



# Authors' perspectives on academic publishing: initial observations from a large-scale global survey

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### Abstract

Authors are at the heart of academic publishing, but their voices are underrepresented in discussions about improving the academic publishing system. To understand the viewpoints of authors on various aspects of academic publishing and the challenges they face, we developed a large-scale survey entitled "Author perspectives on the academic publishing process" and made it available in December 2016. The survey has received 8,795 responses; this paper is based on the interim results drawn from 5,293 survey responses, and presents some interesting and thought-provoking trends that were observed in the authors' responses, such as their interpretation of plagiarism and decisive factors in journal selection, as well as their thoughts on what needs to change in the publishing system for it to be more author-friendly. Some of the most important findings of the survey were: (1) the majority of the authors found manuscript preparation to be the most challenging task in the publication process, (2) the impact factor of a journal was reported to be the most important consideration for journal selection, (3) most authors found journal guidelines to be incomplete, (4) major gaps existed in author-journal communication, and (5) although awareness of ethics was high, awareness of good publication practice standards was low. Moreover, more than half of the participants indicated that among areas for improvement in the publishing system, they would like to see changes in the time it takes to publish a paper, the peer review process, and the fairness and objectivity of the publication process. These findings indicate the necessity of making the journal publication process more author-centered and smoothing the way for authors to get published.

### Keywords

Academic publishing; Author perspectives; Journal guidelines; Journal submission system; Peer review

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## Introduction

Scholarly publishing is constantly evolving through innovations in publishing models, peer review types, avenues of research dissemination, and so on, with the intention of filling known gaps and building a better publishing system. However, conversations about existing gaps and ways to improve the system tend to stay among decision-maker groups, such as journals, publishers, and funders. The views of authors—who form the core of the publishing system—tend to be underrepresented. It is vital to capture the views of authors, who are both creators and consumers of scientific literature. Understanding their viewpoints could provide stakeholders of science with a roadmap to develop an author-friendly system.

During our interactions with numerous authors, we realized that despite advances in the academic publishing system, authors continue to face several grassroots-level problems. The results of our previous survey entitled “International journal editors and East Asian authors: two surveys” [1], which were published in 2013, revealed major gaps between the challenges East Asian authors face in academic publishing and how journal editors perceived submissions from East Asia. To build on this understanding, we sought to obtain an in-depth global perspective of the changes authors want to see in the publishing system. Based on the data we have gathered so far, we will present some thought-provoking trends that we identified. Further, although our previous survey differed drastically from the current one with respect to sample size and scope, we will discuss some apparent similarities and differences in trends observed in the 2 studies.

## Methods

We launched the large-scale survey entitled “Author perspectives on the academic publishing process” [2] with 37 questions covering a wide range of topics such as the challenging aspects of journal submission, openness to publishing open access, understanding of publication ethics, and other issues faced by authors. An important aspect of the survey was that it collected authors’ thoughts on the specific aspects of academic publishing that they would like to see changes in. The survey was distributed in 5 languages: English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Portuguese. So far, we have received over 8,795 responses. The interim report based on responses from 5,293 participants gave us enough data to observe trends and to prepare an interim report [3]. The plurality of survey participants (35.5%) indicated that they had published fewer than 5 papers. For many of them, (38.3%) English was not their first language, and they found writing in English to be challenging. The top 3 geographical areas the respondents hailed from were China (1,493), Brazil (909), and Korea (306).

## Results

### Manuscript preparation is the most difficult part of journal submission

One of the basic steps to getting published is making the manuscript publication-ready and ensuring a good submission package. However, the majority of the participants indicated that they struggled the most when it came to manuscript preparation (33.8%) and preparing the submission package (18.2%) (Fig. 1). The data from the previous survey [1] corresponded to this trend, as the majority of those respondents ranked manuscript preparation as the most challenging task. While a critical element to consider is that most of the respondents of these surveys were not comfortable writing in English, the authors were primarily researchers and may not have possessed specific writing skills. Particularly when it comes to early career researchers, mentors or institutional heads should ensure that support and guidance are extended to help these early-stage researchers prepare their manuscripts for submission.

### Impact factor is the most decisive factor in journal selection

The credibility of the impact factor has been brought into question time and again [4]. However, authors continue to give it precedence over other factors when it comes to journal selection. Most participants stated that the impact factor was their primary consideration, and the other 2 aspects that followed closely were the presence of similar papers published in the journal and a short time to publication or rapid publication (Fig. 2). This is a slight shift from the previous survey [1], in which the majority of respondents rated the topics and types of articles generally published in the journal as more important than the Impact factor. Institutions, as well as authors, regard publishing in a journal with a high impact factor to be prestigious [5]. This skews the main purpose of publish-

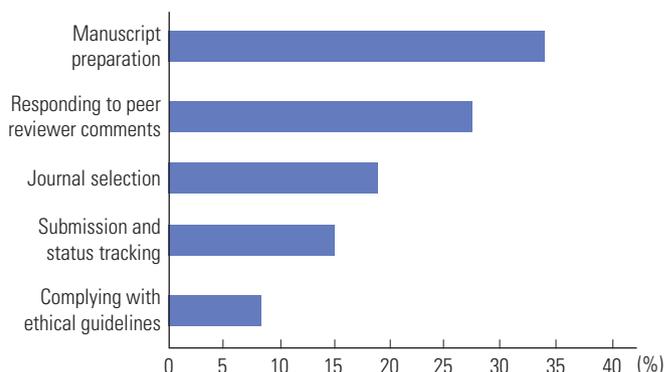


Fig. 1. Percentages of authors rating various stages of academic publishing as “very difficult” (n=4,427).

ing research, which is to use the most appropriate channels to make research known to peers and to influence decision-makers. Authors might tend to disregard critical decisive factors such as the target readership and the match between the paper and the journal's scope, and place a disproportionate emphasis on a journal's impact factor.

### Most authors find journal guidelines to be incomplete

Every journal has its own specifications about submission requirements, formatting style, and presentation. But how clear and complete are these guidelines? Our previous survey [1] indicated that the greatest proportion of authors (34%) found journal submission guidelines to be unclear but complete. Most editors (76%), in contrast, were of the opinion that the guidelines were clear and complete. This indicated a clear divergence in views between authors and journal editors. However, the data based on the current survey's interim results point to journal guidelines being generally clear but incomplete, as indicated by a plurality of the participants (41.8%) (Fig. 3). As the number of journals and their publication volume are increasing, journals need to focus on authors' needs and challenges. Small changes such as ensuring that the guidelines are clear, cover all issues that authors are concerned about, and are easily visible/more prominent on the journal website would make the submission process smoother for authors.



Fig. 2. Factors considered by authors when selecting a journal, ranked from most to least important.

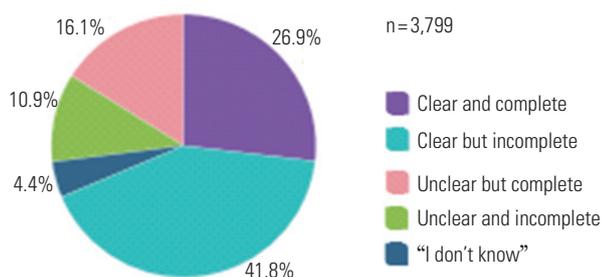


Fig. 3. Authors' opinions on how journal guidelines for authors are framed.

### Major gap in author-journal communication

If faced with a problem during the journal submission process, what would an author do? It might be a common assumption that authors would contact editors to get their questions resolved. However, the responses to the latest survey point to a significant communication gap between authors and journal editors. As many as 17.4% of respondents stated that they were scared to contact the journal, 16.6% pointed out that they were unaware of being allowed to contact the journal, and 14.8% indicated that they were unaware of how to contact the journal. Getting published is crucial for researchers, but while going through the publishing process they are likely to be working on other research projects. In such a case, hesitation to contact the journal or not being able to find information on how to initiate communication could be a major hindrance for authors. This highlights the need to make the publication process more author-friendly.

### Increased awareness of publication ethics, but less so of good publication practice standards

With greater reporting of cases involving misconduct, ethics has become a widely discussed topic in the publishing industry. The survey respondents showed variation in their understanding of what constitutes plagiarism and who should receive authorship credit: 85.5% identified using text from a previous study/someone else's work, without rewording or using quotes, as plagiarism and only 57.3% said that reusing text from one's own previously published study, without citing one's own study as the source, constituted plagiarism. This indicates that authors were aware of plagiarism in the broad sense of the term but did not have a sufficiently nuanced grasp of the nitty-gritty details of plagiarism.

The majority of the authors (81.0% of 1,726) who were approached by a journal guaranteeing publication did not submit to such journals, primarily (67.8%) because they did not

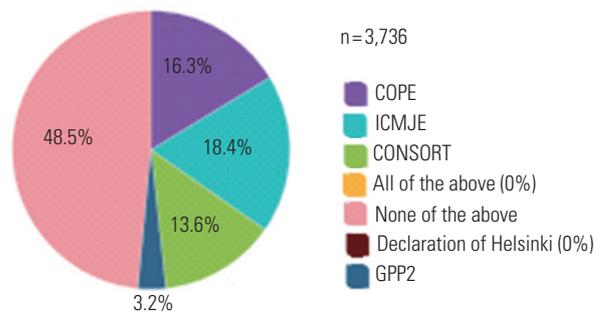


Fig. 4. Authors' familiarity with industry-recognized good publication practice standards. COPE, Committee on Publication Ethics; ICMJE, International Committee of Medical Journal Editors; CONSORT, Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials; GPP2, Good Publication Practice.

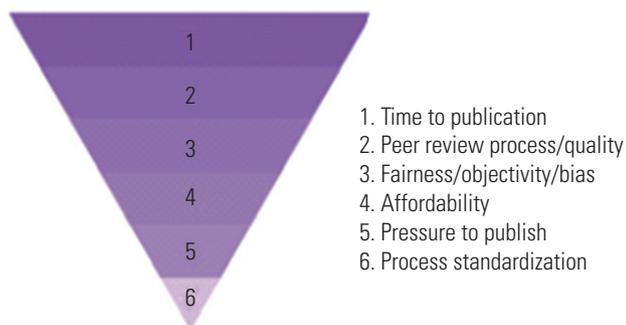


Fig. 5. Author-suggested areas of improvement within the publishing system.

trust them. This shows heightened awareness of the existence of predatory publishers.

Disappointingly, though, almost half of the authors (48.5%) indicated that they were not familiar with industry-recognized good publication practice standards such as the guidelines of the COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics), ICMJE (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors), and CONSORT (Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials) (Fig. 4).

### How do authors envision the ideal academic publishing system?

The academic publishing system is going through disruptive changes to tackle various issues, such as looking to create research impact, ways to influence policymakers, and finding ways of acquiring funding. However, some basic issues may fail to be noticed, and these affect the lives of authors the most. The most urgent current need is to ensure that authors' voices are heard and acted upon.

We asked the participants whether they would like to change anything about the academic publishing system and what that might be. Approximately half (51.7%) indicated that they would like to change something about the publishing system and specified the change they wished to see in a subsequent section for comments. However, the other half (48.3%) indicated that they did not wish to change anything. Of the suggested changes, time to publication, peer review process/quality, and fairness topped the list, which are indicative of the main concerns of authors worldwide (Fig. 5).

This indicates that the system must be made more friendly and transparent for authors to be able to pursue their research without having to compromise on basic necessities such as fairness, time to publication, and being able to identify and make sense of journals' guidelines.

## Discussion

As the above results indicate, this survey represents a treasure trove of valuable perspectives from authors that provide insights into the problems authors face, their awareness of ethics, and how they view academic publishing. The main responses of the authors were clustered around the following themes: the challenges of manuscript preparation, the importance of a journal's impact factor, incomplete instructions to authors, difficult communication between authors and editors, and low awareness of good publication standards. Furthermore, authors wanted an improved peer review process and fair treatment of their manuscripts. Because this was a rare large-scale survey of authors' opinions, our results are a good resource to understand authors' thoughts, perceived difficulties, and behaviors in writing manuscripts or selecting journals. There will be more responses and the further data will be analyzed more intensively.

This study had the following limitations. First, there was no gender identification. If gender had been identified, a different response pattern according to gender may have been found. Second, no in-depth statistical analysis was conducted to compare responses by groups for each item. If such a test had been performed, it would have been possible to interpret the responses more precisely. Third, a content validity test for the survey questionnaires was not done. The questionnaire items were described arbitrarily. If the present questionnaire tool is to be used in another study, a validity test should be done.

Despite those limitations, the results of this study provide us with extensive information on authors' opinions on submission, review, editing, and publishing, due to the large number of responses. In conclusion, these findings are indicative of what publishers, journals, and editors need to do in order to support authors, improve the quality of publications, and make the publishing process easier for authors. Authors should be trained more intensively on how to write scholarly papers. Furthermore, editors should do their best to meet authors' needs, such as by providing a rapid decision process or making more precise and clear instructions available to authors.

## Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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