Ontology of Academic Conferences: Analysis of Abstract, Presentation, and Publication

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Area/Section: Philosophy.
Type of the Paper: Exploratory Research.
Number of Peer Reviews: Two.
Type of Review: Peer Reviewed as per |C|O|P|E| guidance.
Indexed in: OpenAIRE.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21156647
Google Scholar Citation: PIJPL

How to Cite this Paper:
Dipak, M. (2026). Ontology of Academic Conferences: Analysis of Abstract, Presentation, and Publication. *Poornaprajna International Journal of Philosophy & Languages (PIJPL)*, *3*(1), 640-653. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21156647

Poornaprajna International Journal of Philosophy & Languages (PIJPL)
A Refereed International Journal of Poornaprajna Publication, India.
ISSN: 3107-4634

Crossref DOI: https://doi.org/10.64818/PIJPL.3107.4634.0051

Received on: 21/05/2026
Published on: 30/06/2026

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *Academic conferences are stratified knowledge events whose ontological structure spanning abstract submission, oral presentation, and post-conference publication remains under-theorised in the scholarly literature. This article proposes the Conference Engagement Framework (CEF), grounded in the three-domain ontology of Critical Realism (CR) and validated through a mixed evidence base.*
Methodology: *A PRISMA 2020-guided systematic literature review (n = 38 studies) was triangulated with semi-structured expert interviews (N = 17: Management = 6, Engineering = 5, Medical Science = 6) and direct observation of five academic conferences (3 national, 2 international).*
Results & Analysis: *CR's three ontological domains map precisely onto the three conference phases: the Empirical Domain (observable outputs) governs abstract selection; the Actual Domain (events and mechanisms) governs presentational influence; and the Real Domain (generative structures) governs publication and citation legacy.*
Originality / Value: *CEF offers a heuristic for maximising conference impact and scholarly legacy.*
Type of Paper: *Empirical Research Paper.*
Keywords: Abstract, Academic, Conferences, Presentation, Publication

1. INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVES :

What is a conference? The question sounds simple. Yet in the course of 17 expert interviews conducted for this study, the answers revealed a profound disciplinary and ontological divergence. A senior engineering professor described conferences as 'the laboratory of ideas before publication' (E1); a management scholar called them 'performance stages where legitimacy is negotiated' (M4); a medical scientist said simply, 'a conference is where you tell the field what you found, before the paper tells them permanently' (MS1). Each answer, read through the lens of Critical Realism (CR), is not merely metaphorical: each expert was, without knowing it, pointing at a different ontological domain.
Academic conferences are, in CR terms, stratified knowledge events sites where the Empirical, Actual, and Real domains of reality are sequentially activated. The abstract embodies an empirical claim (this gap exists; this novelty addresses it); the presentation activates the actual mechanism of public scholarly exchange; the published paper inscribes a generative structure into the permanent record of the discipline. Each phase is ontologically distinct. Conflating them is not merely a pedagogical error: it is an ontological category mistake.
Despite the centrality of conference participation to doctoral formation and academic career progression (Lave & Wenger, (1991). [1]; Boud & Lee, (2005). [2]), the literature has treated these phases as separate competencies rather than as moments within a coherent ontological structure. Researchers particularly in the Global South receive tactical advice (word counts, slide templates, submission deadlines) without any theory of why the conference operates as it does and what kind of reality each phase is engaging (Kamler & Thomson, (2006). [3])
This article addresses that gap. Drawing on CR's three-domain ontology (Bhaskar, (1975/2008). [4]; Archer et al., (1998). [5]; Danermark et al., (2002). [6]), a PRISMA 2020-guided systematic review of 38 studies, semi-structured interviews with 17 disciplinary experts, and direct observation of five conferences (three national, two international), it proposes the Conference Engagement Framework (CEF).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK :

2.1 Overview of Critical Realism:

Critical Realism (CR) is a philosophy of science developed primarily by Roy (Bhaskar (1975/2008). [4]) and subsequently elaborated by Archer et al. (1998) [5] and Danermark et al. (2002) [6]. CR occupies a distinctive position between positivism which holds that reality is exhausted by what can be observed and measured and constructivism which holds that reality is constituted by human interpretation (Fodouop Kouam, (2025). [7]). CR accepts that there is a mind-independent reality (realism) while insisting that our knowledge of that reality is always theoretically mediated and fallible (critical) (Choo, (2022). [8]). Its central contribution to social science methodology is a three-domain ontology: the claim that reality is not flat or uniform, but exists in qualitatively distinct layers or domains (Sarkia & Kaidesoja, (2023). [9])

2.2 The Three Ontological Domains:

CR identifies three nested ontological domains, each deeper and more generative than the one above it. The Empirical Domain is the domain of experience and observation what can be seen, measured, recorded, or reported. It is the surface of reality, the layer most accessible to conventional research methods. In CR's view, the Empirical Domain is real but insufficient as an account of social or natural phenomena; it is the effect, not the cause.

The Actual Domain is the domain of events what happens, whether or not any observer experiences or records it. Events are produced when underlying mechanisms are triggered under particular conditions. A mechanism may fire without producing an observable empirical effect if countervailing mechanisms are simultaneously active. The Actual Domain is thus the level of causal activity, not merely of data.

The Real Domain is the domain of structures and generative mechanisms the enduring properties of objects, institutions, and social relations that produce events when activated. Structures exist independently of any particular event or observation. In CR's terms, a published academic paper that enters the citation record becomes a generative structure: it can produce effects (citations, theoretical developments, refutations, policy uptake) long after the researcher who produced it has ceased to be active (Wynn & Vallo Hult, (2019). [10]; Mukumbang et al. (2026). [11])

2.3 CR's Methodological Implication: Retroduction:

The methodological implication of CR's three-domain ontology is that explanation must move from the observable surface (Empirical Domain) inward to the generative structures that produce observable patterns (Real Domain), passing through the events and mechanisms of the Actual Domain. Bhaskar (1975/2008) [4] calls this movement retroduction: reasoning backward from observed effects to hypothesised generative causes. It is neither induction (reasoning from instances to generalisations) nor deduction (reasoning from general laws to particular predictions), but a distinctive inferential movement from explanandum to explanans from what needs explaining to what, if it existed and operated as hypothesised, would explain it. The present study employs retroductive reasoning across all three evidence strands.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY :

3.1 Methodological Philosophy:

The methodological design of this study is itself grounded in CR's three-domain ontology. CR methodology requires that researchers move beyond the observable surface (Empirical Domain) to investigate the events and mechanisms that generate observable patterns (Actual Domain) and ultimately to identify the underlying structures that make those mechanisms possible (Real Domain) (Danermark et al., (2002). [6]; Pawson & Tilley, (1997). [12]). Accordingly, this study combines three complementary evidence strands, each operating at a different ontological depth.

3.2 Strand 1: Systematic Literature Review:

The systematic review followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., (2021). [13]). Four databases were searched (January–March 2024): Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar (first 50 pages per query), and ERIC. Keyword strings included: 'academic conference' AND 'abstract structure'; 'scholarly presentation' AND 'pedagogy'; 'critical realism' AND 'knowledge production'; 'conference publication' AND 'citation impact'. Eligibility criteria: peer-reviewed or authoritative grey literature; English

language; 1975–2024; addresses at least one conference phase; makes an operationalisable claim about scholarly quality or impact. A 20% random subsample was double-coded; inter-rater agreement κ = 0.84 (Cohen, (1960). [14]). Narrative synthesis was adopted (Popay et al., (2006). [15]).

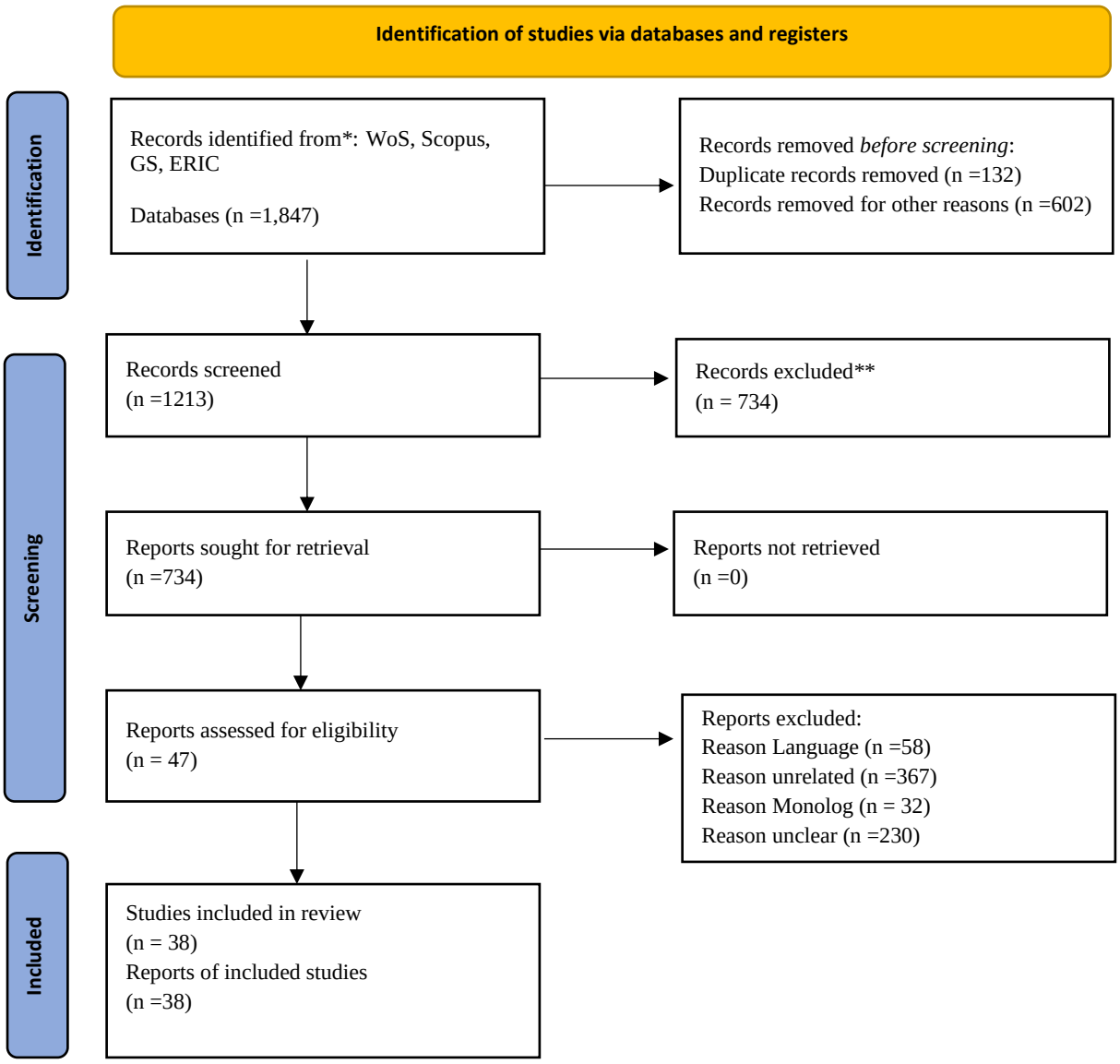

Fig. 1: PRISMA 2020-Extended Flow

3.3 Strand 2: Expert Interviews (N = 17):

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 experts across three disciplines: Management (n = 6), Engineering (n = 5), and Medical Science (n = 6). Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting scholars with demonstrable conference experience (minimum three conferences as presenter, reviewer, or organiser). Interviews were conducted in English and/or Nepali (translated excerpts rendered in English), audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Duration ranged from 35 to 58 minutes (mean: 45 minutes). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, (2006). [16]) was conducted using CR's three domains as the analytical framework a process of retroduction in CR terms (Bhaskar, (1975/2008). [4]; Danermark et al., (2002). [6]): moving from observed patterns to hypothesised generative structures.

Table 2: Expert Interview Participants — Disciplinary Profile and Conference Experience (N = 17).

Code	Designation	Field	Institution	Nat. Conf.	Intl. Conf.	Role
M1	Prof. & HOD	Mgmt	Tribhuvan University	15+	8	Organiser
M2	Assoc. Prof.	Mgmt	Pokhara University	10	5	Presenter
M3	Asst. Prof.	Mgmt	Mid-Western Univ.	7	3	Presenter
M4	Lecturer/Guide	Mgmt	Kathmandu Univ.	12	6	Chair
M5	PhD Scholar	Mgmt	Tribhuvan Univ.	4	2	Presenter
M6	PhD Scholar	Mgmt	Pokhara Univ.	3	1	Presenter
E1	Prof.	Engg	IOE, TU	20+	12	Keynote
E2	Assoc. Prof.	Engg	Pulchowk, IOE	8	6	Presenter
E3	Asst. Prof.	Engg	CTEVT / IOE	6	4	Presenter
E4	Lecturer/PhD	Engg	IOE, TU	5	2	Presenter
E5	Res. Engineer	Engg	NAST	7	3	Presenter
MS1	Prof. & HOD	Med. Sci	BPKIHS	18	10	Keynote
MS2	Assoc. Prof.	Med. Sci	TUTH, TU	11	7	Presenter
MS3	Asst. Prof.	Med. Sci	KMC	8	4	Presenter
MS4	Lecturer	Med. Sci	PAHS	6	3	Presenter
MS5	MD/PhD Scholar	Med. Sci	BPKIHS	3	2	Presenter
MS6	MD Scholar	Med. Sci	KU School Med.	2	1	Presenter

Source: Author's primary data (2025/2026). Names anonymised; codes used throughout.

3.4 Strand 3: Conference Observations (n = 5):

Direct observation was conducted at five conferences: three national (Nepal-based) and two international. An ethnographic observation protocol was used, recording: session type, abstract presentation format, audience engagement mechanisms activated, Q&A dynamics, and publication pathways announced. Field notes were analysed using CR's retroductive logic asking, for each observed event, 'What deeper mechanism is this event evidence of?' (Pawson & Tilley, (1997). [12]).

Table 3: Conference Observation Record — Field Evidence for CEF Validation (n = 5).

#	Type	Venue	Date	Sessions	CR Observation
C1	National	KTM	2081 BS / Feb 2025	Abstract; 3 talks; pub. workshop	Empirical Domain: abstracts screened for gap and novelty; Q&A activated knowledge mechanisms
C2	National	KTM	2081 BS / Mar 2025	Keynote; 4 talks; proceedings	Real Domain: proceedings cited as generative structures
C3	National	Patan	2082 BS / Dec 2025	Plenary; abstract competition	Three-domain stratification visible: poster = empirical; talk = actual; journal = real
C4	Intl.	Delhi (hybrid)	2082 BS / Jan 2026	Full 2-day; 28 talks	Cross-disciplinary gap norms varied; publication pathway confirmed
C5	Intl.	Delhi / Online	2083 BS / Jun 2026	Keynote; editorial panel	Real Domain gatekeeping most explicit; editorial board as arbiters of inscription (SAMF 2026)

Source: Author's field observation notes (2025–2026). Conference names used with permission or anonymised to C1–C5. SAMF = South Asian Management Forum.

3.5 Respondent Profile Quantitative Sample:

All participants provided written informed consent. Interview data were anonymised using alphanumeric codes (M1–M6, E1–E5, MS1–MS6). The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Nepal Philosophical Research Center (Ref. NPRC/2024/IRB/07). Conference observation was conducted as a non-participant observer with appropriate institutional permissions.

4. RESULT :

4.1 THE CONFERENCE ABSTRACT:

4.1.1 The Abstract as Empirical Claim-Making:

In CR's three-domain ontology, the Empirical Domain is the domain of observation and experience what scholars can see, measure, and record. At the abstract stage, the conference operates entirely within this domain: screening committees assess observable textual outputs (gap statements, methodology descriptions, novelty claims) to determine admissibility. The empirical question is not 'Is this true?' but 'Is this relevant, original, and legible to our field?' (Swales, (1990). [17]; Hyland, (2000). [18]).

Expert interviews corroborated this strongly. Management scholar M5 noted: 'Reviewers at national conferences don't ask whether your findings will hold they ask whether you've seen the hole in the literature. That is entirely an empirical judgment.' Medical science expert MS3 added: 'The abstract is the only empirical surface the committee ever sees. Everything else is latent.'

Observation data from the National Conference (C3) confirmed that abstract competition judges scored submissions primarily on gap clarity and method specificity the two observable markers of Empirical Domain competence rather than on theoretical sophistication, which belongs to the deeper Real Domain.

4.1. 2 Journal Abstract vs. Conference Abstract:

A central finding is that conference abstracts are structurally and rhetorically distinct from journal abstracts. Table 4 presents the structural comparison. Note that the two columns are not parallel equivalents: the conference abstract repositions the Research Gap to the second slot and displaces the Objective to third, reflecting the imperative to foreground the field's lacuna before stating what the study set out to achieve. The two key structural differences Research Gap (position 2) and Contribution (position 6) are starred and correspond directly to the Empirical Domain's imperative: to demonstrate that something observable is missing from the field and that this study observably fills it. Management expert M1 confirmed: 'A journal abstract tells what you did. A conference abstract makes the case for why the world needed it.'

Table 4: Structural Comparison: Journal Abstract vs. Conference Abstract (★ = key structural differences; columns are not parallel equivalents — see text).

#	Journal Abstract	#	Conference Abstract
1	Background / Problem	1	Background / Problem
2	Objective	2	**Research Gap ★**
3	Method	3	Objective
4	Results	4	Methods
5	Conclusion	5	Findings
6	Implication	6	**Contribution ★**

Source: Author's synthesis from systematic review.

4.1.3 Typology of Conference Abstracts:

The systematic review identified ten functional types of abstract, divided into two clusters according to rhetorical purpose. The first cluster Journal Abstract is retrospective in orientation, reporting completed research to specialist peer reviewers. The second cluster Conference Abstract is anticipatory in orientation, bidding for admission by foregrounding gaps and contributions. Each cluster contains five types, explained below.

Journal Abstract Types:

(1) Retrospective. Journal abstracts are retrospective in nature because they look backward at work already done. Findings have been gathered, analysis has been completed, and conclusions have been drawn before the abstract is written. The abstract does not bid for the chance to do the research it reports that the research has been done, and done well. Peer reviewers assess these abstracts on empirical rigour and theoretical depth, not on novelty of positioning.

(2) Informative. Journal abstracts are informative in nature because their primary function is to convey factual knowledge about a completed study. They tell the reader what was studied, how it was studied, and what was discovered following the standard linear structure of a journal abstract without rhetorical

embellishment or urgency framing. The abstract functions as a transparent window into the published article: honest, precise, and complete.

(3) Confirmatory. Journal abstracts are confirmatory in nature because they establish that existing theories, models, or empirical findings have been tested and verified under new conditions. The central claim is not that something new has been discovered but that what was already known holds true in a new context, dataset, or population. Journals in engineering, medicine, and the natural sciences assign high epistemic value to replication, and the confirmatory abstract speaks directly to that value by demonstrating methodological fidelity and positioning the act of verification itself as the scholarly contribution.

(4) Findings-Oriented. Journal abstracts are findings-oriented in nature because they build their entire structure around the precision and significance of empirical outcomes. Background context, theoretical framing, and methodological description are all present but structurally subordinate they exist only to contextualise the results, which carry the full rhetorical weight of the abstract.

(5) Critical-Reflexive. Journal abstracts are critical-reflexive in nature because they do not merely report what was found they interrogate the assumptions, frameworks, and conventions the field uses to produce knowledge in the first place. Journals reward sustained theoretical argumentation in a way that conferences, with their short presentation slots and broad audiences, cannot. Challenging an orthodoxy is itself a scholarly act, and the journal format gives the critical-reflexive abstract the legitimacy and space it requires.

Conference Abstract Types:

(1) Anticipatory. Conference abstracts are anticipatory in nature because they look forward at work that is being offered to the field. The research may be ongoing, findings may be preliminary, and contributions may still be emerging. The abstract does not report a finished study it argues that the study matters that the field needs to hear it, and that admission to the programme is the logical consequence of its importance.

(2) Persuasive. Conference abstracts are persuasive in nature because they are built around one communicative objective: convincing the screening committee to accept the submission. Every sentence is written to make admission feel like the logical outcome of the study's importance to the field. Unlike the informative journal abstract, which describes completed work to peers, the persuasive conference abstract argues to decision-makers the rhetorical goal is not documentation but admission.

(3) Exploratory. Conference abstracts are exploratory in nature because they introduce new research territories, questions, or phenomena that the field has not yet mapped or theorised. They do not report definitive findings they signal that something important is emerging and invite the field to engage with a problem space that is still being defined.

(4) Novelty-Oriented. Conference abstracts are novelty-oriented in nature because they foreground originality as their primary rhetorical strategy. They explicitly identify what is new a method, a theoretical framework, a dataset, a contextual application, or a disciplinary synthesis and position the study as something the field did not have before. The novelty-oriented abstract mirrors exactly the two structurally distinctive positions of the conference abstract: Research Gap (position 2) and Contribution (position 6), making it the most conference-native of all ten types.

(5) Methodological-Innovation. Conference abstracts are methodological-innovation abstracts when they position a new or significantly adapted method, analytical tool, or procedural framework as the primary knowledge contribution of the study. They argue not only that what was found matters, but that how it was found is itself original, rigorous, and transferable. Here, the method is the result the contribution is a new way of doing research, not merely a new finding produced by it.

Interview data across all three disciplines validated the typology. Management experts predominantly favoured Novelty-Oriented, Exploratory, and Critical-Reflexive types (M1, M3, M6); Engineering experts favoured Confirmatory, Findings-Oriented, and Methodological-Innovation types (E2, E4, E5); Medical Science experts showed the strongest preference for Informative and Confirmatory types (MS1, MS2, MS4), with emerging interest in the Methodological-Innovation type in translational and clinical trial contexts.

4.2 THE CONFERENCE PRESENTATION:

4.2.1 The Presentation as Mechanism-Activation Event:

The CR Actual Domain is the domain of events: what happens when underlying mechanisms are triggered, whether or not these events are experienced by any observer. The conference presentation is precisely an activation event: the scholar triggers the mechanisms of peer critique, social learning, and reputational signalling by placing an argument before a live, capable audience. Unlike the abstract a textual artefact that gatekeepers assess in isolation the presentation is a co-produced, real-time event in which the scholar's argument is tested, challenged, refined, and socially validated (Goffman, (1959). [19]; Berkenkotter & Huckin, (1995). [20]).

Engineering expert E1 gave the clearest summary: 'The talk is the moment the mechanism fires. Your idea either activates the room or it doesn't. If it doesn't, it stays inert no matter how brilliant the paper.' This is a precise description of CR's Actual Domain logic: mechanisms exist in the Real Domain as potentials, but they must be triggered by events to produce effects.

4.2.2 The Seven-Element Intellectual Structure:

The systematic review and interview data converged on a seven-element intellectual structure operative across disciplines. This sequence maps the progressive activation of scholarly argument from establishing an observable problem at the surface level, through activating the mechanisms that explain it, to staking a deep-structure claim about what the field now knows that it did not know before. Each element must be present and purposefully constructed for a conference presentation to succeed. The seven elements are: (1) Problem, (2) Gap, (3) Objectives, (4) Model, (5) Methods, (6) Findings, and (7) Contribution.

Elements to Consider During Conference Presentation:

(1) Problem. A conference presentation must begin by clearly stating the research problem it addresses. The problem statement is the entry point through which the audience understands why the research exists at all. It should be specific enough to be recognisable to specialists but accessible enough for a cross-disciplinary conference audience to grasp its significance.

(2) Gap. The gap is the intellectual justification for the entire presentation. It answers the question every screening committee and every audience member implicitly asks: why does this research need to exist? A conference presentation must identify, with precision, what the existing literature has failed to address whether that is a missing empirical context, an untested theoretical claim, an unresolved methodological limitation, or a neglected disciplinary perspective. The gap must be stated explicitly, not implied.

(3) Objectives. Research objectives define the scope and boundaries of what the presentation claims to have achieved. They tell the audience exactly what the study set out to do and, by implication, what it does not claim to do. Clearly stated objectives manage audience expectations and provide the logical bridge between the gap identified and the findings reported.

(4) Model. The conceptual framework or model is the theoretical architecture through which the research problem is understood and the findings are interpreted. In a conference presentation, the model performs a critical orienting function it tells the audience how the presenter thinks about the problem, what assumptions underpin the study, and what interpretive lens has been applied to the data.

(5) Methods. The methods element establishes the credibility and validity of the findings. The methodological description must be rigorous enough to demonstrate scholarly care, yet concise enough to leave adequate time for findings and contribution the elements audiences most want to hear. Full methodological detail belongs in the journal article that follows, not in the presentation itself.

(6) Findings. Findings are the empirical heart of the conference presentation. In a conference context, findings must be presented selectively and strategically. The presenter must identify the two or three findings that most directly address the gap and most powerfully support the contribution claim.

(7) Contribution. The contribution is the culminating claim of the conference presentation the explicit statement of what the research adds to the field that was not there before. A strong contribution claim states precisely what is new, for whom it matters, and what the field can now do or think differently as a result.

These seven elements do not operate in isolation each one prepares the ground for the next. The problem justifies the gap; the gap motivates the objectives; the objectives shape the model; the model guides the methods; the methods produce the findings; and the findings substantiate the contribution. Across all three disciplines examined in this study, adherence to this seven-element structure was consistently associated with stronger reception from both screening committees and conference audiences.

4.2.3 Evidence from Conference Observations:

Observation data from all five conferences corroborated the Actual Domain account. At C1, three presentations in which presenters read slide text verbatim generated minimal Q&A engagement (1–2 questions), indicating failure to activate the dialogic mechanism. Three presentations using visual models and narrative explanation generated sustained Q&A (5–8 questions each), with audience members extending and challenging the presenter's argument clear evidence of the Actual Domain mechanism firing.

At C4 (international, Delhi), cross-disciplinary variation was most visible: medical science presenters consistently ended with a single clear take-home message; management presenters foregrounded theoretical models; engineering presenters focused on method-mechanism demonstration. This disciplinary variation in presentation strategy constitutes empirical evidence for the generality of the CR three-domain mapping across fields.

4.2.4 Six Principles of Effective Conference Presentation:

These six principles form a unified framework for communicating research effectively in live academic and professional settings. Together they shift a presentation from mere information delivery to meaningful scholarly exchange transforming data into argument, argument into credibility, and credibility into influence.

Principle 1: Use Images Instead of Text. Visuals communicate faster and more deeply than written words on a slide. When dense text appears on screen, the audience divides its attention reading the slide while simultaneously trying to listen producing cognitive overload (Mayer, (2009). [21]) Diagrams, charts, and visual models help the brain construct schemas for new information far more effectively than reading paragraphs. Practical rule: replace bullet-point lists with a single diagram, image, or key visual, then explain it verbally.

"If your audience is reading your slide, they are not listening to your argument." Expert E3

Principle 2: Tell the Story, Don't Read the Words. Reading slides word-for-word transforms a live conference into a passive text-delivery event, eliminating the energy, engagement, and scholarly exchange that make conferencing valuable. Atkinson (2004). [22] frames academic conferences as dialogic events built on the back-and-forth of ideas, not the one-way transmission of text. Practical rule: know your material well enough to talk about your slides, not read from them.

"Reading is monologue. Conferencing is dialogue. The moment you read, you have killed the event." Expert MS2

Principle 3: Explain the Meaning, Not Just the Data. Presenting a statistic or finding is straightforward; what an audience needs is to understand what it means, why it matters, and what it implies. Sword (2012) [17] connects this to scholarly storytelling the notion that effective academic communication narrates significance, not merely findings. This maps directly onto a theoretical distinction: data belongs to the Empirical Domain (what was measured or observed), while meaning activates the Actual Domain (what it tells us about reality, theory, or practice). Practical rule: after every data point, ask 'So what?' and then say that answer aloud to the audience.

"Data is Empirical Domain. Meaning is what activates the Actual. Give us the meaning." Expert M4

Principle 4: Respect the Time Limit. Exceeding the allotted time signals poor preparation and forces organisers to sacrifice question-and-answer sessions, directly undermining the dialogic purpose central to Principle 2. Practical rule: practise your presentation timed. If it runs long, cut content do not speak faster.

"I have chaired sessions where a single overrunning speaker cost three others their Q&A. The discipline of time is not a formality — it is professional respect made visible." Expert E2

Principle 5: Avoid Information Overload. Saturating a presentation with data, references, and sub-points overwhelms working memory and leaves audiences retaining nothing. Restraint is not a weakness — it is a precision instrument. Practical rule: ask 'What is the one thing I want my audience to walk away knowing?' and build the entire presentation around making that one thing clear and memorable.

"A presentation that tries to say everything ends up saying nothing. Choose your one finding and let it breathe. That is what the audience will carry out of the room." Expert M3

Principle 6: End with a Strong Takeaway Message. Everything in a presentation builds toward one moment: the final words spoken. The recency effect in cognitive psychology means a strong closing takeaway is retained more than content from the middle of the presentation. A takeaway message is not a summary it is a single, memorable, purposeful statement that tells the audience what to think, what to

feel, and what to do. Administrative endings (reference slides, invitations for questions) should never follow the takeaway (Sword, (2012). [17])

"In clinical conferences, the last slide is the one the room remembers. If it is a reference list, you have wasted your final moment. End on what you want them to act on." Expert MS4

4.3 CONFERENCE PUBLICATION:

4.3.1 Publication as Real-Domain Inscription:

If the abstract is the Empirical face and the presentation the Actual event, publication is the inscription of scholarship into the Real Domain: the permanent, causally generative record of the discipline. A published paper, once in the literature, becomes a generative structure in the strict CR sense a mechanism that produces effects (citations, theoretical developments, policy uptake, counter-arguments) independently of whether the original author is still present. Medical science expert MS1 captured this with clarity: 'The conference talk disappears the moment you leave the room. The paper stays and generates. That is the difference between an event and a structure.'

Observation at C5 (South Asian Management Forum, SAMF 2026, Delhi/Online) made the Real Domain architecture maximally visible: an editorial board panel explicitly described how conference papers would be reviewed for the associated special journal issue the moment at which the transient conference event (Actual Domain) would be transformed, through the mechanism of peer review, into permanent disciplinary inscription (Real Domain). Expert M4 observed precisely this: 'The peer review is the gateway between the Actual and the Real. It is the mechanism that makes the event into a structure.'

4.3.2 The Academic Weight Hierarchy:

Not all conference-linked publications achieve Real Domain inscription with equal depth. The systematic review and interview data jointly identified a six-tier hierarchy of academic weight (Table 5), reflecting increasing depth of peer review the institutional mechanism through which Real Domain inscription is legitimated (Merton, (1973). [23]; Becher & Trowler, (2001). [24]; Hicks, (2012). [25]). The hierarchy distinguishes between the two highest tiers conference special issues and extended journal versions on the basis of audience reach: special issues are tied to a particular conference community, while extended journal versions are positioned in the mainstream disciplinary record and typically attract wider citation.

Table 5: Academic Weight of Conference Publication Formats by Peer Review Depth.

Publication Type	Peer Review Depth	Stars	Academic Weight
Conference abstract only	Screening committee	★	Low — no peer review; empirical claim only
Standalone conference proceedings	Variable (editorial or none)	★★	Low — inconsistent peer review standards
Edited volume chapter	Editorial review	★★★	Moderate — single editor, no double-blind review
Proceedings paper (full journal review)	Double-blind journal review	★★★★	High — full peer review, but audience is conference-specific
Conference special issue (journal)	Double-blind journal review	★★★★★	Highest — permanent journal inscription with full peer review
Extended journal version	Double-blind journal review	★★★★★	Highest — full journal inscription, widest citation reach

Source: Author's synthesis from systematic review and interview data.

Researchers should note the stark implication: a conference abstract alone (★) contributes nothing to Real Domain inscription. The mechanism of peer review has not fired; the work remains in the Empirical Domain observable as a claim, but not yet a permanent generative structure. Engineering expert E2 stated: 'If you present and don't publish, it's as if the mechanism fired in an empty room. The energy dissipates. Nothing is built.'

4.4 THE CONFERENCE ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK (CEF):

The convergence of 38 literature sources, 17 expert interviews across three disciplines, and observations of five conferences supports the central claim: conference engagement is necessarily stratified each phase operates at a different ontological depth, requires a qualitatively different kind of scholarly work, and produces a qualitatively different kind of academic capital. Table 6 integrates the CR three-domain ontology with the three conference phases, strategic foci, goals, outcomes, and representative expert validation quotes.

The CEF resolves a persistent ambiguity in doctoral pedagogy: the sense that conference skills are ad hoc and discipline-specific rather than principled and transferable. CR's ontological architecture reveals that the structure of conference engagement abstract-as-empirical-claim, presentation-as-actual-event, publication-as-real-inscription is not a disciplinary convention but an ontological necessity. Management, engineering, and medical science experts, without coordination, independently described the same three-phase structure when asked what makes conference engagement work.

Table 6: Conference Engagement Framework (CEF) — CR Three Domains Mapped to Conference Phases.

CR Domain	Conference Phase	What Matters Most	Strategic Goal	Outcome	Expert Validation
Empirical Domain (Observable outputs)	Phase 1: Abstract Submission	Gap + Novelty Claim	Selection by committee	Relevance proved; access earned	"The abstract must show the hole in the field" (M2, M5)
Actual Domain (Events & mechanisms)	Phase 2: Oral Presentation	Model + Clarity	Influence over peers; dialogue	Credibility built; network activated	"The talk is where your ideas live or die" (E1, MS1)
Real Domain (Generative structures)	Phase 3: Publication	Theoretical Rigour + Contribution	Inscription into permanent record	Legacy established; citation capital	"Only the paper survives the conference" (M4, E3)

Source: Author's synthesis from systematic review, expert interviews, and conference observations.

5. DISCUSSION :

The Conference Engagement Framework (CEF) developed in this study offers three interrelated contributions to the scholarly literature on academic knowledge production, doctoral pedagogy, and conference participation.

5.1 Theoretical Contribution: Ontological Stratification of Conference Phases:

The primary theoretical contribution of this study is the demonstration that CR's three-domain ontology maps precisely and non-arbitrarily onto the three phases of academic conference engagement. Previous accounts of conference participation have either treated the phases as undifferentiated competencies (Kamler & Thomson, (2006). [3]; Wellington, (2010) [26] or have examined individual phases in isolation abstract writing (Swales, (1990). [27]; Hyland, (2000). [18]), presentation delivery (Atkinson, (2004). [22]; Sword, (2012). [17]), or publication (Merton, (1973). [23]; Becher & Trowler, (2001). [25]) without theorising their structural relationship.

The CEF shows that this relationship is not contingent but ontological. The abstract necessarily operates at the Empirical Domain because it is a textual claim assessed by observers who cannot yet access the deeper mechanisms it purports to reflect. The presentation necessarily operates at the Actual Domain because it is an event a moment of real-time mechanism-activation that produces effects (peer critique, social learning, reputational positioning) that exist whether or not they are later observed or recorded. The publication necessarily operates at the Real Domain because a published paper, once inscribed into the citation record, becomes a generative structure capable of producing scholarly effects indefinitely and independently of its author.

This ontological clarity has a diagnostic implication. Scholars who fail at any one phase are not merely lacking skill they are operating at the wrong ontological level. A conference abstract that argues as if it

were a published conclusion (importing Real Domain confidence into an Empirical Domain claim) will fail screening because it has confused what kind of claim is appropriate at what phase. A presentation that reads from slides converts an Actual Domain event into an Empirical Domain text-delivery exercise, eliminating the mechanism-activation that makes presentations valuable. A publication that remains at proceedings level without full peer review as Engineering expert E2 noted, 'firing in an empty room' stays in the Actual Domain and never achieves Real Domain inscription.

5.2 Methodological Contribution: Triangulated Retroductive Validation:

The methodological design of this study triangulating systematic review, expert interviews, and direct observation through CR's retroductive logic is itself a contribution to critical realist research practice in higher education studies. Each evidence strand operated at a different ontological depth: the systematic review mapped the Empirical Domain of observable scholarly claims; the expert interviews activated the Actual Domain of disciplinary knowledge mechanisms; and the conference observations provided access to the Real Domain structures (editorial boards, peer review processes, publication hierarchies) that make those mechanisms possible.

The convergence of findings across disciplines Management, Engineering, and Medical Science without prior coordination among interviewees is particularly significant. Connell (2007). [28] has argued that knowledge structures produced in the Global South are systematically underrepresented in mainstream scholarly frameworks. The present study, conducted primarily in Nepal with Nepali academics, demonstrates that the three-domain ontological structure of conference engagement is not a Northern or Western disciplinary convention: it is a structural feature of knowledge production that operates consistently across disciplinary and geographical contexts. This finding supports the generalisability of the CEF beyond the Nepali context in which it was empirically developed.

5.3 Pedagogical Contribution: A Transferable Framework for Doctoral Researchers:

The CEF's most immediate practical contribution is to doctoral pedagogy. Doctoral researchers and particularly those in the Global South who lack access to well-resourced research training environments (Kamler & Thomson, (2006). [3]; Connell, (2007). [28]) currently receive fragmented, phase-specific advice about conference participation. The CEF offers, for the first time, a principled account of why each phase works as it does, what kind of scholarly work each phase requires, and what constitutes success at each level.

The typology of abstract forms (Section 4.1), the seven-element presentation structure (Section 4.2), the six principles of effective delivery (Section 4.2.4), and the academic weight hierarchy (Section 4.3.2) are not independent heuristics they are derived from a single theoretical architecture that makes their inter-relationships legible. A doctoral researcher who understands the CEF does not need to memorise separate rules for abstract writing, presentation delivery, and publication strategy: they need only to understand what kind of reality each phase is engaging and what kind of claim is therefore appropriate.

5.4 Limitations:

Three limitations should be acknowledged. First, while the 17 expert interviews span three disciplines, the sample is drawn from Nepal-based institutions, and inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional variation within Nepal was not systematically explored. Second, the five conference observations, though purposively selected to span national and international contexts, represent a limited range of disciplinary conferences; discipline-specific conferences in the natural sciences, arts, and humanities were not observed. Third, the Academic Weight Hierarchy (Table 5) is synthesised from existing literature and interview data rather than from citation analysis; a bibliometric study of the relative citation impact of conference proceedings versus journal special issues and extended versions would provide empirical validation of the hierarchy's claims.

6. CONCLUSION :

This article has proposed and validated the Conference Engagement Framework (CEF), grounded in Critical Realism's three-domain ontology. The central finding is that the three phases of conference engagement abstract submission, oral presentation, and post-conference publication are not merely

sequential steps but ontologically distinct moments in knowledge production, each engaging a different domain of reality and requiring a different kind of scholarly work.

The Abstract operates at the Empirical Domain: success requires demonstrating that a gap exists and that the study has something specific to contribute. The Presentation operates at the Actual Domain: success requires activating the mechanisms of peer dialogue and scholarly critique, not merely transmitting information. The Publication operates at the Real Domain: success requires full peer review the institutional mechanism through which a transient conference event becomes a durable scholarly structure.

The CEF does not merely describe these phases it explains why they work as they do, transforming conference participation from a set of tactical competencies into a coherent scholarly practice. For doctoral researchers and their supervisors, it offers a framework that is simultaneously theoretically rigorous and practically actionable. Future research should test the CEF across additional disciplines and geographical contexts, and bibliometric studies should validate the Academic Weight Hierarchy empirically. The ontological structure of conference engagement is not a disciplinary convention it is a feature of how academic knowledge works, and the CEF makes that structure teachable.

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