

International journal editors and East Asian authors: two surveys

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Abstract

Countries in East Asia—specifically China, Japan, and South Korea—are rapidly emerging as major contributors to global research output. However, owing to barriers in language and culture, it is possible that authors from these countries face unique challenges in getting published. Moreover, as submissions from these countries increase, journal editors may be able to spot some trends in the problems encountered when processing these submissions. This study presents the results of two surveys—one involving non-native English-speaking authors from East Asia and another involving international journal editors. The surveys were designed to throw light on the challenges East Asian authors face in the publication process and the perceptions journal editors have of submissions from East Asian countries. Here, we present and discuss the survey results, highlight gaps in the perspectives of authors and journal editors, and make recommendations to bridge these gaps.

Introduction

China, Japan, and South Korea are important contributors to global academic publications, ranking within the world's top 15 countries in terms of article publications in Nature journals in 2012.¹ In fact, China's recent rapid increase in research output has been the subject of considerable discussion.^{2,3} The world is eagerly looking at the contribution China and other East Asian countries will continue to make in the realm of academic publishing.^{4,5}

The difficulties non-native English-speaking (NNES) authors face in getting their work published in English have been well discussed.^{6,7} Owing to the globalization of science⁸ and the emphasis on English as the lingua franca,⁹ NNES researchers are under tremendous pressure to get published in international English-language journals. With increased submissions from NNES countries, journal editors may be able to spot some trends in problems they encounter with these submissions.

This scenario raises some interesting questions: Do NNES authors from a common region, such as East Asia, face common challenges in getting published? Do journal editors encounter unique problems in submissions from a

given region, or are the problems similar in all submissions from NNES countries? Moreover, are the perceptions that journal editors may have formed about such submissions aligned with the actual challenges NNES authors face?

In an attempt to answer some of these questions, we conducted two parallel surveys—one involving authors from China, Japan, and South Korea (hereafter East Asia), and another involving editors of international English-language journals. The objectives of the surveys were to (a) identify the challenges East Asian authors face in trying to get published in international English-language journals, (b) determine the perceptions of journal editors regarding East Asian submissions, and (c) determine whether any gaps exist between the author and journal editor perspectives.

Methods

Survey design and distribution

Two surveys were created—one for East Asian authors (Survey 1, appendix 1) and another for international journal editors (Survey 2, appendix 2).

Each survey had three parts: (I) demographic questions, (II) opinion-based questions for comparative analysis, and (III) opinion-based questions for additional information. In both surveys, parts I and II were mandatory, whereas part III was optional. The questions in part II of both surveys mirrored each other, allowing easy comparison of respondents' views.

Survey 1 was translated into Japanese, Mandarin, and Korean and made accessible primarily to researchers from Japan, China, and South Korea, respectively. Survey promotion channels included country-specific social media forums for researchers; workshops for academic researchers; academic societies and research universities; a Japanese science newspaper; and the website of Editage, Cactus Communications (a company offering English-language editing and publication support services to NNES authors). This survey was open only to NNES researchers; respondents who indicated that they were native English speakers were disqualified.

Survey 2 was distributed via discussion groups for journal editors on LinkedIn and ResearchGate, Listservs of

associations such as the European Association for Science Editors (EASE) and the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP), and emails to contact personnel listed on journal websites. This survey was open only to editors of international English-language journals with first-hand experience in screening journal submissions and making editorial decisions; respondents who indicated that their journal was not an international English-language journal or that they were not directly involved in the manuscript screening and decision-making processes were disqualified.

Both surveys were conducted through Editage/Cactus Communications, and confidentiality of user contact details and responses was ensured. As an incentive, respondents who completed survey 1 were entitled to enter a lucky draw to win an Amazon voucher worth \$50 (10 winners selected from each country). On completion of survey 2, respondents were entitled to enter into a drawing to receive one of three Amazon vouchers worth \$100 each.

Data analysis

For multiple-choice questions in survey 1, results were calculated as the mean percentage of respondents (from among country-specific respondents) selecting a particular option. For questions where respondents had to rank given options in an order, the ranked options were assigned weights (top-ranked item, highest weight). The final score for each option was automatically calculated by the survey software (SurveyGizmo®, Boulder, Colorado, <http://www.surveygizmo.com>), as the sum of the weighted scores of all responses. We then calculated the average ranks from the final scores for each option and plotted these ranks for survey 1 against those for survey 2.

Results

Response rate

Owing to the wide range of survey promotion channels, such as social media and offline modes, the exact response rate could not be calculated. For each survey, we received a mix of complete and partial responses (authors: 326 complete, 248 partial; journal editors: 54 complete, 61 partial). Partial responses are defined as those in which respondents initiated but abandoned the survey before completion. We received around 100 complete responses each from authors in China, Japan, and South Korea, and over 50 complete responses from journal editors. We believe the responses received adequately represent the target population, especially because most journal editor respondents were within the same demographic group (with regard to location, experience, and role description).

Since respondents dropped out as the survey progressed, the results show the total number of respondents for each question.

Part I of Survey I (author demographics)

Q.1 and Q.2: English as a second or third language and geographic location

Of 431 authors, 98% indicated that English was their second language, while only 2% indicated it to be their third language. Those who indicated it was their first language were disqualified and not allowed to continue the survey. Further, 93% of these authors were working in East Asia at the time of the survey, 4% in other parts of Asia, and 3% in the rest of the world.

Q.3. Broad field of study

Of 430 author respondents, 38% were working in medicine or allied health sciences, 23% in biological sciences, 14% in physical sciences, and 25% in other/multidisciplinary fields. Authors' definitions of "other/multidisciplinary" varied widely and included chemistry, environmental science, material science, psychology, and humanities.

Q.4. Number of papers published in international English-language journals

Most author respondents (56% of 428) had published fewer than five papers in international English-language journals. Of the remaining authors, 19% had published 5–10 papers and 26% had published more than 10 papers. Thus, most author respondents were rather inexperienced in academic publishing.

Q.5 and Q.6. Number of papers published in the top quartile (by ISI impact factor) English-language journals in the relevant field of study, and involvement in international collaborative projects.

Of 425 respondents, 81% had published less than five papers in the top quartile (by ISI impact factor) English-language journals in their field of study, 11% had published 5–10 papers, while only 8% had published more than 10 papers. Further, only 33% of respondents had participated in studies involving international collaboration.

Part I of Survey II (journal editor demographics)

Q.1. Qualifier to ascertain that the respondents' journals were international English-language journals

Respondents who indicated the contrary were disqualified and not allowed to continue the survey.

Q.2. Years of experience in screening journal submissions and making editorial decisions

Respondents indicating that they were not directly involved in screening submissions and making editorial decisions were disqualified. Of 83 journal editors, the vast majority (77%) had over five years of experience with

these processes, 18% had 1–5 years of experience, whereas only 5% had less than 1 year of experience.

Q.3 and Q.4. Geographic location and subject area of the journals

Of 83 journal editors, 63% had their journals based in the US; 13% in Canada; 5% each in the UK and Australia; 4% each in The Netherlands and New Zealand; and 6% collectively in other countries, such as Croatia, India, and Italy. With regard to subject area, 36% journals belonged to the broad field of medicine or allied health sciences; 42%, biological sciences; 10%, physical sciences; and 12%, other/multidisciplinary areas. “Other/multidisciplinary” subject areas mentioned were information science and geoscience.

Q.5. Subjective evaluation of journal prestige

We asked the editors about the perceived prestige of their journal rather than for a specific impact factor, as some journals have clear policies against favour of the impact factor. Of 83 editors, 45% placed their journal within the top 5% of those in their field; 29%, top 6–25%; 19%, top 25–50%, and 7%, bottom 50%.

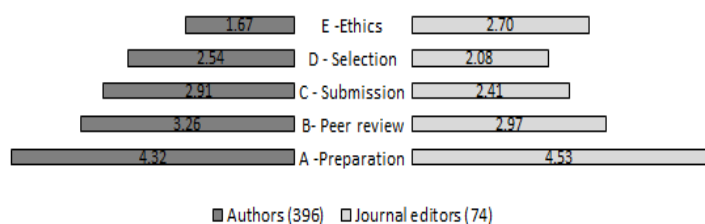
Q.6. Proportion of submissions from East Asia

Since the survey explored the editors’ perceptions of East Asian submissions, we asked what proportion of their journals’ submissions were from East Asia. Of 82 editors, 67% stated that less than 20% of their submissions were from East Asia, 29% reported 20–50% submissions, and 4% reported 50–70% submissions. None of the editors reported more than 70% submissions from this region.

Comparative evaluation of responses in Part II of surveys 1 and 2

Part II of both surveys had questions that mirrored each other, allowing comparison of the author and journal editor responses.

Q.7. Fig. 1. Aspects of the publication process ranked in terms of how challenging authors find them versus how challenging journal editors think authors find them

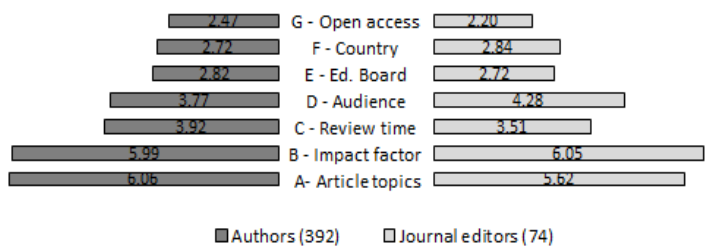


Scores in Fig. 1 indicate average ranks assigned in a range of 1 to 5, where 5 = most challenging. A, manuscript

preparation; B, addressing peer reviewer comments; C, submission process; D, journal selection; E, ethical guideline conformance.

As the figure indicates, the authors (n = 396) and journal editors (n = 74) who answered this question agreed that manuscript preparation was the most challenging aspect of the publication process for authors. However, authors ranked conformance to ethical guidelines the least challenging aspect, while journal editors thought this aspect considerably challenging for authors.

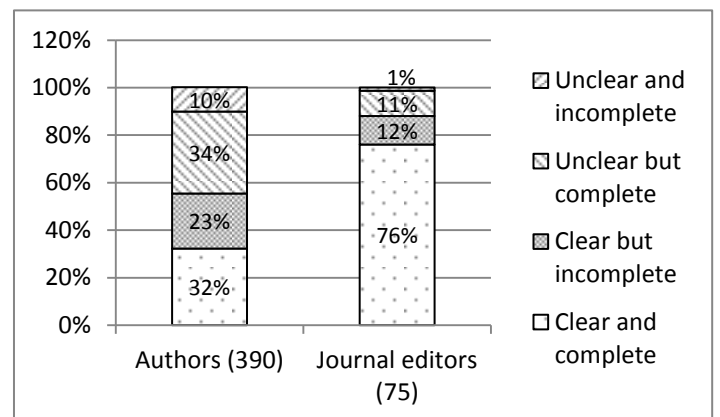
Q.8. Fig. 2. Factors considered when selecting a journal, ranked in order of importance



Scores in Fig. 2 indicate average ranks assigned in a range of 1 to 7, where 7 = most important. A, topics & types of articles generally published in the journal; B, journal impact factor or perceived prestige; C, review time; D, target audience; E, editorial board members; F, country of origin; G, open access status.

Authors (n = 392) and journal editors (n= 74) showed relative congruence in their rankings in this question, with “journal impact factor or perceived prestige” and “topics and types of articles generally published in the journal” being rated as the top two factors considered. Both groups of respondents agreed that the journal’s open access status was the least important factor considered.

Q.9. Fig. 3. Impression of how well author guidelines of journals are framed

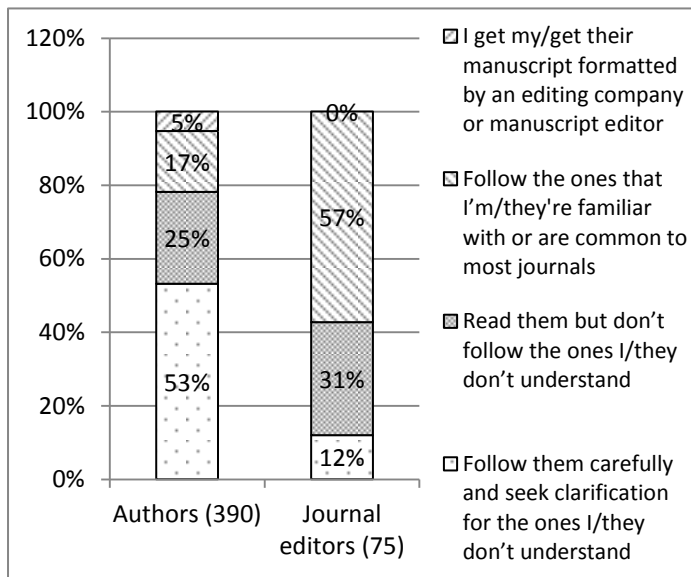


Responses to the question of how well author guidelines of international journals are framed indicated a clear difference in the opinions of authors and journal editors. The options given in the questionnaire were interpreted as follows:

- a. They are easy to understand and give me/authors all the information I/they need = Clear and complete
- b. They are easy to understand but do not give me/authors all the information I/they need = Clear but incomplete
- c. They are difficult to understand but give me/authors all the information I/they need = Unclear but complete
- d. They are difficult to understand and do not give me/authors all the information I/they need = Unclear and incomplete

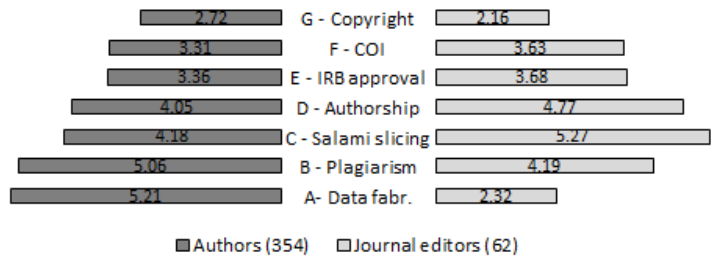
As Fig. 3 shows, of 390 authors, only 32% considered the guidelines of the journals they had experience with to be clear and complete, as opposed to 76% of 75 journal editors who thought their own guidelines were clear and complete. Similarly, only 1% journal editors rated their guidelines unclear and incomplete, as against 10% authors who had selected this rating.

Q.10. Fig. 4. Authors' approach to journal guidelines versus journal editors' perceptions of authors' approach



Here again, there was a discordance in the views of the authors and journal editors. Most authors (53% of 390) who answered this question reported that they follow journal guidelines carefully and seek clarification for the ones they do not understand, whereas most journal editors (57% of 75) thought that authors follow only those guidelines that they are familiar with and that are common to most journals. Interestingly, very few authors (5%) and no journal editors (0%) stated that authors get their manuscripts formatted by an editing company or manuscript editor.

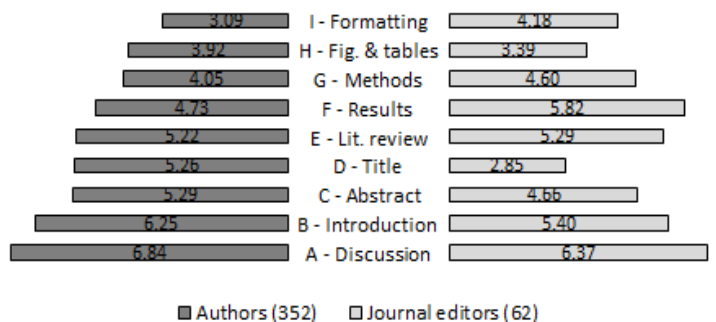
Q.11. Fig. 5. Authors' rating of concepts related to publication ethics from best to least understood, versus journal editors' rating of issues from most to least commonly encountered



Scores in Fig. 5 indicate average ranks assigned in a range of 1 to 7, where 7 = best understood aspect (for authors) or most problematic aspect (for editors). A, data fabrication and falsification; B, plagiarism; C, salami slicing; D, authorship criteria; E, ethical board approval for methods used; F, conflicts of interest disclosure; G, copyright transfer polices.

In Fig. 5, a symmetrical pattern on either side of the options actually indicates greater discordance between the authors and journal editors. Data fabrication was the only point of agreement between authors (n = 354) and journal editors (n = 62): Authors stated they understood the concept of data fabrication really well, and journal editors reported that they rarely encountered data fabrication in manuscripts from East Asian countries. On the other hand, although authors stated that they understood plagiarism and salami slicing well, these were the top two issues most commonly encountered by journal editors. Interestingly, although "copyright transfer" was reported as the least-understood concept among authors, journals rarely seem to encounter problems in this regard.

Q.12. Fig. 6. Authors' ranking of broad aspects of manuscript preparation from most to least challenging, versus journal editors' ranking of these aspects as most to least problematic

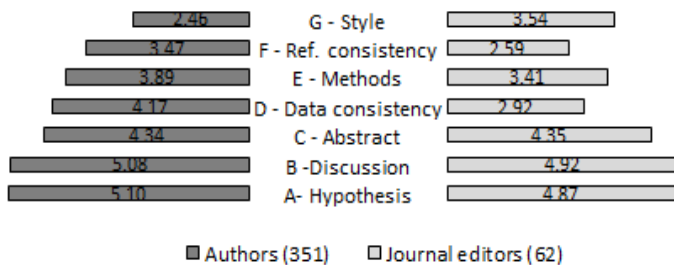


Scores in Fig. 6 indicate average ranks assigned in a range of 1 to 9, where 9 = most challenging (for authors) or most problematic (for editors). A, Discussion section; B, Introduction section; C, abstract; D, title; E, literature

review; F, Results section, H, figures & tables; I, formatting as per journal guidelines.

The responses of authors (n = 352) and journal editors (n = 62) to this question were fairly consistent. Authors viewed the discussion as the most challenging section to write, and journal editors reported maximum problems in this section. One notable point of difference was that although authors consider framing their manuscript title as fairly challenging, journal editors rarely encounter problems in manuscript titles. Further, while authors find formatting as per journal guidelines least challenging, editors frequently note problems in this aspect.

Q. 13. Fig. 7. Authors' ranking of specific minute demands of academic writing from most to least important, versus journal editors' views on problems encountered in these aspects



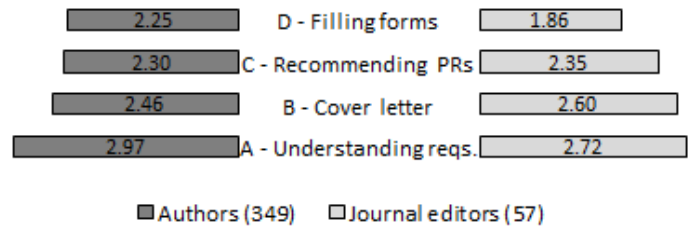
Scores in Fig. 7 indicate average ranks assigned in a range of 1 to 7, where 7 = most challenging (for authors) or most problematic (for editors).

- A - Clearly stating the research hypothesis in the introduction
- B - Ensuring that the discussion section does not merely restate the results but details their interpretation, limitations, and implications for further studies
- C - Ensuring that the abstract covers all important aspects of the manuscript without introducing new information that is not provided in the text
- D - Ensuring numerical consistency and accuracy
- E - Describing the methods in sufficient detail to allow replication
- F - Ensuring consistency between references in text and in the reference list
- G - Following style-related author guidelines

Although authors (n = 351) agreed that stating the research question clearly and developing a thorough discussion section were of prime importance, journal editors (62) reported these aspects to be most problematic. Consistent with the responses to Q. 12, authors rated “following style-related guidelines” (word limits, how abbreviations should be defined, how subheadings and references should appear,

etc.) least important, and journal editors reported that this aspect was problematic fairly often.

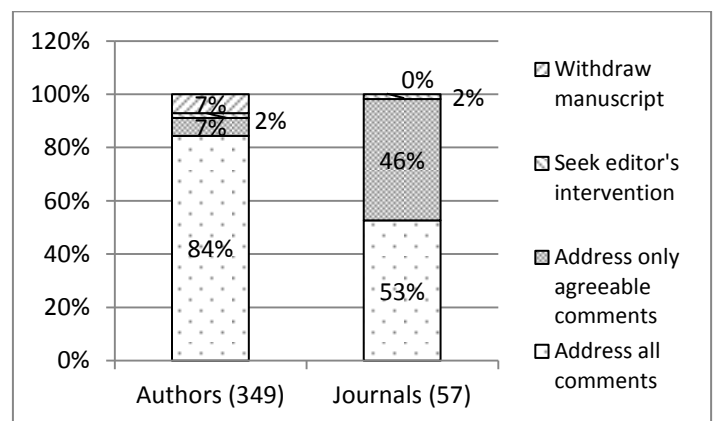
Q. 14. Fig. 8. Authors' ranking of aspects of the submission process from most to least challenging, versus journal editors' views on problems encountered in these aspects



Scores in Fig. 8 indicate average ranks assigned in a range of 1 to 4, where 4 = most challenging (for authors) or most problematic (for editors). A, understanding the submission requirements; B, writing the cover letter; C, recommending peer reviewers; D, filling out various submission forms.

Authors (n = 349) and journal editors (n = 57) had completely congruent responses to this question: Authors found understanding submission requirements most challenging, and journal editors for found that authors most often do not seem to understand these requirements. On the other hand, authors found filling out various forms during submission least challenging, while journal editors rarely encountered problems with the form-filling process.

Q. 15. Fig. 9. Authors' approach to dealing with extensive peer reviewer comments that request many changes

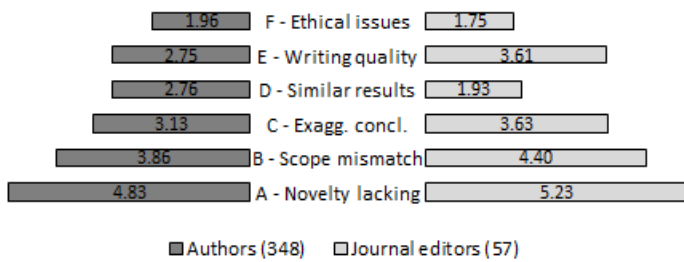


Of 349 authors who answered this question, most (84%) stated that they respond to all reviewer comments point by point and resubmit their manuscript to the same journal. However, a large number of journal editors (46% of 57) thought authors addressed only the agreeable peer review comments. Surprisingly, no journal editor thought that

authors withdraw their manuscript when they receive complex and demanding reviewer comments.

Authors were given two options under manuscript withdrawal. Of 349 authors, 3% reported that they would withdraw their manuscript and submit to another journal without making any changes, whereas 4% reported that they would incorporate the agreeable reviewer comments before resubmission to another journal (data not shown).

Q. 16. Fig. 10. Reasons for manuscript rejection, ranked from most to least common



Scores in Fig. 10 indicate average ranks assigned in a range of 1 to 6, where 6 = most common reason for rejection. A, study lacking novelty; B, mismatch with the journal scope or results not generalizable; C, exaggerated conclusions not supported by data; D, Similar results simultaneously submitted by another author group; E, poor manuscript structure or writing quality; F, lack of conformance to ethical norms.

The authors (n = 348) and editors (n = 57) who answered this question agreed that the study lacking novelty is the most common reason for manuscript rejection, followed by a mismatch with the journal scope, and exaggerated conclusions that are not sufficiently supported by the study results. Interestingly, poor writing quality seems to be a far more common reason for rejection (according to editors) than authors think it is.

Journal editors were allowed to record their comments on this question. Some other mentioned reasons for rejection or delayed publication were poor rationale for the study; unsound methodology in control subject/sample selection; lack of focus in reporting data and results; weak discussions; out-dated references; poorly created tables and graphs; and manuscript seemingly formatted for a previous journal but not reformatted for the current journal.

Part III of survey 1 (author opinions)

Q. 17–20. Table 1. Author recommendations to reduce the challenges they face

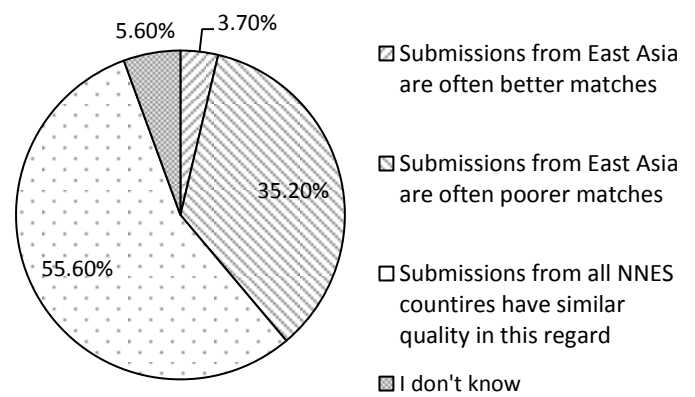
We asked the authors what would help reduce the challenges they face in various aspects of the publication process, namely, journal selection, manuscript preparation,

ethical guideline conformance, and submission. Although these questions were optional, we received a fair number of responses. Many of the opinions overlapped, and listed in Table 1 are the broad types of recommendations. (See Table 1 in the “Supplementary Information” section.)

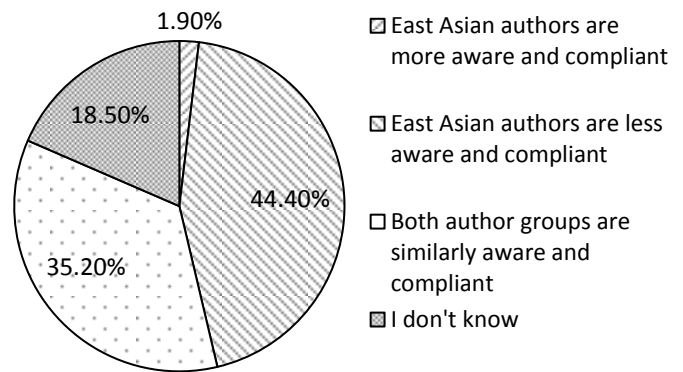
Part III of survey 2 (editor opinions)

Q. 17–19. Fig. 11. Comparison of submissions from East Asia and other NNES countries

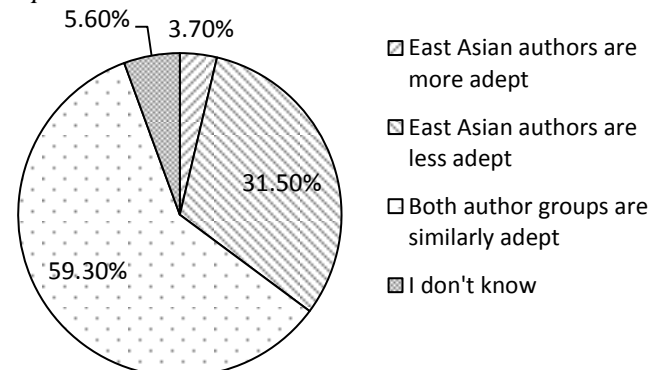
(a) In terms of matching the journal scope



(b) In terms of compliance with ethical guidelines



(c) In terms of how the submission and peer review processes are handled



A total of 54 journal editors answered this set of questions. East Asian submissions were very rarely perceived as better than submissions from other NNES countries on the stated parameters. The majority of editors reported that all NNES country submissions are comparable with regard to match with the journal scope and handling of the submission and peer review processes. However, in terms of compliance to norms in publication ethics, most of the journal editors rated East Asian submissions poorer than other NNES country submissions.

Q. 20. Fig. 13. Issues journal editors would like to educate East Asian authors about

A total of 38 editors provided their subjective opinions on what East Asian authors should be educated about. Fig. 13 lists the broad types of issues mentioned, of which “plagiarism and self-plagiarism,” “research ethics,” and “the importance of getting the manuscript checked by a native English speaker before submission” stood out as common issues among the journal editor responses. (See Fig. 13 in the “Supplementary Information” section.)

Fig. 14. Other comments by journal editors

Fig. 14 presents the additional free comments provided by the journal editors. A few journal editors opined that some of the issues the survey addressed were not specific to East Asia, whereas a few others made specific comments regarding China and other Asian countries. (See Fig. 14 in the “Supplementary Information” section.)

Discussion

The “publish or perish” paradigm makes career growth and attaining tenure extremely challenging for researchers,¹⁰ much more so for NNES authors who are forced to publish in high-impact English-language journals.¹¹ The problem is exacerbated by the fact that most young authors receive no formal training in scientific writing and the publication process.¹²

Several published works have attempted to provide authors tips to get published¹³ and explain what journal editors look for in manuscripts.¹² An interview-based study conducted at the MD Anderson Cancer Center,⁷ University of Texas, highlighted some of the challenges NNES faculty and students face in manuscript writing. The authors concluded that NNES authors “desperately want to improve their English writing skills so that they can become more valuable and productive scientists.”

Thus, while both journal editors and authors are generally aware of problems with submissions from NNES authors, especially with regard to writing quality, there has been no clear documentation of the challenges these authors face at each stage of the publication process, nor of journal editors’ perceptions of these submissions. As a step toward

filling this knowledge gap, this study aimed to compare the perceptions of authors and journal editors regarding the challenges East Asian authors face.

Points of agreement between authors and journal editors

The author and journal editor respondents were in agreement on various issues. For example, manuscript preparation was uniformly rated the most challenging aspect of the publication process for authors (Fig. 1). Although authors consider specific aspects of the introduction and discussion sections most important in academic writing, they find these sections the most challenging to prepare. Concurrently, journal editors encounter problems in these sections most commonly (Figs. 6 and 7). Moreover, the editors rated poor manuscript structure and writing quality a far more common reason for rejection that authors seem to think it is (Fig. 10).

Previous studies on NNES country submissions have discussed how poor language quality may mask good science in manuscripts written by NNES authors and how journals should encourage these authors to use pre-submission editing services.¹⁴ However, despite the increased availability of professional editing services and the large volume of resources available to teach academic writing to NNES authors, our study shows that manuscript preparation remains the most challenging aspect of the publication process. This indicates a need for academicians from NNES countries to receive focused training in communicating in English for academic purposes, possibly at the graduate level.

Authors and editors agreed on the factors considered when selection a journal, with “articles previously published in the journal” and “journal impact factor” identified as the top two factors. Interestingly, both respondent groups rated “open access status” the least important factor considered in journal selection (Fig. 2). This is surprising, given the boom in and advocacy for open access that has been the subject of many discussions in the publishing industry in recent years.¹⁵ It is possible that the urgency of open access publication that has probably become a big consideration for authors in the west may not have reached authors in the east yet.

With regard to ethical issues, authors stated that they understood the concept of data fabrication best, and editors rated data fabrication the least commonly encountered ethical problem (Fig. 5). This seems counterintuitive in light of recent studies that have discussed the increasing number of retractions due to data fabrication.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the journal editor responses seem logical because data fabrication is the most difficult issue to spot during manuscript processing.

The opinions of both respondent groups also concurred with regard to the different stages of the submission process. Authors rated understanding the submission requirements as the most challenging part of the submission process, followed by drafting a cover letter, recommending peer reviewers, and filling out submission forms. Editors provided the same order of ranking for aspects they most to least commonly encounter problems with (Fig. 8). Korean authors, however, ranked filling out submission forms as the most challenging (possibly interpreted as cumbersome) aspect (data not shown). This finding is aligned with the fast-technology culture in South Korea.¹⁷

Points of disagreement between authors and journal editors

The author and journal editor responses indicated that they had conflicting opinions about various issues. The most apparent conflict was that authors viewed adhering to publication ethics as the least challenging aspect of the publication process, whereas journal editors assumed this aspect would pose a considerable challenge to East Asian authors (Fig. 1). Further, under publication ethics, authors reported a fairly good understanding of plagiarism and salami slicing, while journal editors reported these as common problems encountered in East Asian submissions (Fig. 5). This could have two implications: either authors do not understand what constitutes plagiarism and other ethical breaches, or although they are aware of ethical requirements, they find them difficult to follow, possibly owing to language or cultural barriers.

Previous reports have made references to the tradition in certain cultures where copying text written by someone else, without attribution, is a mark of respect to the original writer and a sign that the original writer is considered famous enough to not require attribution.^{18,19} Another argument that has been used in defence of plagiarism and self-plagiarism is that NNES authors find it very difficult to paraphrase a piece that is already perfectly well written. This might explain, to some extent the observed discrepancies in the views of authors and editors in the present study. Thus, East Asian authors need to be educated about western standards of publication ethics, preferably through resources in their native languages. Further, they may also need intensive coaching for correct application of good publication practices.

Another point of remarkable disagreement between authors and journal editors was in the impression of how well author guidelines of international journals were framed; most authors reported that they found journal guidelines incomplete or unclear or both, whereas an overwhelming majority of journal editors thought their own guidelines were clear and complete (Fig. 3). Further, the majority of authors reported that they follow author guidelines carefully and seek clarification where required, in contrast

to journal editors, most of whom reported that authors selectively follow guidelines they are familiar with (Fig. 4). Finally, authors viewed following style-related guidelines as the least important aspect of academic writing, whereas journal editors viewed this aspect as considerably important (Fig. 7). These results indicate the need for journal editors to provide guidelines in various languages, as far as possible; to review and update their guidelines regularly; and make processes simple for authors to seek clarification whenever required. Editing services could help authors ensure that their manuscripts are well formatted for their target journal prior to submission. However, very few authors and no journal editors mentioned that authors use editing services to get their paper formatted (Fig. 4).

Finally, with regard to authors' response to complex peer reviewer comments requesting many changes, most authors stated that they address all comments point by point and resubmit the manuscript. In contrast, a considerable proportion of editors thought that authors in such a situation would address only the agreeable comments (Fig. 9). It is possible that authors do not understand complex peer reviewer comments in entirety and therefore believe that they are addressing them satisfactorily, when in fact they are not. Thus, authors seem to be in need of an academic coach to help them through the publication process, especially with how to respond to peer reviewer comments.

Comparison of submissions from East Asia and other NNES countries

Most journal editors reported that East Asian submissions were either worse than or on par with, but rarely better than, submissions from other NNES countries. In terms of manuscript preparation and handling of the submission and publication process, most editors found submissions from East Asia and other NNES countries comparable. However, in terms of compliance with publication ethics, East Asian submissions were generally considered worse than other NNES country submissions (Fig. 11a–c). This finding ties in with our other findings regarding publication ethics and the need for better author education.

Subjective comments of the journal editors indicated that the quality of submissions from East Asia varied widely, depending on the subject area, country, and author group, and that observations could not be generalized for the region. While one editor reported that submissions from China have improved dramatically in recent years, two other editors reported Chinese submissions to be generally worse than Japanese submissions. Similarly, while one journal editor reported that problems encountered are usually related to manuscript preparation and rarely to the science, others reported that they would like to educate East Asian authors about the need to study something meaningful that advances the science.

These varied and occasionally conflicting responses from journal editors seem to reflect the state of flux in the emerging regions of East Asia, where the pressure to publish and the resulting submission volumes are high, but the quality of output is variable. Given the prominence of East Asian submissions in the global research output and the rapid increase in these submissions,¹ it would be very beneficial for journals and publishers to consider some of the actual challenges East Asian authors face and try to make the publication process easier for them.

Limitations and future prospects

This study has some limitations. First, the survey dropout rate was quite high. We attribute this to the fact that, because of the academic nature of the survey, the questionnaires were rather long and had several ranking-type questions, which were time consuming to fill out.

Further, the majority of the journal editors stated that less than 20% of submissions to their journals were from East Asia. Although this may raise concerns about the reliability of the editor responses, we believe that journal editors who felt they did not have adequate experience to comment on the questions asked, would have opted out of the survey or indicated this in comments.

While our data leave scope for additional levels of analysis, for example, a comparison of author and editor groups based on levels of experience, our survey and the analysis presented above indicate some clear trends and gaps in author and editor perspectives. Moreover, this study has yielded several practical recommendations that journals and publishers could consider to help make the publication process easier for East Asian authors and, by extension, for most NNES authors who may face similar challenges.

Future initiatives could build on these findings and aim to bridge the gap in the perspectives of authors and journal editors through education for authors and cultural sensitization for journal editors.

Supplementary Information

Table 1. Author recommendations to reduce the challenges they face

Journal selection	Manuscript preparation	Ethical guideline conformance	Submission process
Journals should clearly indicate the expected time to first decision, time to publication after acceptance, rejection rates, and reasons for rejection	Pre-submission editing, journal formatting, artwork preparation and peer review services	Clear description of journal processes for checking ethical conformance on journal website	Clearer author guidelines with FAQs, simplified processes, and better use of automation
Journal aims and scope translated into local languages	New reference management and literature search tools	Pre-submission ethics check services	Standardized submission processes for all journals of the same publisher
Reasons for rejection and recommendations for other target journals should be stated in rejection notices	A thesaurus designed for non-native authors and a highly accurate translation software for scientific material	Training workshops and seminars on publication ethics conducted regularly and as part of academic programs	Stable, user-friendly submission interfaces, compatible with various local languages
A universal database listing various journal impact factors, ranking, review times, acceptance rates, target audience, frequency of publication, geographic distribution, etc., allowing for easy comparison	Academic coaches who help with manuscript preparation	Clearer guidelines on identifying conflicts of interest	Clear and specific submission status indicators (e.g., manuscript currently with reviewer 2)
Automated tools that suggest suitable journals based on article keywords and information from the abstract	Standardized journal formatting guidelines translated into local languages	Standardization of ethics-related journal guidelines with clear examples and checklists	Guide for interacting with journal editors
Coaching or tips from experienced authors	Journals accepting more file formats	Ethical guidelines translated into local languages	Essential and non-essential changes clearly indicated in peer review reports
Professional services that offer publication support	Easy access of sample papers on journal websites	Ethics-related discussion forums	Professional services offering submission support with interpreters
Pre-submission inquiry services	Checks by statisticians and analytical experts	Slides on ethics for compulsory viewing during the submission process on journal submission systems	Faster review

Fig. 13. Issues journal editors would like to educate East Asian authors about

The need to study something relevant, meaningful, and novel that advances the science	Biostatistics, research ethics, plagiarism and self-plagiarism	The need to review most updated references in the field
The need to get the manuscript edited by a native English speaker familiar with the subject area	That identical quoted text is not acceptable even in the methods section	Being self-critical of study novelty, choosing a journal accordingly, and explaining the study novelty in the cover letter
Following author guidelines and style manuals carefully	The need to pick a relevant journal	
Appropriate use of control samples	Getting a pre-submission check for substance as well as language	The need to formulate a clear hypothesis and present it in the manuscript
Effective use of translation services	English language competence and better writing quality	

Fig. 14. Other comments by journal editors

Most articles from Japan are at least as good as those from western countries; those from China are rather more varied.	Many of the identified concerns here and above are not exclusive to East Asian authors.	As per investigations of plagiarism in the Croatian Medical Journal for two years, the authors of plagiarized manuscripts were mostly from China, Turkey, and Croatia (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22207497). I think the reasons are cultural and poor English-language competence.
How well a manuscript matches a journal's scope often depends on the subject area rather than the author's country of origin	Quality varies: some of the best and worst papers are from East Asia	
Submissions from China, which were once the poorest, have now improved dramatically due to increased use of professional medical writers	Most issues are language related and not a reflection on the science.	

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