Reaching for Rigor and Relevance: Better Marketing Research for a Better World

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, scholars have highlighted the obligations and opportunities for marketing as a discipline to play a role in creating a better world — or risk becoming irrelevant for the largest problems facing consumers and society. Climate change, poverty, obesity, discrimination and bias, and the Covid-19 pandemic have demonstrated that marketing (and businesses) cannot operate in isolation from the broader community. We seek to provide a framework for authors and reviewers to enhance the rigor and relevance of research in marketing that not only contributes new knowledge to science, but also makes a positive difference in the world. In doing so, we hope to encourage further consideration of the role of marketing scholarship in providing a novel lens into potential solutions for societal concerns.

Keywords: marketing, greater good, rigor, relevance, well-being, sustainability, better world

Declarations

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1 Introduction

The early 21st century is witnessing many disruptions, some with deep historical roots and some relatively recent. These include climate change, poverty, obesity, discrimination and bias. Addressing these issues requires deep consumer knowledge, and marketing as a discipline has a unique advantage in helping to improve lives and livelihoods, reduce inequities, and work for the greater good. Unfortunately, according to some prominent authors (Ludwig and Nestle 2008), marketing is exacerbating these issues as the goals of some businesses may be at odds with those of society.

Over several decades, marketing scholars have highlighted both the opportunities and the obligations that our discipline needs to address or risk becoming irrelevant (Kelley 1971; Mick 2008; White et al. 2019). Even if marketing as a corporate function has traditionally been focused on the objective of increasing shareholder profits, "it is not possible to have a strong business concern without addressing the challenges of inequality, poverty, and climate change in the present times" (Paul Polman, former Unilever CEO). There has been a recent surge in our field's interest in exploring marketing's role in creating a better world (e.g., *Journal of Marketing* issue on this topic, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* issue on the greater good, *Journal of Marketing Research* issue on marketing and education, *Marketing Science* issue on health, various issues of *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* and *Journal of the Association of Consumer Research,* and Transformative Consumer Research work). However, the gap between what we have studied and what marketing can do to address these issues remains substantial (Chandy et al. 2021).

This paper, which grew out of a Knowledge Forum on Better Marketing for a Better World at the 2021 Association for Consumer Research (ACR) Conference, has four key objectives. First, we identify the key challenges for greater good marketing research. Second, we propose multiple ways for researchers to confront these challenges. Third, we suggest key considerations for review teams and gatekeepers to support and strengthen marketing scholarship in pursuit of the greater good. Altogether, we hope to spark conversations around how marketing scholarship can provide a more comprehensive understanding of and solutions to the world's most important societal concerns.

2 Two Key Challenges: Relevance and Rigor

We consider an (empirical) research article to be rigorous if the methods and techniques warrant the conclusions drawn. Thus, rigor is not about methodological sophistication or the use of cutting-edge or novel theories but simply a judgment of whether the methods used lead to valid results and justify the conclusions drawn. We consider an article to be relevant (to the greater good) if it addresses a societal or environmental issue that helps improve individual and/or collective well-being in the short or long term.

For the ACR Knowledge Forum, multiple co-authors of this article discussed a paper they believe exemplifies both rigor and relevance. The discussion at the Knowledge Forum underscored the idea that, as a field, we could do much more to enhance the relevance of our research. The gap between where we are and where we wish to be is perhaps caused by the fact that it is hard to do research that makes a true difference to the world; questions abound but research is circumscribed by resources, data access, and the ubiquity of contextual variables that challenge theory development. Further, because marketing is inherently a business discipline, the relevance of such research may be questioned at some business schools. In other words, marketing for a better world and the marketer's bottom line may be viewed as sometimes being in conflict. Thus, a key challenge in encouraging research in pursuit of the greater good is to elevate its relevance for key stakeholders. We see many win-win opportunities but acknowledge that relevant questions may also involve societal wins that impose business costs, at least in the short term.

The discussion at the Knowledge Forum also highlighted that research that focuses on the greater good is often seen as "soft," "wishy-washy," or lacking in rigor. This may be due to many reasons, including difficulty in collecting data that accurately gauge societal impact, difficulty in collaborating with organizations and governments to conduct field studies/source data, the real world being complex and multifaceted, and academic journals tending to favor "clean" and singular explanations for phenomena. We broadly classify these concerns as underscoring a need to enhance or address the perceived rigor of greater good research.

Arising from the discussion at the Knowledge Forum, Figure 1 outlines a list of considerations, that we detail below to help authors address these two sets of concerns. We also present recommendations for reviewers and gatekeepers who evaluate these papers.

3 Seven Considerations for Enhancing Relevance and Rigor

3.1 Make greater good central to the research question: At the risk of sounding obvious, we underscore that the first step in doing good research for a better world is to start with a research question rooted in the greater good. Researchers (including us) have often treated societal and environmental well-being as an afterthought — at best used as a context to demonstrate a theoretical idea or, at worst, simply relegated to a paragraph in the general discussion section of a research article. A useful way to think about rooting a research question in the greater good is to consider the ecosystem of the behavior one may be trying to encourage (Labroo and Goldsmith 2021). A better world outcome often involves multiple actors, multiple barriers preventing them from acting for the greater good, multiple motivations to do so, and multiple steps in the journey to a better world.

For example, research on prosocial behavior has investigated factors influencing consumers' willingness to donate. Whereas most research stops here, it is worth asking: what happens once a consumer has decided to contribute to a charitable cause? Most consumers in developed markets have no dearth of worthy causes to donate to. How does this availability of choices affect consumers' donation behavior? As Ein-Gar and colleagues (2021) find, having to choose between worthy causes reduces consumers' willingness to donate to any of them. Increasing charitable donations is a worthy goal in and of itself, but identifying barriers to donation puts the greater good at the heart of the research question.

Another route to increasing the relevance of marketing research is to study phenomena with actual populations for whom our research has important implications — which, apart from being important and relevant in the real world, can lead to new theoretical insights. For example, although obesity is mentioned as a key societal concern in most papers on food consumption, little to no research in marketing has studied obese people. Indeed, we acknowledge that conducting research with hard-toreach populations is a resource-intensive endeavor, but enlarging the pool of participants to actually include such populations is one of the most meaningful ways for marketing academics to increase the relevance of our research. For example, a key question linking food advertising to the obesity epidemic is the idea that some people may have become obese because they are especially prone to food advertising. A recent paper (Cornil et al. 2022) shows that whereas people with obesity were initially more responsive to food marketing, undergoing bariatric surgery reduced their responsiveness to food marketing to the level of non-obese people. This paper points to the important idea that the higher responsiveness to food marketing of people with obesity is not a stable individual trait; rather, environmental or biological factors may shape stigmatized groups' responses to marketing influences. Thus, the first step to enhancing the relevance of our research for the real world is to think deeply about the research question and how it can make a tangible difference in people's lives.

3.2 ***Embrace the breadth of roles that marketing can play***: A dreaded question for researchers seeking to work on issues of societal relevance is, "Is it marketing?" We think that defining marketing research as intended primarily for managerial action is an extremely narrow way of interpreting our field. The idea that for-profit companies should be motivated to create value for stakeholders (e.g., Environmental, Social, and Governance criteria), not just shareholders, has been steadily gaining ground among business leaders. The marketplace that we study is a complex system with multiple stakeholders — including not just consumers and firms but also broader communities, governments, and not-for-profit organizations. To that extent, studying the ways in which our research can improve outcomes for the consumer, the firm, or society — are all relevant questions. Thinking broadly about multiple stakeholders may be a particularly powerful way to increase the relevance of papers that focus on the greater good. We acknowledge that often, these objectives are at odds with each other. For example, what may be good for the consumer (e.g., eating less food) may be detrimental to the firm (e.g., reducing its revenue). However, two examples below underscore the idea that it is possible to design and conduct research that is relevant to multiple stakeholders, leading to interventions that offer a win-win outcome for several stakeholders. Where win-win situations are not always possible, research can also make transparent the trade-offs between different stakeholders' objective functions.

The paper by Cornil and Chandon (2016) seeks to tackle a key barrier to consumer health — people's tendency to overconsume delicious, calorie-laden, hedonic foods. To encourage consumers to choose smaller portion sizes, they test an intervention using multi-sensory imagery, asking people to think about the visceral aspects of consumption — e.g., the food's taste, texture, and smell. Merely thinking about the multi-sensorial experience leads consumers to choose smaller portions of rich, hedonic foods like chocolate cake because it helps them realize that a reasonable portion will be as enjoyable as a supersized one. Furthermore, this paper finds that consumers are willing to pay as much for smaller food portions when restaurants use multi-sensory imagery as they are willing to pay for larger portions devoid of any imagery. By providing a simple, actionable intervention that allows consumers to control their portion size, does not lead to a reduction in business revenues, and improves overall health, this paper proposes a win-win solution underscoring the idea that it may be possible to improve consumers' health and well-being, and the pleasure they derive from their food, without any detrimental effects on businesses.

Another paper that exemplifies inclusive research is by Orhun and Palazzolo (2019). They find that low-income households do not tend to take advantage of bulk discounts or buy ahead of time to save money — even for staple goods like toilet paper. Notably, the authors show that failure to use intertemporal savings strategies is not due to a lack of understanding of their benefits, but due to liquidity constraints. Low-income consumers are systematically more likely to take advantage of such discounts at the beginning of the month, when they have more liquidity, than at the end. This finding is immensely valuable for marketing managers who can design and time promotional efforts that yield the highest ROI and for policymakers who may be keen to lower the prices paid by low-income consumers for everyday goods. This example again underscores the point that it is possible for marketing research to benefit both the consumer *and* the firm.

But even if this is not the case, we encourage marketing scholars to ask broader questions about the discipline itself. And perhaps by doing so, research may provide insights not only into what marketing is but what marketing can be. For example, understanding subsistence consumers and their participation in the marketplace is worthy of study in its own right, and not simply because such consumers provide potential markets for existing products. Studying such contexts can lead to relevant insights for marketers about the form and function of the marketplace itself.

3.3 ***Identify multiple ways to do good***. Research that makes a difference in people's lives often involves field testing of interventions, often in the form of nudges that involve changing choice architecture. This presents a major barrier for researchers who lack access to government agencies and/or businesses to test changes in choice architecture. Although nudging and choice architecture interventions are important ways to change behavior, another approach to consider is boosting—that is, enhancing people's capacity to make better choices by fostering existing competencies or instilling new ones (Hertwig and Grüne-Yanoff 2017). For example, imagine that the key desired outcome is for consumers to save more for retirement. A nudge-based approach could involve changing the default options and automatically enrolling consumers in programs to help them save more tomorrow (Thaler and Benartzi 2004). Whereas nudging changes behavior by altering the options or the format of options that are presented to the user, boosting seeks to foster people's competence to make desirable choices. For example, boosting may involve presenting information to users about their estimated retirement corpus should they choose to enroll in a plan today versus later, giving them a mini-tutorial on the power of compounding, or asking them to imagine the needs of their future selves (Bryan and Hershfield 2013).

In a similar vein, a recent paper (Viswanathan et al. 2021) focuses on consumers in subsistence marketplaces. There are several potential ways for firms to increase these consumers' participation in the marketplace, including offering more relevant products/services or reducing friction in the exchange process (e.g., door-to-door selling). The authors instead focus on a consumer up-skilling intervention —

enhancing marketplace literacy. Across three large experiments in India and Tanzania, they find that marketplace literacy increases consumer confidence, decision-making ability, entrepreneurial activity, and general psychological well-being. In a nutshell, thinking deeply about the different ways in which the target behavior can be impacted makes intervention research more inclusive and accessible to more researchers across the world.

3.4 ***Steep yourself in the real world:*** To conduct research that benefits the broader collective, we need to pay attention to important issues which key stakeholders may be grappling with. Our first suggestion for considering the bigger issues is to broaden your sources of research ideas beyond discipline-specific journal articles to reading the newspaper, engaging with literature in other disciplines, and being an observant participant in the marketplace.

Our second suggestion is to consider the problems that governments and practitioners grapple with — both first-order problems and second-order ones. First-order problems take the form, "when we find the problem, what should we do." Second-order problems take the form, "should we do things differently for different people?" As academics, we tend to specialize in particular theories or phenomena, for example, budgeting or financial literacy. However, decision-makers often want to choose between these options, necessitating comparative studies that evaluate the efficacy of these different approaches. Even though incentive structures in academia are often not conducive to these types of "horse race" studies because our field prizes theoretical advances, marketing researchers can add a lot of value by investigating the second-order problems that ask, "should we do things differently for different people/contexts?" We encourage authors to think about this context specificity (i.e., heterogeneity) as moderation of the effect, which can add theoretical and practical nuance to our understanding of what effects work, when, and for whom. A recent paper (Mrkva et al. 2021) illustrates this approach by studying the populations for whom choice architecture interventions (i.e., nudges) are more effective. Even though nudges have been widely implemented in multiple domains, our knowledge of how these nudges work for different people is limited. This paper elevates the importance and relevance of these choice architecture interventions by demonstrating that their effect is largest for consumers with low domain knowledge and skill and those from low socioeconomic status — that is, consumers who most need this kind of support.

3.5 ***Design impactful interventions***: As a field that prizes theoretical advances, there can be tensions between theory testing and intervention design. However, these two aims need not be mutually exclusive. To be deployed widely in the real world, a good intervention needs to have a high impact (i.e., be strong enough to make a tangible difference in people's behavior) and be scalable. Insofar as ease of implementation includes plausibility, theory testing can yield important interventions. For example, a classic prevention focus manipulation involves asking participants to write down their duties and obligations. Although this manipulation is apt for theory testing, it cannot be used as an intervention. However, an advertisement that reminds consumers of their duties and obligations can work well as an intervention. Hence, for our research to aspire to greater relevance and impact, we need to translate the manipulations in our research into interventions that can be implemented in the field and have the ability to make a difference in behavior.

Consumer researchers often test theories by controlling several extraneous variables in lab experiments and by spending significant resources (time/effort) to pin down the underlying mechanism. This is crucially important for relevant (and not just rigorous) research because a clear understanding of *why* there is an effect of A on B is at the heart of designing an effective intervention. For example, in a recent paper, Garbinsky and co-authors (2021) demonstrate that one reason people do not save enough is because of the positive illusion of being financially responsible. Across several studies with lab and online samples, the authors established that people hold this illusion of financial responsibility. Building on these findings, the authors then develop and test a simple real-world intervention that dispels this illusion of responsibility by asking consumers to indicate how often they engage in common superfluous spending behaviors, which encourages them to be more financially prudent.

In an ideal world, a combination of lab studies and field studies can give us the best of both worlds. However, there may be times when some experimental control might need to be given up to test real-world relevance (see section 4). To increase the relevance of any proposed interventions for practitioners, researchers need to pay careful attention to the benchmark in use as the control condition against which different interventions are tested.

3.6 ***Use a diverse methods toolkit****:* For a research paper to help solve a real issue, a diverse methods toolkit can help navigate the relevance-rigor challenge. Lab experiments, field experiments, quasi or natural experiments, surveys, web scraping, etc., can individually enhance the robustness of the research and collectively increase the confidence that stakeholders have in the proposed solution. Whereas lab experiments are useful for demonstrating that something *can* happen—and why—field experiments can be valuable for showing that something *does* happen—albeit in the context in which it is tested. Field experiments also allow us to test the proposed interventions in a naturalistic (noisy) setting. Archival data can also allows us to test for generalizability and for heterogeneity in responses. In addition, methodological approaches, including ethnography, netnography, semiotics, and computational techniques to study cultural artifacts (e.g., the corpus of books, Google searches, movies, songs, etc., see Berger et al. 2022) can be powerful in generating both knowledge of the broader context (see point 3.4) and ideas for designing effective interventions (point 3.5). Together, these methods can be considerably more powerful than any one of them individually.

As an illustration of a diverse methods toolkit to enhance the rigor and relevance of the research, consider a recent paper by Krishna and Orhun (2022). The authors find that female candidates in a business school earned lower grades than men in quantitative courses (e.g., finance) but higher grades in non-quantitative courses (e.g., organizational behavior). This is an important observation because academic achievement shapes occupational choices. The authors found significant differences in starting salaries of women and men across three cohorts, primarily driven by women being underrepresented in high-paying jobs such as investment banking. However, having female instructor(s) significantly reduced the gender-related differences in grades for quantitative courses, as female students earned relatively higher grades. A follow-up survey indicated that this increase in grades was driven by female students who were mid to high level in math aptitude. For these students, the presence of a female instructor sparked their initial interest in the quantitative course. The authors leveraged econometric techniques, qualitative interviews, and surveys to point the way for a real-world intervention that could help address a vexing problem in society (i.e., the gender wage gap).

Apart from deploying a diverse methods toolkit, the paper illustrates several considerations detailed above. First, it identifies and solves a thorny problem in business education — increasing the diversity of the incoming student cohorts. However, much less is known about how to help these students thrive in business schools once they are admitted and further along in their careers. Second, once the authors documented this phenomenon, they also identified that female instructors teaching quantitative courses is a key solution. This research suggests that a high-impact, highly actionable intervention for business school administrators is to recruit more female faculty for quantitative courses. This paper also speaks to our earlier point on multiple constituents by expanding the scope of marketing to include not only the firm (the business school in this case) but also the consumers (the students) and multiple other stakeholders (e.g., the faculty, the administrators, and the human resources team at the university) to make an impact on tangible outcomes. Finally, this paper also illustrates that assembling diverse author teams from a variety of subfields (e.g., consumer behavior, marketing strategy, etc.) and with a variety of methodological skills (e.g., experimental, econometric, etc.) may be an under-leveraged route to enhancing the rigor and relevance of research projects.

3.7 ***Do good science.*** Under this overarching theme, we encourage scholars to carefully consider the analytical and reporting-related aspects of our research. None of the research we do would matter unless we believe that the conclusions are warranted and trustworthy. Needless to say, following open science practices, including, but not limited to, sharing materials, data, and code, goes a long way in increasing the trustworthiness and credibility of our findings. Second, any research for the greater good conducted in a particular context is much more valuable if it conceptually replicates in or generalizes to other related domains. External validity is a function of the laws of nature and the sensitivity of the phenomenon under study to background factor × intervention interactions (Lynch 1982). If the effect is subject to unobserved and unmodeled interactions (treatment x background factors), the average treatment effect may completely distort the real effects on subgroups. For example, student background (e.g., first-generation students) may play a role in how female students respond to being taught by female professors in the Krishna and Orhun (2022) paper discussed earlier. Thus, we recommend that researchers consider background factors both in lab and field studies and how these may affect the generalizability of the results (see Haws et al. (2022) for a discussion in the context of food consumption research). Third, it is imperative to guard against the tendency to overclaim. We encourage researchers to accept incomplete understanding and to be precise about the incremental contribution and the intended audience. For example, findings from a field study are not necessarily generalizable.

4 Recommendations for reviewers and gatekeepers

Although our primary target audience for this article is researchers aspiring to conduct research for the greater good, no conversation about good research can be complete without discussing the people evaluating the research—the reviewers, associate editors, and editors. In this section, we present a summary of the key themes from our discussions with several scholars who have served in these roles.

We encourage review teams to be wary of the "it's just..." problem when evaluating papers, meaning that the finding is merely the application of well-established theories. For example, the finding that consumers pick the "compromise" middle option when a smaller size option is taken away, or a larger size is added, is *just* "extremeness aversion" (Sharpe et al. 2008). When the impulse is to dismiss the paper as an "it's just" paper, we urge decision-makers to consider the following factors. First, is the paper trying to solve an important problem in the real world? The answer for Sharpe et al. (2008) is a resounding yes; it is about using extremeness aversion to prompt consumers to choose smaller portion sizes of sugar-sweetened beverages, as overconsumption is a leading cause of obesity worldwide (State of Childhood Obesity 2020). Even though extremeness aversion may not be a new concept, the policy implication of this robust demonstration of extremeness aversion in this context is very valuable.

Second, does the application of the theory to the thorny problem offer important insights into the better world question? MacInnis et al. (2020) outline phenomenon-to-construct mapping as an important means of making contributions. This entails starting with observations of real-world marketing-relevant phenomena and then helping identify (potentially new) theoretical constructs and relationships that explain them (see point 3.4 above).

We also urge editors and reviewers to reconsider what they may recognize as prototypical research. Slotting a manuscript as “behavioral,” “strategy,” or “quantitative” and expecting it to “fully comply” with those norms may be a disservice to the article and to the field. For example, in consumer behavior research, it is possible to misapply the rules of rigor for lab-based research to natural settings. When papers are clearly trying to address an important societal problem, we urge reviewers to evaluate the research not only based on conformity to the norms of specific sub-fields of research but also on its practical importance and how they can help strengthen these aspects.

Finally, we recommend that editors and reviewers evaluate a specific paper as presenting one set of findings that are part of a larger body of research. Expecting the authors to answer all questions, eliminate all other potential explanations, and explore most boundary conditions not only slows the pace of science but also limits future research that can build on these findings.

5 Conclusion

Although we present a list of considerations to enhance the rigor and relevance of research pursuing the greater good, we do not recommend it as a *checklist* to be followed. The human-centered research questions and contexts that marketing researchers pursue are often unique and contextual — thus making most “one-size-fits-all” guidance limited at best and irrelevant at worst. Instead, we hope that this paper will be used as a *menu* of potential approaches to making relevant research more rigorous and vice versa.

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Fig. 1 Seven recommendations to conduct relevant and rigorous research for the greater good