

Reviewers give higher marks when the author of the paper is famous | Sciences

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Yes, having a big name in science will help get your paper published, an extraordinarily powerful new study confirms. Only 10% of reviewers recommended that a test paper be accepted when the only author listed was ambiguous – but 59% endorsed the same manuscript when it was named after a Nobel laureate.

says Mario Malechucki, a postdoctoral researcher at Stanford University and editor-in-chief of the Journal *Research integrity and peer review*, who was not involved in the research. "It's the largest randomized controlled trial we've seen on publication bias."

For years, scholars have obsessed over the Matthew effect, a term coined by sociologists Robert Merton and Harriet Zuckerman in 1968 to describe how high-ranking researchers—those who already have many citations and grants, for example—tend disproportionately to have more of the same. (The name comes from a parable about abundance in Matthew's Biblical Gospel.)

But efforts to document such bias often had weaknesses, such as a small sample size or a lack of randomization. To avoid these problems, a team led by Jürgen Huber of the University of Innsbruck emailed some 3,300 researchers, asking if they would review an economic study prepared for a real journal. The study had two authors, both at Chapman University: Vernon Smith, the 2002 Nobel Prize winner in economics, who last year had more than 54,000 citations listed on Google Scholar. and Sabiou Inoua, one of Smith's former Ph.D.s. Students who received only 42 citations last year. Potential peer reviewers were submitted one of three descriptions of the paper: one named only Smith, with it mentioned as the corresponding author; else, only inwa; And a third without an author.

In the end, 821 researchers agreed to the review, the team reported last week at the International Conference on Peer Review and Scientific Publishing in Chicago. (The results also appeared in a preliminary version published last month on the SSRN server.) Smith's fame seemed to influence the responses: Of the researchers who gave his name only, 38.5% agreed with the call for a review; The numbers were 30.7% for those who did not give their name and 28.5% for those who gave inoa only.

The team then took a second step to avoid bias in their study. They focused on 313 willing reviewers who did not initially receive an author's name and randomly assigned them to one review of three manuscripts, one listing only Smith, another only Inoua, and the third without authors. (The team also informed the reviewers that their evaluations would be part of a trial that included more than a few invited peer reviews, rather than the usual two or three reviewers—but did not reveal the study design.)

The manuscript attributed to Smith has received the highest marks from reviewers, who praised it for including new information and data-backed conclusions. and 24% of those who reviewed the version without authors recommended accepting it (explicitly or with minor revisions), more than double the share that supported the version added to Inoua alone. (Smith and Inoa are reviewing the paper, and later publishing it as a preprint, for publication in a journal.)

The stark contrast may not surprise many researchers. It’s disturbing, one of the authors of the new study told a peer-reviewed conference. “Identical work should not be evaluated differently depending on who wrote it,” said Christian Koenig Kersting, a behavioral economist in Innsbruck. “Because this makes it difficult for younger, unknown researchers to get their feet in the door in the academic process.”

The authors could not rule out that discrimination based on perceptions of race or geographic origin shaped some of the reviewers’ decisions. Koenig Kersting noted that Smith’s name is an “American voice” and is white, while the Inoua is a Nigerien and dark-skinned.

Researchers who study publication bias have suggested double-blind reviews – in which the identities of both authors and reviewers are anonymised – may reduce Matthew’s effect. But this tactic may not work, Koenig Kersting told Congress, given that reviewers can often identify authors through a preprint or conference presentation.

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