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Fostering the debate among scholars to support the advancement of knowledge in the food-related consumer research: A commentary

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Abstract

In this commentary, I aim to highlight some issues currently challenging the advancement of knowledge in the food-related consumer research academic community. Retracing the sections of a research paper, several strategic writing practices authors use to please reviewers are outlined together with customary referee comments considerably popular nowadays (as paper originality; sample size and external validity; and risk of bias). These odds in the current publishing and reviewing practices, which are also under transition and in an ongoing shift, need thorough discussion among the academic community. The overall goal of the commentary is to foster debate and reflection among editors and scholars to better define the possible boundaries of good contributions to knowledge and the precise guidelines to prevent (potentially) detrimental practices on both sides.

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Introduction

Before starting, I upfront assert my profound appreciation of the peer-review process, which is the keystone of research dissemination, and my truthful persuasion that in an overwhelming number of cases anonymous reviewers effectively enhance manuscripts. Nevertheless, recently I realized that I begin most of the prospective articles writing the limitations section. This is not due to the feeling that the limits of the research are a key issue of the manuscripts, wherefore, I am quite aware of the customary remarks that most reviewers will rise. Let me be straightforward, certainly all consumer-related research has limitations (and even more my manuscripts) and it is surely appropriate to highlight these shortcomings to readers. However, the vicious circle fostered by prejudicial assessments of research outputs is worrying, as reviewers could scrutinize some aspects of my study more than others. Hence, I plan my research accordingly and apply unwritten golden rules of strategic writing to please them. Strong exemplars are the ubiquitous use of scales to measure various information, the application of sophisticated econometric models to explain simple relations between collected data, and the mandatory objective to produce innovative findings.

Here, I briefly discuss the key shortcomings stemming from these practices and present a set of reviewers' usual remarks, which in a similar way (often) challenge knowledge advancement[1].

This commentary neither aims to address how reviewers should perform their job, nor aims to provide guidelines for authors in academic publishing. Additionally, it is not a critical discussion of the peer review process which I strongly bear as the building block of scientific dissemination. Instead, my overriding objective is to stimulate a discussion and reflection among scholars on some issues that are (in my view) hampering current food-related consumer research. Furthermore, the final aim is not to embrace the author's view or the reviewer's view, but to foster a reflection on what we should consider a good contribution to science. I also openly acknowledge that I have not performed a systematic review to identify the practices hereafter described and thus might be (heavily) biased by my personal experience[2].

However, the starting point could involve defining the goals of applied research (Levy and Grewal, 2007). Based on Brown and Dant (2008),

1. Nonetheless, since multiple reviewers evaluate manuscripts a certain balance or relieve of certain biases certainly occurs.

2. As noted by an anonymous reviewer, probably most of the issues included in the commentary apply (generally) to many types of research. Nevertheless, since my personal experience is related only to food-related research I do not feel comfortable to extend it beyond these boundaries.

food-related consumer research should: add new knowledge, deepen the understanding of existing knowledge, provide surprising results, or shed light on new problems of interest to scholars and practitioners. If we concur on these key objectives of applied research, the first important consideration is that "relevant" would not necessarily imply "novel". Using the metaphor of knowledge as a "forest of knowledge trees" (Janiszewski *et al.*, 2016) knowledge creation could be considered as the addition of leaves to a tree, and not always as the starting of a new branch. Ubiquitous evidence reveals that food consumers change attitudes and behaviours over a limited time span; hence, providing updated insights is certainly useful for decision-makers and marketers. Similarly, product type, cultural contexts, consumption occasions, and socio-demographic status strongly influence individual food choices (Giacalone & Jaeger, 2019; Nijman *et al.*, 2019). Academic research is often constrained considering sample representativeness, geographical scope, product category range, and occasion of consumption; hence, findings based on different geographical and consumption contexts could offer valid, supplementary information. Moreover, results considering diverse product categories and target samples could help further test important research hypotheses. Directly stemming from these considerations, we can try to essentially understand if a study worthy of publication could be differentiated based on what it adds to current knowledge. All scholars must clearly define their study contributions and explain their importance, while we should acknowledge that studies could have relevance at an industrial or political level, and at regional, national, or international scales; moreover, they could focus on broader (or limited) food categories or consumer targets. Additionally, many "imperfections" in studies are sometimes discovered after the manuscript is published. Nevertheless, it was worth publishing at the time, allowing scholars to improve the research by continuing and deepening their investigation.

My personal view is that recently both reviewers and authors have been deviating from these parameters, shrouded by other much less important aspects.

1. Authors' strategic writing practices (the unwritten golden rules) and customary reviewer remarks

Every scholar that has planned and executed food-related consumer research is aware of the countless trade-offs faced in selecting the optimal methodology, design, and respondent sample, given budget, time, and human resource constraints (Jaeger *et al.*, 2017). The best outcome a researcher could seek is to maximize the strengths and minimize the shortcomings, achieving

– according to their goals – the highest possible internal, external, and ecological validity of findings (Plaza *et al.*, 2019).

Nevertheless, lately, it seems that some limitations are more disturbing for our peers than others; consequently, authors have developed a sort of *vademecum* to undertake food-related consumer studies to avoid acute scrutiny.

The misalignment of incentives between authors and reviewers is a well-known issue in peer-reviewing (García *et al.*, 2020). All referees are (hopefully) aware that their core role is to examine the importance of the research question and assist authors in improving their paper; however, these two tasks are often extremely challenging. Consequently, in such challenging times, a kind of shortcut has emerged in the reviewing process: a consolidated checklist of key flaws that undermine all studies. This standardized evaluation is thoroughly incongruous, as food-related consumer research could have considerably different relevance and scope; hence, it should be appraised on a case-specific basis.

Additionally, and probably even more worrying, younger scholars are naturally inclined to follow the patterns of their personal experiences and thus replicate most of the common remarks received.

Hereafter, I provide a brief compendium of some practices[3] scholars have been applying to please reviewers (and minimize potential criticisms) and outline several customary referee comments very popular nowadays, which should be better discussed in the academic community.

To effectively drive readers through the discussion, the commentary retraces the general, typical structure of research papers; pointing-out selected issues related to the research question, the methodology, the results, and conclusions. I purposely exclude the theoretical framework from the reasoning as it would involve a plethora of different stands, depending on the discipline through which the paper is observed and evaluated.

1.1. *Research question*

The first phase of all scientific research is to identify a question worthwhile of being investigated. Nevertheless, the value of the study's motivation is not an absolute concept and different scholars might strongly disagree on the meaningfulness of the same research. Indeed, there is no handbook or golden rules explaining what constitutes a good research question. However, in more general terms, the research question should be scrutinized on its relevance while recently the focus has sharply shifted towards novelty per se.

3. This inventory certainly does not exhaust the set of strategies applied.

1.2. *Originality*

All editors and reviewers in their very first evaluation of a manuscript carefully assess its originality (see, among others, Summers, 2001). However, the concept of originality is often confused with novelty. Papers that contribute and add knowledge to the scientific literature or field should be positively appraised, beyond their degree of novelty. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a novel (product) is new and does not resemble something formerly known or used. In the famous presentation "how to publish an academic paper" by Bellemare (2014), he defines the quality of a manuscript as the result of optimizing the function of the research question, its novelty, and execution. Nevertheless, the idea of novelty in the consumer-related domain could be more carefully evaluated by the scholar community. The fact that nobody has previously investigated a topic is not per se a motivation for a sound research question; contrarily, the issue could indeed not be relevant (Varadarajan, 1996). Conversely, a study dealing with a highly explored matter should not be a priori disregarded just because it lacks novelty. Indeed, its findings could add significant information to current knowledge, providing insights on an underexplored market/target, or details of consumer behaviour in a new/different consumption context, or help additionally prove the effectiveness of policies dealing with specific (unexplored) product categories. I believe that the originality of food-related consumer research should be evaluated more comprehensively, also considering the specific sample and product category scope together with the occasion/context of consumption investigated and the individual variables explored. Complementing this information with the methodological approach of a study could provide a complete picture of its originality. Indeed, as underscored by one anonymous reviewer, originality can derive from different facets: the topic, the data, the scales or items applied for measurements, and the estimation methods.

1.3. *Differentiation*

As previously mentioned, academic editors and reviewers usually as a first step, scrutinize the overall importance of a study contribution (Bagchi *et al.*, 2017; Janiszewski *et al.*, 2016). Underlining the contribution of a manuscript to available literature is certainly a keystone in writing an effective scientific paper; however, authors often dwell exclusively on the distinctive features of their studies. However, (evidently) a paper's differentiation factors do not solely validate the merits of the study. Indeed, numerous papers begin with considerable lists of elements that distinguish their research from existing

studies; however, they often provide, limited (or no) information on why these characteristics could or should be of interest, adding to current knowledge. The focus should be on the meaningfulness of our studies, and not on their demarcation.

Additionally, as underlined by one reviewer, journals might assess the importance of the research question very differently. For example, interdisciplinary journals might be keener towards broader research areas/topics compared to a field journal; similarly, if a study is focused on a specific, local challenge, a regional journal could be a more suitable option. Therefore, scholars should devote greater concern to selecting the best fitting outlet for their manuscripts.

2. Methodology

The methodological section of a manuscript should effectively present the motivations (and description) of the techniques applied to gather the data and the statistical/econometric elaborations performed. However, scholars are now almost compelled to follow established patterns of data collection and processing to avoid heavy *a priori* criticism.

2.1. *Overuse of validated scales*

Validated scales undoubtedly provide useful metrics to explore specific food consumer attitudes, needs, and interests (Steptoe *et al.*, 1995; Lusk, 2011; Schnettler *et al.*, 2013), and help measure important personality traits that drive food choices (as, among others, neophobia) (van Trijp & van Kleef, 2008). However, the application of scales to grasp basic, precise information that is directly and unambiguously measurable using a simple question is now quite ubiquitous. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that simple, single-item and straightforward questions could often present more direct (and ecologically valid) individual measurements. Most (if not all) professional consumer market analysis reports[4] such as Euromonitor, IRI, and Mintel corroborate this assumption, not applying any of these scales while providing detailed information on various drivers of everyday food choices. Briefly, one could question if the validated scales could be applied because we really believe that these constructs help effectively measure the targeted attitudes/intentions/perceptions or if these metrics are used only as an expressway to

4. These reports are well-appreciated by private companies worldwide, as demonstrated by their market value and diffusion.

publishing. In other words, even if the alphas of these final constructs are high, it is questionable if we are capturing practical information that could assist the understanding, explanation, and prediction of actual consumer behaviours. Alternatively, scholars should consider collecting data through qualitative techniques, which, however, most applied economists are not well-trained in. Once again, if research should be of high quality and relevant (Winer, 1999), the exploitation of validated scales in food-related consumer studies is somehow drifting away from the latter objective.

2.2. *Econometric sophistication*

Withholding results and selective reporting of findings (also called cherry picking/p-hacking) is a well-known issue (Banks *et al.*, 2016) and also strictly related to publication bias. Similarly, the abuse of p-values (concentrating only on statistical significance and overlooking the real-world impact of estimates) has been detected as an important limitation in several research areas (Brodeur *et al.*, 2016; Greenland *et al.*, 2016; Josephson & Michler, 2018). While p-hacking[5] occurs whenever a statistical strategy exceeds the bounds of the underlying identification strategy (Lybbert & Buccola, 2021), the malpractice I aim to underline here is a more general tendency to apply very sophisticated statistical analysis or econometric modelling to describe considerably straightforward relations. Whilst there is merit to using the most appropriate and new econometric method, as a colleague once powerfully explained, some studies apply methods that shoot sparrows with a cannon. The goal is most probably not motivated by malicious intent but twofold: 1) to showcase authors' empirical knowledge, and 2) to anticipate reviewers' data processing proposals.

Recently, pre-registration and pre-analysis plans have been advocated (and endorsed) by a share of scholars to limit cherry picking/p-hacking (Canavari *et al.*, 2019; Rommel & Weltin, 2021); however, these instruments would not effectively tackle magnified analysis. Data and code sharing could be more effective in delimiting the methodological drift of authors.

5. Lybbert and Buccola (2021, pp. 1336) also provided a more comprehensive definition called "p-hacking" writ large as "the violation knowingly or unknowingly of the principles of theoretical modeling or statistical inference with the intention of maximizing research impact, including the probability of manuscript acceptance, media attention, and subsequent citations".

3. Results

As powerfully explained by Bellemare (2020) the results section of a manuscript should allow the reader to judge the external and the internal validity of the study findings. Therefore, authors' efforts should be devoted to explaining the possibilities of their outcomes to be used for out-of-sample predictions and justify the rationale and robustness of their elaborations.

3.1. *Sample size and external validity*

Many food-related consumer research is performed on small, non-probabilistic, convenience samples; thus, the results cannot be directly transferred broadly or across populations and settings. Additionally, cross-sectional studies widely dominate longitudinal research. Nevertheless, reviewers have been increasingly demanding papers with findings that could be generalized beyond the parameters of a particular study. However, if we aim to generalize the results considering a sample to a specified larger population, sample size and representativeness are certainly core features (Lesko *et al.*, 2017)[6]; moreover, highly realistic research settings[7] provide better information about a particular phenomenon considering a particular time and place. Nevertheless, both are not particularly relevant if the ultimate goal is to generalize across populations and settings; the key component being theory (Lucas, 2003). In more general terms, we could recall again the metaphor of knowledge as a "forest of knowledge trees" (Janiszewski *et al.*, 2016) and consider that scientific knowledge is cumulative; thus, results gain an increased external validity with each successful theoretical replication. Similarly, as data are always limited to a special case of what occurred during measurements (Ahl & Allen, 1996), no study alone could produce general knowledge. Therefore, research should clearly establish the scope of its population and setting and then effectively assess the internal and external validity of its inferences (List *et al.*, 2011). Finally, and probably foremost,

6. As effectively stated by List (2020), "Where external validity refers to generalizing to the rest of the same population from which a sample is taken, increasing the sample size does improve inference. However, where external validity refers to a population of different situations or people different from the populations from which an original research sample was drawn, increasing the sample size of the original study would not necessarily improve the portability to these different populations".

7. Berkowitz and Donnerstein (1982, pp. 249) state that the "meaning the subjects assign to the situation they are in and the behavior they are carrying out plays a greater part in determining the generalizability of an experiment's outcome than does the sample's demographic representativeness".

reviewers (and authors) should devote more attention to the adequate power of statistical tests (Trafimow *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, if generalization either related to the methods or methodology applied is part of the research objectives, this information should be clearly stated upfront.

3.2. *Risk of bias*

Scholars are well aware that all findings are bound by numerous particulars related to data collection (as time, place, setting, and methodology) that are intrinsic limitations of studies. These are then complemented by a systematic bias that cannot be controlled by researchers but could eventually only be computed. My recent personal experience suggests that reviewers have been increasingly questioning the reliability of study findings based on the amount of uncontrolled or design-generated risks of bias detected in a manuscript[8]. If I outsource a professional marketing company to collect panel data on the drivers of preferences of regular shoppers for a food item X, I am inherently accepting some sample-selection bias. Similarly, a laboratory experiment involving multiple evaluations of food will inherently disregard numerous factors that have impacts in natural contexts. These factors may be beyond the control of an experimenter, such as environmental cues and social interactions. Nonetheless, the study findings could be highly valuable.

4. Conclusions

The final section of a research paper should provide its core real-world implications and its more relevant limitations. Thus, authors should conclude by discussing what those implications are, avoiding claims not supported by their results, debating the major shortcomings of their study, and offering some possible way forwards to extend/enrich findings (Bellemare, 2020).

4.1. *Policy and industry recommendations*

Most academic journals today emphasize the requirement of manuscripts to deliver practical insights to policymakers and practitioners. In addition, nearly all research funds are deeply bounded by numerous pragmatic

8. This issue is directly related to the abundance of study limitations (as an immediate consequence of recurrent referee remarks).

objectives and deliverables. Nevertheless, scholars often struggle in providing effective information to stakeholders, probably due to the recognised distance between academia and business (*e.g.*: Cavicchi *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, the conclusion section is sometimes curtailed by a sterile list of unachievable suggestions or recurring stereotypes. A possible solution could be involving interested parties in the interpretation and reasoning of the result together with the specific implications of the study findings.

4.2. *The power of study limitations*

It is somehow humorous that some reviewers are more wholehearted towards manuscripts that devote considerable space highlighting study limitations. Underlining the core shortcomings of research is certainly a proper, and good, practice of academic publications, however, providing a lengthy list of actual or potential threats to the internal and external validity of findings is not always very useful. First, many of these threats (population target, product category, and consumption or purchasing setting) are not study limitations but researchers' conscious choices. Second, exposing the key limitations upfront does not explain or justify why researchers deliberately decide to proceed on that path. A powerful exemplar is the use of the definition of an exploratory study, as a simple manner to lessen the criticism of problems with generalizability (Babin *et al.*, 2016). Attentive authors should clearly expose the core study limitations as precautionary measures and thus avoid the misinterpretation of the results, siding however this information with the reasons why the shortcomings could not be avoided in the performed research. For example, online data collections are inherently prone to involve a higher share of respondents with pc proficiency; nevertheless, this might be the only available manner to gather observations (as in a pandemic). Therefore, scholars should openly disclose this possible bias in the description of their sample (and eventually measure potential discrepancies from the target population) and warrant readers of the possible distortions of final outcomes.

Concluding remarks

Notwithstanding the problems of peer-reviewing, it remains the cornerstone of research dissemination (Alpert, 2007). Recent data shows that journals have experienced a significant increase in submissions after COVID-19 lockdowns began (Biondi *et al.*, 2021), alongside an increase in reviewer fatigue was evident before the pandemic, with a rise from 1.9

to 2.4 in the number of reviewer invitations required to obtain one report (Publons, 2018). Other data show a substantial decrease in the share of accepted submissions. In the field of Agricultural Economics and Policy, for example, an average acceptance rate of under 20% has been computed in the last 20 years (Finger *et al*., 2021). In such a competitive scenario, scholars are susceptible to temptations to achieve the best in their self-interests (Lybbert & Buccola, 2021).

Therefore, as a community, we should aim to foster the publication of papers based on a strong theoretical and methodological basis, solid data, and methodology, and foremost on the relevance of the research, while not focusing our attention only on the results generated (Heckelei *et al*., 2021). Additionally, adapting the famous microeconomic definition by March and Simon (1958), reviewers should not be satisfiers (checking for some pre-defined thresholds of "good studies"), but rather maximizers of contributions to research knowledge.

More efforts should be devoted by scholars, academic mentors, and journal editors to promoting the dissemination of practical, agreed guidelines for the peer-reviewing process of consumer-related manuscripts. Indeed, most of the debate around peer-reviewing pitfalls and problems is found in medical science literature; moreover, consumer-related scholars often learn to conduct reviews through trial and error, with quite limited sources providing practical instructions on how to act as a reviewer[9] (Lovejoy *et al*., 2011; Spigt & Arts, 2010).

Ideally, reviewers (should) have the same, ultimate goal as authors: disseminating meaningful research, always keeping in mind that reviewing must essentially assist authors in improving their paper.

Moreover, we should genuinely reflect on the core motivations guiding food-related consumer academic research: one could question if we are aiming to whisper in the ears of princes (Roth, 1995) – inform policymakers –, or if we are speaking to theorists, or searching for facts (Torgler, 2002), or both. Based on the answer to this, manuscripts could be valued more effectively, closely weighing their actual impact and scrutinizing their most relevant shortcomings.

Ultimately, I invite scholars to debate thoroughly how the different issues raised in the current commentary could be unraveled; should we aim to encourage authors to be more courageous and insist on their cases or modify reviewers' behaviour?

9. Recently, publishers have been providing video and audio tutorials to instruct potential reviewers; however, these instructions are quite broad and not specifically fitted for studies on food-related consumers.

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