

Chinese academics' attitudes and perceptions of the purposes, benefits and challenges of journal peer review

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Peer review is an essential institution in current scientific community and scholarly publishing, while in recent years, it has been criticized for some reasons. However, most related studies have focused on academics in European and North America, there is gap on academics' participation in journal peer review in Chinese mainland. This qualitative study explores Chinese academics' attitudes and perceptions on journal peer review through interviewing with 28 academics. The conceptual framework consists of the purposes, benefits and challenges of journal peer review, summarizing from systematic review to previous studies. The findings of this study identified 5 types of attitudes, 4 aspects of purposes and benefits, and 8 challenges of journal peer review in Chinese academics' opinions. These findings are also explained with institutionalism as a theoretical perspective. This paper therefore brings insights as to not only what academics value about journal peer review but also identifies potential inhibitors in practice.

Full paper

Peer review is an essential institution in current scientific community and scholarly publishing. It has been taken for granted by most scientific communities for many years (Lancet, 2008). However, in recent years, with the exponential growth of manuscripts for journals, peer reviewers are fatigued and overburdened by more reviewing tasks (Breuning et al., 2015; Severin & Chataway, 2021; Tennant, 2018). Many studies explore why academics choose or reject to review for journals (Ellwanger & Chies, 2020; Heesen & Bright, 2021; Zaharie & Osoian, 2016). Most of these studies have focused on those academics in European and North American contexts, but we still lack a comprehensive understanding of Chinese academics' perception and attitudes on journal peer review

Research into academics' perceptions regarding peer reviewing encompasses 3 main topics: the purpose of peer review, the benefits of peer review and the challenges of peer review. There are overlaps between the purpose and the benefits of peer review. The benefits can mainly be divided into two parts: benefits for others and benefits for oneself (Atta-Owusu & Fitjar, 2022; Deem et al., 2007; Gidez, 1991). However, peer review is not always a perfect system. It is criticized because it does not work as expected sometimes (Casnici et al., 2017; Shatz, 2004).

This study used a qualitative approach to reveal how Chinese academics view and handle with the journal peer review system. It was guided by three research questions:

- (1) What are Chinese academics' attitudes towards the journal peer review?
- (2) How do Chinese academics' view the purpose, benefits and challenges of journal peer review?
- (3) What and why do the differences of journal peer review exist among academics in Chinese mainland and in other contexts?

To answer research questions, this study summarized a conceptual framework from previous studies to analyze academics' perceptions on journal peer review. It includes 3 parts: the perceptions on the purpose, the benefits, and the challenges of journal peer review. In order to explain influential factors for Chinese academics' attitudes and perception, institutionalism as a theoretical perspective is applied. With this theoretical view, peer review is regarded as a formal institution in academic community and motivates academics to agree with this institution, and participate in the academic system (Douglas, 1986).

As to methods, in data collection, a sample of 28 Chinese academics (12 females and 16 males) was invited to take part in the study. In data analysis, a three-stage systematic analysis has been conducted based on the inductive and deductive logics with the conceptual framework. The trustworthiness and credibility of the research findings were also ensured by triangulation and member checking.

As to findings, there are 5 types of attitudes towards journal reviewing: (1) negligence; (2) empathy; (3) learning opportunity; (4) playing; (5) burden. 4 aspects of journal peer review's purposes and benefits are summarized. For the whole academic community, it can guarantee the quality, and reliability of manuscript. It can promote academic communication and embody the values of the community, and then maintain academic circles. For journals, peer review system is efficient to improve the quality and influence of journals. For reviewers, this system is useful for improving their own research and promoting their communication with others. For authors, it is helpful to improve the quality of their manuscripts. Challenges of peer review are thematically analyzed into 2 parts: its challenges as an institution itself, and its challenges facing because of some irregular operation. First, peer review system has its naturally drawbacks, such as (1) the reviewers and the editors are subjective; (2) there is no cost for tendentiousness and unfairness in the review; (3) reviewers do not have strong motivations to do this thing. Second, peer review system is influenced by external factors and results in some negative impacts. It includes: (1) the reviewer considers personal goods; (2) sometimes anonymity is invalid; (3) the quality and attitudes of journal reviewers and editors is uncertain.

This study also explored the differences of journal peer review among academics in Chinese mainland and in other contexts by contrasting the findings from data with those from previous studies, which mostly depends on reviewing for Chinese or English journals. With the perspective of institutionalism, Confucian culture, the history of Chinese academic journals, and the current academic system that academics join in are summarized as important factors that result in the "path dependence" of peer review in China.

Considering this study is conducted in a qualitative way, the generalization of the findings needs to be very cautious.

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