

How do authors feel when they receive negative peer reviewer comments? An experience from Chinese biomedical researchers

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ABSTRACT

Background: Peer review is at the heart of academic publishing and has long been instrumental in bringing good science to the forefront. Peer reviewer comments provide authors with valuable suggestions to improve their manuscript; thus, even a rejected manuscript with constructive reviewer comments is highly valuable. However, peer reviewer comments can sometimes be negative, rather than constructive, damaging authors' motivation and confidence levels.

Objective: This study aims to make editors and peer reviewers aware of how negative reviewer comments can affect authors, and suggests ways to ensure that peer review is constructive.

Methods: Through a discussion on DXY, an online community for biomedical researchers in China, authors were asked to share their experiences with negative reviewer comments; 99 participants responded. Separately, similar questions were posted on two other online communities, Academia Stack Exchange and Quora, yielding 11 responses. These responses were analyzed on the basis of their underlying emotion or message.

Results: The authors' responses indicate that they appreciate receiving constructive reviewer comments and benefit from such comments. However, authors are often demoralized when they receive comments that are superficial, harsh, or overcritical, and do not provide constructive suggestions for improvement.

Conclusion: While it is true that peer review work claims a lot of time and energy from busy scientists, the purpose is lost when reviewer comments are purely negative. If peer reviewers could keep in mind the feelings of authors while drawing up their reports, peer review would become more effective and a more positive experience for authors.

Keywords: Author motivation, constructive peer review, negative comments, peer review, positive comments

Introduction

The scholarly publishing industry has witnessed many changes over the last few decades, with concepts such as open access, citation metrics, big data, and multiple authorship hitting the scene and new digital innovations making their presence felt every now and then. However, one system that has endured throughout this phase of evolution is peer review. Peer review is an extremely

valuable and constructive element in scholarly publishing: it is, in effect, the cornerstone on which the entire publication system rests. To this day, scholars recognise the importance of peer review¹ and want the process to continue. Even in the present digital environment where blogging, tweeting, and other social media activity has taken the scholarly world by storm, peer review is still considered the most trustworthy feature by academics when it comes to reading, citing, or publishing scholarly articles.²

Peer review operates as a quality control mechanism by filtering out substandard papers and poor science, and thus aims to bring good science to the forefront. The peer review system benefits authors by providing expert advice that helps improve the quality of their manuscripts.³ Even if a manuscript is rejected by a journal after peer review, the reviewer comments are a value addition: by incorporating these suggestions in the revised manuscript, the author can hope to improve the quality of the manuscript and thereby increase its chances of acceptance by the next target journal. Journals too are benefited by the system: peer-reviewed journals enjoy a good reputation and are trusted by scientists.

However, although peer review is indispensable, critics agree that the process is not without flaws. The peer review system is slow, inconsistent in its effectiveness, prone to bias, and can be easily abused. Also, there is the possibility of reviewers stealing ideas from manuscripts they review or giving harsh reviews to slow down the publication process of a rival.⁴ Further, editors might go awry with the selection of reviewers, reviewers may have widely differing opinions, and authors might not always interpret the reviewer comments correctly.⁵

As per the Council of Science Editors' white paper on publication ethics,⁶ peer reviewers have the following responsibilities toward authors [*sic*]: (1) Providing written, unbiased feedback in a timely manner on the scholarly merits and the scientific value of the work, together with the documented basis for the reviewer's opinion; (2) Indicating whether the writing is clear, concise, and relevant and rating the work's composition, scientific accuracy, originality, and interest to the journal's readers; (3) Avoiding personal comments or criticism and (4) Maintaining the confidentiality of the review process: not sharing, discussing with third parties, or disclosing information from the reviewed manuscript.

Additionally, there are many published articles giving recommendations on how to make the peer review process more effective, how authors should address peer reviewer comments at the time of revision, and what referees should keep in mind when reviewing manuscripts.⁷⁻¹⁰ In a previous

survey, authors from China, Japan, and South Korea were asked how they responded to complex reviewer comments requesting many changes. Of a total of 349 respondents, 3% of the authors said they tend to withdraw their manuscript and submit it to a different journal without making any changes, while 4% said they would incorporate only the agreeable reviewer comments before submitting the manuscript to another journal.¹¹ Previous papers have offered authors advice on how to respond to peer reviewer comments, and there may be various factors affecting how authors choose to respond.^{12, 13, 14} However, there is one angle to peer review that, to my knowledge, has not been discussed in the existing literature – how authors feel when they receive negative reviewer comments and the impact of these comments on the authors' morale.

Peer review is an unpaid service and is highly time and effort intensive. It is commendable that peer reviewers are offering such a service to the academic community. However, possibly due to their immensely busy schedules and stressful nature of work, they sometimes fail to empathise with authors and give their comments mechanically, without considering the feelings of the authors who are at the receiving end. Unfortunately, peer reviewer comments can sometimes be overly critical or brash. At other times, comments can be extremely brief, superficial, or dismissive, which defeats its purpose of adding valuable inputs to improve the manuscript. In this study, I tried to understand what kind of comments authors, particularly non-native English speaking authors from China publishing in international English language journals, consider to be negative; how they react to such comments; and what, if any, long-term impact these comments have on the authors' confidence and motivation levels.

METHODS

Online community

Editage (<https://www.editage.com/>), a company that offers editing and publication support services to authors and journals, started a discussion on DXY (<http://i.dxy.cn/topic/editage-negativepeerreview>), a virtual community for physicians and biomedical researchers and professionals in China. The site is one of the largest online communities for physicians globally with more than 3.2 million members, where physicians and biomedical researchers can discuss new clinical findings and other professional issues with colleagues, get industry news and conference updates, discuss issues related to academic publishing, and obtain material for their continued educational support.

Questions

Researchers/authors on DXY were asked to share their experiences with receiving negative peer reviewer comments by starting the following discussion:

Peer review is an inevitable step to get your paper published. Have you ever received negative comments from peer reviewers? How do you feel when you do? How do you deal with it? Share your experience with us!

This post received 99 responses from DXY participants. The responses were in Chinese, and these were translated into English.

On going through the responses from DXY, we felt the need to understand more clearly what kind of comments authors perceive as negative and to corroborate the views of authors from other countries.

Therefore, as a follow up, we posted slightly different questions on two other online communities, Academia Stack Exchange (<http://academia.stackexchange.com/questions/49854/from-an-authors-point-of-view-what-would-you-consider-as-negative-peer-reviewe>) and Quora (<https://www.quora.com/From-an-authors-point-of-view-what-would-you-consider-as-negative-peer-reviewer-comments-harsh-overcritical-vague-dismissive-or-superficial>)

1. From an author's point of view, what would you consider as negative peer reviewer comments?
2. What are some of the most negative peer reviewer comments that you have received?

Through these channels, I received 11 responses (4 on Academia Stack Exchange and 7 on Quora). All of these responses were in English.

Analysis of responses

The results presented are a combination of the 99 responses from DXY and a qualitative overview of the results on Quora and Academia Stack Exchange.

I looked for patterns in the responses received to understand the underlying emotion or message. The responses were categorised as "positive" if they acknowledged that peer reviewer comments led to some learning or improvement, even though they may initially make authors feel bad (Table 1). Responses were categorised as "negative" if they either mentioned only negative emotions (sadness, shock, anger) or if they indicated a feeling of hopelessness or resignation. Responses that did not clearly fall in either of these two categories were categorised as "other". The responses in the "other" category typically included one or more of the following: the actual negative or unclear comments from reviewers copy-pasted without any further explanation; statements that one gets used to negative reviewer comments, without any clear positive or negative emotion coming through; and statements of the next steps without expression of any emotion – that the manuscript must be revised and resubmitted or simply submitted to another journal.

RESULTS

Out of the 110 responses in all, 108 were valid, 2 being blank responses. Since the discussion question posted was an open-ended one, without defined options of emotions to choose from, the responses were free flowing, sometimes displaying multiple emotions within the same response. The responses were categorised loosely based on the overall sentiment or feeling that they evoked in the authors.

Of the 108 valid responses, 42 (39%) were categorised as negative, 36 (33%) as positive, and 30 (28%) as "other" (Figure 1).

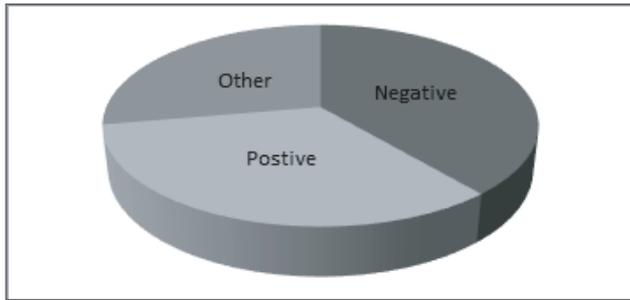


Figure 1. Distribution of emotions connected with peer-reviewer comments

While 35 (38%) of the overall responses expressed feelings of sadness and depression, 19 (21%) displayed annoyance and anger. It was clear from the responses that authors appreciated constructive reviewer comments, with 18 (19%) of the respondents stating that constructive peer reviewer comments helped improve the quality of the manuscript, while 12 respondents (12.9%) felt that such comments could increase the chances of acceptance of a manuscript.

DISCUSSION

The collective responses indicated that most authors have the greatest dislike or fear of receiving no comments at all, or very superficial and cursory comments. Comments that make a generic statement, without any supporting evidence, and without pointing out specific areas of improvement, fall in this category. Even if a comment says something positive about the manuscript, but does not provide any further explanation, it is not helpful and therefore considered to be negative. One of the responses [translated] expresses this viewpoint very succinctly: “I am not afraid of negative comments, but afraid of rejection without comments. The more reviewer comments, the more it helps [improve my manuscript for] future submission.”

Clearly, authors do not like it when peer reviewers misinterpret or fail to understand the study, yet give negative comments or a rejection decision based on their (incomplete) understanding. One comment [translated] describes an instance of such misinterpretation: “Some experts are professional, but some give their comments before they read the manuscript through. Once I started my discussion section with ‘there is no clear conclusion [for a certain direction of thought] from previous studies, so we conducted this study...’ The reviewer took this line as my conclusion and said it did not match with the results.”

Authors also feel disheartened when their manuscripts are rejected for not being up to the journal’s standards, but without any constructive feedback or suggestions for improvement. For instance, some authors speak of their manuscripts being rejected because the level of novelty does not match up to the journal’s standards. One author remarks [translated] that he feels really let down when after months of waiting, the journal gets back with a blanket statement like “there is not enough novelty in the manuscript to merit publication” without providing any other explanation or suggestion for improvement. Another author states that his manuscript was rejected on the grounds that the journal

Table 1. Examples of reviewers’ comments (translated or quoted verbatim)

Comments	Serial No.	Response
Positive	1	I go through it quickly and put the mail aside. Do some activities to make myself happy in the next 24 hours, while subconsciously mulling over the reviewer comments and framing my response strategies. From 24 - 48 hours, list down reviewer comments and draft response, plan the extra experiment suggested. Within 48 hours, make preparations for the experiment. How do I feel? It’s like breaking up, but keeping the faith that you will get someone in the end.
	2	Don’t be nervous when you get negative comments. Read it carefully, check what needs to be improved in the paper, and make the required changes seriously. The chances of getting published will be high when you resubmit. One of my JNC papers is a case in point.
	3	Obviously I feel very low, and also feel that all the effort of so many months went in vain. But it also means that the content of my paper needs a lot of improvement. It gives me the opportunity to improve my paper. When I think in this way, I feel better.
Negative	1	Once I revised my paper based on the first round of reviewer comments. After resubmission, there was a new revision request, and this continued for 5 rounds. I found that the editor invited different reviewers every time which led to new comments being added all the time. After the 7th round of revision, it got rejected.... I was really @\$%^&#!
	2	Unspeakable grief...
	3	Though there are many times I got rejected, depressed, upset, but after fixing my broken heart, I always moved on to revise my paper and submit. After several rounds of this, I am like an ever-lasting cockroach now!
Other	1	If comments are constructive, I will revise paper. If I am able to conduct more experiments, I will add it and then continue submission. Of course I have experiences with unprofessional reviewers. They just commented on my paper without understanding it properly. If so, I will submit to other journal directly.
	2	One reviewer said the rejection reason is I didn’t cite someone’s paper, and he even provided the link. Why do I have to cite that not-so-good paper to get published?

had “too many good papers.”

Authors initially feel sad, depressed, or “uncomfortable” on receiving negative reviewer comments. Words such as “sad,” “disappointed,” “upset,” “pain,” “depressed,” “lost,” “feel very low,” “unspeakable grief” kept appearing in the authors’ responses. They also feel a strong sense of wasted effort. As one author says [translated]: “Obviously I feel very low, and also feel all the efforts spent for months went in vain.” Another author narrates his experience [translated]: “I prepared almost a year, spent a lot of energy and money on language editing. The manuscript got rejected the very next day after submission.”

Along with the initial shock and disappointment, comes a feeling of low confidence in the worth of their research. One of the authors speaks of a sense of shame following the reviewer comments: “The reviewer gave many bad comments: the manuscript didn’t provide any new perspective, the format was totally wrong, why none of the authors had detected this problem....I was so ashamed!” [translated]

Once the initial shock is over, most authors start working on the suggested revisions. They feel that as long as the review is “reasonable,” that is, provides constructive suggestions that can be implemented, it will help improve the quality of the manuscript. Authors in general are willing to accept that there are flaws in their manuscript and that the reviewers’ suggestions are beneficial for them. However, in some cases, the emotional setback could lead to wrong decisions. One author narrates [translated] an interesting incident: “Once reviewer gave comments that my manuscript was meaningless. I was very upset, so I didn’t reply nor revise. Surprisingly, the editor-in-chief mailed and asked me if I didn’t reply because the revision deadline was too tight. I thought the editor might find potential in my manuscript, so I immediately worked on the revisions and replied. The manuscript got accepted in the end.” Another author says [translated]: “Once I got negative comments after submission...I didn’t bother to work on it. I regret it now: I should have continued the communication with the editor.”

At times, the way editors communicate final decisions may also affect authors emotionally. In some cases, the emotional damage might have long-term implications. One author shares on Quora how an editor’s inadequate communication of the final decision affected her perception of the overall quality of her work: “This manuscript cannot be revised so as to be suitable for our journal.’ This, from the editor. I understood it as, ‘There is nothing you could do to this manuscript to make it acceptable for our journal.’ I was crushed. Years later I learned that the journal did not publish articles of the type I had submitted, but the editor couldn’t be bothered to explain that.” [quoted]

Based on the above findings, I would like to make a few recommendations to ensure that peer review is more sensitive towards authors’ emotions, and that authors always receive constructive feedback:

1. Journals should be careful in selecting peer reviewers. Only experts with a thorough knowledge of the field should be entrusted with peer reviews.
2. Some journals, such as general medical journals, face a major problem in reviewer selection as the editors might not know all the disciplines published in the journal and have to search for reviewers from fields they are not familiar with. In such cases, journals can make use of services such as Publons, that can help editors choose peer reviewers.¹⁴
3. Journals, publishers, or universities should organise training programs for reviewers on how to give feedback, what kind of comments to avoid, and how to motivate authors even while communicating the flaws in their work.

4. Journals can use a peer review template. This approach ensures that review formats are standardised and each point made is substantiated with comments or explanations.

5. Journals could have a feedback form which would record how authors felt about the quality, tone, and approach of the review. There could be a credit system by which reviewers earn points for each good review, and this should be citable in their CVs.

6. Open peer review could also be a solution: if comments are open to public viewing, reviewers would be compelled to give detailed and constructive suggestions, and avoid harsh or overcritical comments.

This study does have some limitations. The comments considered are a small sample and the majority represents only the opinions of a non-representative sample of biomedical researchers in China. Thus, there might be an inherent bias in the comments we received and subject-specific or geographical differences in how authors react to negative reviewer comments. Nevertheless, the few comments received through other discussion forums more popular in the west (Academia Stack Exchange and Quora) tended to corroborate the sentiments of comments received on DXY. Also, as there was no way to check the authors’ reactions vis-à-vis the actual reviewer comments, there is a possibility that the authors might have misinterpreted reasonable comments as negative. A possible future direction would be to check whether authors perceive objectively reasonable comments as negative if the comments are overly critical of their work. Additionally, the categorization of positive, negative, and other is rather subjective as the questions asked were open ended and not all the responses lent themselves to definitive categorization. Nevertheless, the comments and categorization do offer a substantial general understanding of authors’ reactions to peer reviewer comments. To explore this further, it might be interesting to check with journal editors whether authors express some of these emotions in rebuttal letters and to get reviewers’ and editors’ perspectives on how to tackle this problem. Another possible future direction would be to assess how much the quality of reviewer comments affects how well authors incorporate the reviewers’ suggestions into their manuscript before resubmission.

The author responses discussed in this article indicate that reviewer comments have an impact on the emotions of authors and can sometimes make authors lose confidence, motivation, and faith in their work. While most authors acknowledge the value of constructive reviewer comments, there is a general feeling that a little more care, understanding, and empathy from the peer reviewers would be much appreciated. Although peer reviewers are at a premium, and reviews are time consuming and not financially rewarding, it is important that reviewers are sensitive to authors, try their best to add value to the manuscripts they review, and communicate their suggestions in a manner that respects the effort the authors have put in. As journals become more author-centric, peer review would be more effective if reviewers also kept in mind the challenges authors face and dealt with them more sensitively.

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