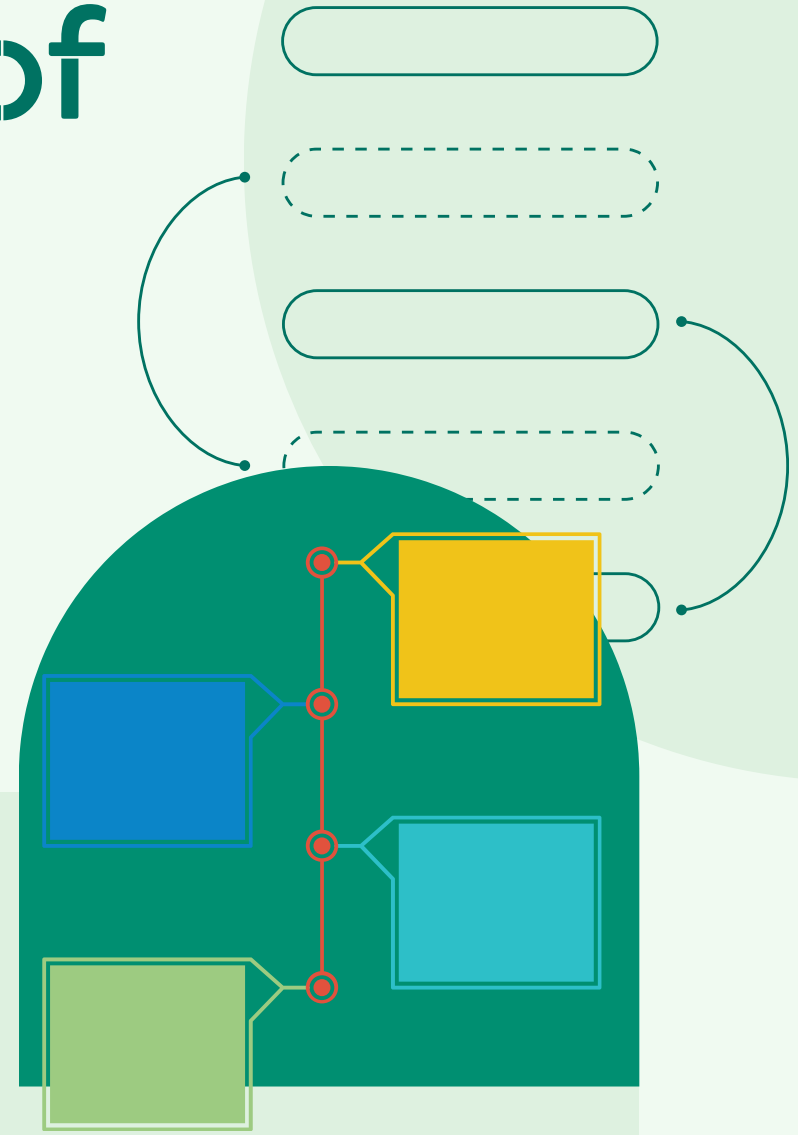
The 2026 Future of Peer Review Report



A strong and sustainable peer review function is the foundation of scholarly publishing. This report explores what's working and what needs to change, so publishing continues to thrive.

SCHOLARONE

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Introduction

Peer review is in crisis. This narrative did not emerge from nowhere, and it does not benefit everyone equally. Publishers, vendors, and funders all have something to gain from a sense of urgency, even when their proposed solutions point in opposite directions. Before accepting that we're in a crisis, it is worth asking: what does the data actually show?

To answer that, this report brings together eight years of ScholarOne Manuscripts submission and review data, a literature review, expert interviews, and a survey of thousands of reviewers and authors. ScholarOne processes roughly one in four scholarly articles published worldwide, which means the patterns visible in this dataset are structural. Together, these sources let us watch manuscript acceptance rates move year by year, measure the time lost when reviewer invitations produce nothing, track how collaboration patterns are shifting across continents, and observe where integrity signals are working and where they are not.

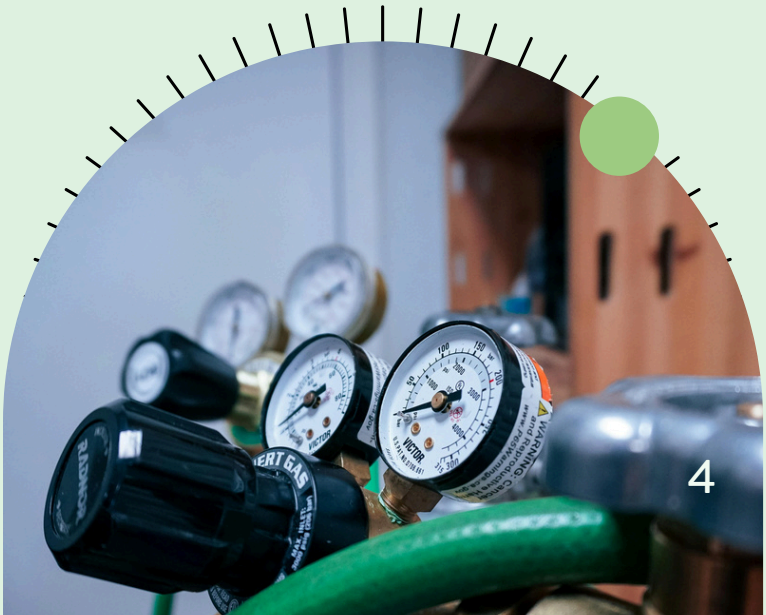
Introduction

(cont.)

The system is absorbing pressure. Whether it can keep doing so is a different question.

The global reviewer pool grew 54% between 2018 and 2025. New research communities are emerging across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, bringing capacity and energy that the system has not yet learned to use well. But the rate at which scholars accept review invitations fell by nearly half in the same period. It now takes an average of 4.5 invitations to secure a single review. The arrival of AI is accelerating dynamics that the system was already struggling to manage, and generating debates that, like the crisis narrative itself, often move faster than the evidence beneath them. The pipeline has not broken. But it *has* slowed generally, if unevenly, and in ways that are **impossible to ignore**.

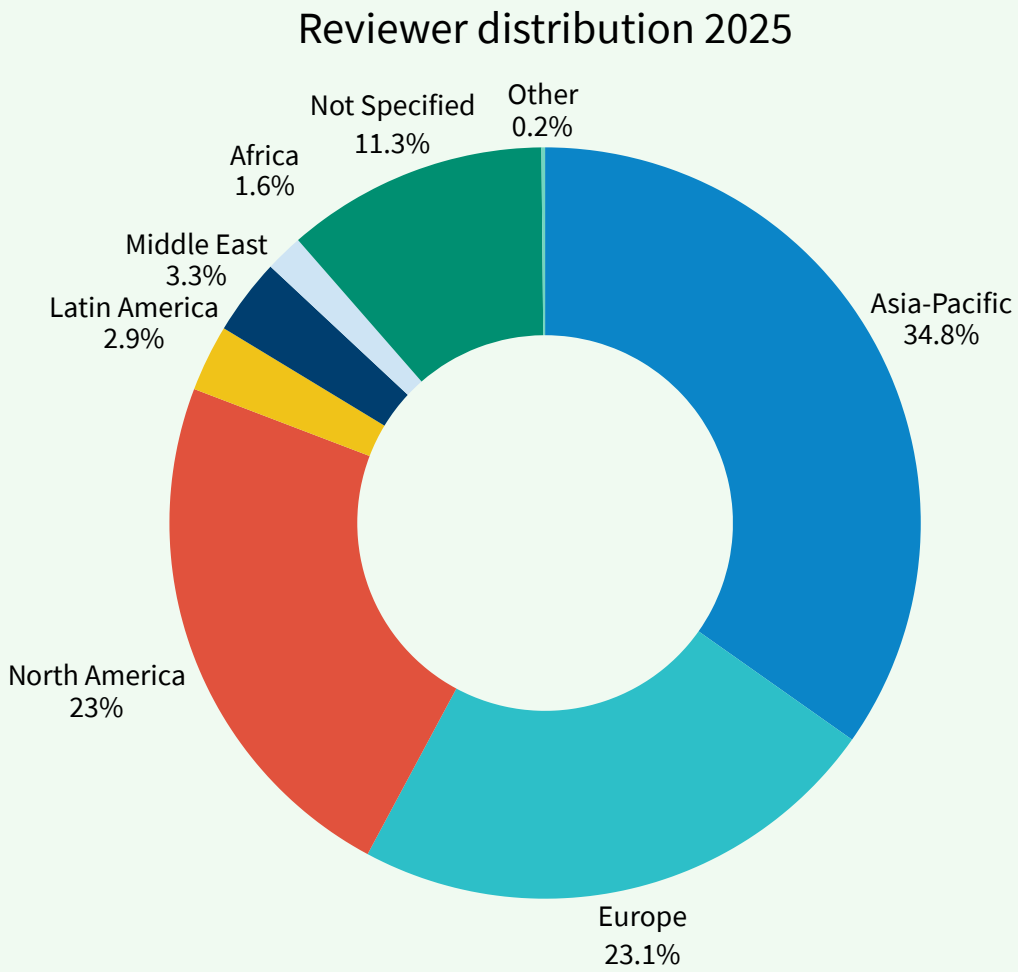
This report is reproduced annually by Silverchair, creating a powerful longitudinal dataset that will reveal evolving trends in peer review behavior, shifting perspectives, and technological advances across the research landscape.



Reviewer engagement

Geographic distribution

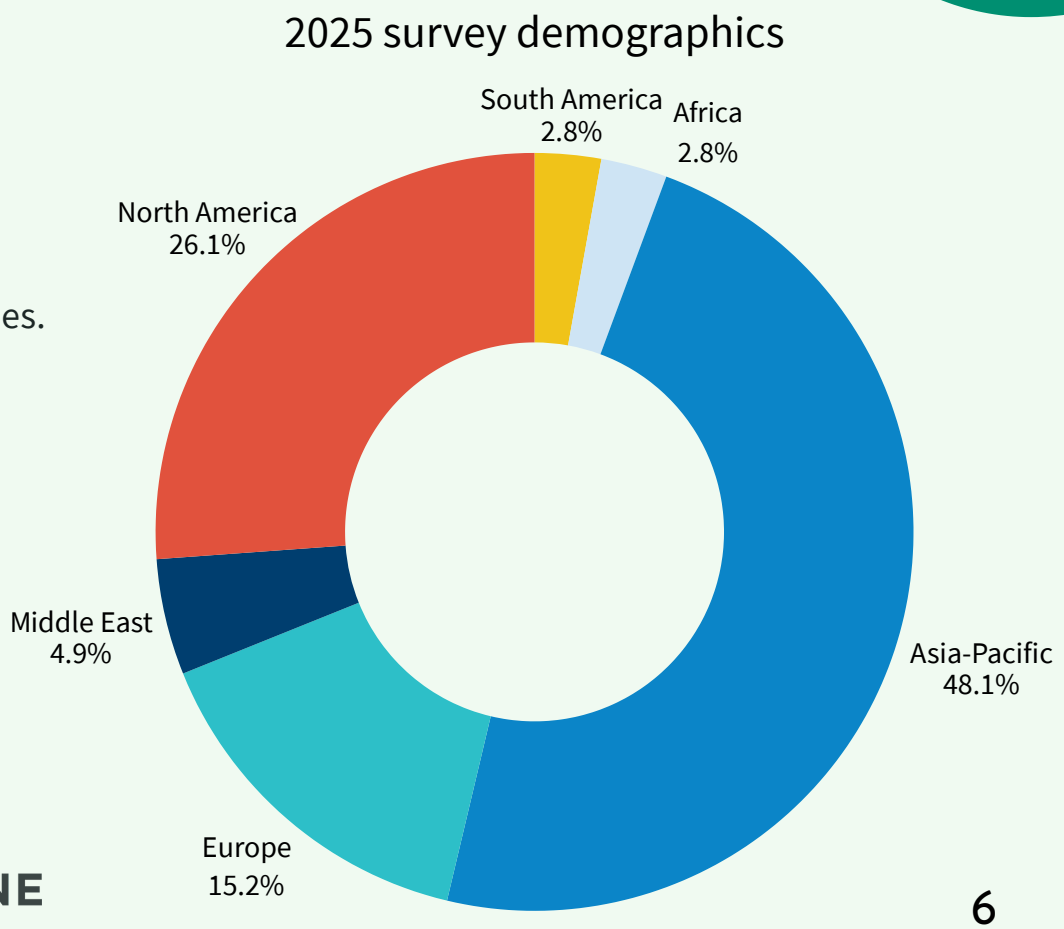
Based on ScholarOne activity for the last eight years, the **global pool of reviewers grew 54%**, from 1.95M in 2018 to 3M in 2025, where a reviewer is defined as a person invited to submit at least one review. During the same period, the global pool of reviewers grew fastest in countries such as Indonesia, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Nepal, Morocco, and the Philippines.



Reviewer engagement

The authors of the papers that these scholars are reviewing most commonly come from China (1.1M), India (385K) and the United States (363K). **Asia-Pacific is the dominant and fastest-growing region for authorship**, expanding from 39% of global share in 2018 to more than 54% in 2025; this growth is driven overwhelmingly by authors in China and India. In contrast, Europe and North America both declined in relative share of authors, even as their absolute counts grew modestly.

Those reviewers who responded to our 2025 survey are concentrated in Asian, North American, and European countries.

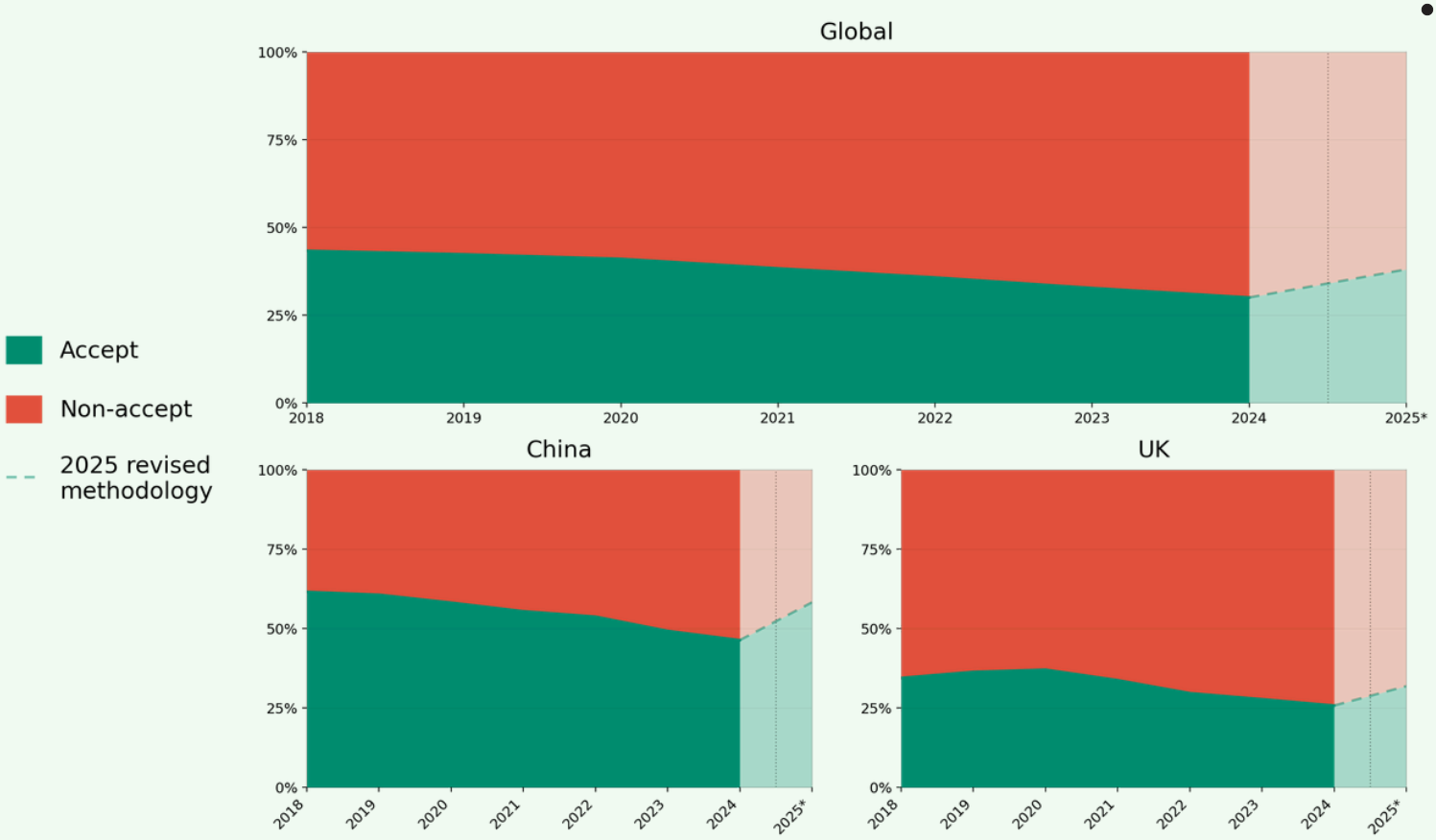


Reviewer engagement

Reviewer invitation rates

Reviewer invitations sent by journals via ScholarOne more than doubled, from 9M (2018) to nearly 21.5M (2025).* Reviewer acceptance rates (the frequency with which reviewers accept an invitation to review) fell every year from 2018 to 2024 (43% to 22.3%). Our study shows that it takes 1.5x longer for reviewers to decline invitations than it does to accept them.

Trends in reviewer invite responses



Non-accept rates include both declines and ignore responses to reviewer invitations.

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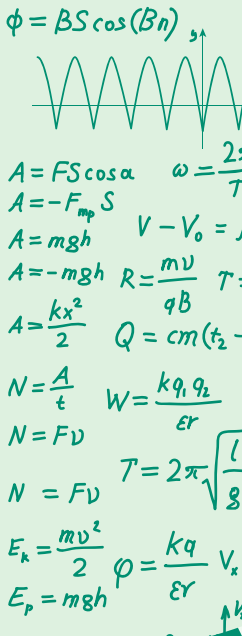
**In 2025, the methodology was revised, expanding the definition of reviewer invitation to include email failures or bouncebacks. As such, it is not directly comparable to the historical data.*

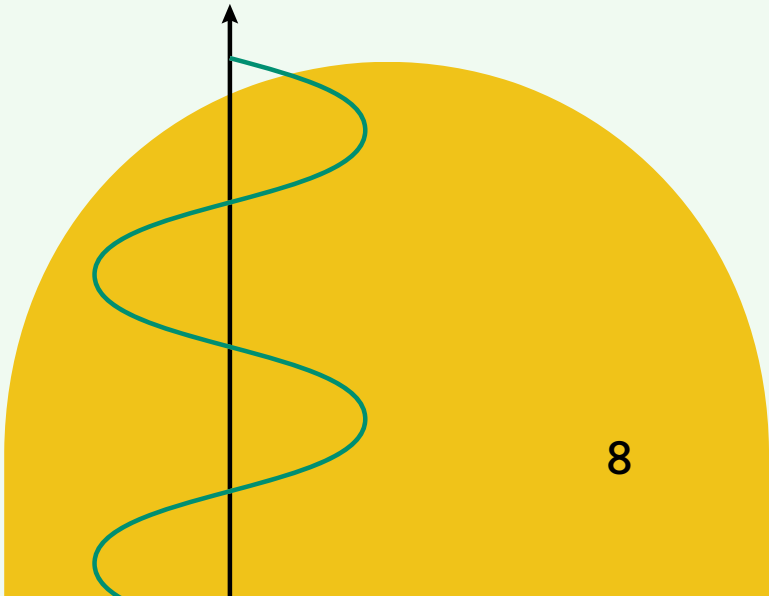
Reviewer engagement



Of all invitations sent in 2025, 77.7% produced no review — and only 45% of those are from active declines by reviewers (the majority of these fruitless invitations are due to "passive declines," where reviewers do not reply to the invitation to review for a variety of reasons).

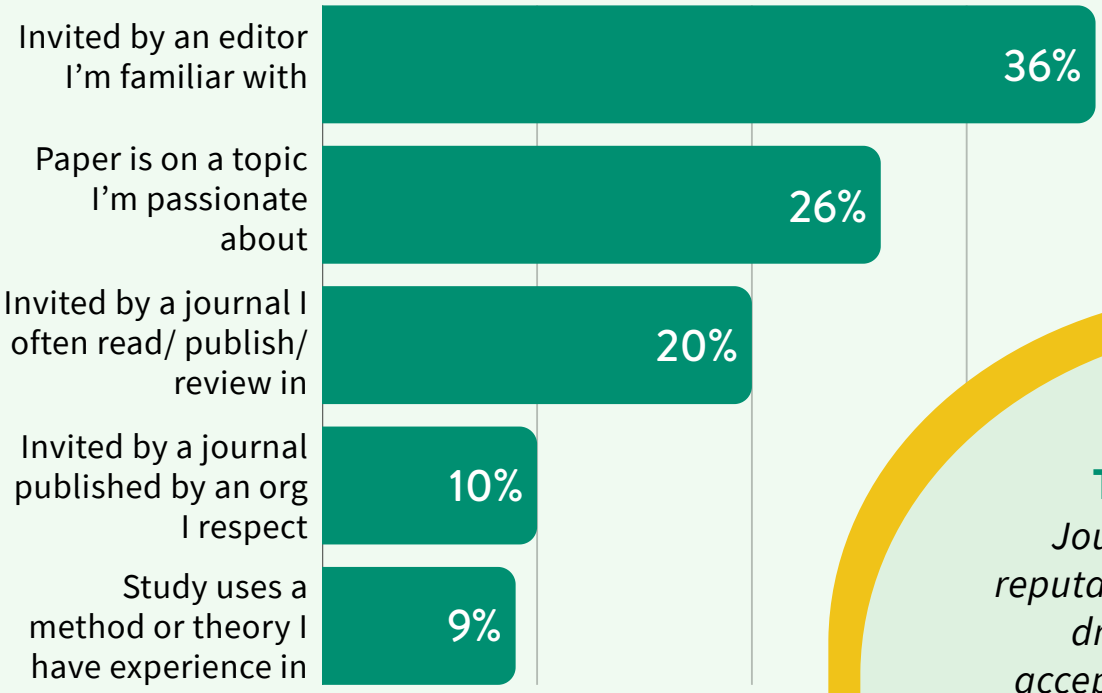
It now takes 4.5 invitations to secure one review, up from 2.3 in 2018.

This trend was reflected in our 2025 survey results, where 44% of respondents indicated that they accept 0-25% of the peer review invitations they receive.



Reviewer engagement

Based on our 2025 survey, scholars accept a peer review invitation primarily due to familiarity with the editor or editorial board of a journal, or if they regularly read that journal. Secondarily, invitations are accepted when the topic of a paper is one that a reviewer is particularly invested in.

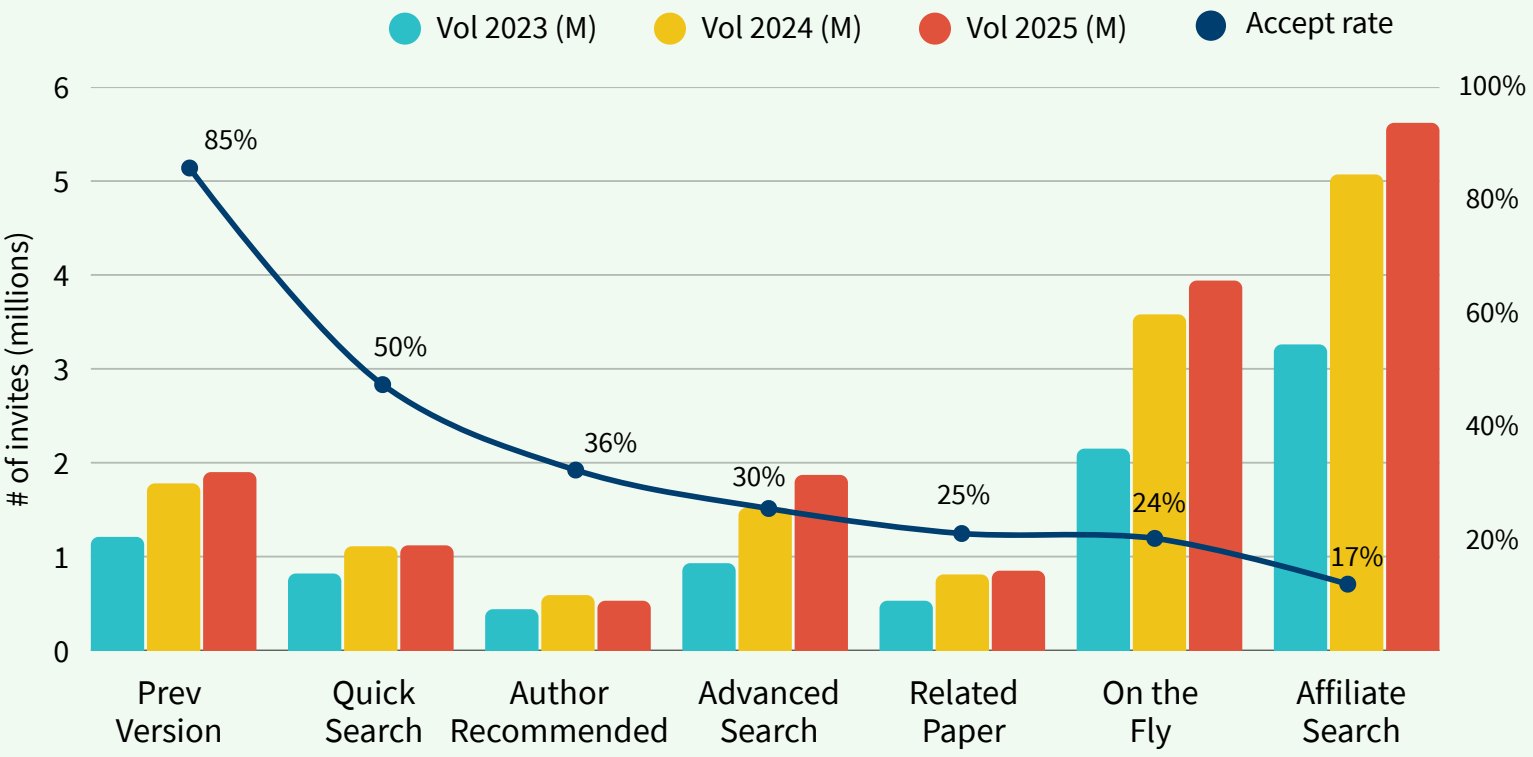


TAKEAWAY:
Journal and editor reputation are prominent drivers of review acceptance. Given high review acceptance rates in China, Hong Kong, India, Vietnam, and Japan, publisher profiles in those regions are of high importance for increasing review accept rates.

Reviewer engagement

Editors search for reviewers through a variety of channels, from taking the author's suggestion for reviewers to affiliate searches within industry databases. Analysis of reviewer invitation sources reveals a persistent inverse relationship between invitation volume and acceptance rate.

Reviewer invite source volume and effectiveness



Reviewer engagement

"Affiliate Search" (where editors add reviewers from various industry databases), the highest-volume source accounting for roughly one-third of all invitations in 2025, yields an acceptance rate of just 17%, while "On the Fly" (where editors add reviewers to the database when the invitation is sent, the second largest source), sits at 24%. By contrast, "Previous Version," where editors target reviewers who handled a prior version of the same manuscript, achieves an 85% acceptance rate, though its use is situationally constrained to revision scenarios. Acceptance rates declined across every source category between 2023 and 2025, with "Author Recommended" falling below the 40% threshold and algorithmic discovery tools continuing to underperform, suggesting that current sourcing strategies prioritize scale over precision.

TAKEAWAY:

Combining editorial and reviewer motivation data reframes the sourcing efficiency problem. It is not primarily about finding reviewers with the right expertise; it is about finding reviewers with the right relationship. Editors currently invest most of invitation volume in cold-contact discovery methods, while the behavioral evidence points to warm-contact and identity-based methods as the primary acceptance drivers. Targeted outreach to build these relationships in newer constituencies likely yields higher acceptances, as it's not sustainable to manage this submission volume with a stagnant pool of reviewers.

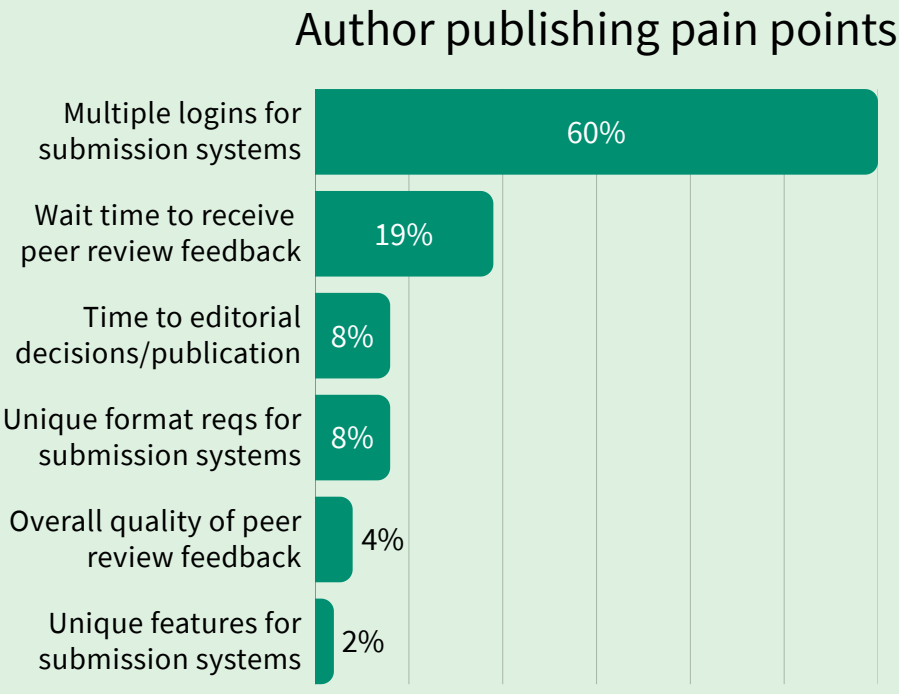
Reviewer engagement

Reviewer & author pain points

Finding the time to perform peer review among other work obligations is the dominant concern among reviewers, in particular those in academic careers. Unlike authoring a paper, the peer review function is often seen as volunteer work that is neither rewarded by research institutions nor compensated by publishers.

Most reviewers who responded to our 2025 survey believe that their outputs deserve some degree of recognition, yet there is little agreement on the ideal solution (whether financial, reputational, or otherwise). Notably, reviewers who also had authorship experience were most likely to support monetary compensation for the peer review function.

Authors' pain points with the peer review journey are overwhelmingly related to submission system usability, particularly the challenge of managing multiple logins across the various systems that support peer review in their fields.



Reviewer engagement

Notably, even authors with review experience find platform usability and logins the most challenging. Naturally, respondents indicated that changes such as a universal peer review system with a single login, among other usability improvements, would have the biggest impact on their experiences. Our 2024 data indicated this is not new: 54% of authors rated a single login as the preferred solution. Secondarily, the wait time for review and editorial decisions is the biggest complaint among productive authors.

Root causes

Consulting published research on scholarly communications, we can see that peer review faces a documented sustainability crisis driven by the imbalance between submission growth and reviewer capacity.

This challenge stems from what some scholars see as the “second wave of massification,” a period where publication volume grows faster than the researcher population itself (Horta & Jung, 2024). Unlike the first wave (1950s-1980s), when peer review successfully scaled alongside university expansion (Baldwin, 2017, 2018), current growth is driven by intensified “publish or perish” pressures, global research expansion, ranking competitions, and what some characterize as “academic capitalism,” where public research becomes commodified by private publishers (Larivière et al., 2015). This creates systematic “peer review debt,” where many publish prolifically but rarely contribute reviews, with senior faculty increasingly advising junior colleagues to skip reviewing entirely (Horta & Jung, 2024).

Reviewer engagement

Scholarly communications experts recognize systemic pressures weighing on both authors and reviewers, particularly for those working in higher educational institutions. “We’ve created this culture of pressuring PhD students to publish more,” says Helen King of PubTech Radar. “In one field I’m aware of, it’s gone from six papers to twelve. The academic cycle of competition keeps getting worse and worse, until it’s become about quantity over quality.” In fact, fraudulent research can be seen as a symptom of these pressures on scholars, whether the result of honest mistakes, attempts to segment research findings to maximize papers, or more malicious practices.

The higher the volume of new manuscripts, the greater the pressure on reviewers to serve as quality gatekeepers. The quality over quantity tension comes down to simple math. Research fields have niche areas of specialty and methodology, which means getting the right reviewer for each paper is a challenge. “Subject areas are narrow, and there are only so many experts,” notes editor and consultant Gareth Dyke.

Some peer review pain points come down to publishing software keeping pace with changing user expectations. Dyke observes that peer review platforms have “been stuck in time since launch,” while reviewers increasingly expect modern applications and web experiences. “The UX friction increases as the gap widens over time,” he notes.

Geographic disparities

Willingness to accept review invitations

Based on ScholarOne data, there are some notable variations in peer review performance across regions. When comparing East/South Asian countries to Western European and Anglophone countries, we can see a striking contrast in the rates and timelines to acceptance of review invitations. Overall, reviewers in Asian countries accept at remarkably high rates, and responses come in quickly (e.g., 1.4 days in Japan, 1.6 days in Korea, and 1.7 days in China). In contrast, countries in the Anglosphere accept at lower rates overall, and they are more likely than other regions to decline rather than ignore invitations (37% active decline rate in Denmark, 38% in Spain, and 35% in Switzerland).

High accept rates for review invitations *(2025)*

China 59%

Hong Kong 58%

India 55%

Vietnam 54%

Low accept rates for review invitations *(2025)*

UK 30%

Spain 34%

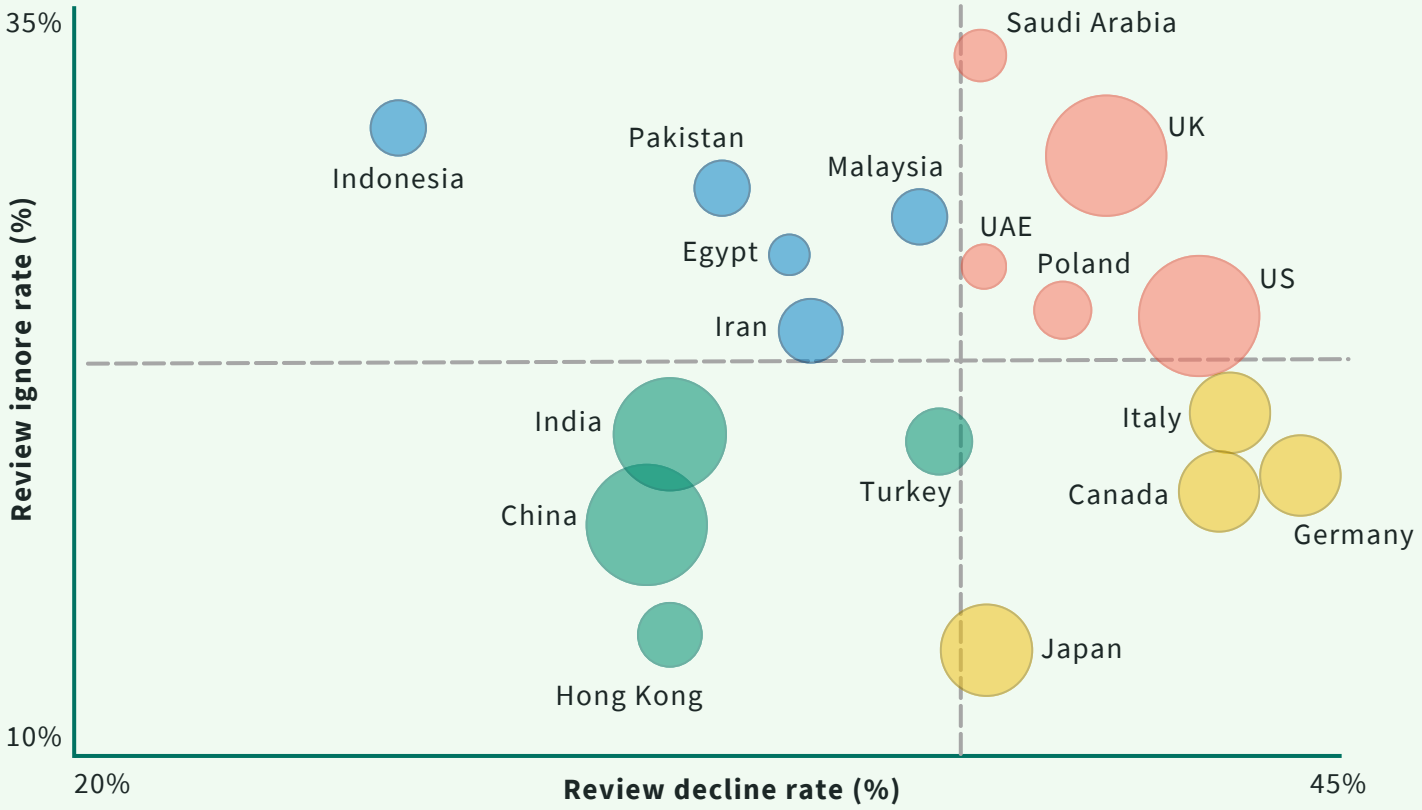
Denmark 34%

US 36%

In 2025, the methodology was revised, expanding the definition of reviewer invitation to include email failures or bouncebacks. As such, it is not directly comparable to the longitudinal data.

Geographic disparities

The most strained reviewer market is found in the UK, with 1M invitations expected of a pool of 142,000 reviewers (just over seven reviews per potential reviewer). Similar patterns are seen in Spain, Korea, and the US, each with around six reviews per potential reviewer requested in a given year. Japan has the most efficiently used reviewer pool among major nations.



Systemic problem
Reviewers both actively refuse and ignore review invites.

Declining workload
Reviewers are unwilling to review, marked by high rates of declines.

Healthy pool
Less likely to ignore or decline invites relative to global norms.

Targeting misalingment
Reviewers frequently ignore review invitations at high rates.

Geographic disparities

TAKEAWAY:

Publishers over-indexing on UK, US, and Western European reviewer pools are operating in the most strained markets. Audit your invitation logic to reach out toward East and South Asian pools. Even a modest geographic shift could meaningfully reduce wasted editorial time and accelerate time-to-review. Prioritizing relationship and community building also builds on insights on why reviewers accept invites from the Reviewer Engagement section of this report.

Author trends

The global author count in ScholarOne grew from 2.1M in 2018 to 3.5M in 2025, an increase of 67%, which has been a fairly steady growth rate (except for a dip in 2021–2022, followed by a strong surge from 2023 onward). The Asia-Pacific region is seeing the largest and fastest-growing author pool, expanding from 39% of global share in 2018 to more than 54% in 2025, with China and India leading the way. Author ratios in Europe and North America, however, both declined in relative share, even as their absolute counts grew modestly.

Geographic disparities

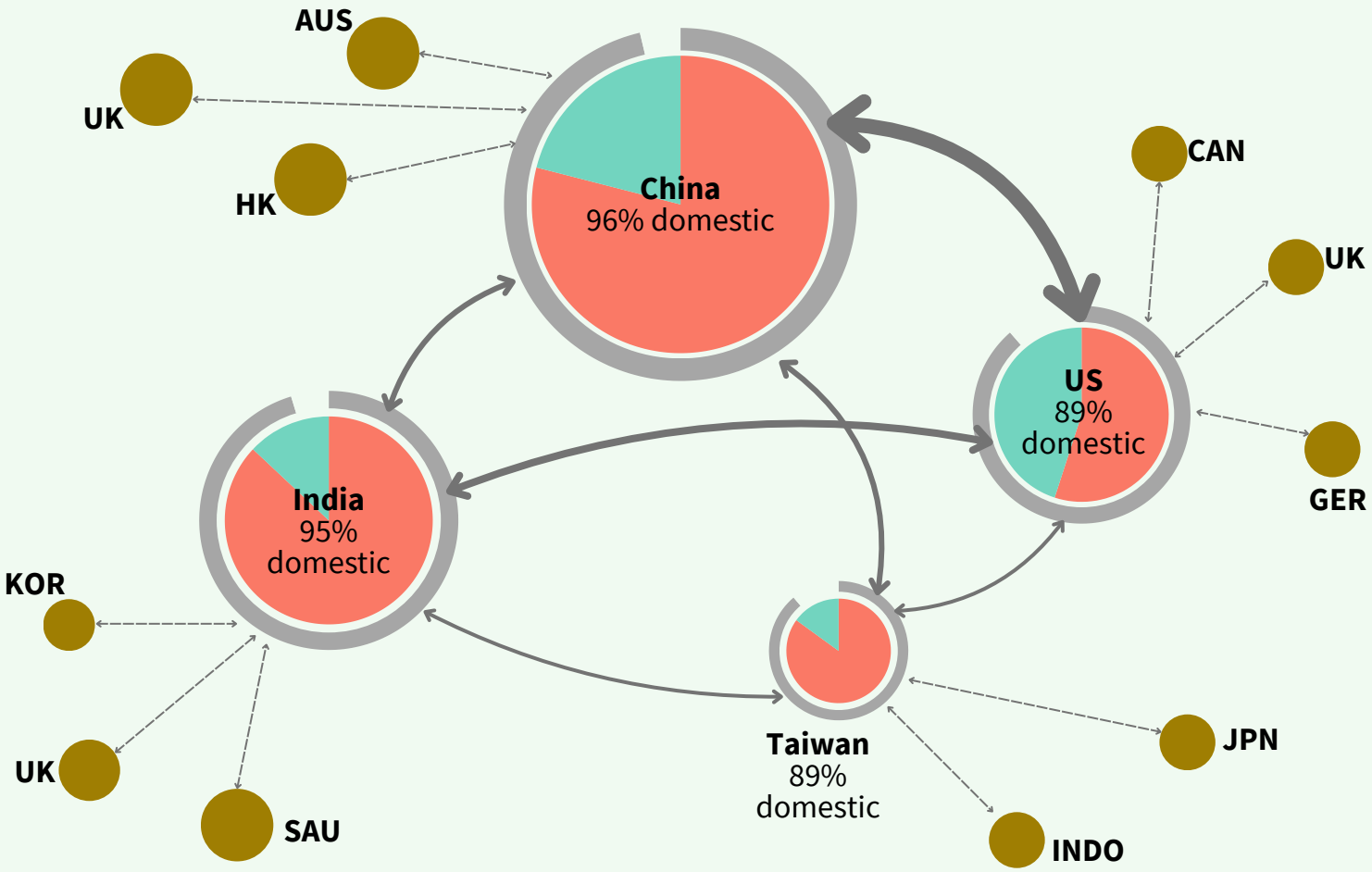
For accepted manuscripts in ScholarOne, the global average number of authors/paper increased from 4.30 authors in 2018 to 5.03 in 2025 — a 17% increase during these seven years. This could indicate a meaningful shift toward accepted manuscripts coming from larger collaborative teams. It may also reflect a growing quality signal associated with multi-author collaboration in some fields, or a shift in the types of papers being submitted by larger teams.

China is a standout in author collaboration trends, with an average of six or more authors per accepted paper, higher than the global average. Notably, the Chinese peer review pool demonstrates a high rate of manuscript acceptance and a shorter timeline to acceptance, suggesting that the country has matured into a leadership role in international research, with both collaborative author teams and responsive, engaged peer reviewers.

Geographic disparities

When comparing author collaboration trends between China, India, and the United States, patterns emerge for domestic and international networks.

Manuscript collaboration network



Each country pie chart reflects the accept/reject rate of manuscripts on average.
The ring around each pie chart reflects the rate of domestic vs. international collaboration for each country.
The relative weight of the arrows reflects the collaboration rate between countries.

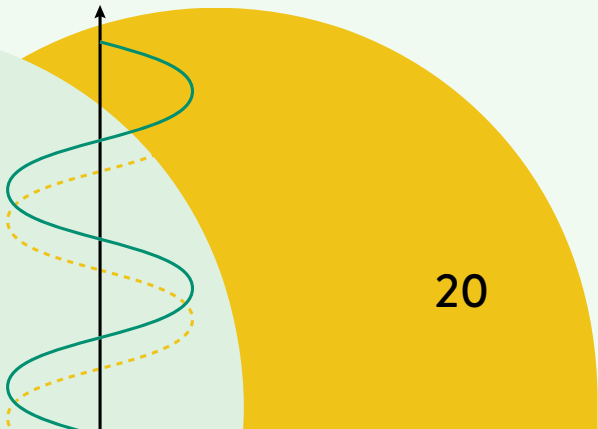
Geographic disparities

China and India show near-total domestic authorship collaboration, where 96.3% and 95.3% (respectively) of co-authors are from the same country. Taiwan and the US are more internationally networked at 88.8% and 88.6% (respectively) domestically.

For papers with US-affiliated corresponding authors, domestic manuscripts outperform international ones (46.4% vs 41.1%).

For China, India, and Taiwan, international collaboration correlates with better outcomes (+4-7 percentage points).

China-led papers include US co-authors at 1.57x the rate of US-led papers that include Chinese co-authors. This asymmetry suggests Chinese authors are more motivated to collaborate with Americans than vice versa. US co-authors on China-led papers enjoy a 27.3% acceptance rate against 51.6% that are desk rejected. US co-authors on India-led papers produce a 22.0% acceptance rate with 59.7% desk rejected. Both outperform the domestic-only acceptance rates for those countries.



Geographic disparities

Peer review burdens

At its core, we have a fundamental misalignment where publications serve as career currency (determining tenure, grants, institutional prestige, etc.), while peer review represents invisible labor (uncounted toward promotion, uncompensated, and institutionally unrecognized) (Horta & Jung, 2024; Emanuele & Minoretti, 2025). This asymmetry means the most qualified reviewers — those with deep expertise and career security — often perform the least reviewing, while the most overburdened mid-career faculty face competing publication pressures (Severin & Chataway, 2021).

Geographic and demographic inequities compound sustainability challenges. According to a 2024 IOP Publishing report, while 30% of reviewers from high-income countries report excessive review burdens, only 10% from low- and middle-income countries report the same, revealing systematic exclusion rather than equitable distribution (Şenel, 2025).

Geographic disparities

TAKEAWAY:

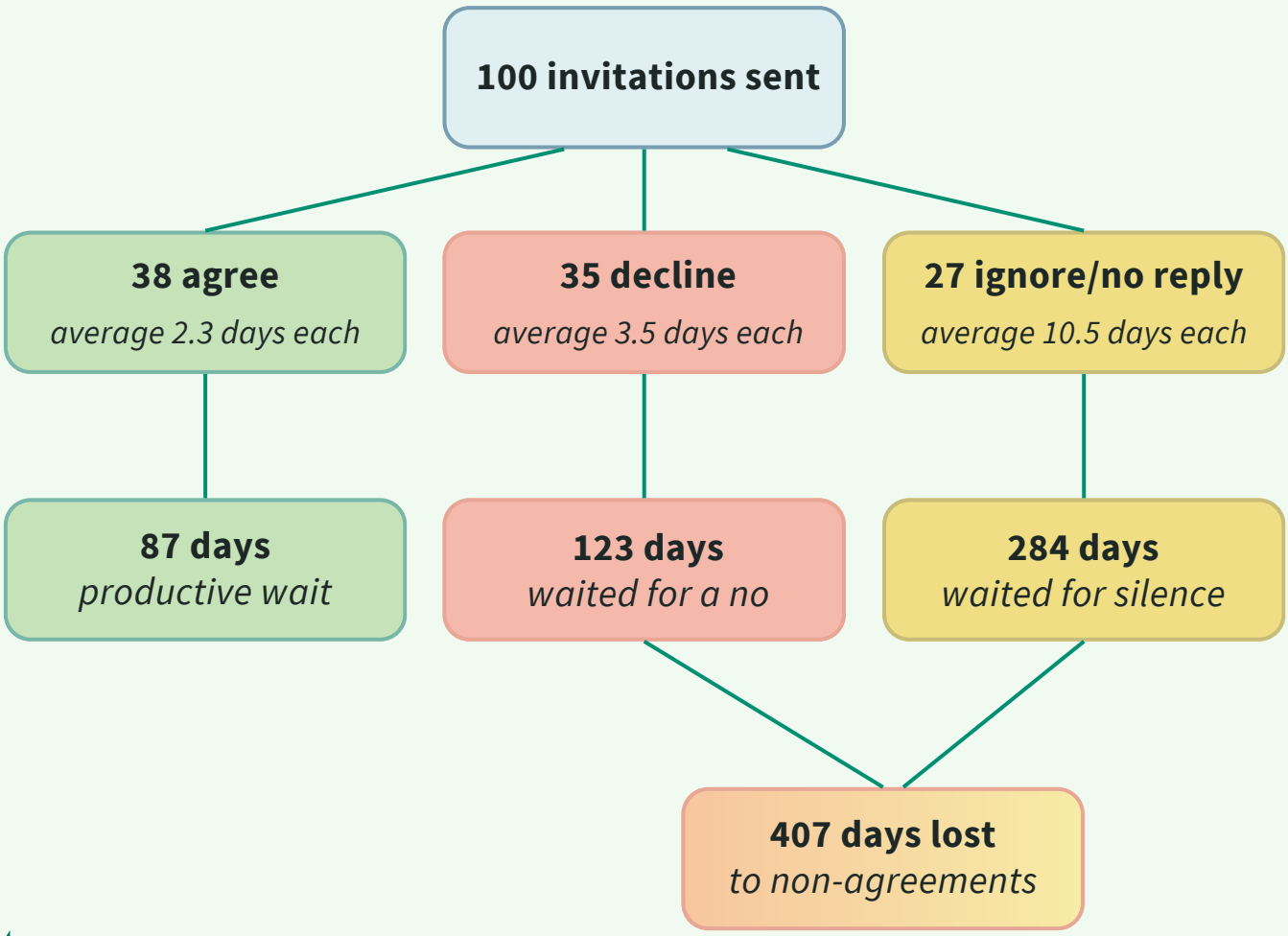
Submissions to ScholarOne journals increased 33% in the first quarter of 2026 alone (compared with the same period in 2025). That volume lands on editors already working from the same taxed networks and limited discovery tools, and under pressure, systems revert to what's known. The reviewers most likely to get the call are the ones who've already gotten it too many times. At this scale, the answer isn't building more relationships. The system is extracting value from the same pools faster than anyone can replenish them.

Studies across 145 journals confirm a persistent gender bias (Squazzoni et al., 2021), while editors concentrate review invitations within familiar Global North networks (Chawla, 2018). Language barriers disadvantage non-native English speakers, epistemological exclusion marginalizes Indigenous and non-Western knowledge frameworks, and resource limitations reduce institutional support for service work in developing regions (Horta & Jung, 2024). These exclusions perpetuate Global North dominance while depriving scholarship of diverse perspectives — some of whom are much more eager to participate in the peer review process.

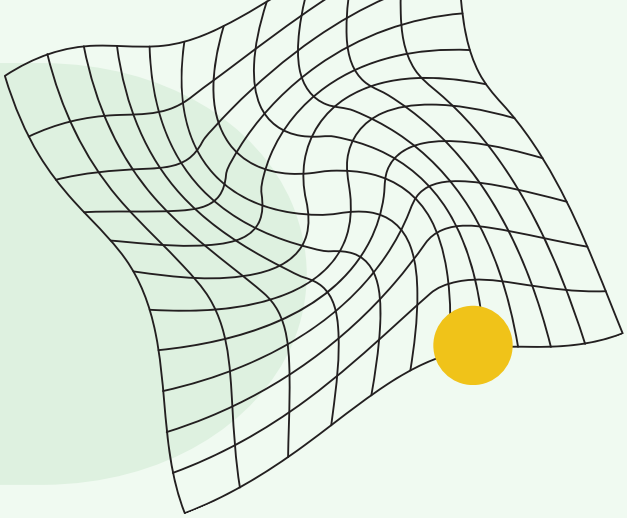
The cost of non-engagement

Although reviewer invitations jumped from 18.3M in 2024 to 21.5M in 2025, editors are sending an average of 4.5 invitations to secure one review. The 77% of invitations sent last year that produced no review equate to a **cumulative cost of 235,000 years of elapsed wait time**.

Time lost finding reviewers (per 100 invitations)



The cost of non-engagement



This trend in ScholarOne journals is borne out in the wider literature as well. In 2020, the peer review process consumed approximately 15,000 person-years annually, valued at $1.5 billion in the US alone (Aczel et al., 2021). In some disciplines, editors report inviting 10-12 reviewers to secure two reviews on one article, and that difficulty is more acute for multi- or interdisciplinary research (Horta & Jung, 2024).

Authors responding to our survey indicated that the wait time to receive peer review feedback is the second-highest pain point (19%) in their journal publishing experiences. Reviewers echo this temporal tension, the majority of whom struggle to find adequate time for peer review among other obligations (many of which have clear incentives and compensation structures).

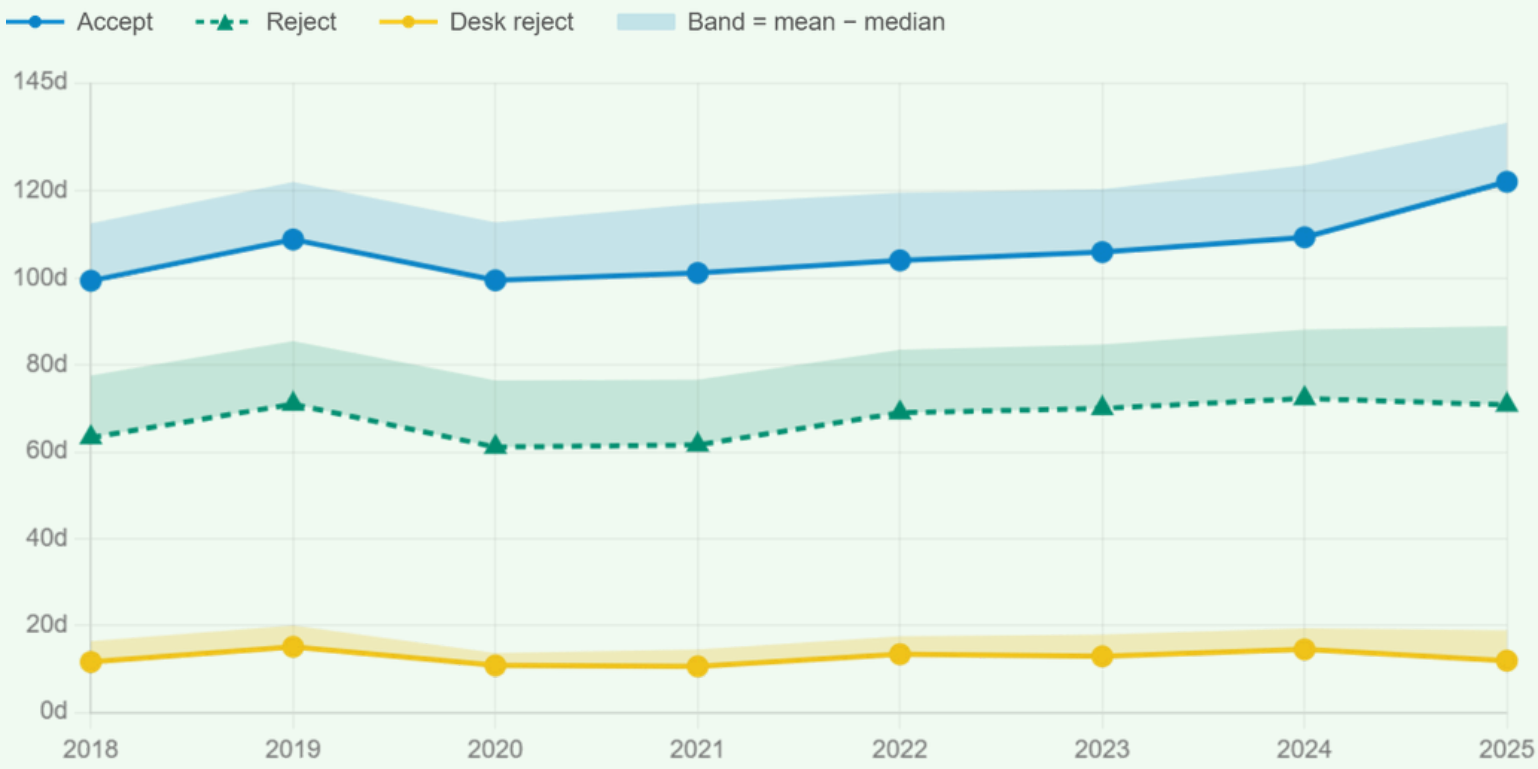
Most reviewers surveyed (52%) believe that automated integrity checks would have the biggest impact on their work as a reviewer. However, **experts observe that, despite technology improvements, review times continue to lengthen rather than shorten** (Huisman & Smits, 2017; Lyman, 2013; Nguyen et al., 2015).

Peer review timelines add to the total time from submission to publication. Based on ScholarOne trends, the time to acceptance for reviews in 2025 rose 20.6% since 2018. For those papers that don't make it to publication, post-review rejection decisions are also taking longer, up 33.7% from 2018.

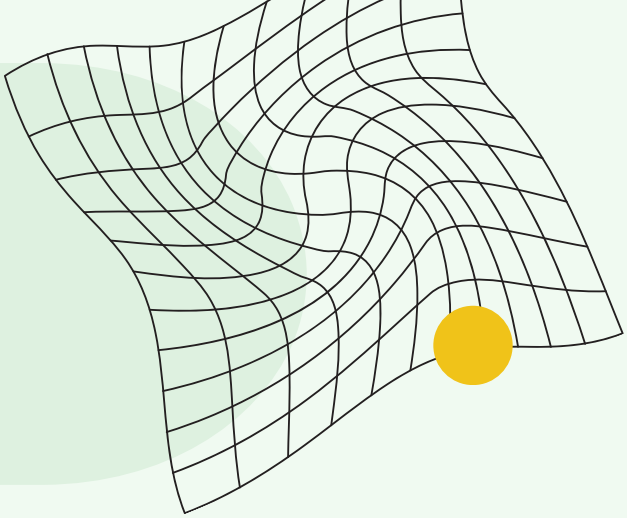
The cost of non-engagement

Time to publish

When looking at the full peer review and decision process, the time from submission to editorial decision tells a consistent story. The median time for accepted papers rose by 23 days between 2018 and 2025, a shift that cannot be explained by a few extreme outliers. The bandwidth between mean and median has remained largely stable across the period for accepted manuscripts, which means the distribution has not become more skewed — it has simply moved upward as a whole.



The cost of non-engagement



This is a systemic signal: the entire peer review pipeline has slowed, not just the tail. Desk reject times, by contrast, have remained comparatively stable, suggesting the slowdown is concentrated in the work of securing and completing accepted reviews.

The frustration with ever-longer waits for manuscript reviews and final decisions is a recurring frustration for authors across all fields of research.

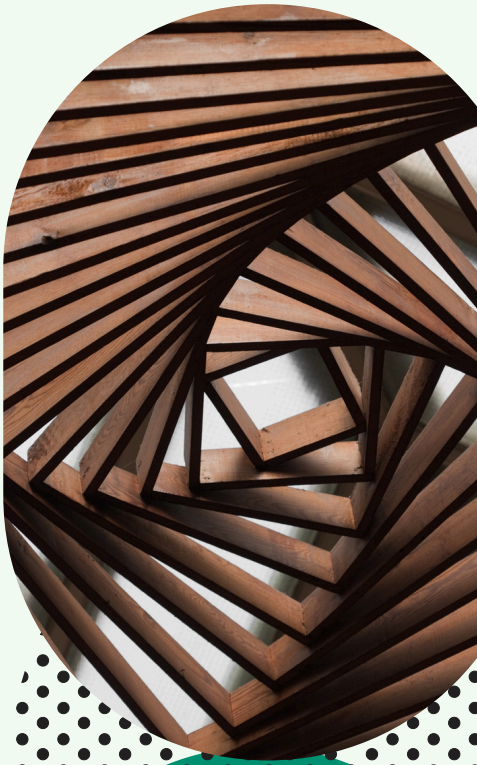
Authors who responded to our survey felt that wait times, both to receive peer review feedback (19%) and to an editorial decision (8%), were the second-highest pain point in their publishing experiences.

These wait times are the result of various challenges, including the rapid growth of research literature in a climate where publications serve as career currency (determining tenure, grants, prestige, etc.). The experts needed to produce high-quality manuscripts often wear multiple hats in the publishing lifecycle; the same scholars serving as reviewers are also authors and editors at various stages of their careers.

The cost of non-engagement

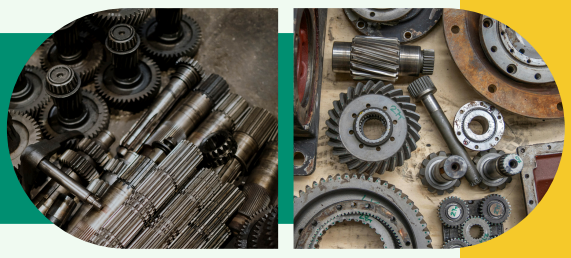
Ultimately, peer review represents invisible labor, as these activities do not consistently count toward promotion and are largely uncompensated. This asymmetry can create perverse incentives, where the most qualified reviewers (those with deep expertise and career security) often perform the least reviewing, while the most overburdened mid-career faculty face competing publication pressures (Severin & Chataway, 2021).

Volume adds an inevitable layer of pressure to peer reviewers' engagement and efficiency. **ScholarOne processed 3.8 million reviews in 2025, a 7% increase in a single year.** Even as more scholars are added to reviewer databases each year, the ratio of available, willing reviewers to manuscripts requiring assessment continues to tighten. Some share of the declining engagement rates and lengthening timelines reflects genuine disengagement; some reflects simple capacity: there are more papers than there are hours to review them.



Integrity under pressure

The fundamental purpose of peer review is quality control. However, the system is strained by increasing cases of falsified research data, misrepresentation of authors' identities, and other forms of research dishonesty — compounding the long timelines to editorial decisions and declining rates of reviewer engagement. Breaches of information ethics or publishing standards / policies throughout the research lifecycle are growing, along with a steadily rising number of new manuscripts. And the advent of intelligent automation makes fraudulent research that much easier to produce.

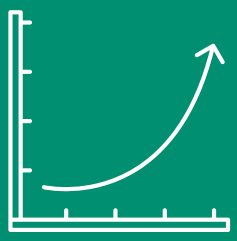


Most research integrity interventions rely on checking manuscripts against various criteria and flagging failed checks for editors' final decision-making. These checks are imperfect but powerful proxies of integrity, complicated by different thresholds across disciplines depending on their niche, and are unstandardized across publishing. Each is part of the puzzle. The data required to piece together the full picture, however, is imprecise and not easily aggregated. Retractions, for instance, might indicate faulty research practice; equally, they may indicate that the system is working as designed, given the self-correcting standards for scholarly research.

Integrity under pressure

Research integrity scholars have framed the efforts against mis/disinformation in scholarly communications as an emerging field of “forensic scientometrics” and proposed a “taxonomy of scientific manipulation” (McIntosh & White, 2025). The STM Integrity Hub and the Researcher Identity task force are efforts to standardize how the industry measures trust and monitors cases of integrity flaws. ScholarOne is among many systems that integrate with such initiatives as well as develop bespoke automated validation tools (for example, ScholarOne’s Unusual Activity Detector — UAD).

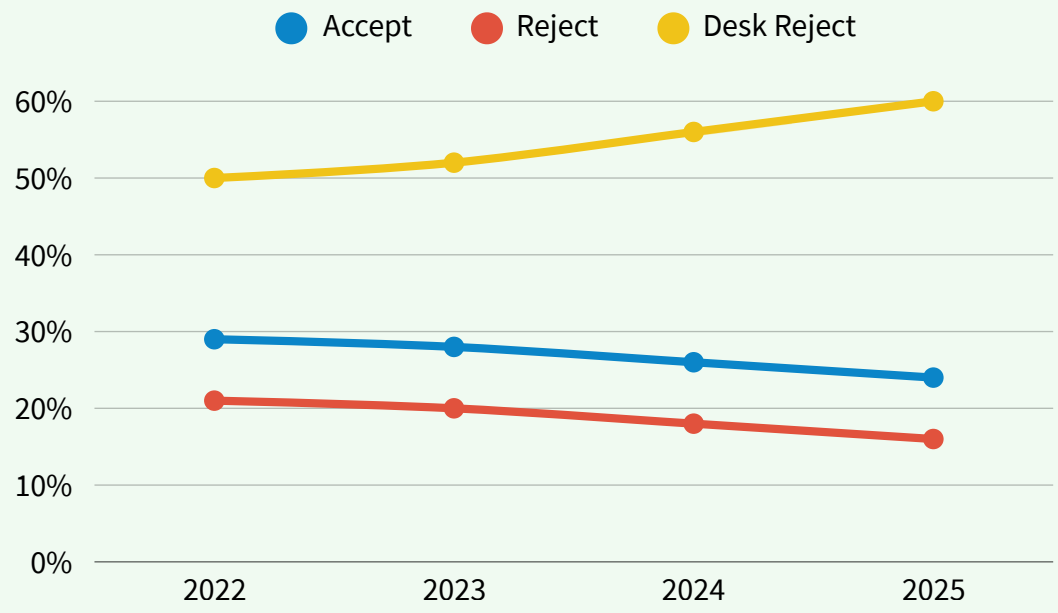
The pressure on these systems is intensifying.



Submission decisions (totaling manuscript acceptances, desk rejects, and rejects) on ScholarOne **grew by roughly 43% between 2022 and 2025**, while flag rates via automated integrity checks as a proportion of submissions have declined over that period.

The absolute number of flagged manuscripts accepted without editorial clearance remains in the hundreds of thousands annually. Integrity tooling has not kept pace with the volume of work it is being asked to screen.

Integrity under pressure



Between 2022 and 2025, desk rejects grew 72% (from 1.23 million to 2.12 million). For every acceptance in 2022, editors issued 1.69 desk rejects. By 2025, that ratio had climbed to 2.49. The desk reject rate is filtering submissions at a higher and accelerating rate.

What's harder to determine is whether this reflects stricter editorial standards or editorial triage under pressure. If editors are raising the bar, that's a sign the system is self-correcting, filtering out lower-quality work before it consumes reviewer time. If they're desk-rejecting at higher rates simply to manage the decision load, the quality signal becomes murkier. Manuscripts that might have reached peer review in 2022 may be stopped earlier today, not because they are less worthy, but because the queue behind them is longer. **The desk reject rate, in other words, is a function of both quality and capacity, and right now, it's impossible to fully separate the two.**

Integrity under pressure

When asked about mis- or disinformation in research, **the majority of survey respondents (44%) felt that the risk of fabricated or manipulated research data was the biggest problem**. Another 12% felt that exaggerating or inflating research results was of greatest concern. Together, these data points underscore the stress scholars are under to “publish or perish.”

Such competitive pressures can inspire some to game the system, which skews the scholarly record and undermines the integrity of the scholarly lifecycle. In turn, these quality concerns threaten peer review's foundational legitimacy. As the “golden standard” providing legitimacy to scientific findings (Horta & Jung, 2024), deteriorating trust between authors, reviewers, editors, and publishers endangers the integrity of the entire scientific enterprise. Our survey results indicate that most scholars believe the general public does not understand the role of peer review in the research lifecycle. As public trust in science declines, some experts observe an existential crisis for scientific validation (Irfanullah, 2025).

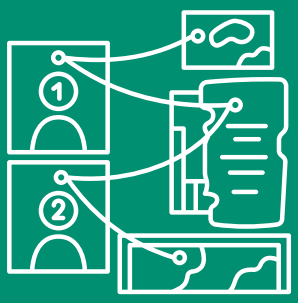
Integrity under pressure

Clearly, the peer review system must adapt to meet the demands posed by these risks to research integrity. The arrival of AI presents both risks and rewards, including what some experts have called an “arms race” dynamic (Barnett & Spick, LSE, 2026). This resonates with our survey findings, where 52% of reviewers felt that automated integrity checks would have the biggest impact on their publishing experiences.

Experts note, however, that the risks to research integrity go beyond the use of AI. “If research is bad, the research is bad,” PubTech Radar’s King reflected. “The biggest risks are essentially human; the pressure to publish meaningful results means the findings are overegged.” STM’s research integrity initiatives underscore this reality, aiming to shore up the shared governance of publishing ethics. Ultimately, the use of technology to commit and detect fraud are human activities, which we should keep in mind despite the growing concerns about the impact of AI in scholarly research.

AI & peer review

Studies examining the use of AI in research reveal an increased prevalence; for example, between 10% and 17% of reviews at several major computer science conferences are substantially AI-modified or generated (Liang, et al., 2024). The likelihood that researchers used LLMs to support or generate their reviews also increased when they were submitted within three days of the deadline.



Editors observe **AI hallmarks in roughly 10% of reviews**: excessive length (3000+ words versus the typical 500-1,000 words), generic comments lacking specific feedback, perfect formatting, and telltale phrases like “meticulous” and “commendable” (Chawla, 2024; Nature, 2025).

It is no surprise, then, that 83% of journals with high impact factors have updated their policies to address the use of AI (Wang & Gong, 2025; Yoo, 2025), where some have implemented complete bans, and others have established more nuanced guidelines (Mollaki, 2024; Lendavi, 2026). Increasingly, authors are expected to disclose the use of AI for any task in the research and publishing process.

The impact, benefit, and governance of these policy changes are still being assessed. Still, our research shows that current AI-detection tools achieve only approximately 30% accuracy, and "humanization" techniques defeat even these modest detection rates (Nature, 2025). We are even seeing cases of AI-generated papers passing human peer review checks (Arnold, 2026).

AI & peer review

Among authors responding to our survey, 22% reported not using AI at all in their publishing activities, while a significant portion (43%) indicated their use of AI focused on research data analysis and/or visualization. Notably, those authors who have used AI in their own scholarly activities are somewhat supportive of its use in general throughout the research lifecycle, but worry most about data manipulation in others' work.

Publisher policies regarding the use of AI in peer review are lagging behind those addressing authorship. While many publishers have established AI policies for authors, **only 2 of 10 major publishers address the uses of AI in reviews at all (Mollaki, 2024), and 64% of journals did not provide any AI-related guidance for peer reviewers/editors (Charbonneau, 2026)**. Enforcement is virtually nonexistent, relying on an informal honor system. Many authors surveyed were unsure or unaware of how publishers use AI to help reviewers, and most reviewers felt AI tools would help with the speed and accuracy of their reviews for a variety of tasks.

AI & peer review

Industry experts note the potential of AI tools to “make the act of reviewing less of a chore for some people, which could be nudging acceptance rates up in some fields,” noted King. A recent survey indicates 53% of reviewers are now using AI for peer review tasks (Frontiers Media, 2025), without the regulation and detection applied to manuscript submissions.

Attitudes about AI’s role in peer review reveal growing polarization across various studies. IOP Publishing surveys show dramatic shifts between 2024 and 2025: positive views increased from 29% to 41%, while neutrality collapsed from 36% to 22% as fence-sitters formed stronger opinions (Şenel, 2025). Wiley’s 2024 global research survey indicated that four out of five scholars prefer human judgment over AI reviews.

Demographic divisions emerge clearly: women express more negative views than men, junior researchers show more enthusiasm than senior colleagues, and technical fields report the highest usage rates (Şenel, 2025).

AI & peer review

Some experts observe that AI-enabled manuscript review tools should be fine-tuned to the most intractable risks to research integrity. “The authenticity of the researcher is the #1 biggest nut to crack, and all else can flow from that,” noted Tony Alves, co-founder of Scholarly Publishing Solutions. “You can spend all day testing the content, but if we can validate authentic authors, we can reduce all other functions.”

He added: “The fear of fabrication/manipulation is real and must be addressed, but AI assistants will be a major force in helping researchers prepare and organize their research for submission, and **they will be an effective tool in leading researchers through the peer review process in a structured and thoughtful way**, making the peer review process more regulated.”

Pressure points & potential solutions

The peer review system is facing a sustainability problem of simple math: there is an imbalance between the growth of manuscript submissions and reviewer capacity. The current incentive framework for scholars does not enable scaling the reviewer pools, but instead promotes authorship, which further stresses the system. Solutions to these tensions, however, involve more than simply flooding the system with more reviewers. Consulting the literature, we've outlined the primary approaches that would improve our current peer review system.

Professionalization and compensation

Formalizing the remit and remuneration for peer reviewers has been promoted as the best way to shore up the quality and availability of qualified reviewers. For example, the "450 Movement" proposes a standard $450 fee per review (Brainard), which many journals would not be able to afford in their current business models.

About half of the editors who participated in our study indicated that recognition or compensation would be a game-changer for peer reviewers, but they did not agree on what that looks like or who would be responsible.

Pressure points & potential solutions

TAKEAWAY:
Professionalism would support the sourcing strategies we explored in ScholarOne data, where the most effective channels for finding reviewers are relationship-based. A professional reviewer pool would potentially solve for both willingness and reachability.

Professionalization and compensation

Scanning the literature for examples, implementation experiments reveal complexity: the ResearchHub journal pays the cryptocurrency equivalent to $150/review (Else, 2024), and a 2025 NIH proposal suggests capping APCs (article processing charges) at $3,000 for journals compensating reviewers and using open peer review (STAT News, 2025). Many experts agree that institutional recognition would have the biggest impact on reviewer acceptance and quality. “ORCID recognition is fine,” said Alves, consultant, “but what might be really compelling is to have reviewer activity count toward tenure and for institutions to recognize and compensate for the time it takes to review a paper.”

Emanuele & Minoretti (2025) advocate transforming reviewers into certified professionals resembling sports referees: formal training and certification, team-based approaches with lead reviewers supported by specialists (statisticians, methodology experts, reference checkers), and funding from publishers' profit margins (Walter & Mullins, 2019) or research funders. Some argue paid review represents “justice” after exploiting “free labor,” maintaining “perpetual injustice,” with lawsuits filed against publishers claiming collusion to keep review uncompensated (Else, 2024). Others warn that payment could undermine the community ethos essential to peer review's integrity (Cheah & Piasecki, 2022).

Pressure points & potential solutions

Training and recognition

Elevating the reviewer function in the scholarly lifecycle is a critical step in resetting the current structural imbalances that pose challenges to a healthy peer review ecosystem. Major initiatives expanded dramatically starting in 2024 — including Nature Portfolio's co-review programs across multiple journals, GSA Journals' structured review curriculum, NIH Early Career Reviewer Program pairing beginners with experienced researchers, and PREreview Open Reviewers' 14-week cohort.

Experts point to evidence from these programs in their observations that training and recognition have positive impacts on the quality, timeline, and throughput of reviews. "Peer review is often 'on the job' training," remarked Gareth Dyke, consultant, "so academics need help." He notes that such training should focus on both the use of editorial software as well as on research integrity, ethics, and quality assurance.

Recognition systems such as Publons (now part of Web of Science) have garnered some engagement but are generally underutilized, in part because they are not acknowledged within the formal tenure and promotion criteria for researchers.

Pressure points & potential solutions

Training and recognition

Some field-specific "Reviewer of the Year" honors establish the sort of framework that positions reviewing as a core academic competency, taught from graduate school and recognized in hiring/promotion (Horta & Jung, 2024).

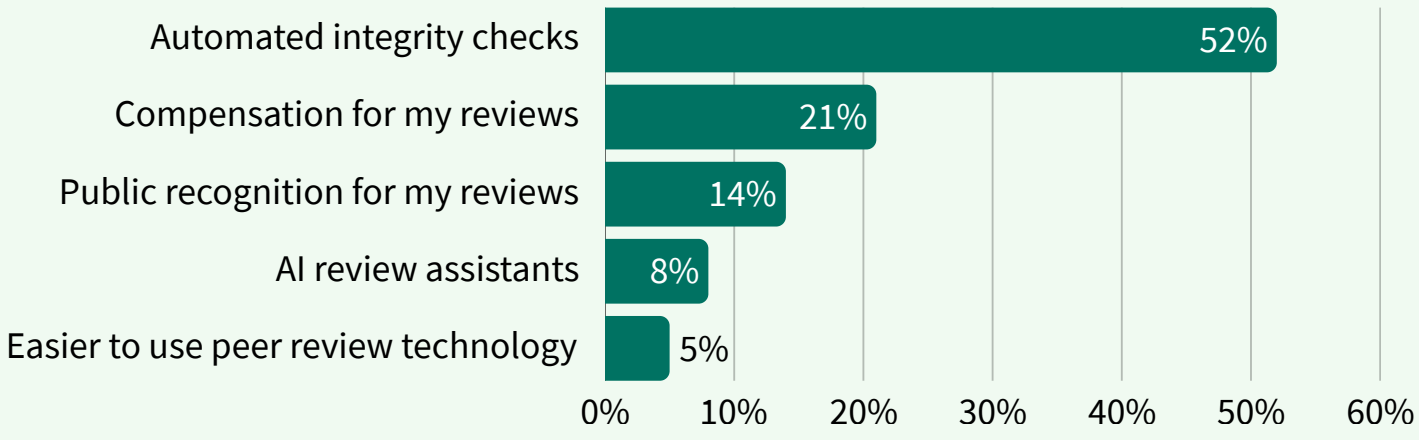
These efforts, however, are unevenly distributed globally — looking at the results of our survey, regions where reviewer pools are the strongest are likely not the regions with access to training and recognition infrastructure. This exacerbates international imbalances and can be addressed by institutions and publishers who provide these programs for researchers.

Pressure points & potential solutions

Ethical AI reviews

When asked which improvements would have the greatest benefit to their work as a reviewer, a majority of survey respondents indicated the need for automated validation of research integrity, such as confirming author identities and scanning for mis/disinformation. Notably, automating integrity checks was the most popular change rated in our survey, and presented in the 2025 report as well. This could be explained by the fact that respondents indicated they are most concerned about AI-assisted manipulation or fabrication of research data when it comes to research integrity risks.

Change with biggest impact on your work as a peer reviewer



Pressure points & potential solutions

Ethical AI reviews

“The authenticity of the researcher is the #1 biggest nut to crack, and all else can flow from that,” reflected Alves. “You can spend all day testing the content, but if we can validate authentic authors, we can reduce all other functions. In the last year, this has become more important and should be where we all invest asap.”

Computer science scholars have been experimenting with cryptography and intelligent automation to detect flawed or fraudulent research and review practices for some time now (Gibney, 2026). Studies show authors are experimenting with embedding hidden prompts in their manuscripts to manipulate AI-assisted reviews (Lin, 2025).

Ethical AI-based review models are in the experimentation stage, as outlined in December 2025 in the *CSE Science Editor* (Mullen & Lewis), which posits a model-agnostic, values-driven decision system. The emerging consensus on AI integration acknowledges risks of hallucinations, bias reproduction, and context-free recommendations (Maslej, 2025; OECD AI Observatory; Şenel, 2025) while defining acceptable versus prohibited uses.

Pressure points & potential solutions

Ethical AI reviews

This framework emphasizes that AI augments rather than replaces human expertise (Zou, 2024), with 100% human accountability maintained for all AI-assisted content (COPE, 2023; Zielinski et al., 2023). Detection remains challenging given low accuracy rates and evolving “humanization” techniques, requiring transparent policies, disclosure statements, and consequences for violations (Mollaki, 2024). This results in a fundamental tension between AI humanization and AI detection accuracy improvements.

Pressure points & potential solutions

TAKEAWAY:
As median time to acceptance rose 23 days between 2018 and 2025, with the slowdown concentrated in the work of securing and completing reviews, finding alternatives that bypass that bottleneck may relieve author frustration.

Alternative review models

Many journals are experimenting with alternative, more open models of peer review as a step toward improving accountability, integrity, and recognition. For example, *Nature* announced in 2025 that it would publish all peer review comments, ACS is running pilots in *Central Science* and *Journal of Physical Chemistry Letters*, and Sage is offering transparent peer review (TPR) on select journals. However, adoption faces barriers including retaliation fears (especially for junior researchers), disciplinary differences (Pontille & Torny, 2014), and potential reduction in candid critical feedback.

Based on our survey results, there is a wide variability in authors' experiences with and attitudes toward TPR. Reviewers are evenly split in their experiences and awareness of TPR, believing it would have a neutral impact on the scholarly record or their decision to accept a review invite. A minority of editors felt TPR would offer the most positive changes to peer review. On principle, TPR is seen as having a moderate capacity to improve the peer review process, but this isn't borne out in practice, or is perhaps unevenly distributed.

Pressure points & potential solutions

Alternative review models

In addition to TPR, several experimental models have been developed:

Review Sharing:
Some publishers experiment with transferring rejected articles between journals alongside their reviews, reducing duplicate effort. However, successful examples remain within single publisher portfolios or closed consortia, limiting scale.

Preprint Servers and Post-Publication Review:
These models enable rapid dissemination, community engagement, and capture of null findings and replications. Quality control concerns persist, and expert evaluation is still required eventually, not necessarily solving core capacity problems (Horta & Jung, 2024; Hardwicke et al., 2022).

Registered Reports:
Pre-approving protocols before research is conducted guarantees publication regardless of results, reducing publication bias. The two-stage process requires more upfront reviewer time, and adoption remains limited without addressing core capacity.

Institutional Review:
Proposed research review committees (RRCs) would filter manuscripts before journal submission, potentially reducing workload. Critics cite risks of institutional bias, variable standards, exclusion of independent scholars, and workload shifting rather than reduction (Irfanullah, 2025).

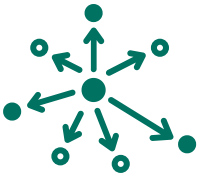
After the tipping point: four futures of scholarly publishing

While it's clear that peer review is facing growing pains, the trends we see do not point to a single destination. A 20-point decline in reviewer acceptance rates since 2018, geographic concerns in reviewer pools, and struggles with integrity at scale: these are all signs of a system under accumulating weight. The scenarios in this section are tools for making decisions, not forecasts. Ultimately, these options are not mutually exclusive: different research communities or journal types are already on different trajectories, heading toward different futures simultaneously.

Managed evolution
The most probable path

System strain and selective collapse
An underappreciated risk

Professional transformation
A high-effort scenario



Decentralized disruption
The wildcard

After the tipping point: four futures of scholarly publishing

Managed evolution
The most probable path

Change continues incrementally, with no single trigger forcing transformation. Peer review absorbs the increased pressure through gradual adjustment, from a normalized hybrid of AI-human review, expanded training programs, token-based compensation for reviewers, and increased transparency around selective areas.

Talk of a peer review crisis fades, but the underlying tensions remain.

Reviewers want the system fixed, not replaced. More than 50% of survey respondents cited automated integrity checks as the change that would have the greatest impact, even more so than reviewer compensation. East and South Asian reviewer pools are filling the gap, where Western markets lag, and that shift is happening without any policy push. Relationship-based reviewer selection still outperforms algorithmic sourcing, despite the time it takes.

The risks to this scenario are structural. As reviewer acceptance rates continue to drop, compounding editorial burden, and reviewer burden continues to be geographically unbalanced, this fragile equilibrium will remain under stress. Incremental reform has limits. While this path may be most likely, it doesn't solve for the increasing pressure, and the challenges peer review faces potentially become more acute.

After the tipping point: four futures of scholarly publishing

System strain and selective collapse
An underappreciated risk

Collapse is uneven across geographies, journal tiers, and publication types. As some fail, others stabilize. Publisher metrics will define warning thresholds, but these are lagging indicators of localized failures. Slower degradation and collapse paint a picture that is harder to detect, and by extension harder to interrupt.

A few signals will stand out in this future environment. Trends in desk-rejecting papers suggest strains on managing new submissions. Manuscripts are stalling in a way that hints at a structural problem at the very start of the peer review process. Author collaboration and participation pile onto this situation; as participation outpaces infrastructure, that gap creates pressure that the system isn't built to absorb. As authors collaborate and submit more multi-author papers, screening for conflicts of interest becomes more complex. **These issues reinforce each other.**

What comes after selective collapse is less a rebuilt system than an accelerated version of existing trends. Lower-tier and high-volume journals automate review entirely, or fold; prestige titles survive by making human review a differentiating feature rather than a baseline expectation. The result is not reform but stratification, becoming a tiered landscape that formalizes and cements the inequalities the current system has so far only implied.

After the tipping point: four futures of scholarly publishing

Professional transformation
A high-effort scenario

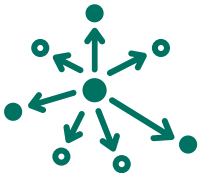
Certified reviewers, compensated labor, team-based review, and meaningful AI integration would deliver more durable improvements to quality and equity than anything currently underway. But it requires funding on the order of billions of dollars annually and alignment across publishers, institutions, and funders that has not materialized and shows no signs of doing so.

The data makes the gap between need and demand visible. Only 21% of reviewers identify compensation as the change with the biggest impact on their engagement. Editor familiarity drives acceptance decisions more than any other factor, yet it is the one thing algorithmic sourcing cannot replicate. A professional reviewer corps would institutionalize that trust at scale.

The problem is that doing so requires powerful stakeholders to invest in a system that currently hides its cost in time spent.

The geographic dimension sharpens the challenge further. Building certification infrastructure around existing editorial networks would solve yesterday's problem. Research leadership is shifting east and south, and any professionalization effort that does not build capacity where that leadership is emerging will reproduce the same structural inequities it set out to fix.

After the tipping point: four futures of scholarly publishing



Decentralized disruption
The wildcard

Technology and generational change combine to work around traditional infrastructure. In this paradigm shift, decentralized platforms emerge where reviewers earn tokens, smart contracts handle payment, and reputation systems replace journal prestige. ResearchHub is an early operational example.

The conditions for this scenario are more developed than they appear.

Algorithmic reviewer sourcing underperforms relationship-based sourcing, which signals that the current infrastructure is not solving the matching problem. Growing research communities in East and South Asia, already underserved by Western editorial networks, represent a natural constituency for alternatives. Decentralized platforms gain traction where structural exclusion is most visible.

The vulnerability is also structural. Token-reward systems are susceptible to coordinated gaming within tightly networked communities — the same insularity visible in some collaboration networks documented in this report. And the author data is telling: 43% of authors already use AI in research and data analysis, and only 22% report never using AI in any publishing activity. The gap between how researchers actually work and what most publisher policies acknowledge is exactly the space where disruptive alternatives take hold.

After the tipping point: four futures of scholarly publishing

Several futures, simultaneously

Researchers, wearing both their reviewer and author hats, are already operating in these scenarios in different regions around the world. These are not the same system at different speeds. They are different systems sharing infrastructure, and the portfolio-level metrics most publishers rely on are papering over the divergence. Scenarios such as these are decisions more than they are forecasts. As an industry, we get to decide what to build — and what we fail to prevent.

We began this report by questioning who is served by the peer review "crisis" framing. These scenarios reframe that question:

Will the people with the power to act do so before managed evolution becomes the only option, not because it's the best path, but because every other window has closed?

The scale of the system feels daunting, but it cuts both ways. Too embedded to collapse cleanly, too consequential to keep absorbing pressure without breaking somewhere. That paradox is not a reason for paralysis. The scenarios in this report are not equally likely, but they are all still available.

Which one we move toward is, for now, still a choice.

Conclusion

So, is it a crisis?

The data does not support collapse: the reviewer pool is growing, and new research communities are joining the system. Integrity tooling is catching problems that would otherwise reach publication undetected. These are not the signatures of a system in freefall. Peer review is, by most measures, still working: unevenly, inefficiently, under accumulating strain, but working.

And yet the crisis framing is not without value. If the language of crisis creates the conditions for change that the evidence of strain alone has not, it is doing something useful. We can be clear-eyed, even critical, about the framing. But a more interesting question is whether (and how) to use the urgency it generates before the window closes.

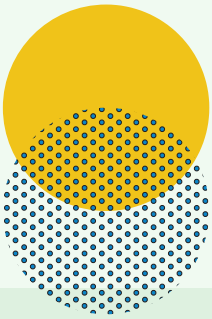
Conclusion

As with any analysis, this report sparks an open set of questions, which will be important to keep asking as peer review continues to evolve. We do not yet have reliable ways to measure AI usage across the peer review lifecycle, for authors, reviewers, or editors, which means policy is currently running ahead of evidence. The data on reviewer pool fatigue surfaces patterns — geographic, demographic, gendered — but it is less clear what interventions those patterns should inform, or who has the standing to make them. That work cannot happen without the people it affects. Surveying stakeholders, listening to practitioners, and building qualitative understanding alongside longitudinal datasets is how the field closes that gap.

The opening for meaningful change is genuine, and the stability of the system is an asset, not a reason for inaction. It means there is room to experiment without risking what works. The solutions most likely to hold are the ones built with the people closest to the problem: reviewers, authors, and editors who have already told us what they need.

The next step is to take that seriously, and to keep asking the hard questions.

Methodology



Survey
Survey data was collected via two instruments: SurveyMonkey and in-platform ScholarOne polling. A total of 2,132 responses were received from reviewers, authors, and editors around the world. Results were tabulated and analyzed by the authors of this report using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Interviews
Interviews were held via Zoom with the following experts: Tony Alves, co-founder of Scholarly Publishing Solutions; Gareth Dyke, researcher and consultant; Helen King, PubTech Radar; and Nihar Shah, Associate Professor in the Machine Learning and Computer Science departments at Carnegie Mellon University. Qualitative analysis was applied and all facts, quotes, and attributions have been approved by the interviewees.

Literature review
The literature review was conducted using an iterative, AI-assisted process. Primary sources were read in full, with structured notes documented. Those notes plus the source files were then processed using Claude (Anthropic), a large language model (LLM), to surface initial thematic patterns and analytical observations across the corpus.

The resulting themes were interrogated through continued dialogue with the model: testing coherence, probing for gaps, and challenging interpretations against the underlying source material. Where themes held up or were refined, the analysis was rewritten and recontextualized before being reintroduced to inform subsequent review cycles.

This approach combines close human reading with computational synthesis, treating the LLM as an analytical tool. All conclusions, interpretations, and thematic judgments are the authors' own; the model was used to aggregate and surface patterns across the source material, not to generate findings independently.

ScholarOne data
Unless specified in the report (such as the data on where editors find reviewers, in which a random sample of 1% was used), all ScholarOne data reflects an aggregate view of all publications using ScholarOne.

Methodology

ScholarOne data

Authors
"Author" is defined throughout as the corresponding author. Geographic attribution is based on the location of the corresponding author's institutional affiliation.

Co-authorship patterns in this analysis are characterized at the country and manuscript level rather than the individual author level. This reflects both the structure of the available data and the analytical goals of the study: the questions most relevant to publishers concern the geographic shape of collaboration footprints, the relationship between collaboration structure and editorial outcomes, and concentration patterns across journals. These are well-served by manuscript-level analysis. Resolving individual author identities across a dataset of this scale would additionally require name disambiguation at volume, complicated by transliteration variation across writing systems, common name collisions, and inconsistent recording of given names and initials. Country and manuscript-level characterization preserves analytical integrity while delivering the signals most directly actionable for editorial decision-making.

Time to Publish data
Analysis covers only manuscripts that reached a final decision within the study period. Manuscripts submitted but not yet decided were excluded. The time frame is bounded by the decision date, not the submission date. Desk reject is defined as a manuscript receiving a final decision with no reviewer invitations issued. Many journals use proprietary decision labels; these were aggregated into three categories: accept, reject, and desk reject. All analysis reflects final decisions only; revision stages are not broken out separately.

Reviewer Invitations
A reviewer is defined as any individual invited to submit at least one review. The data reflects the number of review requests issued, not the number of unique reviewers. Geography is based on the location of the reviewer's institutional affiliation. Response types were aggregated from journal-specific labels into standardized categories. Bounced or undeliverable email responses were classified as ignored rather than excluded. Reviewer invitations with no logged response date due to auto-decline thresholds were removed from analysis, as an invitation without a recorded ignore action was considered incomplete.

Methodology

ScholarOne data

AI-Assisted Data Analysis
Raw ScholarOne data was first processed and structured by the authors, including pivot table construction, data cleaning, and initial aggregation. Prepared datasets were then analyzed with the assistance of Claude (Anthropic), a large language model, which generated and executed Python code (pandas, openpyxl) for cross-file aggregation, validation, and pattern surfacing. All outputs were reviewed and verified by the authors before incorporation into the report.

The model did not make independent interpretive judgments about the data. Analytical decisions, including classification choices, framing, and the identification of patterns worth reporting, were made by the authors. Where outputs were inconsistent with prior calculations or expected patterns, discrepancies were flagged and investigated before any figures were accepted.

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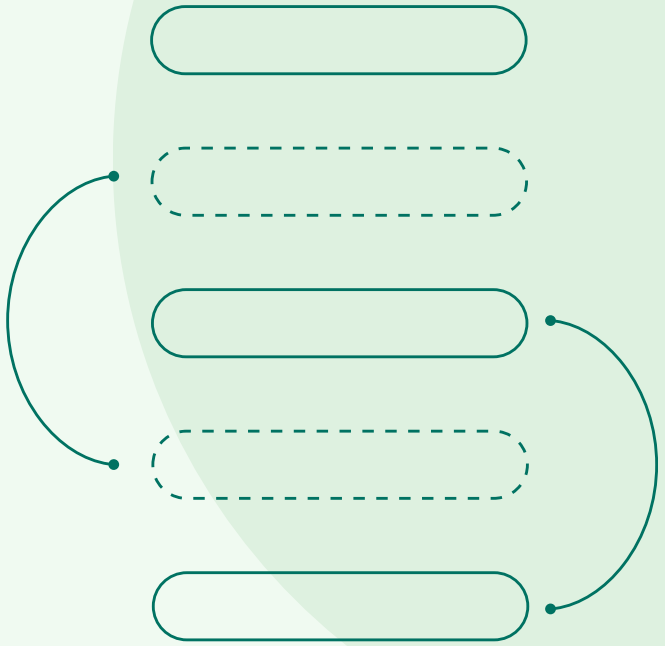
Let’s build the future of peer review together.



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