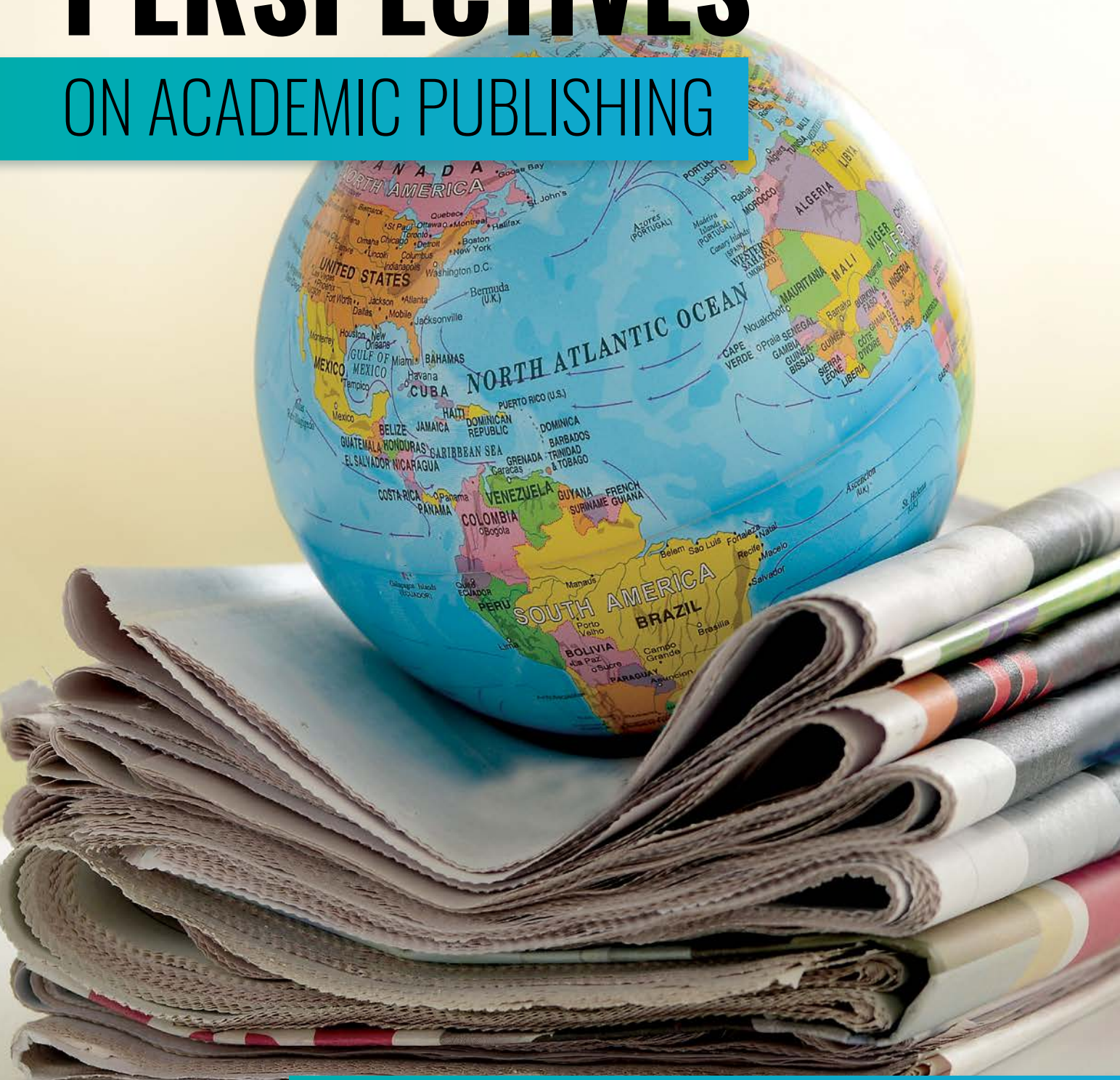


# AUTHOR PERSPECTIVES

ON ACADEMIC PUBLISHING



GLOBAL SURVEY REPORT 2018

# NOTE FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dear reader,

For over 16 years, Editage has offered support to authors worldwide—primarily non-Western and non-English-speaking authors—from all disciplines, at various stages in their career, and with different publication-related needs. Working closely with tens of thousands of authors has given us profound insights into the major author pain points in the scholarly publishing system.

Stakeholders in the academic publishing industry often discuss how various aspects of the system require improvements, for example, peer review, means to access research and data, impact measures, and the way research is communicated to the public. This has led to various innovations in journal publishing—new models of peer review, the movement towards open access and data sharing, and the emphasis on communicating scientific research effectively to the public. However, people who usually have a strong voice in these matters tend to be better aligned to the journal perspective, rather than the perspective of active academic researchers, i.e., authors. So while authors are at the heart of the publishing system as both producers and consumers of published research, their opinions tend to be underrepresented in discussions on potential improvements to scholarly communications.

The industry especially needs access to consolidated views of authors from countries such as China, Japan, Korea, and Brazil, which are gaining prominence as producers of research output.

Editage is committed to promoting positive discussions and changes in the industry, and to this effect, we present this report on a large-scale author survey that was designed to systematically gather inputs from authors on wide-ranging topics related to academic publishing: difficulties they face in manuscript preparation, their understanding of publication ethics, their attitudes toward open access, and their opinions about peer review.

This report aims to provide answers to questions such as

*Which aspects of academic publishing do authors from key non-native English-speaking geographies struggle with the most?*

*What are some of the pressing concerns that journals, publishers, funders, and other bodies should take note of when attempting to engage with authors from emerging regions?*

While this report will have eye-opening takeaways for all involved in scholarly publishing, we expect it to be especially valuable to funders and publishers, who do not often have access to such consolidated information on authors from emerging regions. We hope that this report encourages more meaningful dialogue on the subjects covered and leads to developments that will benefit not just authors but all stakeholders in scholarly publishing.

Please share your comments using **#EditageAuthorSurvey** on Twitter, or write to us at [insights@editage.com](mailto:insights@editage.com).

Warm regards,

Clarinda Cerejo

Editor-in-Chief | Editage Insights



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Editage conducted a large-scale author survey (n = 6,903) to gather the views of authors on a wide range of topics related to publishing in international English-language journals. The objective was to understand where authors' experiences are deviating from an ideal scenario – from either the authors' or publishers' point of view so that we can identify areas where service providers and publishers may be able to change ways of working in order to make the process of publishing for authors smoother. While this does not purport to be an exhaustive or scientific study, it still provides a useful snapshot of an important group of stakeholders within the scholarly communication environment whose views are not often collectively gathered. In some cases, the study has raised further questions, and Editage is committed to undertaking further studies to address this.

The survey was administered using SurveyMonkey. It was released in English, Japanese, Simplified Chinese, Korean, and Portuguese. The majority of respondents were based in non-Western, non-English-speaking countries.





**MANUSCRIPT PREPARATION:** About 76% respondents find this a challenging step in the publication process. The difficulty level seems directly related to English-language proficiency. The publishing industry needs to deliberate on how to eliminate or minimize this additional burden on non-English-speaking authors so that journals do not miss out on scientifically strong research because authors choose to submit in regional-language journals.

**FRAMING A RESEARCH QUESTION:** Around 69% respondents find this step moderately to extremely difficult, and the more experienced an academic, the less difficulty faced in this step. This raises questions about how to best educate researchers at the very beginning of their academic careers about framing robust research questions.

**AUTHOR-JOURNAL INTERFACE:** The majority of the respondents (66%) felt that journal guidelines were unclear, incomplete, or both, and several authors commented that they would like simplified language in journal instructions. In addition, 49% of the respondents stated that they find it difficult to send enquiries to the editor, with a substantial number being either afraid to do so or not knowing how to do so. International English-language journals who wish to attract authors from wider demographics should consciously revise their guidelines and clarify communication modes to ensure a smoother author experience.

**TIME TO PUBLICATION:** In general, authors were unhappy with the long turnaround times of journals. Most authors belonging to the STEM fields indicated that the ideal duration from manuscript submission to publication should be less than 3 months, while most from the humanities/social sciences said this should be less than 6 months. Journal turnaround is an important journal-selection criterion, and most publishers/journals know this and are working hard to identify how to reduce turnaround times; they should ideally communicate the typical time taken from submission to first decision to authors.

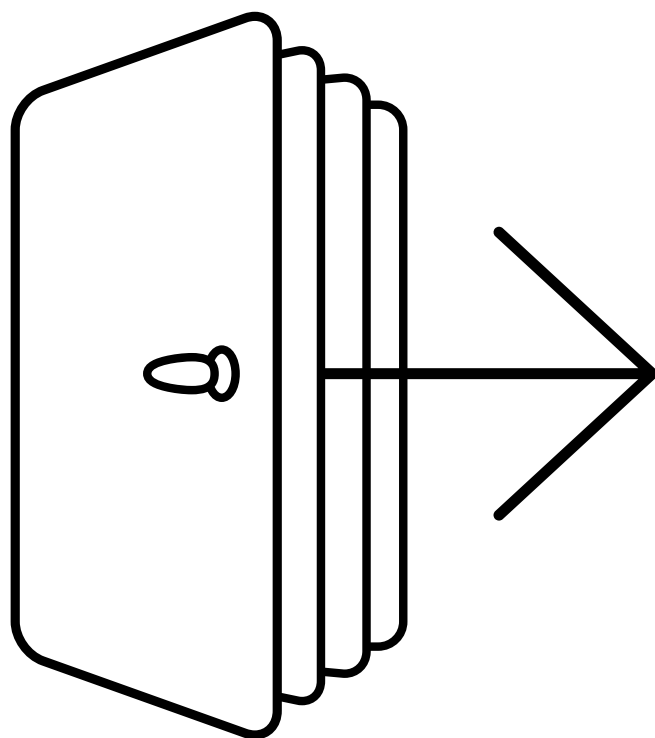
**JOURNAL CREDIBILITY/TRUST:** An overwhelming majority of respondents who had been contacted by a journal offering guaranteed or rapid publication declined the offer because of lack of trust and unfamiliarity with the journal.

**ETHICS-RELATED ISSUES:** A substantial proportion of respondents (~10% to 25%) were unaware of or confused about what constitutes plagiarism and duplicate submission or who qualifies for authorship. In addition, 31% were not familiar with established ethics-related bodies/guidelines such as COPE or ICMJE. However, a relatively small proportion reported facing difficulty in ethical compliance when preparing a submission. This points to a gap in author understanding of ethical issues that publishers/journals should consider addressing through better author education.

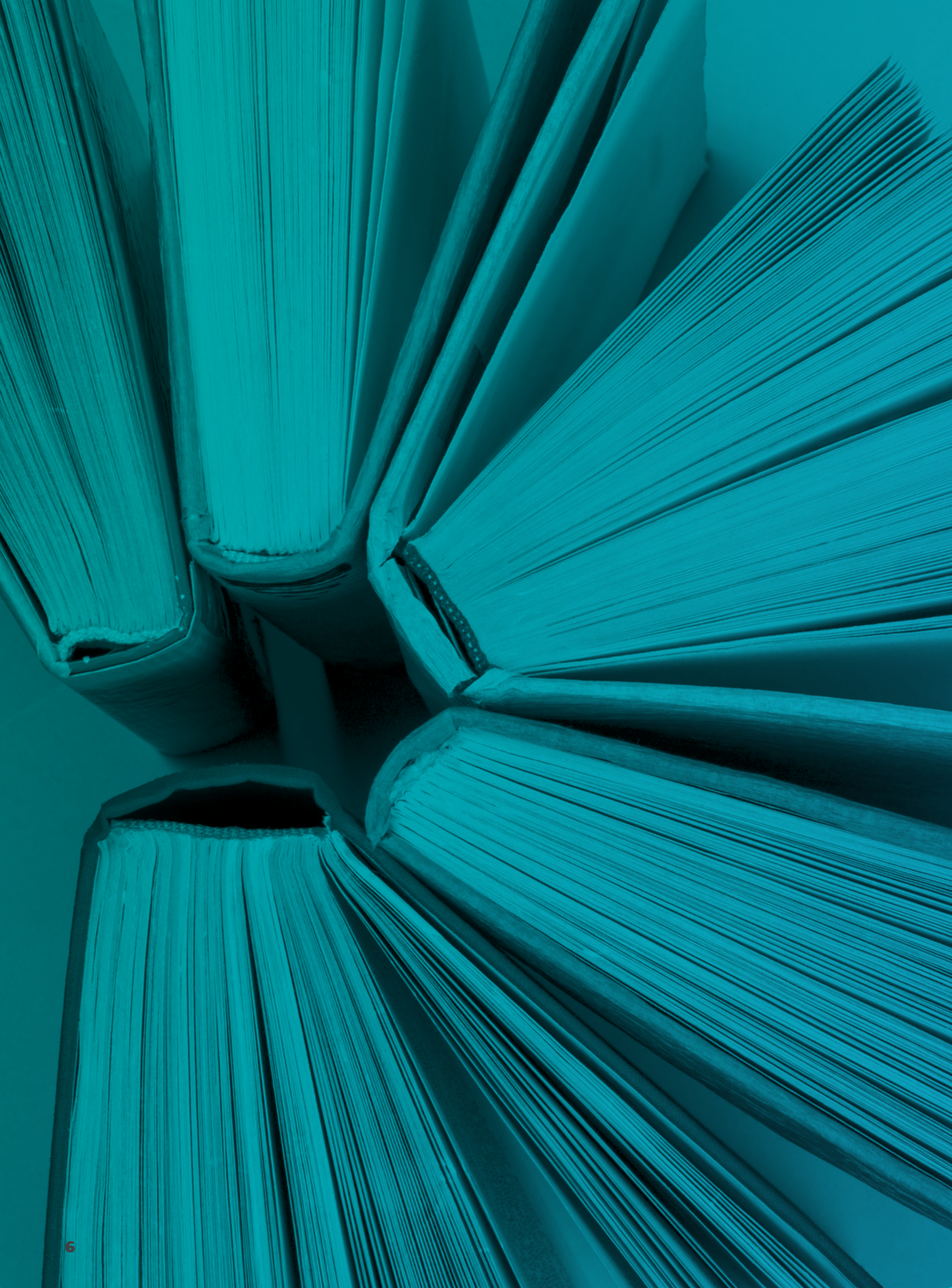
**OPEN ACCESS:** Awareness of and comfort level with open access increase with tenure. Authors should be sufficiently educated about this publishing model early on in their research career, so that they are sufficiently well informed to decide when they should or should not choose to publish open access. We found that the most common reason for publishing open access was access to a wider audience, while the common reasons for not publishing open access were unrelated to any inherent lack of trust in this model.

**PEER REVIEW:** In general, respondents seem satisfied with the quality of peer review, but they find conflicting reviews and requirements for additional work frustrating. About 70% found it difficult to respond to reviewer comments. Peer review is the most time-consuming step in manuscript processing, and journals particularly struggle to find suitable reviewers. These findings therefore call for reviewing and improving mechanisms for sharing feedback with peer reviewers and offering them comprehensive training.

**CHANGES NEEDED IN THE PUBLISHING SYSTEM:** The pressure to publish in high-impact-factor journals and publication delay were rated the most urgent problems to be addressed in scholarly publishing. These are major well-known issues that cannot be solved by individual publishers. They will need to be addressed through concerted efforts of funders and governments by changing how research quality is evaluated and rewarded.









# INTRODUCTION

Much of the recent discourse on scholarly publishing has focused on whether long-established metrics and approaches to publishing are still relevant. Over the past two decades, the system has been adapting to changes in technology, establishment of new publishing models and processes, ever-increasing scholarly output, shift in author demographics, and the challenges arising from all these developments. Thus, whether the system still efficiently meets its overriding objectives is a natural topic in commentaries on what direction it should take.

The shift in author demographics is particularly significant since an increasing amount of research is being conducted in non-Western and non-English-speaking countries. China, South Korea, and Japan are among the top 15 countries spending the highest percentage of their GDP on research and development (OECD, 2018). In January 2018, China was declared the world's largest producer of scientific publications (Jeff Tollefson, *Nature News*, 2018). Because English is already established as the primary language for global academic communication, most authors from these countries are required to publish in reputable international English-language journals for career prospects. Publishers and journals have long recognized this shift in author demographics and realize the importance of attracting authors from these regions and building stronger relationships with them.

Numerous articles and books focus on helping authors understand scholarly publishing and navigate the publication process to get their manuscripts published (e.g., Germano, 2009). However, it is rare to find the reverse perspective—what the scholarly communications industry should know about author perceptions of the publication process and the publishing industry in general, especially the perceptions of authors from countries such as Brazil, China, Japan, and

South Korea. In other words, author-centric scholarship in this area is mostly prescriptive, rather than describing the cognitive and emotional investment of authors.

The understanding of the pain points in the system will be incomplete unless it is also informed by detailed views of those at the heart of the publishing ecosystem—authors. Authors create, consume, and facilitate the dissemination of scholarly work, and their perspectives can offer invaluable inputs on what needs to change in the system. Published articles that do examine author perspectives tend to focus on specific aspects of publishing, such as attitudes towards open access, factors influencing choice of journal, and motivations for publication (e.g., Taylor & Francis Open Access Survey, 2014; Author Insights, Nature Publishing Group, 2015; UK Survey of Academics, 2012; Tenopir et al., 2013).

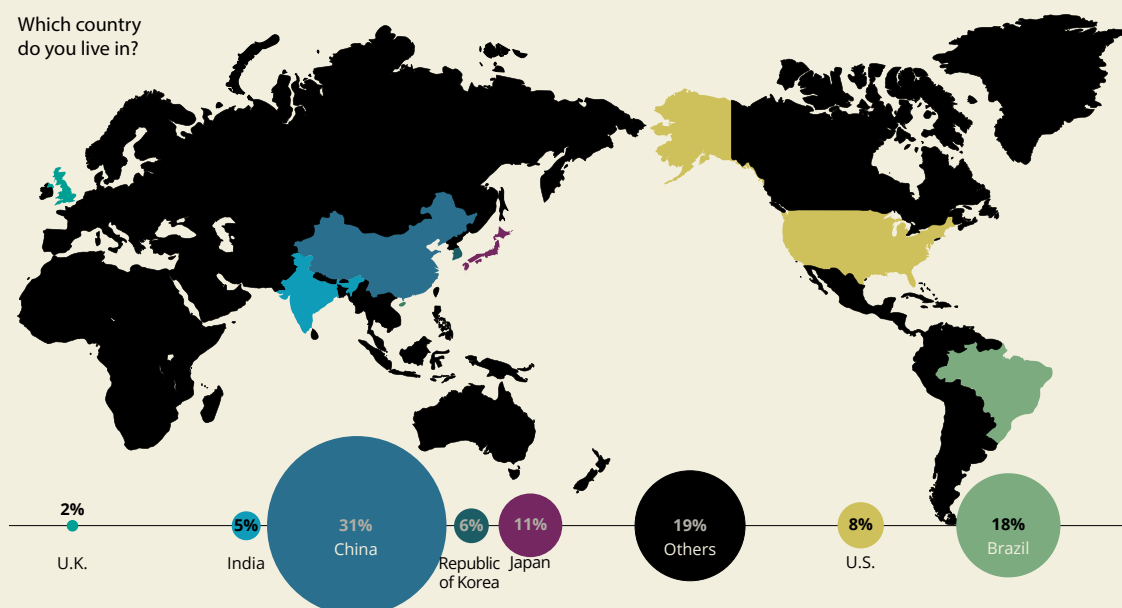
However, given the combination of numerous factors shaping the attitudes of authors toward scholarly publication, a comprehensive author survey covering a wide range of relevant topics would be holistically informative, especially to publishers. Editage is in a unique position of advantage for gathering such inputs on a large scale and sharing them with publishers because the majority of authors we serve and have strong relationships with belong to precisely the geographies and contributor segments that Western publishers want to engage but may not have access to.

Therefore, Editage Insights—the knowledge and education arm of Editage—conducted a large dataset survey of authors to examine their opinions on and experiences with the publication processes and journal communication, their understanding of ethical considerations, and the changes they would like to see in journal publishing. This report summarizes the findings from the survey in a thematic manner and hopes that these can guide steps taken by the scholarly publishing industry to improve practices.

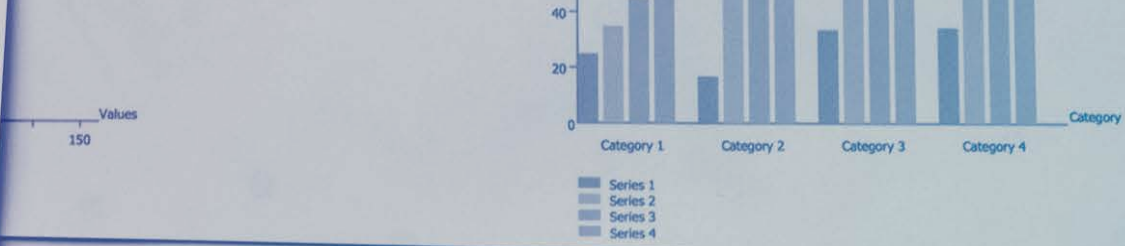
# ABOUT THE SURVEY

This was a large-scale survey administered to authors by using SurveyMonkey. It was released in English, Japanese, Simplified Chinese, Korean, and Portuguese to reach a wide audience. The questionnaire comprised 37 questions, which included those about demographics; factors influencing journal selection; and views on the academic publication process, open access, and manuscript preparation and submission stages. The survey was completed by 6,903 respondents. Further details about the survey are provided in the “Survey Methods” section after the Conclusions. An interim analysis was conducted on data from 5,293 respondents, and an opinion piece based on the interim results was published as an article in Science Editing in January 2018. This report represents the complete dataset of responses received. We have also included some particularly poignant or representative comments from respondents throughout this section. Author comments have been quoted verbatim to allow the voice of the author to come through; comments in languages other than English have been translated, with minor editing.

Which country do you live in?





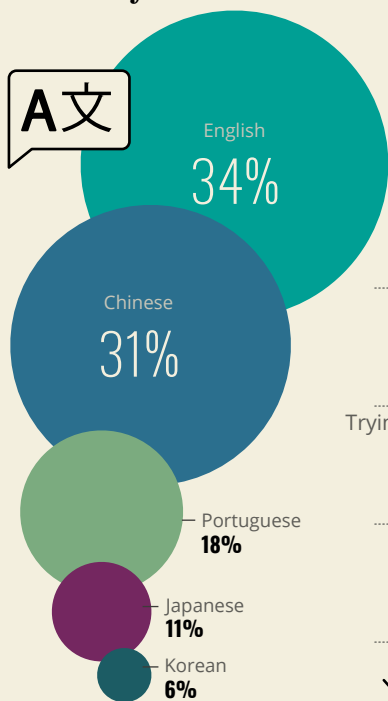


# RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

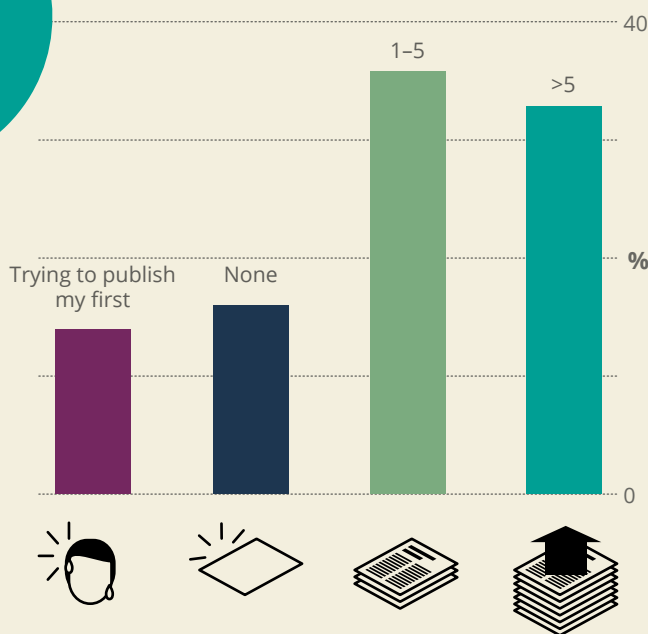
The survey received participation from over 100 countries. Interestingly, the top 10 countries and languages are aligned with the top research-producing countries in the world. English was not the first language of most respondents. About 85% of the respondents self-identified as authors. More than half of the respondents had over five years of experience in academic research or journal publishing, and almost 70% had published at least one paper. All the broad fields of study were fairly evenly represented, and the respondents who selected "Other" as their field of study reported belonging to fields such as engineering, business and management, or interdisciplinary research.



### Language in which the survey was taken



### How many papers have you published in an international English language journal?



### What is your written English proficiency?



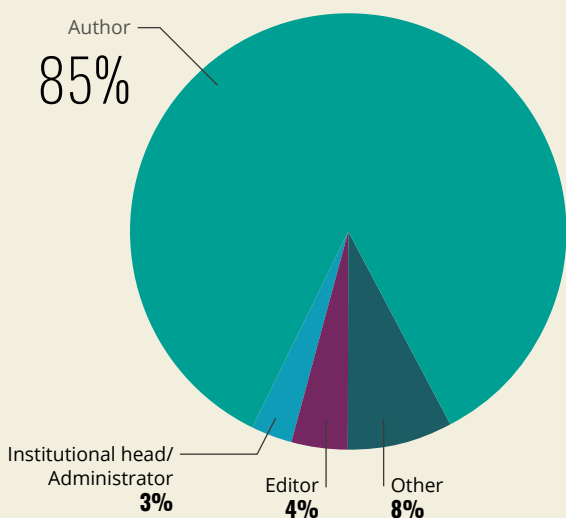
English is not my first language and I find it difficult to write in English

English is not my first language but I feel comfortable writing in English

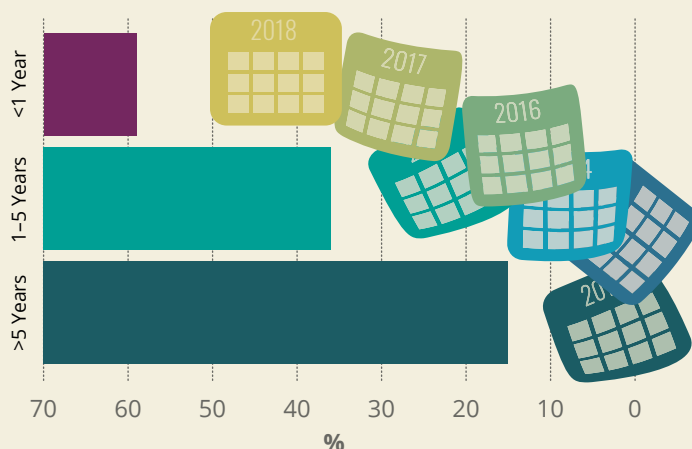
English is my first language



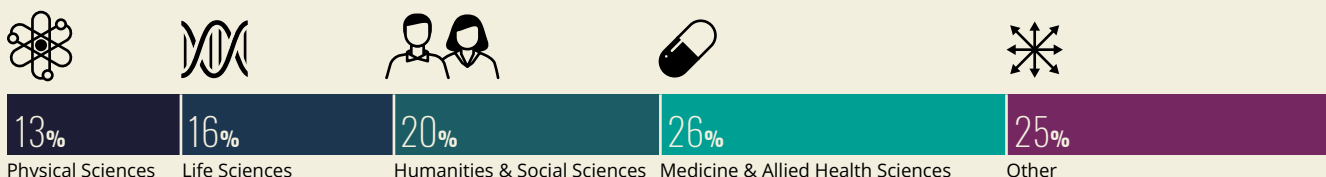
### Which of these primary roles do you identify yourself with as a researcher?



### How long have you been involved in academic research and/or journal publishing?



### What is your broad field of study?



# KEY FINDINGS

## CHALLENGES FACED AT DIFFERENT PUBLICATION STAGES

We asked respondents to rate the difficulty of different stages in academic publishing to understand exactly where authors struggle the most and may need support or resources. This section describes the most important findings obtained.

### How difficult do you find preparing your manuscript for publication in an international English-language journal?

Of all the stages of academic publishing, manuscript preparation seems to pose the greatest challenge to most respondents, with about 76% reporting that they find this stage moderately to extremely difficult (Fig.1 a).

**It is too hard for a young researcher in Humanities to write a English paper for submission to international journals. It is enough hard in English to pass a peer review... I am not good at writing English, it is too difficult to write, it takes time, and I cannot judge my English paper is good or not.**

FIG.1

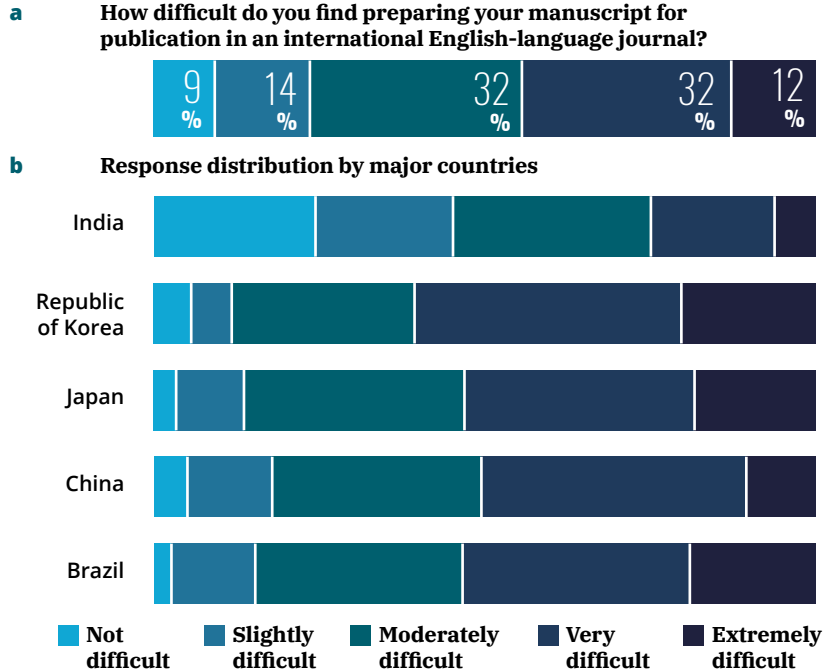
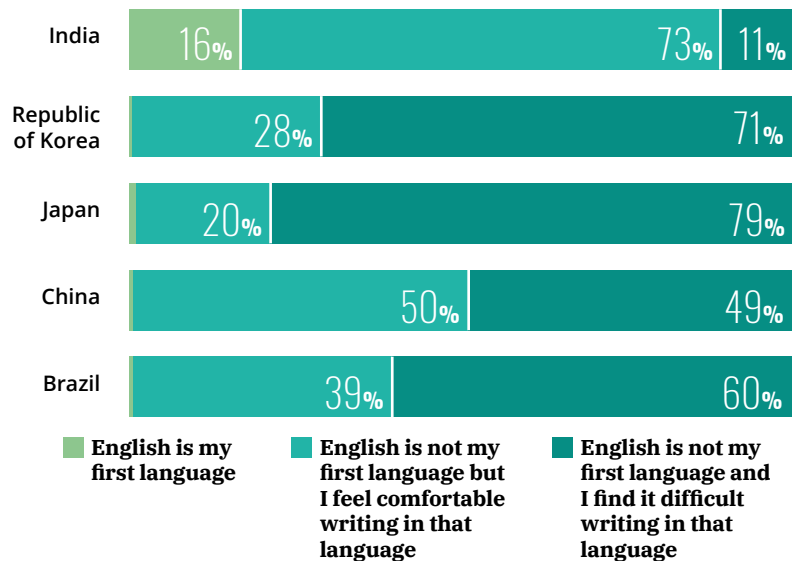


FIG.2 Language proficiency by country



Publication success hinges largely on the quality of the manuscript and, hence, preparing a manuscript requires heavy investment in terms of both time and effort during the publication process. Therefore, it is only natural that this stage will be challenging for authors, especially our respondents, most of whom were based in non-English-speaking countries and reported low English proficiency.

Next, we reviewed the break-up of respondents by geography and language proficiency.



We found substantially high proportions of “moderately to extremely difficult” responses from the following countries: South Korea, 88%; Japan, 86%; Brazil, 85%; and China, 81% (Fig.1b). In contrast, this percentage was much lower for India, at 55%.

As we had anticipated, these figures roughly corresponded with the percentage of respondents from these countries who had said “English is not my first language and I find it difficult to write in that language” (China, 49%; Brazil, 60%; South Korea, 71%; Japan, 79%; India, 11% (Fig.2)).

These findings quantitatively confirm how critical a factor English-language proficiency is in shaping author perception of how difficult manuscript preparation is. India is an Anglophone country, and the medium of instruction in most higher education institutes is English. Therefore, researchers in India, even those who learn English as a second language, are familiar with the language and hence may feel that preparing a manuscript in English is not overly challenging, unlike authors in the other countries.

The conventional research article has been the established format for research communication for decades, and even though numerous resources on how to prepare manuscripts are available, authors continue to struggle with this step. New means of research communication, such as preprints and videos, have been introduced and might ameliorate the stress experienced by non-English-speaking researchers, but their effectiveness and acceptance in the long-term need to be observed.

Perhaps there is room for journals, publishers, higher education institutes, research organizations, and other stakeholders in the academic publishing industry to deliberate on whether we need to develop a format for academic communication that does not depend on the proficiency of researchers in a particular language, and whether the burden of bringing an otherwise good research article to international publication standards should shift from authors to another stakeholder.

**Q How difficult do you find framing a research question?**

Framing a research question is the keystone step around which the research and almost the entire manuscript preparation process revolves, and hence requires considerable thought. We found that 69% of the respondents claimed to find this step moderately to extremely difficult (Fig.3a).

Our data do not allow detailed speculations on why this may be so, but we did find some interesting patterns when we delved further into this aspect.

The overall proportion of respondents who said that this step was moderately to extremely difficult decreased with tenure (Fig.3b).

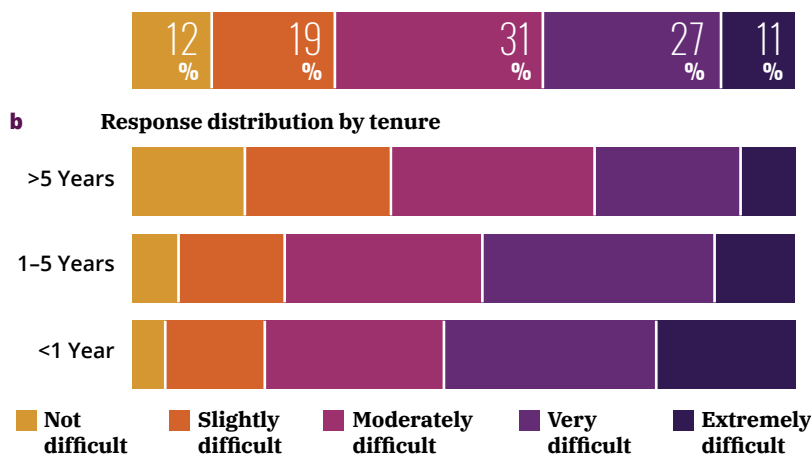
This underscores the importance of comprehensive guidelines on this aspect of research/publication for early-career researchers. Arguably, the only occasion at which researchers may formally get feedback on their research question during the publication process is at the peer review stage, when it would be too late for researchers to implement this feedback. Perhaps there is a need for a formal system that reviews and provides feedback on research questions and ideas even before they are executed into a research project and subsequent manuscript?

Another interesting observation was that respondents from China and South Korea had among the highest proportions of those who found this step very/extremely difficult: 58% and 50%, respectively (data not shown).

While we do not know the exact reason behind this pattern, it coincides with the high percentage of questions we receive on framing research questions from Chinese authors on the Editage Insights Q&A forum.

**For authors who are non-English-native and resident in non-English-speaking world, too much cost is taken in time and money, in spite of the importance of publishing papers in English. Researchers who receives grants could afford to this amount of money, but it is too expensive for researchers as an individual. For this, many reserachers are giving up submitting papers to English journals, even if they are doing excellent studies.**

**FIG.3**  
**a How difficult do you find framing a research question?**



## How difficult do you find journal selection?

Remarkably, journal selection was found to be moderately to extremely difficult by about 60% of all authors (Fig.4).

To identify possible reasons for this, we reviewed the criteria that authors use to decide their target journals and found that the top criterion was high journal impact factor, followed by the journal's record of having published articles similar to theirs and short turnaround time (Fig.5).

The heavy reliance on the journal impact factor as the primary journal selection criterion is not surprising since similar observations have been made in other survey reports as well (e.g., Author Insights, Nature Publishing Group, 2015; Tenopir et al., 2013).

Perhaps one reason why authors find journal selection so difficult is that they struggle to find a journal that both has the required impact factor and is likely to accept their manuscript. It was noteworthy that many of our respondents also expressed dissatisfaction with the excessive focus on journal impact factors; in subsequent responses, this was ranked as the most urgent issue that needs to be addressed in the industry. Reported difficulty in journal selection may align with how often manuscripts are rejected by journals because of mismatch with scope, especially since authors' decisions to submit their manuscripts to a journal may be driven more by the impact factor rather than by whether the research topic and findings fit the journal's scope.

## If you face difficulties during any of the above stages, where do you look for help?

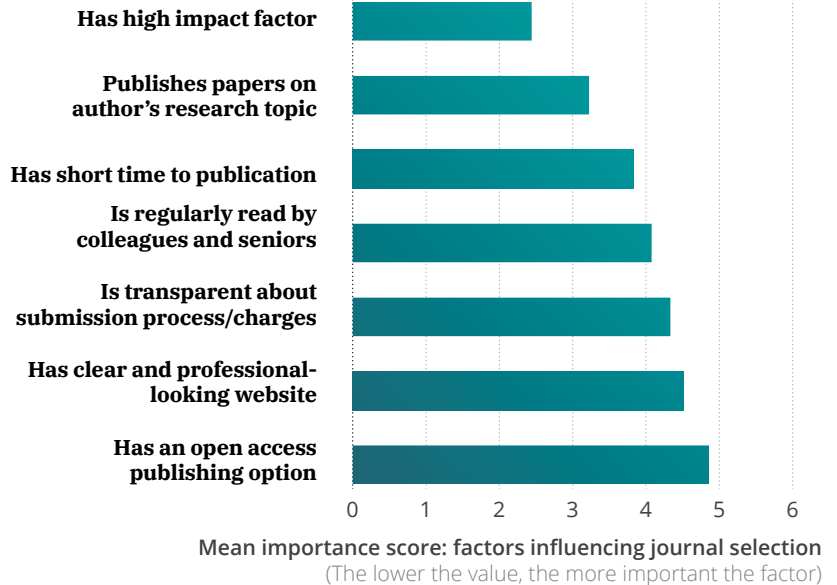
We also asked respondents how they resolved the difficulties faced at various stages of academic publishing; the majority indicated that they seek help from seniors or colleagues or use online search engines to seek information and guidance (Fig.6).

Interestingly, social media and librarians seem to be less of a go-to resource than we would have expected. While it is heartening that only

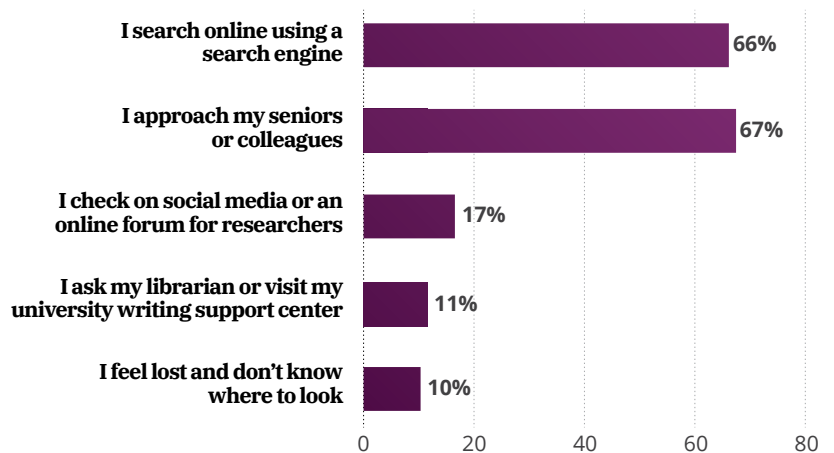
**FIG.4** How difficult do you find journal selection?



**FIG.5**



**FIG.6** If you face difficulties during any of the above stages, where do you look for help?



10% respondents said they feel lost and don't know where to look, this is not a negligible number. It is important for publishers and research institutions alike to make available publication-related resources and training for their researchers.



## AUTHOR-JOURNAL INTERFACE

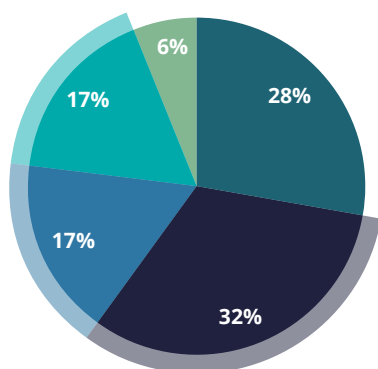
One of the most common problems journals face is authors not understanding or adhering to their requirements. Processing large submission volumes is challenging, and there are a high number of desk rejections because journal requirements are not met. We wanted to understand from the authors' point of view how easy it is to understand journal requirements and also seek clarifications from journals when needed. Questions on this topic were designed to understand how easy or difficult authors found communicating with journals or understanding their requirements.

### Q In general, how well do you think journal guidelines for authors are framed?

About 66% of the respondents felt that journal guidelines were unclear, incomplete, or both (Fig.7).

These percentages are roughly comparable with the results reported in an earlier survey we administered to East Asian authors (Cerejo, 2014), where 68% of respondents felt that journal guidelines were unclear and incomplete.

**FIG.7** In general, how well do you think journal guidelines for authors are framed?



- Clear and complete** - They are not difficult to understand and give authors all the information they need
- Clear but incomplete** - They are not difficult to understand but do not give authors all the information they need
- Unclear but complete** - They are difficult to understand but give the authors all the information they need
- Unclear and incomplete** - They are difficult to understand and do not give the authors all the information they need
- I don't know**



Several comments provided by respondents on what they would like to see improved about academic publishing revolved around the problems they face with journal guidelines.

Given the large and ever-increasing volumes of submissions, our results clearly underscore the importance of simplified and complete guidelines to make submissions more hassle-free for authors. It is possible that many journals have framed their guidelines many years ago when the large proportion of submissions were fairly homogenous, coming from established research-producing areas. It would be interesting to explore whether international English-language journals are now consciously revising or simplifying their guidelines to address the newer diverse author demographics.

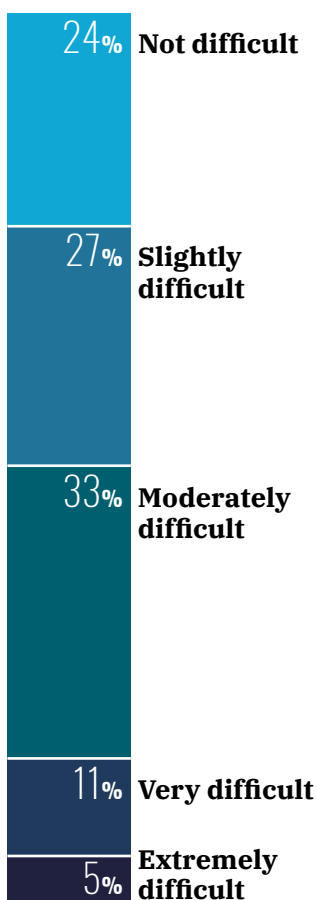
**Q How difficult do you find formatting as per journal guidelines?**

Interestingly, formatting a manuscript per journal guidelines was reported to be moderately to extremely difficult by 49% respondents (Fig.8).

This may seem inconsistent with the much higher percentage (66%) of respondents who claimed to find journal guidelines unclear or incomplete, but it is possible that respondents consider formatting less difficult in comparison with the other stages. It is also possible that authors do not perceive formatting a manuscript per journal guidelines to be as high-priority as journals do. Our earlier study by Cerejo (2014) demonstrated a gap between authors and journal editors in terms of how difficult they believe it is for authors to format a manuscript per journal guidelines; editors believed this step was more challenging for authors than authors did themselves. Our findings support this gap in perception and highlight the need to address it.

**“ Often the guidelines provided for authors on the journals’ websites are confusing and sometimes contradictory.**

**FIG.8**  
**How difficult do you find formatting as per journal guidelines?**



## Q How difficult do you find sending enquiries to the editor?

Given that many authors face difficulties in understanding journal guidelines, we next examined how many of them approach journals for clarifications or with enquiries. Roughly 49% of the respondents found it moderately to extremely difficult to send enquiries to the editor (Fig.9).

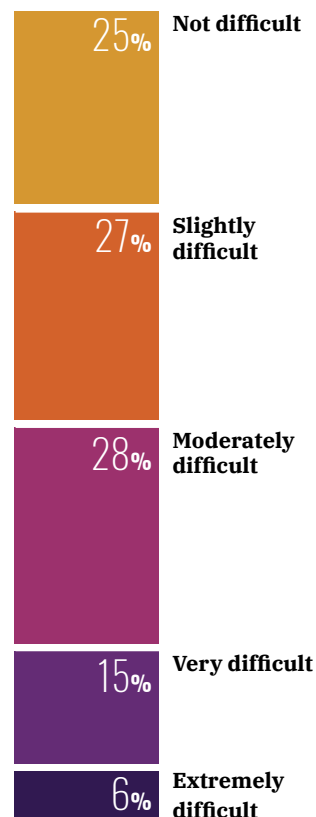
We asked authors about their experience with writing to journals for clarifications or with questions. While almost half of the respondents said they had written to journals with queries (Fig.10a), and a majority of these received a prompt and clear response (Fig.10b), a substantial number were afraid to contact the journal editorial office (15%) or were unaware if and how they could contact the journal (13%) (Fig.10c).

Ideally, authors should not hesitate to send important preliminary or post-submission follow-up queries to the journal since doing so can save them substantial amounts of time and effort.

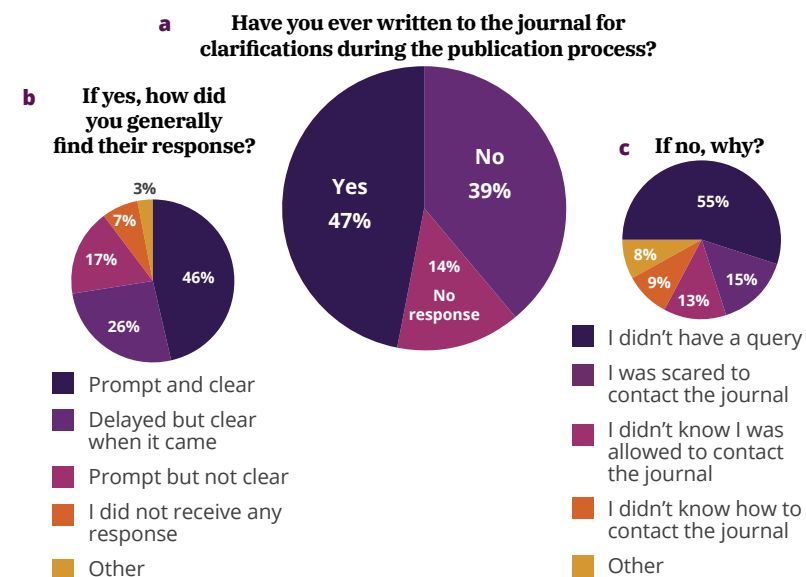
Some of the respondent comments provided interesting perspectives on what holds them back. One of the most noteworthy concerns shared by several authors was that sending a query asking for clarifications on manuscript status may annoy busy editors and unfavorably influence the final decision on a manuscript.

These findings suggest that many authors tend to perceive journals as being unapproachable or are unaware of journal communication channels they can use.

**FIG.9**  
How difficult do you find sending enquiries to the editor?



**FIG.10** Author experiences with writing to journals





“Usually, the response presents a concocted cut-and-paste of standard editorial text blocks, where none of the concrete questions are addressed.”

## TIME TO PUBLICATION

We asked authors several questions about the time taken to publish their manuscripts.

### Q What is the shortest time it has taken you to get a paper published from the time of first submission?

One respondent explained that he/she did not feel the need to contact the journal because “journal’s instruction was quite clear.”

Given the large submission volumes many journals receive, they may not be able to promptly attend to all author queries. Meanwhile, writing to journals for clarification can be very daunting, especially for non-native English-speaking authors, because they may not be confident of their language skills and are afraid that writing to journals may have a negative effect on manuscript processing. So the key takeaway from this set of results is that journals may need to invest effort in ensuring clear communication with authors, through simplified author instructions, detailed author resources, and journal online systems that provide clear information on manuscript status. This may pre-empt author queries, and with fewer queries, journals may be better able to respond to them promptly and adequately.

According to the majority of respondents (52.4%), the shortest time taken by them to publish with a journal ranged from one to six months (Fig.11a).

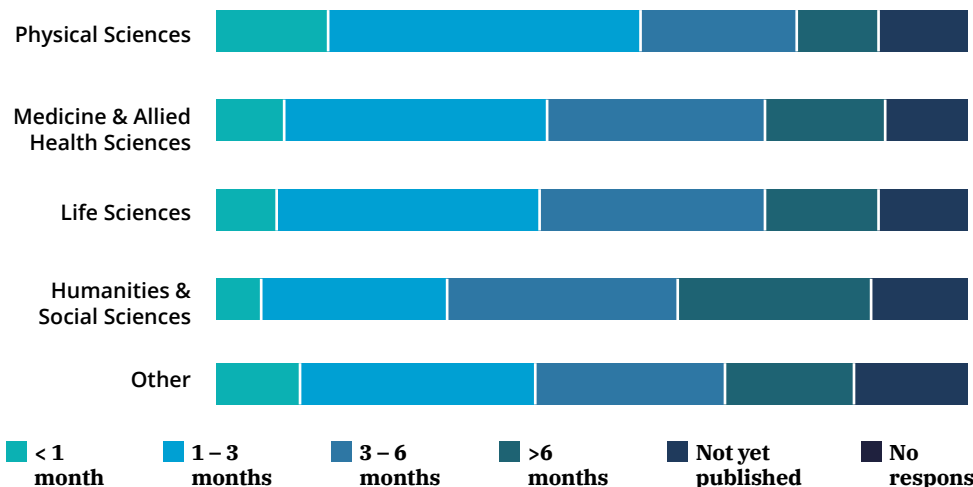
A closer discipline-wise look at the data suggested that, on average, the shortest time taken for publication follows this trend: physical sciences < life sciences = medical/allied health sciences < humanities and social sciences. The broad field of the physical sciences had the highest proportion of respondents who chose “Less than 1 month” and the fields of humanities and social sciences had the highest proportion of respondents who chose “More than 6 months” (Fig.11b).

FIG.11

**a** What is the shortest time it has taken you to get a paper published from the time of first submission?



**b** Response distribution by discipline



**In your experience, how long does a manuscript remain at the different status points on the journal submission system?**

According to the majority of respondents, in their experience, a manuscript is with the editor for up to a month, under review for one to six months, and awaiting decision for up to a month (Fig.12).

Considering the discipline-specific differences we observed earlier, we reviewed these stage-specific data to identify any patterns.

Discipline-specific differences in the overall time taken to publish a paper have been demonstrated earlier. For example, Björk and Solomon (2013) found that the longest delays in publication occur in the humanities, social sciences, and business/economics—a pattern that our findings support.

The physical sciences had the highest percentage of respondents whose papers were processed relatively swiftly across all stages, and the humanities/social sciences had the highest percentage of those whose papers were processed slower across all stages (data not shown).

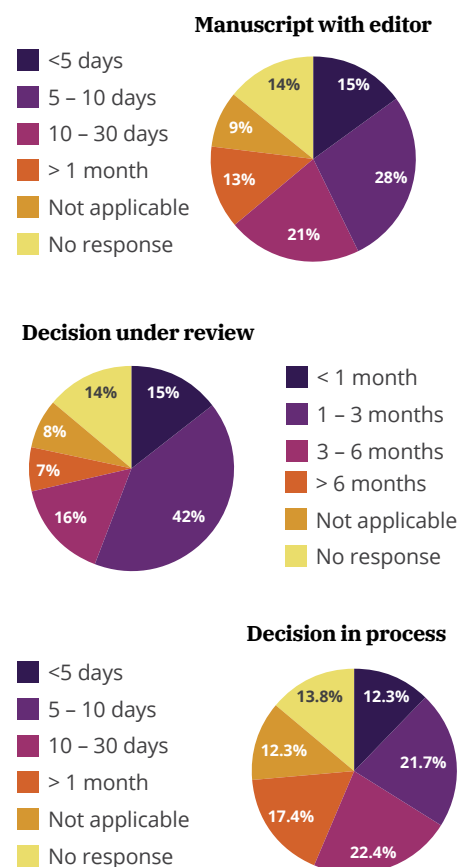
We had expected that the peer review stage would be the longest stage across disciplines. Indeed, for the STEM fields, the stages of “With Editor” and “Decision in Process” appear to take much less time than “Under Review.” However, a remarkably high percentage of respondents belonging to the humanities/social sciences indicated that the stages of “With Editor” and “Decision in Process” took over a month (31% and 44%, respectively, in contrast to 8% and 11% in the physical sciences, or 12% and 18% in the life sciences).

We are yet unsure why these stages take particularly long in these disciplines, but this is certainly worth examining, especially by publishers

in these subject areas.

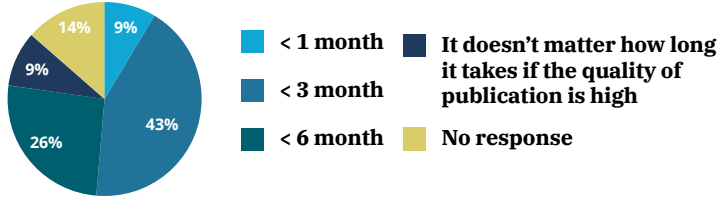
**“...the process is sometimes very time-consuming and when the article is published it is already a year and in this time the knowledge has not been added to, new references have already been published and thus one’s article gets outdated.”**

**FIG. 12** In your experience, how long does a manuscript remain at the different status points on the journal submission system?

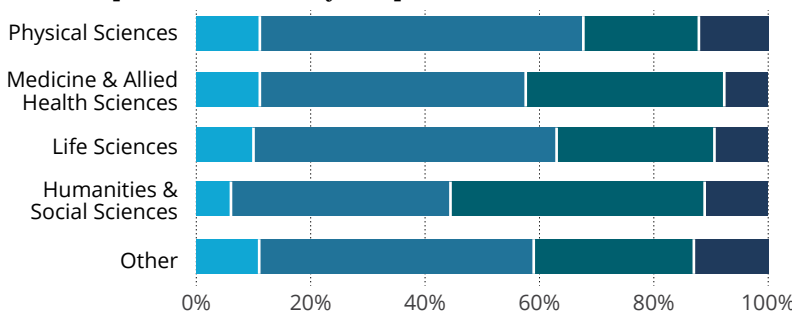


## How long do you think it should ideally take to publish a paper in a journal (from submission)?

**FIG.13**  
**a** How long do you think it should ideally take to publish a paper in a journal (from submission)?



**b** Response distribution by discipline



Almost 69% of authors thought the ideal duration between submission and journal publication should be less than six months (Fig.13a).

We observed a discipline-wise difference in these data too. The majority of respondents belonging to the STEM fields felt the ideal duration was less than 3 months; the majority of respondents belonging to the humanities and social sciences said it should be less than 6 months (Fig.13b).

Authors seem to treat the shortest time they have taken to publish a paper as the basis to decide what the ideal time taken should be.

Many respondents across disciplines expressed unhappiness with the long turnaround time taken for the publication of articles.

These observations are consistent with those of Powell (2016), whose author-centric paper focusing on publication delays draws on interviews and published work. Powell's paper states that authors are surprised at delays that continue to occur more than ever in the digital age, and that these delays are likely the result of a complex interplay between factors such as the continuing emphasis on publishing in high-impact-factor journals, increasing submission volumes, and

more frequent requests by editors for additional data, experiments and reports.

An important takeaway for publishers and journals is that they need to identify the factors influencing their turnaround time at different stages and explore measures to eliminate delays. Those who are working toward this already and have achieved a reduction in their turnaround times should highlight their success in their communication with authors since this may be an important factor for authors when selecting a journal as well.

## AWARENESS OF ETHICAL ISSUES AND GOOD PUBLICATION PRACTICES

We examined how authors responded to journals that approached them with offers of guaranteed or rapid publication and the reasons behind their decisions. Since many predatory journals adopt this approach, the results offer some insight into author attitudes toward such practices.

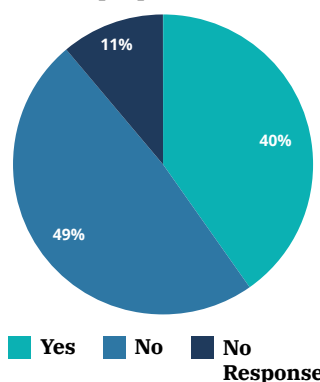
### Has a journal ever contacted you, guaranteeing publication or promising rapid publication?

About 49% of the respondents indicated that they had not been contacted by a journal with such promises (Fig.14).

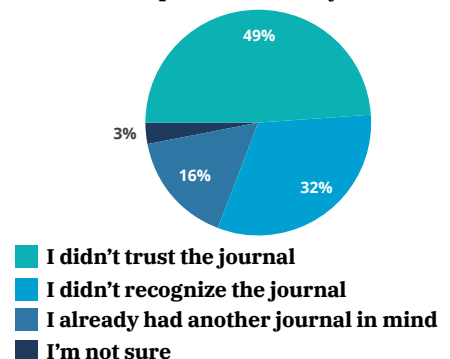
Of those who had, 92% did not submit a

The response time should be short. It is a debacle to wait 12 to 14 months to receive a no or start the first review.

**FIG.14** Has a journal ever contacted you, guaranteeing publication or promising rapid publication?



**FIG.15** If no (you have never submitted to a journal that guaranteed publication or promised rapid publication), why?







manuscript to the journal, the primary reason being lack of trust (Fig.15).

This result shows that an overwhelming majority of authors perceive such journal practices with distrust and are wary of predatory journals in spite of the pressure to publish.

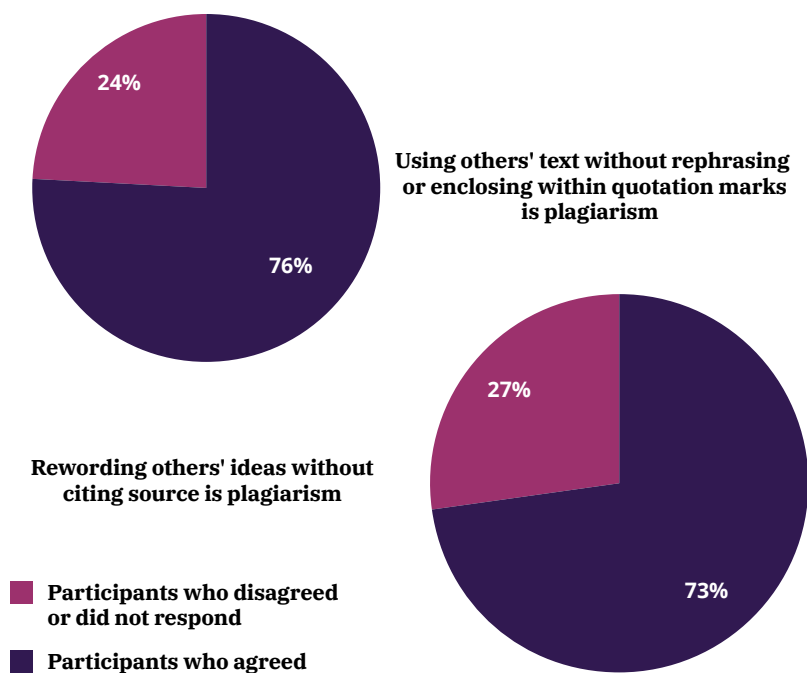
### Q Which of the following, in your opinion, constitute(s) plagiarism?

We provided authors four scenarios and asked them which could be considered plagiarism. A quarter or more of the respondents were unaware that it is plagiarism to reword peers' ideas without citing their papers or to quote them verbatim/without using quotation marks (Fig.16).

Respondents seemed more confused about or unaware of what constitutes self-plagiarism. The majority reported that reusing text from their own previously published study is not plagiarism, irrespective of whether the study is cited.

While it is possible that our respondents did

**FIG.16** Which of the following, in your opinion, constitute(s) plagiarism?



not understand the nuanced differences in the scenarios posed, the overall lack of understanding of plagiarism seen in the responses in our

survey corresponds with the type of questions on plagiarism we receive on the Editage Insights Q&A forum.

**Q Which of the following people, in your opinion, should get coauthorship on your paper?**

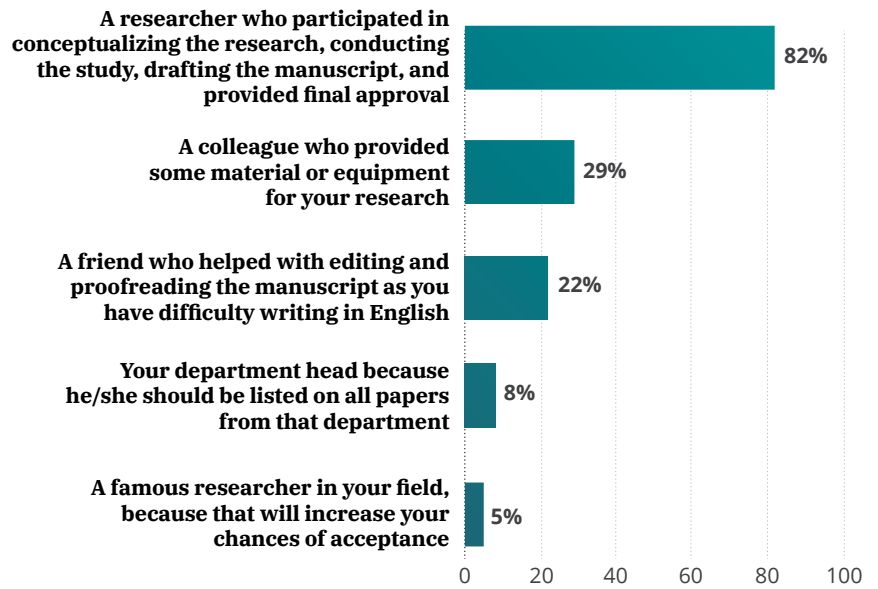
Our survey also revealed some flawed perceptions of authorship. About 82% of the respondents were aware of the standard criteria that qualify a researcher to be a coauthor (Fig.17). However, a substantial number indicated that individuals would qualify as coauthors if they provided some material or equipment for research (29%) or helped them with language editing and proofreading of the manuscript (22%).

**Q Which of the following constitute(s) duplicate submission?**

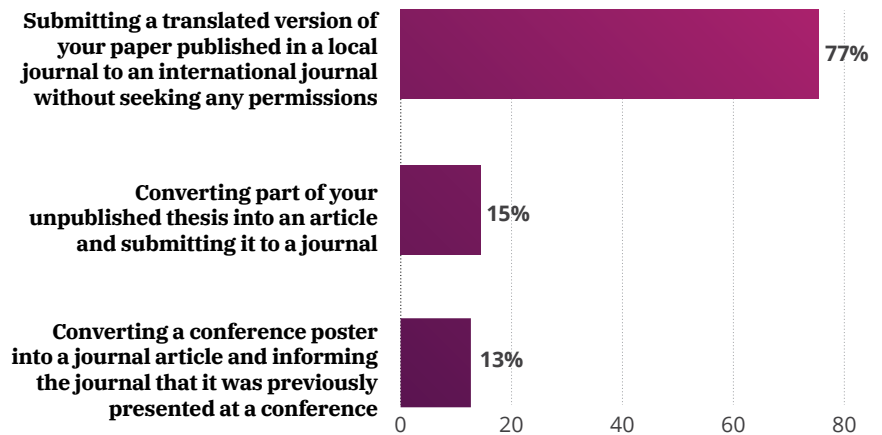
About 77% respondents were aware that submitting a translated version of their paper published in a local journal to an international journal without seeking any permission constitutes duplicate submission (Fig.18). The rest were not aware or did not respond.

However, it is remarkable that 13% to 15% did not know that it is not duplicate submission to convert part of an unpublished thesis into an

**FIG.17** Which of the following people, in your opinion, should get coauthorship on your paper?



**FIG.18** Which of the following constitute(s) duplicate submission?



article and submit it to a journal, or to convert a conference poster into a journal article while informing the journal that it was previously presented at a conference.

### Q Which of the following bodies/guidelines are you familiar with?

We tested author knowledge of industry bodies and guidelines for good research and publication practices.

Only about 21% of the respondents were familiar with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) (Fig 19). Less than 20% were familiar with the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICJME), the Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT), the Declaration of Helsinki, or GPP2.

Bodies/guidelines such as ICMJE evolved to serve academics from medical/life science disciplines, and we observed that a higher proportion of respondents belonging to these disciplines (33%) were familiar with these guidelines than respondents from the physical sciences (17%) and the humanities (10%). However, 33% is a rather low figure for the medical sciences, especially considering that many medical journals direct authors to refer to ICMJE guidelines when preparing their submissions. Further, several

ICMJE guidelines (e.g., those on authorship) are relevant for researchers from other fields as well, so it is important to have them at least know that such guidelines exist.

COPE, which covers universally relevant ethics-related issues, was familiar to roughly similar percentages of respondents from STEM backgrounds (23% to 27%), but to only 18% of respondents from the humanities/social sciences. While COPE focuses on publishers and editors, many of the resources they provide are relevant to authors as well.

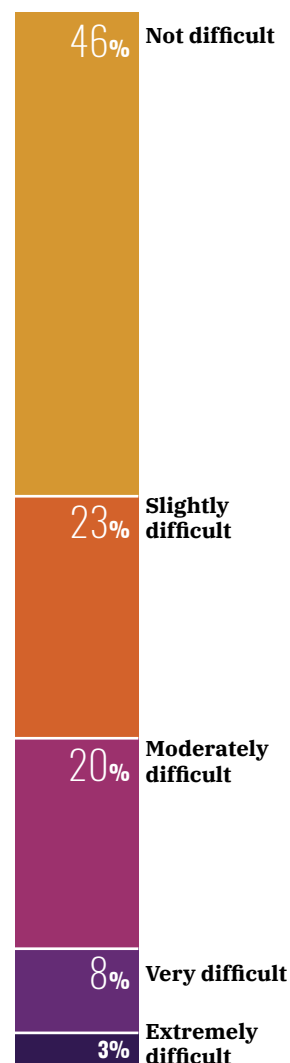
About 31% of the respondents did not know about any of these industry bodies.

### Q How difficult do you find ensuring that you comply with all ethical guidelines for academic publishing?

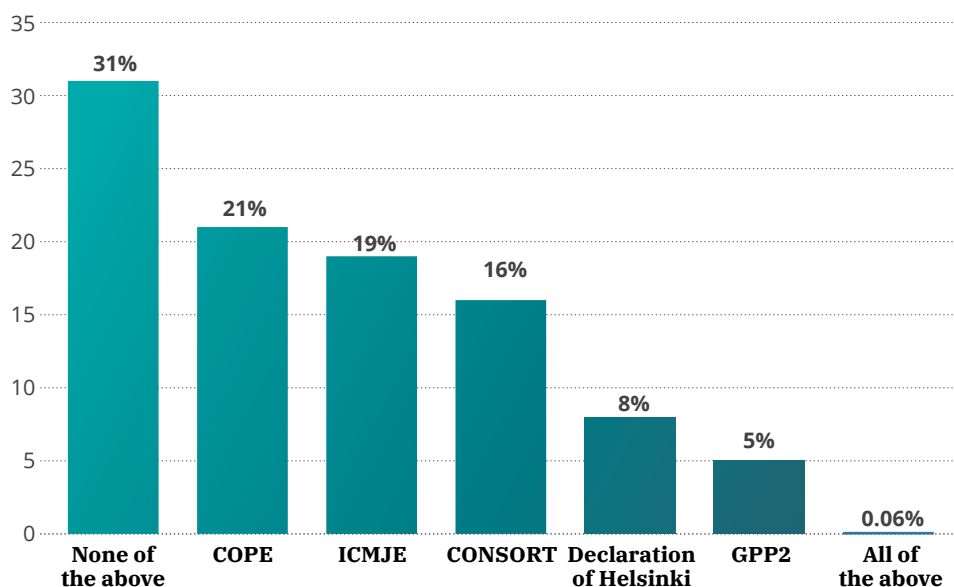
Somewhat surprisingly, relatively small proportions of authors found ethical compliance moderately to extremely difficult (Fig.20).

This may be because respondents considered ethical compliance as less difficult compared to manuscript preparation. But perhaps this also correlates with the fact that a remarkable percentage of respondents did not have a solid understanding of some aspects of publication

**FIG.20**  
How difficult do you find ensuring that you comply with all ethical guidelines for academic publishing?



**FIG.19** Which of the following bodies/guidelines are you familiar with?





ethics or were not familiar with standard ethics-related guidelines and bodies.

Our results indicate the need to educate authors about what constitutes plagiarism and other ethical breaches, how these are addressed by journals, and the negative impact that a flawed understanding of these issues can have.

Many publishers recognize the gap in author understanding of ethical issues such as plagiarism, authorship, and duplicate submission and are increasingly developing and offering educational resources to authors. However, it is likely that the reach of such resources is limited, especially if they are not available in the native languages of the authors that journals serve. Authors also need to be familiarized with all the relevant and established ethics-related bodies/guidelines early on their research careers so

that they know where to look for answers to any questions on publication ethics.

## ATTITUDES TOWARD OPEN ACCESS

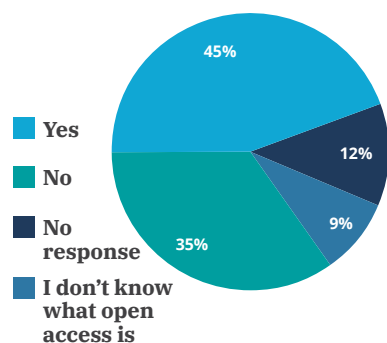
### Have you ever published in an open access journal?

About 45% of respondents reported having chosen to publish in an open access journal (Fig.21a).

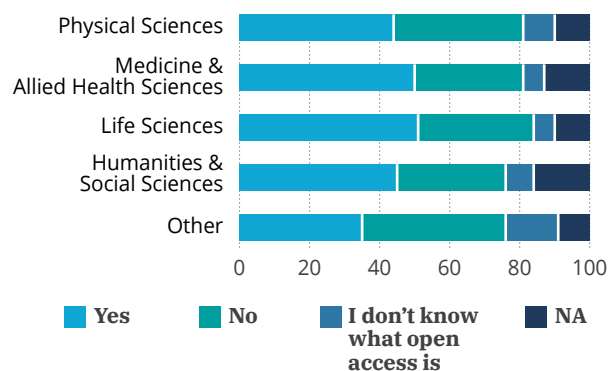
We expected to find both discipline- and tenure-specific trends and hence reviewed the data more closely. We found that the percentage of

**FIG.21**

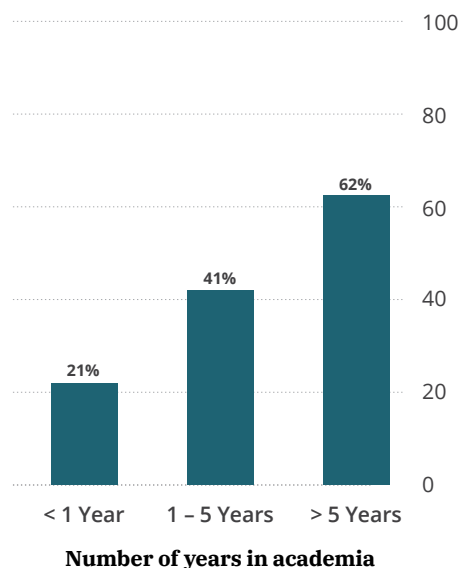
**a** Have you ever published in an open access journal?



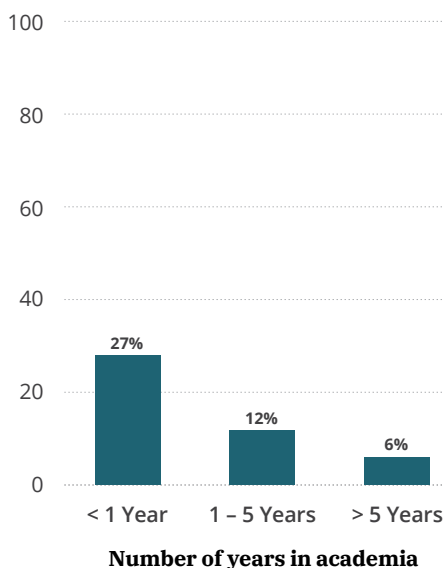
**b** Response distribution by discipline



**c** Tenure-wise proportion of authors who have published in an open access journal



**d** Tenure-wise proportion of authors unfamiliar with open access



respondents who had published open access was slightly higher in the life sciences and medical/allied health sciences (~50%) than in the humanities and the physical sciences (~45%) (Fig.21b).

Further, the likelihood of choosing to publish in an open access journal increased with tenure (Fig.21c).

These findings might indicate several possibilities: for example, experience equips academics with more knowledge about this publishing model and greater confidence in making decisions about the right target journal, or tenured academics are more likely to be entitled to greater funds and can therefore better afford the potential article-processing charges of open access journals.

About 9% of the respondents were unfamiliar with open access. Here, too, we found a tenure-specific pattern: the likelihood of unfamiliarity decreased with tenure, across all disciplines (Fig.21d).

It is remarkable that over a quarter of respondents with less than a year's experience were unfamiliar with open access. Open access is a well-established publishing model and is rapidly gaining ground globally; so it is imperative that researchers are educated about the basics of this model right at the beginning of their careers. It's clear that the proportion of respondents who mentioned institutional or funder mandates as the reason for publishing open access is not negligible. This proportion is likely to increase as more governments and funding bodies embrace open access.

### If yes (you have published in an open access journal), why?

The most common motivation for publishing open access was reaching a larger audience (Fig.22); this was consistent with the findings of the Taylor and Francis Open Access Author Survey (2014) and those of Tenopir et al. (2013). The second most

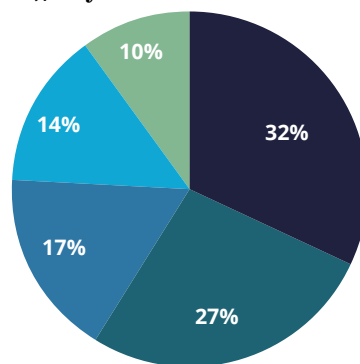
common reason was preference for the open access model of publishing.

### If no (you have never published in an open access journal), why?

A common perception is that authors who choose not to publish open access do so primarily because of inherent misgivings about this model. However, this does not appear to be the case. The most common reason for not publishing in an open access journal was unrelated to any preference against this publishing model: 32% of respondents said that the journal they chose as the best fit for their paper only happened to be a subscription journal (Fig.23). This finding is consistent with those in the report of Tenopir et al. (2013), which showed that open access publications are not thought to be inherently untrustworthy.

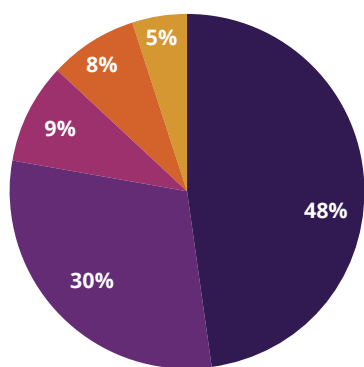
About 27% of respondents said that they could not afford the article-processing charges in open access publishing.

**FIG.23** If no (you have never published in an open access journal), why?



- I chose the journal that best fit my paper and it happened to be a subscription journal
- I don't understand open access publishing
- I couldn't afford the article-processing charges
- I don't see any/adequate benefits of open access publishing
- I doubt the quality of open access journals

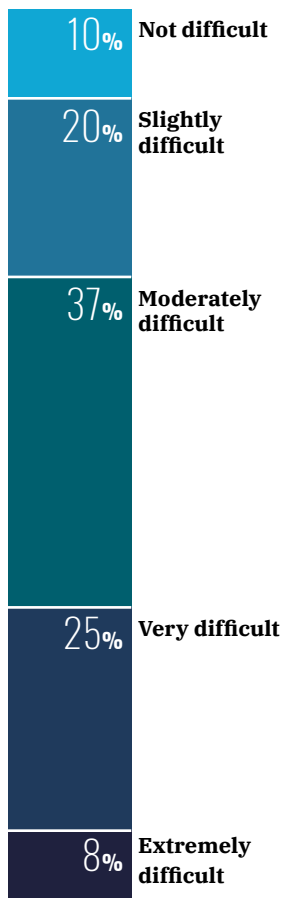
**FIG.22** If yes (you have published in an open access journal), why?



- I want my paper to be read by a larger audience
- I prefer the open access model of publishing
- I chose the journal that best fit my paper and it happened to be open access
- The journal guaranteed publication
- My institute or funding body mandated open access publishing

**Open access should be everyone's commitment, the democratization of knowledge should be a universal movement.**

**FIG.24**  
How difficult do you find responding to peer reviewer comments?



## EXPERIENCES WITH PEER REVIEW

### Q How difficult do you find responding to peer reviewer comments?

Responding to peer review comments emerged as the second most challenging step in academic publishing, with about 70% of respondents reporting that they found it moderately to extremely difficult (Fig.24).

This high percentage may be linked to low English-language proficiency—as in manuscript preparation. However, it may also be considerably influenced by perceptions of peer reviews, as indicated by the following inputs we gathered.

### Q Based on your experience, what are your views about peer review comments?

Overall, authors seem to appreciate the helpful nature of peer reviewer comments, but they are also wary of the additional burden that they impose (Fig.25).

About 60% of the respondents felt that peer reviewer comments were useful; over 45%, that peer reviewer comments were clear and easy to understand; and about 44%, that peer reviewers usually provided their feedback in a constructive and actionable way. These results

are consistent with those published in the Publons' Global State of Peer Review report (2018), which states that researchers are relatively happy with the quality of peer review.

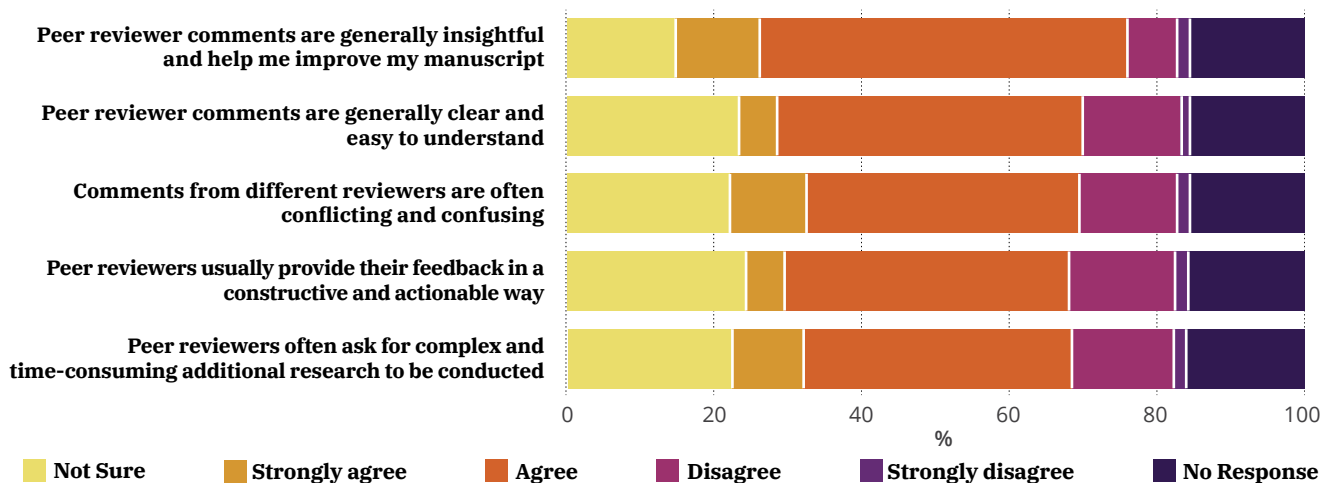
At the same time, however, about 47% of the respondents felt that comments from different reviewers were often conflicting and confusing. Considering that discrepant reviews are not uncommon, this percentage is rather high and indicates that this situation can be a major pain point for both authors and journal editors. In addition, about 46% said that peer reviewers often asked for complex and time-consuming additional research to be conducted. Together, these two factors may explain why a substantial proportion of authors find it difficult to respond to peer reviewer comments.

System-centric discussions on peer review typically focuses on the value of peer review as a gate-keeping mechanism and assesses its performance in terms whether peer review is efficient in discriminating between good-quality and poor-quality research. The above results provide author-centric insights on the perceived value of peer feedback to authors personally and their experiences with the review system.

Overall, opinion on the value of peer review and experiences associated with it seem rather divided. Several respondents seemed aware of the challenges journals face in finding suitable reviewers for large volumes of research papers, and they acknowledged the need for recognition for peer reviewers.

Quite a few comments that respondents provided on peer review revolved around improving

**FIG.25** Based on your experience, what are your views about peer review comments?





the following aspects: (1) objectivity (for example, some authors wrote about reviewer comments reflecting biases against authors or their work); (2) transparency and accountability (some authors felt that reviewer anonymity seems to dilute accountability for the feedback/comments provided and thus decrease the usefulness of the feedback); and (3) quality (some felt that peer reviewers are at times not experts on the research topic or are not trained well enough to assess and share constructive feedback on the papers they review).

Peer review remains the primary gatekeeping mechanism for research. Therefore, journals should explore ways to strengthen the peer review feedback mechanism by providing comprehensive guidelines or training to peer reviewers.

## OVERALL OPINIONS ABOUT THE PUBLISHING SYSTEM

We concluded the survey by asking authors to rank problems with journal publishing in the order of urgency with which they should be addressed. The graph below (Fig. 26) shows the ranking of all the problems.

Finally, we asked respondents if they thought anything needs to be changed in the publishing system and if yes, what that is. A little more than half the respondents suggested that they would like changes in the publishing system. We received about 2,640 supporting comments; the major themes are listed in the blue text box to the right.

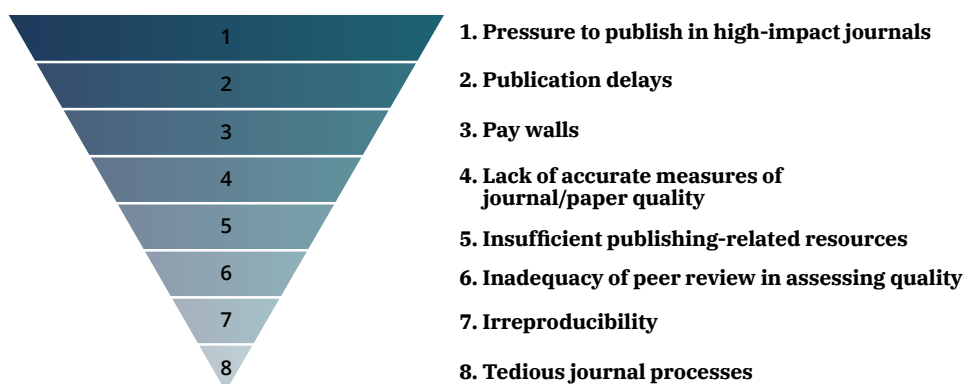
### Author-suggested changes needed in the publishing system

- Increasing the transparency of the publishing process
- Improving the peer review process, by giving reasons for rejection
- Decreasing the time taken for publishing, and providing clear information on the status of review
- Harmonizing the differences between journal systems and submission guidelines so that if a paper is rejected by one journal, it can be easily resubmitted to a different one
- Decreasing the cost of publishing and bringing down paywalls
- Simplifying the English required of non-native English speakers
- Dealing with misconduct and data fabrication more strictly
- Reducing the overemphasis on the impact factor
- Recognizing and rewarding good reviewers
- Making publication easier for early-career researchers

We speculate that several results obtained in this survey may show interesting demographic patterns, and we aim to perform a more detailed analysis to examine possible trends that can offer more granular insights. There is also scope to conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis of the comments gathered on this subject, and we hope to do so in the near future.

There should be a mechanism for authors to provide feedback to editors about the quality of peer review comments. This is not to say that authors should be able to complain about reviewers simply because reviewers have given unfavorable comments. Authors should be able to provide feedback about reviewers' comments in terms of helpfulness, accuracy, and overall quality.

**FIG.26** Problems that need to be addressed in the publishing industry (most to least urgent)



# CONCLUSIONS

Our survey provided valuable inputs on how journal publishing can be improved by focusing on the views and needs of authors. The following are the key takeaways:

## Publication-related challenges

Authors with low English proficiency find manuscript preparation substantially more challenging and frustrating than others. Framing a research question and selecting a journal were indicated to be highly challenging steps in manuscript preparation. Authors need training and resources to help them with these steps especially at the beginning of their careers, and perhaps, an early feedback mechanism for research-question framing as well.

## Awareness of ethical issues and good publication practices

Authors are generally wary of journals that approach them with offers of guaranteed or rapid publication. A substantial proportion had incorrect knowledge of what constitutes plagiarism and who qualifies for coauthorship. Further, a high percentage of respondents were unaware of standard ethics bodies/guidelines. Journals/publishers should consider providing comprehensive guidelines on ethics-related issues, preferably in the native languages of authors from the geographies they want to attract.

## Author-journal interface

The survey results highlighted the need for international English-language journals to simplify their communication with authors by providing clear and complete submission and manuscript-preparation guidelines. They also pointed to the need for journals to ensure that authors are aware of the available channels for communication with the journal and are comfortable using them.

## Time to publication

Most respondents expressed unhappiness with the long turnaround times of journals and believed that a manuscript should ideally take less than six months to be published from the time of submission.

## Attitudes toward open access

A little less than half of the respondents had published in open access journals, and the overall knowledge and comfort level with this publishing model seemed to increase with tenure. Reaching a large audience was the most common motivation to publish open

access. A relatively small proportion of authors have reservations about the quality of open access journals. Early career researchers may need more information and guidance on open access.

## Experiences with peer review

Opinions on peer review seemed divided. While respondents generally acknowledged the value of peer review, they also reported dissatisfaction over conflicting comments, unclear feedback, or requests for additional work. There seems to be considerable scope to improve the value peer review can offer to authors.

## Author suggestions for improvement

About half of the respondents felt the need for improvements in the publishing system. The most frequent suggestions revolved around ensuring transparency, improving peer review processes, and reducing the time taken to publish an article.

# SURVEY METHODS

The survey was administered to authors by using SurveyMonkey, in December 2016. It comprised 37 questions, many of which were multiple-choice questions either requiring only one response or allowing more than one. Some were Likert-scale questions, and some, questions with binary yes/no answers. For some questions, participants had the option of entering free-text responses. The survey was designed such that it could be completed in about 15 minutes. It was open from December 2016 to January 2018. The full questionnaire can be viewed [here](#).

It was promoted on all local-language websites of Editage and Editage Insights; other associated Editage properties; Editage partner and affiliate channels; social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, ResearchGate, Quora, Academia.edu, WeChat); paid channels (sponsored advertisements, PR distribution channels); publishing industry channels and platforms. It was also promoted through universities, journals, and publishers that expressed interest in sharing it with their authors; on local-language researcher platforms (e.g., DXY and ScienceNet in China, Scielo in Brazil). To maximize participation and encourage survey completion, respondents were offered lucky-draw-based incentives, including a free 1-minute video (created by the Editage Video Team) of their most recent published paper and gift vouchers from Amazon and similar retailers in countries where the survey was promoted.

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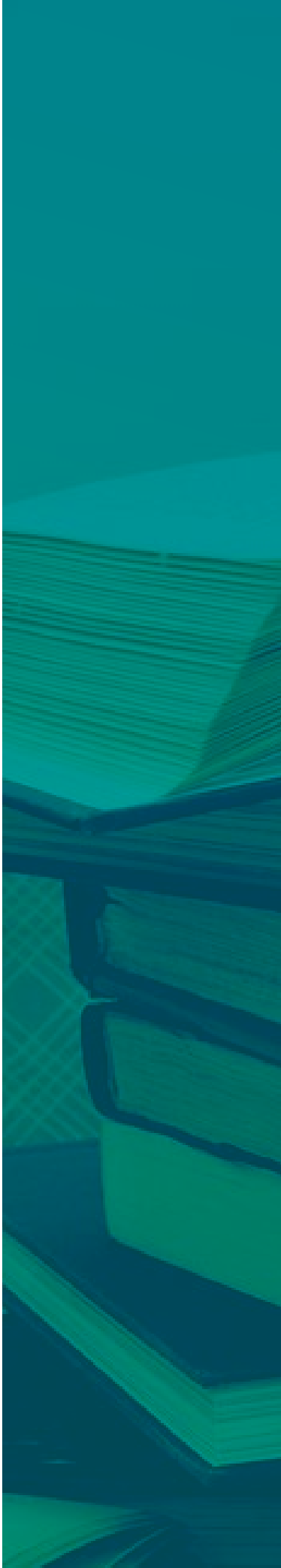
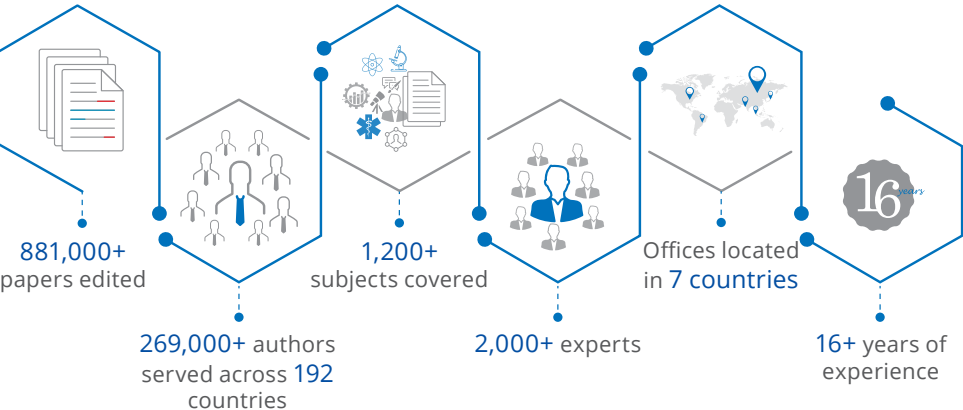
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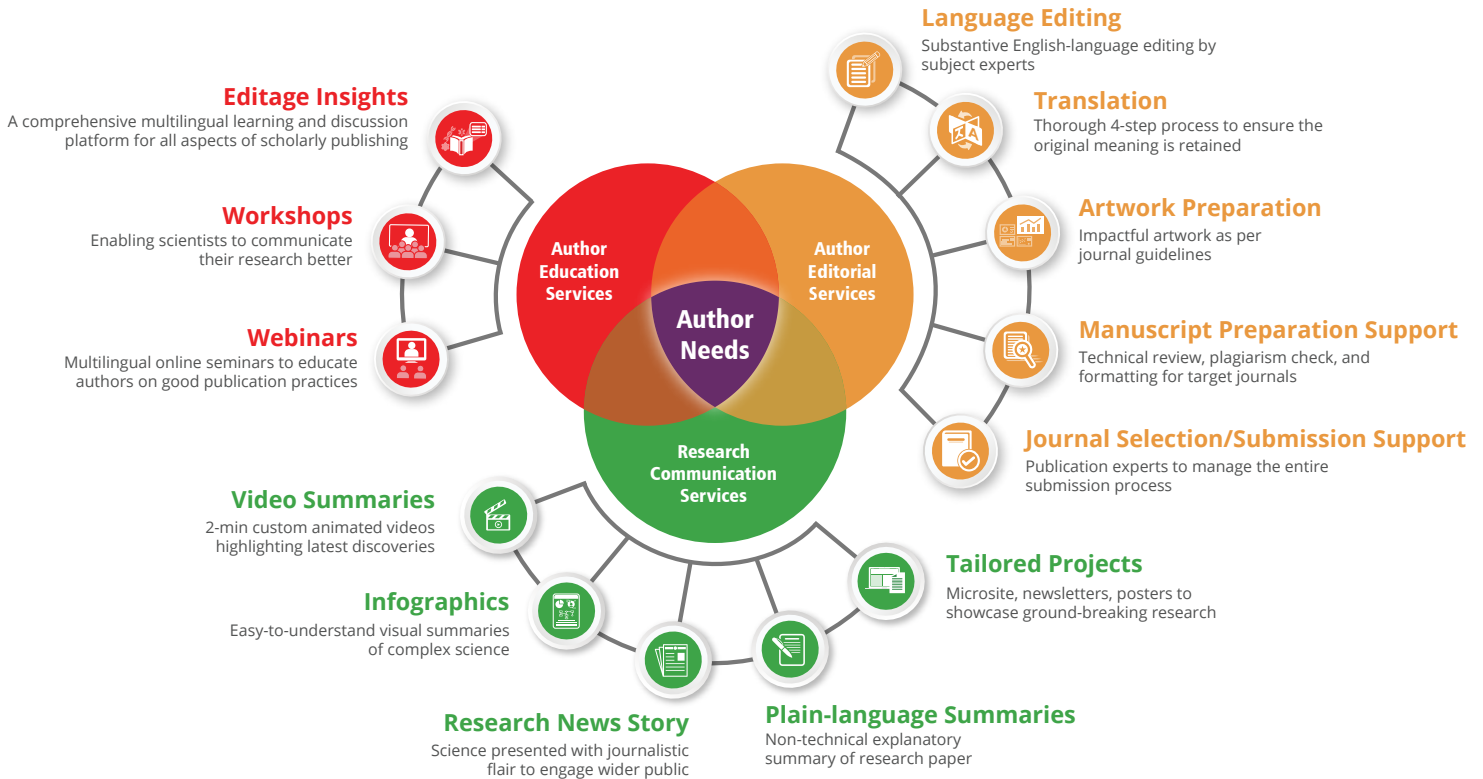
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