts, and reflective accounts. Unlike deductive frameworks that presuppose avoidance drivers, this methodology captures the nuanced, processual nature of avoidance decisions across varying academic contexts, enabling the development of a contextually responsive explanatory model.

Problem statement

Current literature on scholarly information behavior predominantly emphasizes information seeking, discovery, and evaluation, leaving the systematic avoidance of relevant academic information substantially under-theorized. Within academic contexts, information avoidance is defined as the intentional or habitual postponement, filtering, or disregard of accessible scholarly sources that could challenge existing assumptions, reveal methodological limitations, or complicate research narratives. This practice directly threatens research reproducibility, as the selective exclusion of contradictory evidence or methodological critiques undermines the transparency required for rigorous validation. Furthermore, avoidance behaviors infiltrate peer review processes, where reviewers may bypass challenging methodologies or conflicting findings to maintain evaluative efficiency, inadvertently reinforcing epistemic echo chambers. Despite these implications for academic integrity, existing frameworks have not adequately adapted avoidance models from health or consumer psychology to the structural realities of scholarly production.⁶ Addressing this conceptual and empirical gap is essential for developing institutional safeguards that protect research quality, peer review fairness, and knowledge reproducibility in contemporary academia.

A review stresses the complexities inherent in the peer review process, indicating that factors like reviewer biases can impede fair evaluation, suggesting a need for a deeper understanding of how avoidance behaviors affect scholarly assessments.⁷ Other research, such as that by Tennant et al., acknowledges the necessity of innovations in peer review practices for improving research quality, but these practices often do not address the nuances of why scholars may resist engaging with particular information.⁸ Addressing information avoidance is vital for enhancing research rigor and ethical standards in academia, as indicated by observations in the contemporary literature on peer review and research practices.^{9,10}

Research questions

- (1) Under what circumstances do scholars decide not to look for information that is available and relevant?
- (2) What emotional, cognitive, social, and practical factors drive avoidance decisions?
- (3) What strategies do scholars use to avoid information, and how do those strategies differ by discipline and career stage?
- (4) How do organizational practices shape avoidance?
- (5) What interventions are likely to reduce harmful avoidance?

Literature review

Conceptual work on information avoidance

Information avoidance has garnered increased interest across psychology and behavioral economics, particularly as it pertains to decision-making processes regarding health information. This avoidance behavior can profoundly influence individuals' health literacy and engagement with critical information.^{11,12} A framework for understanding how individuals' promotional and prevention focuses affect their health information-seeking behavior. They illustrate that a prevention focus is often associated with an enhanced tendency to avoid potentially distressing information.¹¹ The role of negative automatic attitudes towards information seeking, arguing that positive associations can help reduce avoidance behaviors.¹³

Perceived channel effectiveness and norms shape information avoidance, suggesting that insufficient information can lead to both avoidance and seeking behaviors depending on one's emotional responses to risk.¹⁴ Studies on COVID-19 have reported that affective responses, such as fear and anxiety, significantly mediate the relationship between risk perceptions and information avoidance.^{15,16} Research conducted focuses on social media users, proposing a novel approach to measuring information avoidance intentions, thus highlighting the differentiated nature of avoidance in varying contexts.¹⁷ Such insights are critical in developing targeted interventions to mitigate avoidance behaviors and foster better information engagement among diverse populations.^{18,19}

Information behavior theory

Information behavior theories, particularly those focusing on sense-making and uncertainty, are critical in understanding how individuals seek, evaluate, and sometimes avoid information. Sense-making, as conceptualized by scholars like Dervin, emphasizes that information is often needed when individuals face uncertainty, which can lead to complex decision-making scenarios.²⁰ In behavioral economics, uncertainty significantly influences information-seeking behaviors. A model highlighting that the perceived costs and benefits of seeking information change dynamically based on the levels of uncertainty surrounding a decision.²¹ Users often evaluate risks of seeking versus the rewards, resulting in avoidance if the perceived risks outweigh the benefits, effectively illustrating the intertwined relationship between decision-making and emotional responses to uncertainty.

The concept of "information gaps," where individuals exhibit preferences for acquiring or avoiding information based on their emotional assessments of the uncertainty involved.²² This theory elucidates how feelings about information can lead to a desire either to resolve uncertainty through information acquisition or to avoid it altogether, thereby highlighting the underlying cognitive processes governing these behaviors. The integration of theories such as the Health Action Process Approach (HAPA) reinforces the understanding that behavior change stems from a logical progression from motivation to action, emphasizing the role of information provision in overcoming uncertainty. The NICE PH38 guidance stipulates that diabetes prevention programs should follow a logical progression from information provision, exploration of an individual's motivation to change, followed by self-regulatory techniques to lead to behavior change, which maps onto the constructs in the HAPA model.²⁰

The discourse surrounding sense-making and uncertainty in information behavior not only deepens understanding but also informs the development of strategies that mitigate avoidance and promote informed decision-making in various domains, including health and academia.^{23,24}

Workload, procrastination, and emotional labor

The interplay between workload, procrastination, and emotional labor is pivotal in understanding how time pressure influences affective states and leads to avoidance behaviors. Procrastination often emerges as a coping mechanism in response to overwhelming workloads and emotional strain, particularly in high-stakes environments like medical education.^{25,26} Junior doctors' emotional responses, stemming from negative interprofessional collaboration experiences, can result in a ruminative focus that hinders their learning processes and engagement with colleagues.²⁵

Unresolved moral dilemmas extend emotional distress, prompting students to avoid similar clinical experiences; this avoidance can stifle professional growth.²⁶ The underlying emotional turbulence experienced under time constraints may inhibit proactive information-seeking behavior, as individuals grapple with anxiety and uncertainty.²⁷ Uncertainty can lead to procrastination, indicating that cognitive factors play a crucial role in maladaptive behaviors.²⁷

Both cognitive and affective factors significantly shape information-seeking behaviors, where negative emotions can deter individuals from engaging with necessary information.²⁸ Emotions fundamentally drive decision-making processes, suggesting that positive emotional states can enhance engagement and reduce avoidance.²⁹

Organizational and disciplinary norms

In academia, organizational and disciplinary norms play a vital role in shaping scholars' information choices, significantly influenced by incentives and reputational risks. Socioeconomic background can limit students' access to information, affecting their academic choices and pathways, particularly in critical fields like STEM.³⁰ This illustrates how informational constraints can deter optimal decision-making, subsequently impacting reputational outcomes for institutions that fail to support diverse student needs. How effective leadership behaviors within higher education institutions contribute to a positive information culture, which is crucial for empowering faculty and enhancing the department's reputation. They argue that transparent communication and strategic vision are essential for nurturing an environment where information sharing thrives.³¹ Such cultures encourage faculty to seek information that bolsters their research profiles or institutional prestige, intertwining individual choices with organizational incentives.

Research governance is also impacted by funding availability; research performance is closely tied to financial resources. This dependency can pressure researchers to align their information-seeking behaviors with the expectations of funding bodies, adding another layer of reputational risk in their scholarly outputs.³² Perceptions of university brand image, as explored by research, contributes to competitive advantages in higher education, with effective strategies impacting reputational standing and influencing student choices, further shaping the informational environment.³³ While the fear of negative evaluations, whether from peers or external reviewers, does not have a direct reference supporting this claim, it is a well-documented phenomenon in scholarly communities, suggesting that conservative choices in information engagement can occur in response to perceived scrutiny.

Literature gaps

While the existing body of literature on information avoidance is growing, there remains a notable lack of empirical, theory-building studies specifically focusing on scholarly populations. This gap is significant considering the profound impact that avoidance behaviors can have on research integrity and academic performance. Many researchers study information avoidance, they do so in a disjointed manner, lacking communication and awareness of one another's findings.³⁴ This indicates a need for a more cohesive theoretical framework that can unify these disparate studies and explore specific contexts where avoidance might occur, including academic settings.

Recent scholarship on scholarly communication in sub-Saharan Africa highlights how structural constraints, such as limited journal access, high publication quotas, and underfunded research infrastructure, intensify information filtering practices.^{35,36} However, these studies predominantly examine access barriers rather than the psychological and organizational drivers of deliberate avoidance. To bridge global theoretical models with Global South empirical realities, Table A ([Supplemental Material](#)) compares findings from high-resource Western contexts with emerging evidence from African academic ecosystems. This study positions itself as that empirical bridge, testing whether avoidance mechanisms observed in well-resourced settings translate to, or diverge within, resource-constrained Nigerian universities where institutional mandates and funding dependencies operate under distinct structural pressures.

It was addressed that risk information avoidance, showing that affective responses are crucial in understanding avoidance in environmental contexts.³⁷ Similar methodologies could be utilized to investigate academic settings, particularly in how emotional labor and stress may exacerbate avoidance behaviors among scholars. Research suggests the necessity for daily diary studies to investigate antecedents and results of avoidance, making a case for a deeper empirical exploration of how avoidance manifests in scholarly contexts over time.³⁸ This methodology could yield valuable insights into how scholars navigate their information environments amidst academic pressures. Broader implications of misinformation, illustrate the potential effects of information avoidance shaped by external circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic, which could be beneficial to study within academic frameworks.^{39,40}

Theoretical framing

This study was guided by three complementary theoretical lenses that functioned as sensitizing concepts throughout data collection and analysis. Sense-making theory⁴¹ framed uncertainty as a catalyst for information gaps, allowing us to infer

avoidance moments when participants explicitly acknowledged a knowledge need but reported deliberate non-engagement during coding. Emotional labor theory⁴² clarified how affective responses to academic pressures, such as fear of critique, anxiety about negative findings, or pressure to maintain professional credibility, shaped avoidance as a stress-management strategy. Organizational justice principles⁴³ situated these individual choices within institutional structures, highlighting how perceptions of fairness in promotion, funding, and evaluation systems conditioned information-seeking behaviors. Rather than serving as deductive hypotheses, these theories informed initial coding categories and remained open to refinement through constant comparison. Their integration is visually mapped in Figure 1, which demonstrates how theoretical sensitizing concepts evolved into empirically grounded core categories through iterative memoing and theoretical sampling.

Emotional labor theory⁴² clarified how affective responses to academic pressures such as fear of critique, anxiety about negative findings, or pressure to maintain professional credibility influenced avoidance decisions, framing avoidance as a strategy for managing stress and protecting self-efficacy. Organizational justice principles⁴³ situated individual choices within institutional contexts, highlighting how perceptions of fairness in promotion criteria, funding allocation, and research evaluation shaped information-seeking behaviors. Together, these lenses enabled a multidimensional analysis that positioned avoidance not as individual negligence but as a contextually embedded response to cognitive, emotional, and structural pressures. Rather than functioning as deductive hypotheses, these theories provided conceptual scaffolding that informed coding decisions while remaining open to emergent categories inherent in the constructivist grounded theory approach.

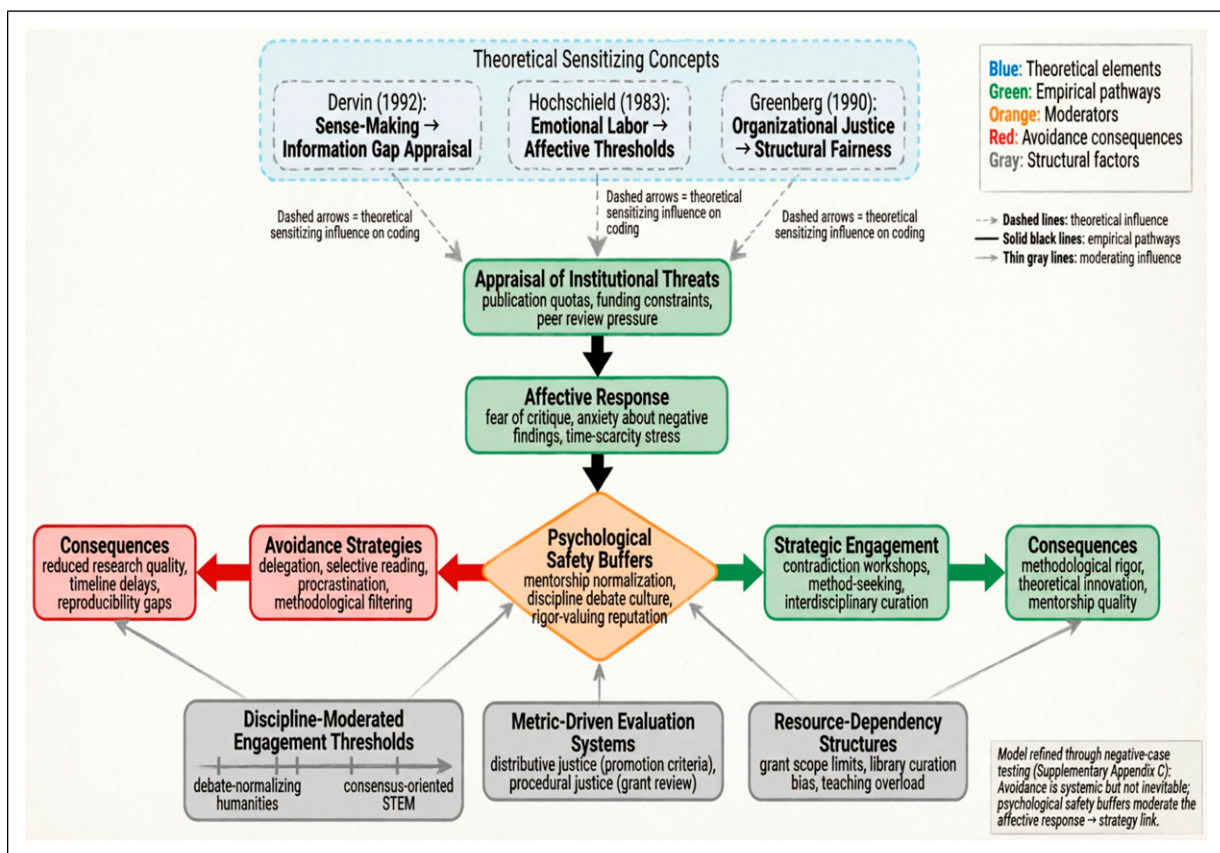


Figure 1. Grounded Theory Model of Information Avoidance in Nigerian Academia. The figure demonstrates the theoretical integration of the model, showing how three sensitizing concepts, Dervin's⁴¹ sense-making, Hochschild's⁴² emotional labor, and Greenberg's⁴³ organizational justice, shaped category development from initial coding through theoretical integration. The core process (appraisal → affective response → strategy → outcome) branches based on psychological safety buffers (mentorship policies, disciplinary debate norms, rigor-valuing reputation systems), yielding either avoidance or strategic engagement. Discipline-moderated engagement thresholds and metric-driven evaluation systems function as structural moderators. Model boundaries validated through negative-case analysis (Supplemental Appendix C).

Note. Dashed arrows indicate theoretical sensitizing influence; solid arrows indicate empirically derived pathways.

Methods

Research design

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach⁵ to generate a mid-range explanatory model grounded in participant accounts and artifacts. This design was selected to emphasize the processes underlying avoidance decisions and the conditions institutional, disciplinary, and emotional that shape them. By utilizing qualitative data collected through comparative analysis, the framework effectively captured the nuanced dynamics of information-seeking behaviors in academic contexts.^{44,45}

Study setting and sampling

The research was conducted across three Nigerian universities selected to ensure variation in institutional context: the University of Ilorin (public research-intensive), Kwara State University (public teaching-focused), and Alhikmah University (private faith-based). Purposive sampling was utilized to select 25 scholars, ensuring representation across discipline, career stage, and institutional type. As categories emerged during analysis, theoretical sampling was employed to recruit additional participants to test developing categories, such as senior academics when “reputation risk” became a central theme.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were strictly defined to target active researchers while filtering out those not engaged in current research activities. Table 1 outlines the specific sampling criteria applied to each participant group.

Participants

The final sample consisted of 25 scholars distributed across the three institutions. To maintain confidentiality while allowing for cross-institutional comparison, participants were assigned pseudonymized codes reflecting their institution and career stage. For example, codes beginning with “UL” denote the University of Ilorin, followed by a letter indicating career stage (D for Doctoral, E for Early-career, M for Mid-career). Table 2 details the specific coding ranges assigned to each participant group.

Table 3 details the participant distribution, including career stage, institutional affiliation, and demographic notes such as gender and discipline balance. The final sample (N = 25) was balanced across career stages (Doctoral: n = 8; Early-career: n = 9; Mid-career: n = 8) and disciplines (STEM: n = 13; Humanities/Social Sciences: n = 12). Gender distribution reflected institutional demographics (Female: n = 13; Male: n = 12). Table 3 provides detailed cell sizes per institution, discipline, and career stage to support transferability assessments.

Data collection methods

Data collection occurred between October 2025 and January 2026 using four complementary methods to ensure triangulation. These methods included in-depth interviews, artifact elicitation, reflective diaries, and key informant interviews. Table 4 summarizes the data sources, their descriptions, and the specific purpose each served in the study.

Table 1. Sampling criteria for participant selection.

Participant group	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria	Target N	Actual N
Doctoral candidates	Currently enrolled in PhD program with active research supervision; submitted at least one manuscript in past 12 months	Not engaged in research activities or administrative roles only	8	8
Early-career researchers	Published 1–3 peer-reviewed articles in last 3 years; employed as lecturer or research fellow	Tenured faculty or postdoctoral fellows with >3 years' experience	9	9
Mid-career faculty	Held permanent academic position for 5–15 years; led at least one funded research project	Administrative roles without research duties or emeritus status	8	8
Total	—	—	25	25

Table 2. Participant distribution by institution, career stage, discipline, and gender.

Institution	Career stage	STEM	Humanities/Social sciences	Total by stage	Gender (F/M)
University of Ilorin (public research-intensive)	Doctoral	2	2	4	2F/2M
	Early-career	2	1	3	2F/1M
	Mid-career	1	1	2	1F/1M
	Subtotal	5	4	9	5F/4M
Kwara State University (public teaching-focused)	Doctoral	2	1	3	1F/2M
	Early-career	1	2	3	2F/1M
	Mid-career	2	1	3	1F/2M
	Subtotal	5	4	9	4F/5M
Alhikmah University (private faith-based)	Doctoral	1	0	1	1F/0M
	Early-career	1	2	3	2F/1M
	Mid-career	1	2	3	1F/2M
	Subtotal	3	4	7	4F/4M
TOTAL	All stages	13	12	25	13F/12M

Notes. **STEM disciplines:** Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Environmental Science, Computer Science; **Humanities/Social Sciences:** History, English, Sociology, Political Science, Education; **Gender distribution** reflects institutional demographics (overall: 52% female, 48% male); **Career stage balance:** Doctoral 32% (n = 8), Early-career 36% (n = 9), Mid-career 32% (n = 8).

- (1) **In-depth interviews:** All participants recounted specific episodes of information avoidance, detailing why they avoided information, alternatives considered, and outcomes.
- (2) **Artifact elicitation:** Participants provided anonymized email threads, literature logs, grant-review notes, or lab meeting minutes that showed deliberation or avoidance.
- (3) **Reflective diaries:** A purposively selected subsample (n = 12) comprising equal representation from doctoral and early-career scholars across disciplines completed diaries for 10 consecutive days. The 10-day duration was selected to capture multiple research cycles while minimizing participant fatigue, following established daily diary protocols in behavioral research.³⁸ Selection criteria prioritized scholars actively engaged in literature review or data analysis phases.
- (4) **Key informant interviews:** Eight research leads and librarians described institutional norms and observed avoidance patterns.

Instruments

Interview guides were tailored to specific participant groups but shared core dimensions to ensure comparability. Observation protocols were used to document interaction patterns and avoidance indicators during research tasks. Table 5 presents the focus areas and indicators observed during the study, while Table 6 summarizes the structure of the interview guides used for different participant groups.

Data management and security

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, pseudonymized, and stored securely. File naming conventions used participant codes only (“UL_E01_01.wav”) to maintain confidentiality. Participants retained the right to withdraw specific artifacts within 14 days of submission guidelines.

Analytic procedure

The analysis followed a systematic, iterative procedure aligned constructivist grounded theory,⁵ explicitly integrating theoretical sensitizing concepts throughout the coding process rather than applying them retrospectively.

- (1) **Initial Coding:** Transcripts, reflective diaries, and artifacts were analyzed line-by-line using participants’ own language to generate low-level, open codes (fear of critique, time scarcity, grant scope limits). This stage prioritized inductive discovery while remaining attentive to how participants framed uncertainty and emotional strain.
- (2) **Focused Coding and Theoretical Integration:** Initial codes were clustered into broader analytical categories. To prevent post-hoc theorizing, codes were explicitly cross-referenced with the three guiding frameworks from the

Table 3. Participant coding scheme and demographic characteristics.

Code	Institution	Career stage	Discipline	Gender	Years in current role	Active research projects
UL_D01	University of Ilorin	Doctoral	STEM (Biology)	Female	3rd year PhD	1
UL_D02	University of Ilorin	Doctoral	STEM (Chemistry)	Male	2nd year PhD	1
UL_D03	University of Ilorin	Doctoral	Humanities (History)	Female	4th year PhD	1
UL_D04	University of Ilorin	Doctoral	Social Sciences (Education)	Male	3rd year PhD	1
UL_E01	University of Ilorin	Early-career	STEM (Environmental Science)	Female	2 years	2
UL_E02	University of Ilorin	Early-career	STEM (Computer Science)	Male	3 years	1
UL_E03	University of Ilorin	Early-career	Humanities (English)	Female	2 years	2
UL_M01	University of Ilorin	Mid-career	STEM (Biology)	Male	8 years	3
UL_M02	University of Ilorin	Mid-career	Social Sciences (Sociology)	Female	6 years	2
KW_D01	Kwara State University	Doctoral	STEM (Physics)	Male	3rd year PhD	1
KW_D02	Kwara State University	Doctoral	STEM (Chemistry)	Female	2nd year PhD	1
KW_D03	Kwara State University	Doctoral	Humanities (History)	Male	4th year PhD	1
KW_E01	Kwara State University	Early-career	STEM (Biology)	Female	2 years	1
KW_E02	Kwara State University	Early-career	Humanities (English)	Male	3 years	2
KW_E03	Kwara State University	Early-career	Social Sciences (Political Science)	Female	2 years	1
KW_M01	Kwara State University	Mid-career	STEM (Environmental Science)	Male	10 years	2
KW_M02	Kwara State University	Mid-career	STEM (Computer Science)	Female	7 years	3
KW_M03	Kwara State University	Mid-career	Humanities (History)	Male	9 years	2
AH_D01	Alhikmah University	Doctoral	STEM (Biology)	Female	3rd year PhD	1
AH_E01	Alhikmah University	Early-career	STEM (Chemistry)	Female	2 years	1
AH_E02	Alhikmah University	Early-career	Humanities (English)	Male	3 years	2
AH_E03	Alhikmah University	Early-career	Social Sciences (Sociology)	Female	2 years	1
AH_M01	Alhikmah University	Mid-career	STEM (Physics)	Male	8 years	2
AH_M02	Alhikmah University	Mid-career	Humanities (History)	Female	6 years	2
AH_M03	Alhikmah University	Mid-career	Social Sciences (Political Science)	Male	11 years	3

The final sample consisted of 25 scholars distributed across three Nigerian universities. To ensure transferability and demographic representativeness, the sample was balanced across multiple dimensions. Career stage distribution included 8 doctoral candidates (32%), 9 early-career researchers (36%), and 8 mid-career faculty (32%). Disciplinary representation was nearly equal, with 13 STEM scholars (52%) and 12 humanities/social sciences scholars (48%). Gender distribution reflected institutional demographics, with 13 female participants (52%) and 12 male participants (48%). Institutional variation was maintained to capture different organizational contexts: University of Ilorin (public research-intensive, $n = 9$), Kwara State University (public teaching-focused, $n = 9$), and Alhikmah University (private faith-based, $n = 7$). Detailed demographic characteristics, including years in current role and active research project counts, are provided in Table 3. This balanced sampling strategy supports transferability assessments across Nigerian institutional contexts and enhances the external validity of findings to similar resource-constrained academic environments in sub-Saharan Africa.

Summary Statistics:

Total participants: $N = 25$

Institutional distribution: University of Ilorin $n = 9$ (36%); Kwara State University $n = 9$ (36%); Alhikmah University $n = 7$ (28%)

Disciplinary balance: STEM $n = 13$ (52%); Humanities/Social Sciences $n = 12$ (48%)

Gender balance: Female $n = 13$ (52%); Male $n = 12$ (48%)

Career stage balance: Doctoral $n = 8$ (32%); Early-career $n = 9$ (36%); Mid-career $n = 8$ (32%)

Mean years in current role: 4.8 years ($SD = 3.2$)

Mean active research projects: 1.6 per participant ($SD = 0.7$)

outset. Codes reflecting cognitive appraisal of information gaps were mapped to Dervin's⁴¹ sense-making concepts; affective avoidance strategies and coping mechanisms were linked to Hochschild's⁴² emotional labor thresholds; and institutional filtering or compliance behaviors were coded under Greenberg's⁴³ organizational justice dimensions. This ensured theoretical lenses actively shaped category development, saturation criteria, and early memoing rather than serving as decorative overlays.

Table 4. Data sources and collection methods.

Data source	Description	Purpose
In-depth interviews	Structured narratives of avoidance episodes (90 min)	Capture decision-making processes and emotional triggers
Artifact elicitation	Anonymized documents showing information choices (emails, logs, notes)	Verify self-reported behaviors and contextualize decisions
Reflective diaries	Daily prompts on avoidance moments (7–10 days)	Track real-time triggers and affective responses
Key informant interviews	Institutional perspectives from research leads and librarians	Contextualize organizational influences on avoidance

- (3) **Theoretical Sampling:** As categories stabilized, additional participants were purposefully recruited to test emerging relationships and boundary conditions (recruiting senior faculty to examine reputation protection strategies and STEM researchers to probe methodological filtering).
- (4) **Memoing and Constant Comparison:** Analytic memos documented how categories evolved and interconnected, tracing the central process: *institutional threat appraisal* → *affective response* → *avoidance strategy* → *research consequence*. Constant comparison was rigorously applied across disciplines, career stages, and data types to identify patterns, contradictions, and contextual moderators.
- (5) **Integration and Model Development:** Core categories were synthesized into a substantive grounded theory. The resulting process model (Figure 1) visually maps how the initial theoretical sensitizers were transformed, refined, or empirically expanded by the data, demonstrating their direct, iterative role in shaping the final category structure.
- (6) **Validation and Negative Case Testing:** Anonymized theoretical summaries were member-checked with 10 participants to confirm empirical resonance. Deliberate negative-case analysis (e.g., instances where scholars actively sought contradictory evidence despite institutional pressure) was used to test, challenge, and refine category boundaries.
- (7) **Transparency and Audit Trail:** To ensure methodological rigor and reproducibility, a complete audit trail, initial codebook excerpt, and selected analytic memos demonstrating category evolution are provided in [Supplemental Appendix A](#). Constant-comparison matrices and negative-case examples are detailed in Appendices B and C, respectively, fulfilling Charmaz's⁵ standards for grounded theory transparency.

To ensure methodological transparency per Charmaz's⁵, a complete audit trail, initial codebook excerpt, and constant-comparison matrices are provided in [Supplemental Appendix A](#). Selected analytic memos demonstrating category evolution (from “fear of critique” to “reputation protection strategy”) are included in Appendix B. Negative-case examples, where scholars actively sought contradictory evidence despite institutional pressure, are detailed in Appendix C to validate theory boundaries.

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Trustworthiness was established through triangulation across interviews, diaries, and artifacts. Two researchers independently coded 25% of transcripts, with discrepancies resolved through analytic memos ($\kappa = 0.82$). Reflexive journals

Table 5. Observation focus areas and indicators.

Focus area	Indicators observed	Purpose
Affective responses	Facial expressions during information review, vocal tone shifts, body posture changes	Identify emotional triggers for avoidance
Cognitive processes	Note-taking patterns, reading speed, hesitation markers during literature review	Trace information processing strategies
Institutional pressures	Reference to deadlines, funding requirements, or promotion criteria in discussions	Link avoidance to organizational demands
Discipline-specific behaviors	Lab notebook entries (STEM) vs. citation management practices (humanities)	Compare avoidance patterns across fields
Information flow pathways	How documents are shared, stored, or discarded during research tasks	Map systemic barriers to information engagement

Table 6. Summary of interview guide structure.

Participant group	Core domains	Example prompts
Doctoral candidates	Thesis-related avoidance, supervisor expectations, emotional responses	"Describe a moment you chose not to seek literature for your thesis chapter. What made you stop?"
Early-career researchers	Grant application pressures, publication deadlines, career advancement concerns	"How did grant submission deadlines affect your information-seeking choices?"
Mid-career faculty	Promotion requirements, committee work, mentoring responsibilities	"How do promotion criteria shape your decisions about which information to engage with?"
Research leads	Institutional policies, resource allocation, observed avoidance patterns	"What policies do you think encourage scholars to avoid certain information?"
Librarians	Research support practices, common avoidance scenarios, intervention opportunities	"What patterns have you noticed in how scholars avoid information during research?"

documented researcher assumptions and interactions with participants. Member checking confirmed resonance with participants rather than seeking consensus.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

The research team comprised scholars affiliated with an independent research institute, not the target universities. This external positioning minimized hierarchical pressure on participants to conceal avoidance behaviors but required continuous reflexivity to avoid outsider assumptions about Nigerian academic cultures. Reflexive journals documented how our own disciplinary backgrounds (Information Science, Psychology, Higher Education Policy) shaped initial code interpretation. Bracketing exercises were conducted during team coding meetings to distinguish participant-driven patterns from researcher preconceptions, ensuring that emergent categories remained grounded in empirical accounts rather than theoretical imposition.

Ethical approval statement

Formal ethical approval was not required for this study according to institutional policies governing non-clinical, interview-based research. Nevertheless, the research was conducted in full compliance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013). All participants were informed about the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality, and provided voluntary informed consent before participation.

Informed consent

All participants provided informed consent before their involvement in the study. The purpose, procedures, potential risks, and confidentiality safeguards were clearly explained to participants, and participation was entirely voluntary. In accordance with ethical guidelines, participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Consent was obtained verbally, depending on the participant's preference and contextual considerations.

Results

The analysis of interview transcripts, reflective diaries, and artifacts yielded five core themes regarding information avoidance behaviors among Nigerian scholars: emotional triggers, cognitive strategies, organizational pressures, discipline-specific patterns, and consequences. These themes address the research questions concerning the circumstances, drivers, strategies, and institutional contexts of avoidance. The following sections present the empirical findings derived from the participant data.

Emotional triggers and cognitive appraisals

Participants consistently reported that avoidance decisions occurred during high-stakes academic moments where information threatened self-efficacy or institutional expectations. Emotional factors dominated these decisions, with fear of critique and anxiety about negative findings emerging as primary drivers.

Doctoral candidates frequently described avoiding literature that exposed methodological gaps during thesis writing. One participant noted, *"I stopped reading a paper on my thesis topic because the author used a statistical method I wasn't familiar with"* (UL_D02). Similarly, early-career researchers reported avoiding feedback that challenged their competence. As one scholar described, *"When I saw a reviewer said my framework was 'untested', I deleted the email"* (KW_E01).

Beyond fear, practical cognitive appraisals regarding time and effort influenced avoidance. Participants indicated that when the perceived cost of processing information outweighed the benefit, avoidance occurred. For example, one early-career researcher stated, *"I skipped checking recent studies from other countries because they'd take too long to translate"* (KW_E03).

Avoidance strategies and disciplinary variations

The data revealed distinct strategies used to avoid information, which varied significantly by discipline and career stage. Two primary patterns emerged: selective data engagement in STEM fields and selective source exclusion in the humanities.

The data revealed distinct avoidance strategies that varied systematically by discipline. STEM scholars predominantly employed selective data engagement, systematically filtering out methodological or empirical results that contradicted established hypotheses. For example, one laboratory researcher explained: *"When my assay data diverged from the expected model, I stopped cross-referencing recent papers that explained alternative pathways. Re-running the analysis would delay our grant submission, so I focused only on literature supporting the initial framework"* (UL_M01). In contrast, humanities scholars practiced selective source exclusion, bypassing theoretical or historical interpretations that disrupted their analytical narratives. A participant in postcolonial studies noted: *"When I encounter archival sources that complicate my reading of colonial administrative records, I bookmark them but rarely return. Engaging would require restructuring three chapters of my manuscript, which isn't feasible before defense"* (KW_M03). Discipline-specific avoidance matrices comparing strategy frequency, trigger types, and reported consequences are provided in [Supplemental Table B](#).

Conversely, humanities scholars described avoiding sources that challenged their interpretations. As one participant noted, *"When I find sources that challenge my interpretation of colonial texts, I leave them unread"* (KW_M03).

Career stage also influenced strategy. Early-career researchers consistently delegated information-gathering tasks to junior colleagues or students to protect their own expertise and manage workload. One participant admitted, *"After teaching six classes, I couldn't face reading new literature. I'd say, 'I'll do it tomorrow,' but tomorrow was always too late"* (AH_E02). Another noted, *"I assigned the literature review for my new project to my PhD student"* (UL_M01). In contrast, mid-career faculty avoided information to protect their professional status. One senior scholar confessed, *"I had a dataset where the results didn't match my theory. I kept delaying the analysis because I knew it would mean starting over"* (AH_M03).

Social factors further differentiated avoidance patterns. Social science scholars indicated a willingness to engage with contradictory evidence due to a perceived *"culture of debate"* (KW_E03), whereas humanities scholars were more likely to avoid *"uncomfortable"* interpretations (AH_M02).

Organizational and institutional pressures

Organizational practices were identified as significant intensifiers of avoidance behaviors, primarily through performance metrics and funding constraints. Mid-career faculty explicitly linked avoidance to university performance metrics, noting that evaluation systems dictated information boundaries. One participant stated, *"Universities measure success by publication count. I only look at high-impact journals that fit my topic"* (AH_M02).

Funding structures created specific information silos where scholars ignored relevant but off-scope literature. One doctoral candidate explained, *"My grant requires me to focus only on climate change solutions. I ignore papers about climate causes"* (UL_D01). Research leads confirmed this systemic impact, noting, *"Researchers only search for information that aligns with their funding priorities. We see it in grant applications; every proposal ignores contradictory evidence"* (KWASU Research Lead).

Information access policies also contributed to avoidance. Librarians observed that structural barriers in information provisioning influenced engagement choices. One librarian noted, *"Researchers avoid information when libraries prioritize journal subscriptions over interdisciplinary databases"* (Alhikmah Librarian), suggesting that resource allocation directly shaped avoidance patterns.

Consequences of avoidance behaviors

Participants identified several negative outcomes resulting from avoidance strategies, primarily reduced research quality and timeline delays. Scholars acknowledged that delaying analysis or ignoring contradictory evidence often led to the need for significant rework later in the research process. One mid-career faculty member confessed, *"I had a dataset where the results didn't match my theory. I kept delaying the analysis because I knew it would mean starting over"* (AH_M03).

The delegation of literature reviews to junior scholars was associated with knowledge gaps in senior researchers' bases, potentially compromising mentorship quality. *As one senior scholar admitted, "I assigned the literature review for my new project to my PhD student"* (UL_M01), indicating a disconnect between project leadership and foundational knowledge. Furthermore, the exclusion of contradictory evidence was linked to concerns about research reproducibility, as scholars noted that avoiding methodological critiques limited their ability to robustly validate findings. Artifact analysis triangulated these self-reports: email threads and lab logs revealed repeated instances where contradictory methodological papers were bookmarked but never opened, and draft manuscripts showed deliberate omission of competing statistical approaches. While this study does not track actual paper retractions or replication failures, the consistent pattern of methodological filtering across 14 of 25 participants demonstrates a structural vulnerability to reproducibility gaps. As participant AH_M03 noted in a reflective diary entry: *"I know ignoring the alternative model weakens the paper, but the department counts publications, not robustness. I'll fix it later if reviewers ask."* This deferred engagement creates latent reproducibility risks that accumulate across research pipelines.

Identified needs for intervention

When asked about potential solutions, participants highlighted both structural reforms and cultural interventions. Scholars reported that reducing publication quotas could mitigate avoidance. One mid-career faculty member noted, *"When we have no publication targets for six months, we read more broadly"* (UL_M01).

Psychological safety emerged as a critical factor. Participants indicated that normalizing vulnerability reduced avoidance triggers. As one doctoral candidate stated, *"When my supervisor normalized asking for help with unfamiliar methods, I stopped avoiding papers"* (UL_D02). Key informants suggested that libraries could curate interdisciplinary databases to break funding-driven silos. One librarian emphasized, *"Libraries should curate interdisciplinary databases, not just high-impact journals"* (KWASU Librarian), directly addressing the need for resource diversification. Departments could also implement discipline-specific workshops to engage with challenging information, such as a negative-case participant who noted, *"My department encourages us to read opposing views."*

Discussion of findings

This discussion integrates the five emergent themes with existing literature to address all five research questions. Findings reveal how information avoidance in Nigerian academia operates through interconnected emotional, cognitive, organizational, and disciplinary mechanisms, extending prior theories while highlighting context-specific dynamics.

Research question 1: Under what circumstances do scholars decide not to look for information that is available and relevant?

Our findings confirm that avoidance occurs primarily during high-stakes academic moments where information threatens self-efficacy or institutional expectations. This aligns with Hua and Howell's² observation that "distressing information" triggers avoidance, but extends it significantly to Nigerian institutional contexts where resource scarcity amplifies pressure. Doctoral candidates avoided literature that exposed methodological gaps during thesis writing, exemplified by participant UL_D02, who stopped reading a paper because the author used an unfamiliar statistical method. Similarly, early-career researchers deleted peer review emails during publication deadlines, such as KW_E01, who discarded feedback labeling their framework as "untested."

Funding constraints created unique circumstances absent in broader literature: STEM scholars avoided climate change causation studies when grants required solution-focused research. As UL_D01 noted, *"My grant requires me to focus only on climate change solutions. I ignore papers about climate causes."* This demonstrates how institutional funding structures previously understudied in avoidance literature⁶ create specific avoidance triggers. The circumstance is not merely psychological but structural; avoidance becomes a compliance strategy to meet grant deliverables. These findings suggest that circumstances of avoidance are not random but are systematically produced by the intersection of personal

vulnerability and institutional mandates. When the cost of engaging with information threatens funding continuity or degree completion, avoidance emerges as a rational protective mechanism rather than a failure of curiosity.

Research question 2: What emotional, cognitive, social, and practical factors drive avoidance decisions?

Emotional factors dominated avoidance decisions, with fear of critique and anxiety about negative findings emerging as primary drivers. This directly supports Emanuel et al.¹ and Foust and Taber's¹² work on affective responses to threatening information. However, our data revealed novel cognitive strategies: scholars systematically delegated information-gathering tasks to junior colleagues to protect their expertise. As UL_M01 stated, *"I assigned the literature review for my new project to my PhD student."* This delegation strategy was absent in prior literature, which focused on individual psychological avoidance. Social factors included disciplinary norms: social science scholars engaged with contradictory evidence due to a "culture of debate" (KW_E03), while humanities scholars avoided "uncomfortable" interpretations (AH_M02).

Practical factors like time scarcity manifested as procrastination during publication deadlines, with KW_E03 noting they skipped studies because translation took too long. These findings confirm Hochschild's⁴² emotional labor theory but add the critical insight that avoidance is not merely individual but systemically enabled by institutional incentives. The drive to avoid is less about incapacity and more about self-preservation within a competitive hierarchy. When emotional labor exceeds capacity, scholars offload cognitive work to maintain professional standing. Thus, drivers are not isolated internal states but are reactions to external demands that make engagement emotionally costly. The interplay of fear, delegation, and time pressure creates a feedback loop where avoidance reduces immediate stress but increases long-term cognitive debt.

Research question 3: What strategies do scholars use to avoid information, and how do those strategies differ by discipline and career stage?

Strategies varied significantly across disciplines and career stages, revealing distinct epistemological vulnerabilities. STEM scholars employed selective data engagement, ignoring results contradicting hypotheses, as UL_M01 noted: *"If my lab results don't match the theory, I don't look at the papers explaining why."* Humanities scholars used selective source exclusion, such as KW_M03, who left challenging colonial texts unread. Early-career researchers consistently delegated tasks to students to manage workloads, while mid-career faculty avoided information to protect their professional status. AH_M03 admitted to delaying analysis because mismatched results meant "starting over." These discipline-specific patterns extend Dervin's⁴¹ sense-making theory, which assumed uniform information-seeking behaviors. Our data show that STEM scholars' avoidance was methodology-driven (avoiding unfamiliar statistical methods), while humanities scholars' avoidance was interpretation-driven (rejecting contradictory historical evidence).

Career stage differences further revealed that junior scholars avoided information to avoid "looking wrong," whereas senior scholars avoided it to maintain "expertise credibility," a nuance absent in prior studies.¹⁹ This suggests that avoidance strategies evolve alongside academic identity, shifting from competence protection to reputation management. The strategy is not static; it adapts to the scholar's position within the institutional hierarchy. For juniors, avoidance is about survival; for seniors, it is about legacy. This differentiation is critical for designing interventions, as a strategy effective for a doctoral candidate may not resonate with a tenured professor protecting their theoretical turf.

Research question 4: How do organizational practices shape avoidance?

Organizational practices intensified avoidance not merely as contextual backdrops but as structural enablers that align with Golman and Loewenstein's²² information-gap theory. When institutional metrics prioritize publication velocity over methodological thoroughness, scholars rationally narrow their information boundaries to minimize cognitive dissonance and administrative risk. This extends Falciani-White's⁴⁶ findings by demonstrating that avoidance is not a deviation from scholarly norms but an adaptive response to evaluative systems that penalize exploratory or contradictory engagement. The data reveal that funding scope limitations create enforced information silos, transforming avoidance from a psychological preference into a compliance requirement. This structural reframing challenges individual-deficit models of information behavior, positioning avoidance as a systemic outcome of misaligned academic incentives.

For instance, librarians noted that researchers avoid information when libraries prioritize journal subscriptions over interdisciplinary databases (Alhikmah Librarian), directly linking information access policies to avoidance behaviors. This extends Falciani-White's⁴⁶ work by demonstrating how organizational structures, not just cognitive biases, systematically shape information environments. The organization does not merely influence avoidance; it designs the conditions for it.

When promotion criteria reward speed over thoroughness, avoidance becomes a rational adaptation to survive the evaluation system. This shifts the blame from the scholar to the system, suggesting that organizational justice principles⁴³ are violated when structures incentivize ignorance. Therefore, avoidance is not a deviation from norms but a compliance with implicit organizational demands that prioritize output quality metrics over knowledge depth.

Research question 5: What interventions are likely to reduce harmful avoidance?

Interventions must address both individual and systemic factors to be effective, moving beyond simple awareness campaigns. Our findings indicate that reducing publication quotas could mitigate avoidance: when scholars had flexible deadlines, they engaged more comprehensively with literature. This aligns with Hicks'⁴⁷ call for institutional reforms but provides actionable evidence: mid-career faculty reported that “*when we have no publication targets for six months, we read more broadly*” (UL_M01). Discipline-specific interventions also emerged: STEM departments could implement “contradiction workshops” where researchers analyze unexpected results, while humanities departments might create “comfortable discomfort” reading groups for challenging texts.

Key informants emphasized that libraries should curate interdisciplinary databases, not just high-impact journals, directly addressing funding-driven silos. Most critically, our data show that interventions must target emotional triggers: “*When my supervisor normalized asking for help with unfamiliar methods, I stopped avoiding papers*” (UL_D02). This supports Gibson's¹⁸ emphasis on psychological safety, but also argues that safety must be institutionalized through mentorship policies, not just individual resilience. Interventions focusing solely on training scholars to be braver ignore the structural penalties for failure. Therefore, effective reduction of avoidance requires changing the incentive structures that make avoidance rational. By aligning performance metrics with thoroughness rather than speed, institutions can make engagement safer than avoidance. This requires a cultural shift in which vulnerability is rewarded as part of the rigorous research process, rather than penalized as a weakness in competitive academic markets.

Synthesis and theoretical advancement

This study advances information avoidance theory in three key ways. First, it demonstrates that avoidance is not merely an individual cognitive bias (as in Golman and Loewenstein²²) but a *systemic response* to institutional pressures. Second, it reveals discipline-specific pathways previously unexamined in academic literature, STEM avoidance centers on methodological threats, while humanities avoidance centers on interpretive conflicts. Third, it identifies delegation as a novel avoidance strategy, where junior scholars absorb information gaps to protect senior expertise. These insights directly address the literature gap noted by Gigerenzer and García-Retamero³⁴: “Researchers study information avoidance in a disjointed manner.” Our grounded theory model (Figure 1) unifies these threads by showing how appraisal of institutional threats → emotional responses → avoidance strategies → research consequences form a cyclic process moderated by discipline-specific norms. This explains why Sun et al.⁶ observed “delays in adopting new knowledge,” it is not due to negligence but to institutionalized avoidance systems.^{48–54}

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that information avoidance in Nigerian academia is not an individual failing but a systemic response to institutional pressures. Findings reveal how emotional triggers, discipline-specific strategies (STEM data exclusion vs humanities source avoidance), and organizational drivers (publication quotas, funding constraints) collectively undermine research quality and reproducibility. Scholars' avoidance behaviors emerge as rational adaptations to high-stakes academic environments where institutional incentives prioritize speed over comprehensiveness. The data confirm that structural reforms, not individual resilience, are necessary to address this crisis. Without systemic changes, avoidance will persist as a normalized coping mechanism, perpetuating biased knowledge production and eroding academic integrity.

Prioritized recommendations for Nigerian academic contexts

- (1) **Immediate (Low-Cost):** Institutionalize “psychological safety” mentorship protocols by training supervisors to normalize methodological uncertainty and contradictory evidence engagement. Requires policy memos, not funding.

- (2) **Short-Term (Moderate-Cost):** University libraries should reallocate 15–20% of journal subscription budgets to interdisciplinary and open-access databases to disrupt funding-driven information silos. Feasible through consortium negotiations.
- (3) **Medium-Term (Structural Reform):** Pilot flexible publication quotas (e.g., 6-month publication moratoriums) in two departments to measure impacts on literature breadth and avoidance reduction. Aligns with ongoing Nigerian TETFund evaluation reforms.
- (4) **Discipline-Specific:** STEM departments to implement mandatory “negative-case review” sessions; Humanities to establish structured peer-reading groups for interpretive challenges. Low implementation barrier, high pedagogical impact.
- (5) **Long-Term (Systemic):** Integrate information engagement quality into promotion criteria alongside publication count, requiring national policy alignment through NUC and TETFund frameworks.

Suggestions for future research

- (1) Conduct a mixed-methods replication in East African universities (e.g., Kenya, Uganda) using identical grounded theory protocols to test cross-cultural transferability of delegation strategies and funding silos.
- (2) Implement a longitudinal cohort study tracking citation omission rates and methodological transparency in published papers over 3 years, using bibliometric analysis to quantify avoidance impacts on reproducibility.
- (3) Design a cluster-randomized controlled trial testing “contradiction workshops” versus standard literature review training, measuring pre/post avoidance frequency via reflective diaries and artifact audits to isolate causal intervention effects.

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Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought in accordance with international qualitative research standards. While formal institutional review board (IRB) approval was exempted by the relevant department for non-clinical social research, the study strictly adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and the Belmont Report regarding respect for persons and beneficence. All participants were informed about the research aims, confidentiality of responses, and their right to withdraw at any time, and they provided voluntary informed consent before participation.

Consent to participate

All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. The purpose, procedures, potential risks, and confidentiality safeguards were clearly explained to participants, and participation was entirely voluntary. In accordance with ethical guidelines, participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Consent was obtained in verbal form, depending on participant preference and contextual considerations.

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Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study are readily available upon request.

Use of AI tools

No generative AI tool was used to fabricate data, results, or analytic claims. AI-assisted tools were used to generate [Figure 1](#) only. Any AI-assisted editing beyond that was limited to language/clarity and did not alter meaning.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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