

Vecchio, Riccardo

Article

Does anyone read my papers? The gap between academic consumer research and the real (wine) world

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Does anyone read my papers? The gap between academic consumer research and the real (wine) world

RICCARDO VECCHIO

Department of Agricultural Sciences, University of Naples Federico II (Italy), Via Università 100, 80055 Portici - Naples, Italy
E-mail: riccardo.vecchio@unina.it

Abstract. The goal of this discussion paper is to foster the debate among scholars on some of the key issues that are currently challenging the impact of academic wine consumer studies and encourage younger researchers towards alternative paths. Based on my personal experience, I will focus on some scholars' practices that (in my view) could be revised to increase the reconnection of researchers to the practical world, namely: topic relevance Vs. trendiness, methodological approaches and data utility, sample issues and the replication crisis.

Keywords: relevance, practitioners, scholars.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a wine consumer scholar from the beginning of my academic career I was clearly aware that I would never uncover the role of oncogene activation in human thyroid carcinomas or discover a real-time strategy to control prosthetic hands. Nevertheless, I always thought that my research outputs could be of (some) interest for practitioners and policy makers. The sad reality is (in my case) that the outcome papers are only read by academic colleagues. The most frustrating consideration stems from the fact that nowadays research funds are deeply bounded by practical objectives and deliverables. Nonetheless, my wine consumer studies (I can state with a great degree of confidence) have rarely whispered in the ears of princes [1] – informed policy makers – and never advised wineries' managers in their strategic planning. As a partial consolation, I quote Lockshin and Corsi [2] (p.493, 2020) which stated: "This behaviour has often led to the accusation, particularly from industry, that our research does not provide answers to the questions that really matter". The researcher-practitioner divide is indeed an enduring issue among many disciplines and especially in applied academic fields (see, among others, [3]). Notwithstanding the merits of knowledge diffusion among the academic community, I do believe that as applied scholars we should profoundly aim to reach a wider audience of possible ben-

eficiaries of our research. Similarly, we must encourage young scholars to develop studies that have an impact also (or foremost) on the real-world. However, this pattern is not without potential pitfalls, recalling the caveats of too closely following practitioners' agendas [4]. In my personal view, academic studies have strongly been pressured towards novelty of findings and the application of innovative methodological approaches, which are surely important features of research but do not represent (necessarily) a quality mark. Additionally, the increasing competitiveness and complexity of the scientific publication process has encouraged scholars to engage in research that have greater publication appeal (the so-called indicator game). Moreover, academic research timing (from hypothesis formulation to data gathering and article publication) is clearly divergent from practitioners' need to collect and analyse market information. Nevertheless, a sharp shift towards relevant research that addresses substantive problems could be necessary, urged by the increasing amount of external funding which is progressively more outcome based. The goal of this discussion paper is to foster the debate among scholars on some of the key issues that are currently challenging the impact of academic wine consumer studies and encourage younger researchers towards alternative paths. In my view not everything is directly attributable to the scholars' community, as some push-backs are also due to the industry and to policy makers. Hereafter, due to my personal experience, I will focus only on some scholars' practices that (in my view) could be revised to increase the reconnection of researchers to the practical world: topic relevance Vs. trendiness, methodological approaches and data utility, sample issues and the replication crisis. But first some words of warning. Whilst I am aware of the importance of the relevance versus rigour debate [5] and the differences existing among Universities and business schools' research, for sake of conciseness I will not dwell into these issues. Additionally, I do not question the basic principles of academic freedom [6], which is in my opinion one of the most remarkable benefits of our profession. Finally, I transparently admit that in many papers I have deviated from several recommendations provided in this discussion and (as later highlighted) I am aware of the incentives of digressing.

2. RELEVANCE VS. TRENDINESS (AND THE INDICATOR GAME)

Scientists consider an article to be relevant if it addresses an issue that has an impact on collective and/

or individual well-being in the short or long term. While undoubtedly it is hard to perform wine consumer research that actively benefits the broader collective, we should encourage studies that provide useful insights for multiple stakeholders. However, an unwritten, but quite well-known, fast-track to publication is to perform research on a "hot topic"; in other words, investigate an issue that is popular in the international or national media due to some (recent) trend or phenomenon. Nevertheless, most often when a topic is popular among the general press, the wine industry has already exploited its market opportunities. Similarly, articles dealing with such hot topics have higher probabilities to be cited by colleagues and thus contribute to the indicator game [7].

3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES AND DATA UTILITY

The general rule in science is that empirical research is rigorous if the methods and techniques warrant the conclusions drawn. Whilst scholars generally acknowledge that all methodologies investigating consumer and other stakeholders' attitudes and behaviours (from field experiments to stated preferences techniques) hold specific limitations and strengths (see, among others, [8]), there seems to be a periodic popularity upsurge of one, specific method of data gathering. Guiding to over-criticism towards other methodologies and to a proliferation of studies more concerned of showcasing the complexity and grandeur of the underlining design rather than focusing on the potential utility of outcomes. Relatedly, a worrying issue is also the use of validated scales in our research, which is certainly due to seek high methodological rigour, nonetheless it can lead scholars to diverge from real-world measurements. Whilst information on psychological processes in the consumer journey and possible moderating or mediating influences are key for wine industry stakeholder, often the outcome of these scales depict individual psychometric characteristics that do not offer practical insights to wineries or policy makers interested in identifying market segments or interventions' effectiveness. Studies should be designed building on the unique make-up of that market [2] and carefully considering their final, empirical contribution [9].

4. UNDER-POWERED SAMPLES AND THE REPLICATION CRISIS

Causal inferences to be informative relies on externally valid samples [10]. However, empirical evidence suggests that non-representative convenience samples

can provide insights that closely resemble those found using representative samples [11]. Indeed, many wine consumer studies rely on limited samples, most often non representative of any specific target population [12, 13]. While acknowledging the difficulties in achieving successful academic collaborations, an alternative to perform studies with narrow, convenience samples could be to crowdfund larger datasets collecting quota-based sub-samples from different affiliations. The immediate advantages of such practice would be to reduce individual scholars' efforts of data collection (as each participant could provide a limited number of respondents) and more closely reach a larger population, (probably) located in different geographical areas. Strictly related to the issue of low external validity of many wine consumer studies is the huge issue of the publication bias attached to replication studies. Most scholars are convinced (and I fear appropriately) that journals will never publish research that loyally replicates an investigation performed by other authors [14]. Whilst the advancements provided by this work for the academic community could indeed be limited, the outcomes would be of great benefit for the practitioners. As findings could offer an important update on stakeholders' attitudes or/and behaviours and, even more importantly present, a validation of previous insights.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I hope that this discussion paper, examining a non-exhaustive list of core topics that limit academic studies' usefulness to solve practitioners and policy makers problems, will provide some impetus to wine consumer researchers to further debate (and potentially increase) our contribution to the real-world. Among the possible options, we should try to engage practitioners in the design of our studies and further exploit the opportunities offered by traditional and social media to share outcomes through popular science outputs (as indeed many younger scholars are increasingly doing). Overall, I sincerely believe that enhancing the impact of our wine consumer research is a win-win solution.

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