

Preprint policies in Spanish academic journals: analysis of the clarity of instructions to authors

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Abstract:

Purpose: To analyse the clarity of Spanish academic journals' preprint acceptance policies in their instructions to authors, to assess which journals have adopted explicit policies on preprints and how these policies align with the transparency recommendations of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Design/methodology/approach: An analysis was conducted of the preprint acceptance policies of 221 Spanish academic journals classified in the Q1 and Q2 quartiles of the *Scimago Journal & Country Rank*. The instructions to authors and self-archiving policies on the journals' websites were examined, as well as the *Open Policy Finder (OPF)* and *Dulcinea* directories. The journals were classified into four categories: explicit acceptance, explicit rejection, unclear mention and no mention.

Findings: Only 17.6% of the journals analysed clearly state their preprint policy (15.4% explicitly accepting preprints and 2.3% explicitly rejecting them), while 40.3% make confusing statements and 42.1% make no mention of preprints. So that, there is significant room for improvement in the way journals present their preprint policies.

Originality/value: This study is one of the first to explore the preprint policies of scientific journals based on analysis of instructions to authors. Although the sample corresponds to Spanish journals, the results may be useful at the international level. The results have twofold value: they show that preprints, as an important component of open science, are not the focus of attention of Spanish open access journals; on the other hand, the paper prompts self-assessment for publishers to improve the clarity of instructions to authors.

Keywords: Preprints, Academic journals, Editorial policies, Open access, Open science

1. Introduction

Scientific manuscripts can take many months to be published in recognised journals, as they must first undergo the peer review process, the incorporation of suggested modifications, proofreading, layout, etc. Although processing times from author submission to final publication vary significantly between different fields of knowledge and journal titles, and as well as within the same journal, some studies report long averages of publication delay (Andersen *et al.*, 2021; Björk and Solomon, 2013; Marcó del Pont Lalli and Martínez Navarro,

2022). This is a major limitation of the scientific communication system, as research progress cannot be shared as quickly as it should be. To solve this problem, since the 1990s, various online preprint repositories or servers have been established to make manuscripts that have not yet passed peer review immediately available to the scientific community, with the resulting acceleration of the scientific communication process (Tian *et al.*, 2024; Wang *et al.*, 2020).

The preprint is a type of research output that has grown considerably over the last thirty years (Xie *et al.*, 2021), increasingly accepted over the last ten years among researchers in various fields, such as biomedicine and some social sciences, which were initially more resistant to the model (Rzayeva *et al.*, 2025). Initial impulse came from the development of numerous scientific communication initiatives online that crystallised in the Budapest Open Access Initiative's commitment to open access (OA) via the green route, later with the development of the open science movement (Puebla *et al.*, 2022), and finally, since 2020, with the accelerated research process on a global cooperative scale that was unleashed to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic (Benson Marshall *et al.*, 2024; Biesenbender *et al.*, 2024; Rzayeva *et al.*, 2023).

Anyway, the degree to which researchers adopt preprints continues to vary greatly depending on the disciplinary culture and geographical area to which they belong (Ni and Waltman, 2024; Rzayeva *et al.*, 2025), and of course also the experiences they have had reading preprints, depositing or submitting them later as manuscripts to certain journals (Rzayeva *et al.*, 2023; Urbano *et al.*, 2021). For all these reasons, it can be said that apart from disciplines such as physics, mathematics, and computer science, where preprints are well established, the overall picture is still evolving toward a greater role for preprints, but characterised by a phase of experimentation, in which it is being demonstrated that “a one-size-fits-all approach to preprints is neither feasible or appropriate” (Chiarelli *et al.*, 2019).

In any analysis of the use of preprints, it is essential to understand the role played by peer-reviewed journals, since the final validation of an academic study is still mostly dependent on this formal communication environment. Preprints enable authors to gain immediate recognition for their contributions to knowledge, while at the same time facilitating open feedback from the scientific community. In the vast majority of cases, researchers conceive the preprint as a step prior to submission to a refereed journal (Klein *et al.*, 2019), as formal publication in renowned scientific journals is for most authors the key step to ensure their research is recognised as valid (Niles *et al.*, 2020).

For all these reasons, when choosing a journal to submit their work to, authors who use preprints need to know whether and under what conditions journals will accept manuscripts based on preprints. Although an increasing number of journals in the experimental and biomedical sciences are accepting preprints, there are still many titles that make no clear statement on the matter (Klebel *et al.*, 2020; Purgar *et al.*, 2025). Such a stipulation raises the question of whether the journal considers a preprint to be a prior publication, and thus a number of actors in the scientific communication ecosystem have been calling for journals to state their preprint policy explicitly (COPE Council, 2018). That is why this paper aims to determine the extent to which Spanish academic journals have taken this step of clarifying the instructions they provide authors.

1.1 The nature of preprints

Preprints are defined as scientific papers that have not yet passed the peer review process and that are shared in repositories, so that research results can be made immediately available. Balaji & Dhanamjaya (2019) demonstrate that there is a wide range of definitions of preprints,

but given that the focus of this paper is the relationship between preprints and journals, the definition adopted for this study is one offered by the emblematic OA publisher PLOS: "A preprint is a version of a scientific manuscript posted on a public server prior to formal peer review [...]" (PLOS, n.d.).

In the same vein, it is worth mentioning the definition of ASAPbio (Accelerating Science and Publication in Biology), a non-profit organisation that promotes open and innovative communication in the life sciences: "A preprint is a scientific manuscript that is uploaded by the authors to a public server. The preprint contains data and methods, but has not yet been accepted by a journal" (ASAPbio, 2021). These definitions are the foundation of the concept of preprint that we use in our study: a publicly available document in a "pre-submitted version" to any journal stage, which allegedly, as a result of interaction with the community, may be improved before being submitted to a journal, or not sent at all at the end.

It should be noted that the managers of the SciELO journal portal referred to the ASAPbio definition in the presentation of their initiative to create the SciELO Preprints server (Packer *et al.*, 2017), conceived as a parallel space to manage the preprint phase in the workflow for the evaluation and publication of articles in this network of journals. To complete these definitions more systematically, we can refer to Chiarelli *et al.* (2019), who consider six components to characterise nowadays a preprint: is a complete manuscript, part of the scientific literature ("1. Genre"); has a position in the knowledge production process prior to formal publication ("2. Timing"); represent a version, or more than one, of an output along the research life cycle ("3. Versioning"); is openly available online, through a public server ("4. Accessibility"); the author(s) is responsible for posting it ("5. Responsibility"); and has potential value for readers, deserving a process of bibliographic control ("6. Value").

Once these characteristics have been highlighted, it is important to emphasise the role of the digital platforms on which they are distributed. Certainly, the exchange of non-reviewed manuscripts among colleagues has existed since time immemorial, with attempts at disciplinary systematisation in the analogue environment in the 1960s (Puebla *et al.*, 2022). Also, in the early days of the internet, authors were able to provide access to their manuscripts on their own personal websites, as was common during the 1990s. The same was true for serialised working papers deposited on departmental or research group websites with simple technical solutions and without interoperability. However, as can be seen from the definitions quoted above, a key component in the "formal" definition of a preprint is its public archiving in a digital repository as a first step towards bibliographic control, facilitating widespread dissemination thanks to the repository's interoperability with all kinds of information systems. One of the earliest versions of this concept is the arXiv.org repository, created in 1991 for the fields of physics, astrophysics and mathematics, which is recognised as the original paradigm for preprint repositories (Ginsparg, 2011). Repositories provide an advantage over the isolated dissemination of a preprint, as they exercise a certain degree of oversight of what is shared within an academic community, while also ensuring that the works deposited are traceable, discoverable and permanently available. In this respect, where a preprint is deposited and how it is presented are important questions for researchers to consider, and to this end it is advisable to review the recommendations and examples of good practice provided to both preprint servers and authors (Beck *et al.*, 2020; Moshontz *et al.*, 2021; Tjeldink *et al.*, 2020).

The nature of the preprint as a document that has not been reviewed or edited by a publishing company is a key consideration in the process adopted by journals to determine the originality of manuscripts prior to the start of peer review. According to the tradition established by the "Ingelfinger rule", first stated in an editorial published anonymously by the editor-in-chief of

The New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) Franz J. Ingelfinger (*New England Journal of Medicine*, 1969), academic journals should only accept original unpublished articles. This of course raises the question of whether a preprint should be considered a published paper. To answer this question from a contemporary perspective, it is worth citing the current policy of *NEJM*, which acknowledges the acceptance of preprints: "*NEJM* accepts the submission of manuscripts that have previously been posted on a nonprofit preprint server. Authors should notify *NEJM* of any preprint related to a manuscript submission" (*New England Journal of Medicine*, n.d.).

Similar policies have been adopted by many journals in the experimental physical and natural sciences, and to a lesser extent in biomedicine. However, there was no established guideline by any academic publishing association regarding the nature of preprints as "public but unpublished" documents until 2018, when the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) published a discussion document that is of great value as a recommendation to its members: "The views on this vary among disciplines, journals, and editors, but in general, preprints are not considered prior publication in a way that would prevent later publication after peer review in a journal" (COPE Council, 2018). This argument is based on the difference in scope of the verbs "to post" and "to publish", since journals that do accept preprints as manuscripts distinguish formal agents in the scientific communication ecosystem that "publish" research from individuals who "post" it in a repository.

Crossref adopts a similar interpretation, establishing a difference between publications ("published content") and unpublished manuscripts ("posted content"), including preprints for which it uses a specific metadata schema: "Posted content includes preprints, eprints, working papers, reports, dissertations, and many other types of content that has been posted but not formally published. [...] Crossref can help you to clearly label content as a preprint using a preprint-specific schema" (Crossref, n.d.). Despite the clear positions taken by COPE and Crossref, the reality is that many publishers do not have a clear understanding of what constitutes prior publication, which means that journal preprint policies need to be standardised (Teixeira da Silva *et al.*, 2025).

1.2 Preprints in an open science environment

While COVID-19 brought the issue of preprints to the attention of the mass media, it is important to note that the connection between preprints and open science had been established long before the pandemic. It is a relationship that manifests itself in predictions about the future of scientific work in the new open paradigm, suggesting that research in its preliminary stages would increasingly be shared as a prior step to peer review in journals: "sharing intermediate results, such as research plans (preregistration), will also become more common" (Waltman and Eck, 2023). This perspective, which identifies the need to share research processes and results openly and quickly, is present in international guidelines (European Commission, 2025; UNESCO, 2021) and also clearly reflected in all kinds of open science handbooks designed specially as training tools for new generations of researchers. One example is *Open Science: A Practical Guide for Early-Career Researchers*, published by a consortium of university libraries in the Netherlands, which makes clear recommendations regarding preprints: "By posting preprints, you can rapidly share your findings and start early and open academic discussions, which strengthens your work" (Brinkman *et al.*, 2023). That is why preprint servers are considered part of the infrastructures for open science (Silveira *et al.*, 2023).

Without doubt, preprints offer certain benefits that support the proposal of open science to transform the scientific communication ecosystem, such as allowing authors to communicate

research results quickly to claim priority and facilitating a broader and more open review of the study by members of self-organised disciplinary communities (Neylon *et al.*, 2017). On the other hand, preprints may also allow the dissemination of unconventional content in the context of open science, as they are sometimes used to publish ideas or research not yet suitable for publication in conventional media, perhaps because they are not yet mature, the arguments have not been fully developed, or they are presented using alternative structures and formats (Ng, 2017).

However, the step from the theoretical level to its practical application in the scientific journal ecosystem is far from being completed. With the growing acceptance of open science postulates in science policy (in legislation, national agreements, institutional declarations, etc.), one might assume that preprints, as one of the various key methods for advancing open science, would be explicitly acknowledged in the policies of academic journals, especially those that define themselves as OA journals. However, an initial examination of journal policies (Urbano, 2023), as well as observations from other published studies (Abadal *et al.*, 2023; Choi *et al.*, 2021; Yi and Huh, 2021), suggest that many titles do not recognise preprints as a key component of their adaptation to open science culture.

Furthermore, according to a qualitative work with semi-structured interviews to preprint server managers (Chtena *et al.*, 2025), there is still no clear consensus on whether their role in the ecosystem should be dependent on their relationship with journals, whether their platforms constitute an alternative to the traditional system of formal validation and archiving of research represented by journals, or even if new models of journals more integrated with preprints, like the overlay journals (Rousi and Laakso, 2024) or Publish-Review-Curate (PRC) platforms (Corker *et al.*, 2024), could thrive. In any case, journals cannot fail to consider what their position should be in relation to preprints from a strategic point of view. As Pipa Smart (2022) says, "journal-related stakeholders should consider preprints as an unavoidable development, taking into consideration both the benefits and disadvantages."

1.3 Clarity of requirements in instructions to authors

While journals have the freedom to determine whether or not to accept preprints, the clarity with which they define their position is crucial for the process of transformation of the scholarly communication culture. Thus, whatever policy a journal adopts in relation to preprints, authors should be able to identify it clearly on the journal's website, ideally in the instructions with the manuscript submission requirements. Indeed, in its "Discussion document" on preprints, COPE stipulates that "Transparency is key, so COPE guidance is to develop policies and make these clearly and publicly available in appropriate places, such as author guidelines" (COPE Council, 2018). The policy adopted must therefore be explicitly communicated, as well as the requirements that authors are expected to meet in the event of acceptance of their paper, such as informing the editor at the time of submission that the manuscript they are submitting is deposited as a preprint.

The journal's position on preprints should be clear in both the submission policy and the self-archiving policy, because they are two different processes. First, the submission policy should define whether the preprint will be accepted at the beginning of the editorial process. Second, the self-archiving policy needs to specify whether it permits self-archiving, with or without embargoes (Teixeira da Silva *et al.*, 2024), of one of the three possible versions of a paper accepted for publication (submitted, accepted or published) according to the terminology used in the *Open Policy Finder* (OPF), the international directory with the widest coverage and recognition in identifying self-archiving policies (Gadd and Troll Covey, 2019). The fact that the term "preprint" is often used as a synonym for "submitted version" (Klebel *et al.*, 2020) can

lead to confusion. When a journal allows self-archiving of the "submitted version" it could be assumed that it also accepts manuscripts that are preprints, as suggested in certain guidelines on preprinting that refer to *OPF* to find out whether a journal accepts the submission of preprints (ASAPbio, 2021; Hettne *et al.*, 2021; Moshontz *et al.*, 2021). But it could not be the case, as in the case of Spanish journals on *OPF* that we have checked in our field work for this paper (see *infra* section 4.4): around a quarter of the journals allow self-archiving of the "submitted version" once the manuscript has passed review, but only half of them explicitly declare acceptance of manuscripts submitted for evaluation that are preprints already in circulation.

Our work aims to clarify this difference, as previous studies have based their analyses on *OPF* data equating preprint policies on acceptance of manuscripts to self-archiving policies for submitted versions (Teixeira da Silva and Dobránszki, 2019). Although self-archiving policies in directories such as *OPF* referring to submitted versions may be a proxy for studying the acceptance policies of manuscripts that previously circulated as preprints, our thesis is that they cannot be equated, since what really determines this policy is what is established in the journals' instructions to authors for submitting manuscripts.

2. Objectives and research questions

In an initial exploratory study on the acceptance of preprints as manuscripts for evaluation in Spanish academic journals (Urbano, 2023), it was found that the vast majority of journals did not clearly identify preprints in their manuscript acceptance policies. The aim of the present study is to explore the question further with a more systematic analysis involving a larger number of journals and a wider variety of academic disciplines. In this way, it will be possible to confirm the finding of the previous study that Spanish academic journals with the highest rankings in selected indexes do not have clear guidelines regarding the status of preprints in their manuscript acceptance policy or in their policy on self-archiving of "submitted versions".

Given that both these policies are considered important elements of a journal's alignment with open science policies, the findings of this study may also contribute to the assessment of the extent to which these aspects of open science are being embraced in the scientific communication ecosystem in Spain. Also, the exploratory work (Urbano, 2023) revealed that the vast majority of titles were OA and were published using the Open Journals System (OJS) software from the Public Knowledge Project (PKP). This raised the question of the extent to which the templates and settings that come with this program can influence the final wording that journals adopt to explain their policies, since many journals presented almost identical texts when referring to the conditions for accepting manuscripts.

Based on the state of the art presented in the introduction and the previous exploratory study carried out in 2023, the following research questions were established:

Q1: Do the top-ranked Spanish scientific journals in the *Scimago Journal & Country Rank* comply with the requirement for clarity on acceptance of preprints as manuscripts for evaluation stipulated in the discussion paper on preprints issued by the COPE Council (2018)?

Q2: To what extent does the type of publisher and form of access influence policies on the acceptance of preprints as manuscripts for evaluation?

Q3: To what extent does the academic discipline influence policies on the acceptance of preprints as manuscripts for evaluation?

Q4: What is the relationship between policies on the acceptance of preprints as manuscripts for evaluation and the self-archiving policies specified for the journals analysed in the *Dulcinea* and *Open Policy Finder* directories?

Q5: What is the relationship between the Content Management System (CMS) software used to publish the journal and the clarity of its preprint policy?

3. Materials and methods

For the purposes of this study, Spanish journals in the Q1 and Q2 quartiles of the 2022 edition of the *Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SJ&CR)* were taken as journals with Scopus's higher calculated impact among all the Spanish academic publishing venues. To ensure the feasibility of our work, not all Spanish academic journals were considered, many of which are not even included in Scopus. This limitation was accepted in the study, as we wanted to focus on those titles that were better positioned in an international context, even though this prevented us from extrapolating the results to all Spanish journals.

Journals in all disciplines were considered, except titles classified only in the "Arts and Humanities" area. These titles were excluded based on the understanding that preprints are not part of the scholarly communication culture of the core research fields in this area. Journals with labels of other areas as well as "Arts and Humanities" were considered, as the classification made by *SJ&CR* was taken as valid without assessing whether a journal with the labels "Arts and Humanities" and "Social Sciences" was predominantly one or the other. As for Spain as the country of publication, the information provided by *SJ&CR* was respected, although some titles are currently published by publishers based in other countries. The result of applying these filters was a list of 221 titles, as it was necessary to exclude one journal whose website was not operational between 1 and 19 October 2024, the period during which the data was collected.

The study was conducted with a data file from *SJ&CR*, in which the ISSN, *SJ&CR* Best Quartile, Categories, Areas and Publisher information were kept. Based on the "Categories" and "Areas" information, the journals were classified into four main areas: Sciences, Natural Sciences and Mathematics; Engineering and Architecture; Medicine and Health Sciences; and Social Sciences.

Subsequently, for each journal, additional data were captured by visiting the journals' websites and the self-archiving directories *Open Policy Finder (OPF)* and *Dulcinea*. Specifically, searches were conducted for the self-archiving policies of all journals in both sources, identifying whether or not the journals allow self-archiving of the "submitted version" without embargoes. The presence of the journals in these directories and their policy on the submitted version, due to the proximity of this concept to a preprint understood in a more general sense, was considered a valid means of comparison with what is stated on the journal's website in relation to the acceptance of manuscript submissions already circulating as preprints. It should be noted that when studying self-archiving policies, we have adopted the current *OPF* terminology, which no longer refers to self-archiving of preprints in the green open access policies of the journals, but rather to "submitted versions," despite the fact that in the beginning, controlled vocabulary was used in which preprint was used as a term associated with the self-archiving policy of journals (Jenkins *et al.*, 2008) and that even today, the other directory we have used for the Spanish sphere, *Dulcinea*, uses the term referred to in Jenkins' work.

Based on the information collected from the journals' websites, the CMS programme they use was entered into the data file, along with categorisations of the publisher (commercial or non-commercial) and the journal (OA or non-OA). Finally, excerpts from the instructions to authors and the OA and copyright policies were copied and used as evidence to classify each journal into one of the four categories based on the information it provides on its preprint policy:

- **Yes:** The journal explicitly states that it accepts manuscripts shared as preprints (or equivalent concepts) either prior to submission to the journal or after submission but prior to completion of the peer review process. An example of a journal in this category is *Limnetica* (<https://www.limnetica.com/en/instructions-authors>):

Limnetica has no objections about considering preprints for publication. If an author submits a manuscript that has been previously published as a preprint, authors should include the preprint server name and DOI in the cover letter. Further, we ask that upon publication in *Limnetica*, the authors update the preprint version to provide a link to the final published paper.

- **No:** The journal explicitly states that it does not accept manuscripts shared as preprints (or equivalent concepts) either prior to submission to the journal or after submission but prior to completion of the peer review process. An example of a journal in this category is *América Latina Hoy* (<https://revistas.usal.es/cuatro/index.php/1130-2887/about>):

Authors are allowed to publish their work on the Internet (e.g. in institutional repositories or personal websites) only after editing (in any case not before, revision, layout or even proofreading). These measures are done to encourage reading and citation of the article, as well as to achieve a wider and faster dissemination of the published work (see The Effect of Open Access).

- **Confusing Mention (CM):** The journal's instructions state that manuscripts are not accepted in "any previous medium" (i.e. they do not limit the exclusion to journals), but the rejection of preprints is not explicitly stated. The instructions, or more specifically the OA policy, may state whether or not self-archiving of the preprint is allowed, but without a clear indication of whether this can be done prior to submission (i.e. it is not clear whether manuscripts that have been previously circulated as preprints are accepted). The way this is expressed may be related to the various options for self-archiving once the manuscript has passed the journal's peer review. Journals classified in this category often include contradictory information on the instructions page itself, or information on the instructions page that is contradicted by information on the OA policy page. An example of a journal in this category is *Proyecto, Progreso, Arquitectura* (<https://revistascientificas.us.es/index.php/ppa/about/submissions>):

The submission has not been previously published –journal, book, conference or seminar proceedings– nor has it been previously submitted to another journal (or an explanation has been provided in Comments to the editor). It is also not visible on web platforms and/or repositories. [...] Authors are allowed and encouraged to publish their work on the Internet (e.g. on institutional or personal pages) before and during the review and publication process, as it can lead to productive exchanges and faster and wider dissemination of the published work (see The Effect of Open Access)."

- **No Mention (NM):** There is no mention at all of preprints (or equivalent concepts) either in the author instructions or in the OA policy. In most cases, since the instructions state that submissions must be original and unpublished, this may be interpreted as an implicit indication that preprints are not accepted as manuscripts, but preprints are not explicitly

mentioned. An example of a journal in this category is *Adicciones* (<https://adicciones.es/index.php/adicciones/guidelines>):

The articles must be original. [...] All manuscripts will be evaluated with plagiarism control tools. The authors should ensure that significant portions of the material have not been published previously.

The classification of the journals into one of these four categories involved a two-step process. In the first step, the journals were distributed among the three authors of this paper, and each author collected the information from the websites and made an initial categorisation. In the second step, each author reviewed the journal information collected, and the initial categorisation proposed by the other two authors, rating each journal in the established category, to reach a consensus on the final categorisation. The file with all the raw research data captured is available at OSF [<https://osf.io/e8jqv>].

Based on the number of journals classified in the two explicit categories (YES and NO), the level of clarity of the preprint policy instructions could be calculated as a percentage, adopting the approach proposed by Klebel *et al.* (2020), whereby "clarity" is defined pragmatically as the situation in which a researcher reasonably versed in science communication would be able to locate and understand a given journal's preprint policy in a reasonable amount of time.

We consciously decided not to analyse other possible aspects of the preprint acceptance policy that could have been taken into consideration, such as requirements regarding whether the preprint must come from specific servers, how the author must report the existence of the preprint in their submission, how the author should update the preprint record with a link to the version finally published by the journal, the use of a licence for the preprint that does not conflict with that of the article published in the journal, etc. It is a kind of more detailed study that has been carried out by other authors (Purgar *et al.*, 2025), but which we did not consider relevant after conducting the capture de information from journals websites, which showed us that very few titles explicitly accepted preprints.

4. Results

4.1 Compliance with COPE clarity requirement

Table I shows the results of the application of the criteria established to classify the statements of preprint policies by the Spanish scientific journals included in the sample. The largest proportion of journals (42.1%) do not mention preprints, while a similar proportion (40.3%) express their preprint policies in an unclear or ambiguous manner. It is noteworthy that only 15.4% of titles explicitly state that they do accept them, and somewhat encouraging in terms of the progress of open science that only 2.3% explicitly reject them.

Table I. Statement of preprint policy (Source: Authors own work)

Acceptance of preprints	No. journals	%
YES explicit	34	15.4
NO explicit	5	2.3
Confusing Mention (CM)	89	40.3
No Mention (NM)	93	42.1
Total	221	100.0

Adding together the journals that explicitly state that they accept preprints and those that explicitly reject them, only 39 titles (17.6%) comply with the COPE recommendation for clarity, which stress the importance of transparency: "COPE guidance is to develop policies and make these clearly and publicly available in appropriate places, such as author guidelines" (COPE Council, 2018). These data show a high percentage of journals that do not make their preprint policy clear (82.35%), and therefore are not complying with the COPE recommendation.

4.2 Analysis by publisher type and access type

As Table II shows, of the commercial publishers with more than one journal in the sample, the only one with a clear preprint policy is Elsevier (which acquired journals from the Spanish publisher Doyma a few years ago). This publisher has adopted a clear policy of accepting preprints across all its journals, both OA and closed, referring authors to a general publisher's page for those who need further details on the subject. The publishers Hipatia, Medicina Oral S.L., and OmniaScience express confusing mentions or do not address the issue at all.

Table II. Statement of preprint policy by commercial publishers with more than one title in study sample (Source: Authors own work)

Publishing company	No. of journals	Acceptance				% of clarity (YES+NO)
		YES	NO	CM	NM	
Elsevier	6	6				100%
Hipatia	6			2	4	0.0%
Oral Medicine S.L	2				2	0.0%
OmniaScience	2				2	0.0%

Non-commercial publishers, mainly represented by universities, do not have a standard policy of accepting preprints across all their journals (see Table III). Among the publishing institutions with 10 or more titles in the sample, only one of the 17 journals published by the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) clearly states its preprint policy, indicating that it does not accept them; five of the 11 journals published by Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona state that they do accept preprints, while none of the 12 journals published by Universidad Complutense de Madrid clearly states its preprint policy. Most of the institutions that have between three and eight journals in the sample state their policy in a confusing way, or do not mention it at all.

Table III. Statement of preprint policy by non-commercial publishing institutions with more than two titles in study sample (Source: Authors own work)

Publishing institution	No. of journals	Acceptance				% of clarity (YES+NO)
		YES	NO	CM	NM	
CSIC	17		1	9	7	5.9%
Universidad Complutense de Madrid	12			10	2	0.0%
Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona	11	5		2	4	45.5%
Universidad de Sevilla	8	2		2	4	25.0%
Universidad de Alicante	7			2	5	0.0%
Universidad de Granada	6	1		4	1	16.7%
Universidad de Valencia	6	2		1	3	33.3%
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia	6	3		2	1	50.0%
Universidad de Barcelona	5			2	3	0.0%
Universidad de Murcia	5			4	1	0.0%
Universidad de Navarra	5			4	1	0.0%

Universidad de Salamanca	4		2	2		50.0%
Universidad Politécnica de Valencia	4			4		0.0%
Colegio Oficial de Psicólogos de Madrid	3			3		0.0%
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid	3			2	1	0.0%
Universidad de Alcalá	3	1			2	33.3%
Universidad de Oviedo	3			1	2	0.0%
Universidad Jaume I	3	2			1	66.7%

As a summary of the data outlined above, Table IV presents aggregated data broken down by type of publisher (commercial/non-commercial). Although the relatively small number of journals published by commercial publishers limits the value of comparisons with non-commercial ones on this point, it may at least be taken as indicative that a higher percentage of journals belonging to commercial publishers explicitly accept preprints (30.0% vs. 13.1%), while the few that explicitly state they do not accept are all published by non-commercial publishers. On the other hand, a majority of titles by commercial publishers are in the "No Mention" category (53.3% vs. 40.3%), while non-commercial institutions are responsible for a higher percentage of unclear mentions (44.0% vs. 16.7%).

Table IV. *Statement of preprint policy by type of publisher (Source: Authors own work)*

Type of publisher	No. of journals	Acceptance				% of clarity (YES+NO)
		YES	NO	CM	NM	
Commercial	30	9		5	16	30.0%
Non-commercial	191	25	5	84	77	15.7%
Total	221	34	5	89	93	17.6%

Table V shows the preprint policy data broken down according to whether the journals are OA or closed. As the table shows, OA is clearly the dominant category and explicit acceptance of preprints is, in percentage terms, half as common as it is among closed journals (14.7% vs. 30.0%). All five journals that explicitly reject preprints are OA, and the percentage of OA journals in the "Confused Mention" category is twice as high as that of closed journals (41.2% vs. 20.0%). Conversely, the percentage of OA journals in the "No Mention" category is similar to that of closed journals (41.7% and 50.0%, respectively).

Table V. *Statement of preprint policy by type of access (Source: Authors own work)*

Type of access	No. of journals	Acceptance				% of clarity (YES+NO)
		YES	NO	CM	NM	
OA	211	31	5	87	88	17.1%
Closed	10	3		2	5	30.0%
Total	221	34	5	89	93	17.6%

4.3 Disciplinary analysis

The field of social sciences accounts for the vast majority of journals in the study. In relative terms, the percentage of clarity in this field is low (15.2%), although it has the highest number of titles that explicitly state preprint acceptance (22) and rejection (5). Medicine and health sciences has the highest percentage of journals that explicitly state acceptance of preprints (42.1%). Excluding the journals in this field, the overwhelming majority of titles have confusing mentions or no mention of a preprint policy (see Table VI).

Table VI. Statement of preprint policy by field of study (Source: Authors own work)

Field	No. of journals	Acceptance				% of clarity (YES+NO)
		YES	NO	CM	NM	
Natural Sciences and Mathematics	8	2		3	3	25.0%
Social Sciences	178	22	5	76	75	15.2%
Engineering and Architecture	16	2		8	6	12.5%
Medicine and Health Sciences	19	8		2	9	42.1%
Total	221	34	5	89	93	17.6%

4.4 Relationship between receipt of preprints as manuscripts and self-archiving policy

The *OPF* and *Dulcinea* directories specialise in gathering and analysing the OA, copyright and self-archiving policies stated by scientific journals. *OPF* has a global scope, while *Dulcinea* focuses on Spanish journals. Of the 221 journals analysed, 108 (48.9%) were listed in *OPF* and 206 (93.2%) in *Dulcinea*. Eight journals appear in *OPF* but not in *Dulcinea*, while 106 appear in *Dulcinea* but not in *OPF*. Seven journals are not included in either of the two directories, and 100 are present in both. Of the 100 titles included in both directories, 66 had matching information while 34 had diverging information (see Table VII). This reveals a high level of inconsistency in the information provided on self-archiving of the "submitted version" (preprints, in *Dulcinea's* terminology), as there are six titles for which *OPF* indicates that it is permitted while *Dulcinea* states it is not, while in 27 titles the information provided is the other way round. In one specific case, while *OPF* states that self-archiving is not allowed, *Dulcinea* states that it is allowed but without specifying the type.

Table VII. Authorisation of self-archiving of the "submitted version" by journal presence in *OPF* and *Dulcinea* (D) (Source: Authors own work)

Accept Self-Archiving	Present in both directories with matching information 66 titles	Present in both directories with discrepant information 34 titles		Present only in one directory 8 titles in <i>OPF</i> 106 titles in D	
	OPF = D	OPF	D	OPF	D
YES	17	6	27	6	24
NO	49	28	6	2	80
no data			1		2

Prohibition of self-archiving the "submitted" version is the predominant policy in both repertoires: 79 out of 108 titles (73.1%) in *OPF* and 135 out of 206 titles in *Dulcinea* (65.5%). However, if we compare the percentage of journals that explicitly accept preprints as manuscripts (15.4%, see Table I) with the percentage of journals that accept self-archiving of submitted versions (26.9% in *OPF* and 33% in *Dulcinea*), it appears that journals are more inclined to accept, after peer review, the self-archiving of unreviewed manuscripts that have been accepted for publication than to accept these same manuscripts in the form of a public preprint prior to review.

In both the *OPF* and *Dulcinea* directories, the "YES" and "NO" values related to the authorisation of self-archiving of submitted versions are clearly higher than those observed in the preprint acceptance policies on the journals' websites (see Table VIII). On the other hand,

the “Confusing Mention” and “No Mention” categories account for the majority of journals in the *OPF* and *Dulcinea* directories, irrespective of the self-archiving policy reported.

Table VIII. Comparison of statement of preprint policy in instructions to authors (rows) with policy on self-archiving of submitted versions according to the *OPF* and *Dulcinea* (*D*) directories (columns) (Source: Authors own work)

		Values registered in the <i>OPF</i> and <i>D</i> directories				
		OPF = YES	OPF = NO	D = YES	D = NO	D = no data
		29	79	68	135	3
Values by preprint acceptance policy in the instructions to authors	YES	14	7	18	11	
	NO		4	1	4	
	CM	12	35	27	59	
	NM	3	33	22	61	3

It should be noted that there is a stronger match-up of "YES" values between the preprint acceptance policy and the self-archiving policy recorded in the *OPF* directory, while journals in the "NO" category in *OPF* fall mainly in the "Confused Mention" or "No Mention" categories established in the fieldwork.

In the case of *Dulcinea*, there is greater discrepancy between "YES" values, as while the directory identifies a total of 68 journals that authorise self-archiving, only 18 of these journals explicitly accept preprints according to the fieldwork. This suggests that what the editors understand as "preprint" in the terminology of *Dulcinea* differs from the definition of this type of manuscript in the instructions to authors. Thus, of the 68 journals that authorise self-archiving according to *Dulcinea*, 27 fall into the “Confusing Mention” and 22 into the “No Mention” categories established in the fieldwork. Most of the 135 journals in the "NO" category in *Dulcinea* also fall into these categories.

Given their supposed orientation towards open science, it is interesting to note that only 26 (25.5%) of the 102 OA journals with *OPF* records authorise self-archiving of the "submitted version", compared to 66 (33.3%) out of the 198 OA journals with records in *Dulcinea*. Moreover, considering the lower percentage of journals that accept this type of self-archiving, it is interesting to note that the fieldwork observed explicit acceptance of preprints as manuscripts in only 18 OA journals that accept self-archiving of the "submitted version" out of the 102 journals in *OPF* (17.6%), and in 27 of the 198 journals in *Dulcinea* (13.6%).

4.5 Analysis according to the CMS of the journal

For 188 titles, it was possible to determine the version of the CMS used to manage the journal's website (see Table IX). A total of 172 journals use some version of the Open Journal System (OJS) provided by the [Public Knowledge Project \(PKP\)](#), the oldest version being 2.4.6.0, the newest 3.4.0.5. The other systems used are Academia Pro, Adobe Page Mill, Joomla, Lodel and Webnode (one case each), Drupal (six cases) and WordPress (six cases).

Table IX. Statement of preprint policy by CMS of journal (Source: Authors own work)

CMS	No. of journals	Acceptance				% of clarity (YES+NO)
		YES	NO	CM	NM	
Drupal (various versions)	6	1		2	3	16.7%
OJS 2.4.X.X	3	1			2	33.3%
OJS 3.1.X.X	13	1		6	6	7.7%
OJS 3.2.X.X	64	10	2	24	28	18.7%
OJS 3.3.X.X	86	9	3	45	29	14.0%
OJS 3.4.X.X	6				6	0.0%
WordPress (various versions)	6	1		1	4	16.7%
Other CMS with 1 occurrence each	5			1	4	0.0%
No CMS / CMS not identifiable	32	11		10	11	34.4%
Total	221	34	5	89	93	17.6%

From the data collected, it is not possible to infer much about the relationship between the percentage of clarity and the CMS used, or the different versions of the same CMS. The group of journals with the highest and most significant percentage of clarity (33.4%) is the group without a CMS or with no identifiable CMS. This group includes the journals published by Elsevier and other commercial publishers, which, as noted above (Table IV), tend to state their preprint policy more clearly than others.

Journals using the clearly dominant OJS (77.8% of journals in the sample) are often characterised by the presence of very similar or identical texts in their instructions to authors. This can be explained by the existence of OJS templates with texts for much of the journal's website, with models that make it easier for editors to write the submission instructions and checklists for authors. The fieldwork thus revealed that OJS templates play an important role in the way editors formulate their policies and instructions to authors, as it was found that a significant number of journals belonging to different publishers have identical or very similar content. This is a phenomenon that can be traced beyond the sample analysed. For example, Google phrase searches for sentences extracted from the instructions to authors of these journals returned thousands of results, most of which appear to be from websites of OJS journals published worldwide:

- "La petición no ha sido publicada previamente, ni se ha presentado a otra revista" [*translation: Petition has not been previously published, nor has it been submitted to another journal*]
(<https://www.google.com/search?q=%22La+petici%C3%B3n+no+ha+ido+publicada+previamente,+ni+se+ha+presentado+a+otra+revista%22>) returned **1,270** results (2025/3/27).
- "El envío no ha sido publicado previamente ni se ha enviado previamente a otra revista" [*translation: Submission has not been previously published or previously submitted to another journal*]
(<https://www.google.com/search?q=%22El+env%C3%ADo+no+ha+ido+publicado+previamente+ni+se+ha+enviado+previamente+a+otra+revista%22>) returned **677** results (2025/3/27).
- "The submission has not been previously published, nor is it before another journal for consideration"
(<https://www.google.com/search?q=%22The+submission+has+not+been+previously+published%2C+nor+is+it+before+another+journal+for+consideration%22>) returned **57,900** results (2025/3/27).

Given the influence that OJS may have on the formulation of instructions due to the presence of standard texts in the "Checklist for the preparation of submissions" sections of the journal websites, it was considered relevant to analyse the relationship between preprint policy and OJS version used to determine whether the most recent versions exhibited greater clarity and alignment with open science principles in relation to preprints. The results of this analysis

show no clear trend towards a higher percentage of clarity in successive OJS versions. The average degree of clarity for the 172 journals published with this software is 15.1%, while the clarity percentage for the two most recent versions (3.3.X.X.X and 3.4.X.X.X) is 13.0%. As the number of installations observed of version 3.4 was very small, an analysis was conducted of version 3.4.0.3 installed on the servers of Hermes Data S. A. de C. V., which strongly suggested that there are no templates more oriented towards open science that would help publishers ensure that their preprint policy is clearly stated.

5. Discussion

Based on the results obtained, this section attempts to respond to the questions posed for the study:

- Q1: Do the top-ranked Spanish scientific journals in the *Scimago Journal & Country Rank* comply with the requirement for clarity on acceptance of preprints as manuscripts for evaluation stipulated in the discussion paper on preprints issued by the COPE Council (2018)?
- Q2: To what extent does the type of publisher and form of access influence policies on the acceptance of preprints as manuscripts for evaluation?
- Q3: To what extent does the academic discipline influence policies on the acceptance of preprints as manuscripts for evaluation?
- Q4: What is the relationship between policies on the acceptance of preprints as manuscripts for evaluation and the self-archiving policies specified for the journals analysed in the *Dulcinea* and *Open Policy Finder* directories?
- Q5: What is the relationship between the CMS software used to publish the journal and the clarity of its preprint policy?

The insights and conclusions have been formulated based on the limitations stated in the “materials and methods” section regarding the representativeness of the journals analysed in relation to the totality of Spanish academic venues. However, we understand that the methodological approach used for this present work may serve as a basis for future more exhaustive studies.

Q1. Only 17.6% of the journals analysed clearly state their preprint policy in their manuscript submission requirements, while a lower percentage (15.4%) explicitly state that they accept the submission of preprints as manuscripts to be evaluated.

The fact that 82.4% of the journals analysed do not follow the recommendation for clarity on preprints issued by the COPE Council (2018) may indicate either a lack of knowledge of these guidelines or a deliberate decision by the journals not to adopt the recommendations of an organisation that has become a benchmark for integrity and ethics in scientific publication. The lack of specificity also suggests an implicit rejection of preprints, as stipulating that previously “published” papers are not accepted without identifying preprints as an exception or expressly defining them as “unpublished” may give authors the impression that preprints will not be accepted as manuscripts.

The figure of 15.4% of journals that provide clear, affirmative statements of acceptance of preprints already in circulation before the review process is considerably lower than the 39.2% observed five years ago in the TRANsparency in Scholarly Publishing and Open Science Evolution [TRANSPOSE] study (Klebel *et al.*, 2020), which covers high-impact international journals normally published by major publishing groups. However, the findings of the present study are consistent with those of the survey of Spanish publishers by Abadal *et al.* (2023),

which, considering journals in all subject areas, found that an almost identical percentage of 15% of journals accepted preprints as manuscripts for evaluation.

Q2. The few commercial publishers in the sample are the clearest about their policy and the most explicit in their acceptance of preprints. OA journals clearly constitute the majority of the sample, but they are actually less rather than more likely to accept preprints.

Although the number of journals published by commercial publishers in the sample analysed is relatively low compared to that of non-commercial publishers (most of which are universities), the results clearly show that commercial publishers are more likely to accept preprints. These results should be treated with caution when considering whether this is a generalisable trend, given the large number of journals in the sample produced by the same commercial publisher (Elsevier). In any case, there is an increasingly common practice among journals produced by publishing groups of adopting the same policies for a large number of titles in different disciplines (Klebel *et al.*, 2020; *Wikipedia*, 2024).

The findings on the relationship between the acceptance of preprints and the access status of the journals are consistent with the finding mentioned above of a wider acceptance of preprints among journals published by commercial publishers, as these include the majority of the few titles in the sample with paywalls (4.5%). The paradox observed should therefore be taken with caution: the few titles that explicitly reject preprints are OA titles, while the largest proportion of those that explicitly accept preprints are paywall titles. In both cases, however, the number of confusing mentions, or those that do not address preprints at all, is much higher. Although the percentage of explicit mentions is higher among paywall journals, it can be assumed that this is due not to the nature of paywall access, but rather to the fact that the three journals in this group that explicitly accept preprints are commercial Elsevier titles with a common editorial policy for both OA and paywall titles.

Q3. Experimental and health sciences journals have clearer instructions and are more likely to state explicit acceptance of preprints.

The classification of journals by academic discipline reveals the biases of the database used, as well as the much larger volume of scientific publishing in the humanities and social sciences in the Spanish academic world (Claudio-González *et al.*, 2017; Navas-Fernández *et al.*, 2018). In this context, it is inevitable that in absolute terms the highest number of journals that state acceptance of preprints as manuscripts should be in the field of social sciences, although this is not the case in terms of percentages of the total. Thus, while the categories of "Confusing Mention" and "No Mention" constitute the majority in all fields, journals in the fields of medicine and health sciences and natural sciences and mathematics are the most likely to explicitly accept preprints. These findings are consistent with a larger tradition of preprints in the experimental sciences, whereby the culture of science communication prioritises the need for greater agility in the presentation of results (Ni & Waltman, 2024) and the incorporation of open science practices is more palpable (Klebel *et al.*, 2020). Given the nature of the research and the culture of communication in the social sciences, it is revealing that the only five journals that explicitly reject preprints are in this field, especially considering that *SJ&CR* classifies four of these five journals simultaneously in the "Arts and Humanities" field.

Q4. A total of 26.9% of the journals identified in *Open Policy Finder* accept self-archiving of the "submitted version" while for *Dulcinea* this figure is 33%. These values are significantly higher than the 15.4% of journals in the sample that explicitly accept preprints as manuscripts for evaluation according to the information on their websites. In any case, these findings should be interpreted with attention to the low percentage of titles in *Open Policy*

***Finder* (48.87%), as well as the inconsistencies observed in the information about the same journals in the two directories and in the information on the journals' websites.**

The data obtained show that the percentage of journals that accept self-archiving of submitted versions is higher than the percentage that state acceptance of preprints as manuscripts in the instructions to authors on their websites. This is a significant discrepancy, which may be explained by the large number of journals whose websites either contain confusing references to preprints or do not mention them at all. One of the possible reasons for such a discrepancy may be to preserve anonymity in double-blind reviews. However, many of the discrepancies are probably due to a time lapse between when the policy texts were written for the journal's website and when the record was completed in one of the aforementioned directories. It should also be noted that publishers are not required to give a yes-or-no answer on preprints when writing the submission policies for their journals' websites, as they do for the question of self-archiving at the time of registration of the record in both directories.

Moreover, it is plausible to assume that publishers do not tend to ensure regular updating of their information in this type of directory, which would also explain the contradictions observed for many journals between the information contained in *Open Policy Finder* and that in *Dulcinea*. Overall, the results show that in a significant number of cases these directories do not clearly reflect what the journals state on their website, calling into question their effectiveness as a source for authors seeking journals that accept preprints for evaluation and allow self-archiving of the submitted version. It should be noted that a "submitted version", without necessarily being a preprint conceived as a document made public by the author without undergoing peer review and without the necessary connection to the journal submission process, is equivalent in terms of content. It might therefore be assumed that self-archived papers should be treated similarly to manuscripts circulating in preprint repositories as non-peer-reviewed versions. However, the results of this study suggest that this is an erroneous assumption, which to some extent underscores the advice that can be found in author guidelines (ASAPbio, 2021; Brinkman *et al.*, 2023; Hettne *et al.*, 2021) that recommend consulting the *OPF* directory as a way of identifying journals that accept submissions of preprints as manuscripts for review.

Delving further into the question of self-archiving policies, it is worth noting that a significant number of the OA journals included in the sample are committed to ensuring that the version published in the journal matches the one circulating in repositories via the OA green route. In some cases this commitment is defended with very elaborate arguments referring to the bibliometric effect of one or the other option, justifying the prohibition of self-archiving the version submitted, or the version evaluated prior to the published version, as a means of preventing the journal from losing citations in certain databases due to the presence of multiple versions in institutional and research repositories that do not correctly cite the link to the version of the record on the journal website. It is conceivable that this may be an additional reason for not accepting the submission of preprints as manuscripts for evaluation. In summary, the lack of clarity about self-archiving at the different stages of the editorial process may be considered consistent with the lack of clarity observed in the manuscript acceptance policy.

Q5. OJS is the content manager for 77.4% of the journals, but only 15.1% of the 172 journals using OJS clearly state their preprint policy, a figure even lower than the 17.6% clarity of the sample as a whole.

The similarity of the instructions for the submission of manuscripts on a significant number of OJS journal websites highlights the potential for improving the level of clarity by explicitly

including the subject of preprints in OJS templates or examples associated with the programme, as well as the option of configuring the link to the preprint in the submission form or in the metadata of the final published version. The comparative analysis conducted in this research of texts in the submission guidelines of OJS journals has confirmed the influence of the text templates included with the programme. Unfortunately, in the journals that use the most up-to-date versions of the programme, there is no notable improvement in terms of the clarity of the instructions on the question of preprints, which is attributable both to a limitation of the templates themselves and to a lack of reflection on the part of the journal editors on the need to adapt them so that they clearly state their preprint policy. It is therefore reasonable to assume that greater clarity about preprints and self-archiving in OJS templates would lead to a substantial improvement in the clarity on this point in the author instructions of the journals that use the programme, provided that the importance of this change in the templates is highlighted in the release notes.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal a low level of clarity in the instructions to authors on preprints and a minimal number of journals that explicitly state their acceptance of preprints. This contrasts with the heightened importance that preprints have acquired since the end of the last century in the context of open science. In particular, non-commercial publishers operated by universities and public science institutions are currently in the process of collectively aligning their policies with the principles of open science, while commercial publishers are also embracing these principles to attract authors to their journals. In international science policy documents, preprints are considered an essential component of the green route to OA, and of a scientific approach that is more transparent, agile and participatory, involving varying degrees of open peer review. In this context, the COPE guidelines on the clarity of information constitute an indispensable aid for publishers when determining whether to accept or reject preprint submissions to their journals. These guidelines should be integrated into OJS templates, given their significant influence on the management of scientific content, providing publishers with text options that will clearly state their preprint policy to authors.

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Research data

The raw research data captured in the analysis of journals is available at OSF:
<https://osf.io/e8jqv>

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