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Peer review assessment of originality in tourism journals: critical perspective of key gatekeepers

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ABSTRACT

Originality is an essential element of academic research and the peer review system plays a key gatekeeping role in its acceptance. However, there is no consensus as to the precise definition of the concept, its measurement nor the importance attached to it. Primary data from 26 interviews with editors or editorial board members of top ranking tourism journals inform a discussion of the nuanced understanding of the concept and of how different levels of originality (radical vs. incremental), among other peer review assessment criteria, influence tourism publication. Finally, the main challenges relating to recognising originality in the peer review process are identified leading to recommendations for improvements to how originality is assessed.

Introduction

Originality is an institutional imperative in academic research and the peer review system plays a key role in its encouragement, legitimation and acceptance. There are two main focal points of gatekeeping in the academic system with respect to recognition of original research: 1) funding agencies allocating resources to initiate the research process and 2) scientific journals providing prestigious platforms within the scientific community (Stamps, 1997). The assessment of originality in the peer review process of funding bodies has attracted some academic attention and discussion in general, specifically in the humanities and social sciences (Guetzkow, Lamont, & Mallard, 2004). In particular, Lamont, Fournier, Guetzkow, Mallard, and Bernier (2007) highlight that originality is judged on the basis of substantive aspects of the proposal itself but also the characteristics ascribed to applicants (e.g. reputation, credibility or trustworthiness) and the "affective" engagement of the panellists with the proposals. Therefore, judgments, which are partly based on both affective and analytic means of thinking, knowing, and information processing (Chaiken & Trope, 1999), contain a speculative element, since the research is supposed to be original but is inherently subject to risk and uncertainty as it has not yet been conducted.

Another literature strand, and the focus of this paper, has concentrated on the peer review system within scientific journals. While there are virtually no substantial studies of the latter topic in tourism studies, except for Yuksel (2003) who investigated originality among a range of factors influencing peer review, there is a strand of research in the general literature which critiques the quality control system of using peer reviewers to assess original work (Armstrong, 1997). Some of the issues raised deal with the difficulties of recognising originality in new areas which significantly depart from the reviewers' current knowledge or areas of expertise (Armstrong, 1997; Lamont, Fournier, Guetzkow, Mallard, and Bernier, 2007). The perceived disconnection to the contemporary

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canonical knowledge can be a major (or the principal) reason why an argument for a work being original is not accepted by the gatekeepers in the field at the time it is presented (Hook, 2002). Another aspect is strong and persistent resistance to new findings (Kuhn, 1962) when they conflict with prior beliefs. Therefore, despite the importance assigned to originality in academic research, creative and novel ideas are often rejected. For example, Sternberg and Lubart (1995) contend that various fields of science (grants, publications, rewards, etc.) have, probably unintentionally, constructed a system for enforcing conformity via the notion of accepted wisdom which ensures that scientists "follow the crowd". They argue that this system is highly risk-averse whereas individual original academics tend to be risk takers who assume, that in the long term, there will be significant returns to originality.

The above critiques contrast with originality being considered a primary goal and an institutional norm of science (Lamont et al., 2007) since "it is through originality in greater or smaller increments that knowledge advances" (Merton, 1973, p. 293). Thus, originality is consistently listed among the most valued components of submitted papers (Nedic & Dekanski, 2016; Siler & Strang, 2017; Yuksel, 2003). However, that still leaves the question of what is meant by original research. For Gaston (1973), it implies doing something that no one ever worked on before or that will add to what the scientific community acknowledges to be knowledge. Originality can, thus, be associated with using a new approach, theory, method or data, studying a new topic, doing research in an understudied area or producing new findings (Guetzkow et al., 2004). However, there are disciplinary differences in the definitions of, and importance attached to, the concept and there is no consensus as to precise definition or an 'objective' measure of originality (Dirk, 1999; Yuksel, 2003; Guetzkow et al., 2004; cf. Lamont et al., 2007). In the Analysis section we will revisit the concept and try to bring a more nuanced understanding of how it is understood in the context of tourism journals.

In summary, and challenged by Mahoney's (1982, p. 36) statement that "we are sorely ignorant of the system to which we entrust our ideas, innovations and careers", this study focusses on new knowledge evaluation by journal editors who constitute "gatekeepers of science" or epistemological authorities in tourism that certify that a work is worthy of attention because of its originality. It provides insights into the extent to which there is shared understanding of what constitutes originality in the domain of tourism research. The specific questions addressed are:

- How do the editors and editorial board members of prestigious academic tourism journals define and recognise an original contribution to knowledge?
- What level of importance do they attach to originality in their assessments?
- What informs their decisions when judging originality: tacit or codified knowledge embedded in the review process, intuition, willingness to take risks, conflicts of interest or bias, etc.?

Ultimately, the study aims to help understand the effectiveness of the current journal review system as a means to recognise and certificate new knowledge claims. Tourism is an interesting testing ground for these questions because of its distinctive characteristics which pose challenges to originality assessment: 1) it is a multidisciplinary field; 2) it is theoretically and methodologically very broad with a lack of clear consensus about the nature of high quality and valued research (in comparison to well established disciplines such as economics for example); 3) it is a relatively new field of study where academic discourses often display a lack of confidence compared to more established disciplines and 4) it displays relatively heavy reliance on the borrowing and application of concepts and theories from other disciplines. Given the complexity and nuanced nature of the issues addressed by this research, a qualitative approach was adopted. In-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 26 editors and other editorial board members of a number of prestigious tourism journals.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. First, a brief literature review is presented on earlier studies and commentaries contemplating how peer review systems assess originality. Second, the methodology and the interview framework of this paper, are outlined. Third, the most significant implications of the analysis of these interviews are discussed. Finally, the conclusions note the limitations of the analysis, together with suggestions for further research.

Literature review

Peer review is an established way to evaluate scientific work in the scholarly publication process. The process is ostensibly simple: experts evaluate the originality, relevance/significance, rigour and quality of scientific work produced by others in their field. Commonly the identity of either the reviewers (single blind) or both the authors and the reviewers (double blind) have been anonymised. The former protects the reviewers from potential "retribution" by discontented authors, whereas the latter aims to safeguard against social bias, for example, favouring well-known authors over less-experienced ones or favouring research on the basis of the reputation of research institutes and universities (Lee, Sugimoto, Zhang, & Cronin, 2013).

It is commonly agreed that peer review of scientific papers reduces the number of errors (in language and calculations, use of methods, interpretation, omission of relevant earlier works, etc.) and serves as a self-regulating selection mechanism providing a signal of quality for the readership. Most of the criticism directed towards the peer review system of scientific journals has focused on its reliability and perceived risk aversion towards highly original work. Both concerns extend across many fields of science (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Armstrong, 1997; Cicchetti, 1997; Peters & Ceci, 1982; Thurner & Hanel, 2011). Nevertheless, there has been very little substantial empirical research on the topic of originality in peer review (Armstrong, 1997; Lamont et al, 2007), and it remains an opaque "black box" (Scott, 2007). Moreover, the peer review process has essentially remained unchanged since it became prevalent over a century ago.

However, there is evidence that contemporary peer review procedures, designed to assure quality, can discourage some forms of knowledge advancement, when individual papers are considered: 1) controversial; 2) challenge the status quo; and 3) provoke strong

feelings. For example, Kuhn (1962) has claimed that when new findings conflict with the existing "status quo" within a scientific field, there is likely to be strong resistance to publishing these conflicting results: reviewers have a stronger tendency to reject papers with controversial findings or new challenging perspectives, compared to safe/low risk papers that support or extend conventional beliefs (Armstrong, 1997; Siler & Strang, 2017; Steinhauser et al., 2012; Sternberg, 1998). Originality per se is not rejected. However some types of originality can attract higher levels of criticism: incremental improvements integrating new perspectives into established bodies of knowledge are commonly less harshly criticized than papers which challenge existing paradigms (Siler & Strang, 2017). This tendency to support the publication of findings consistent with prevailing theoretical frameworks and methods has been termed the "confirmation bias" (Siler & Strang, 2017).

Another consideration is that, in the case of original findings, the authors inevitably are most knowledgeable about the exact topic of their paper. For example, McKercher (2002) points to tourism manuscripts being rejected because the reviewers were unfamiliar with the literature or methodology. Therefore, the reviewers' expertise can be less than adequate for the assessment task (Armstrong, 1997) because they are required to look beyond and across the existing knowledge frontier to other domains which do not overlap with their own expertise, training and experience (Boudreau, Guinan, Lakhani, & Riedl, 2016). This applies particularly to multi- or interdisciplinary research fields (Perper, 1989), as in the case of tourism. In fact, given the multidisciplinary diversity of tourism research, Crouch and Perdue (2015) question the capacity of referees and editors to develop sufficient expertise across multiple fields. This can lead to referees being aware of limitations to their abilities to identify errors or flaws in theories and methods, and adopting a more risk averse attitude.

Peer review may also include moral hazard problems – although some scholars maintain it is unlikely that there is an intentional bias against originality (Armstrong, 1997) – as for example when the original scientific work challenges their own work (Thurner & Hanel, 2011) and could incur reputational loss (Frey, 2003). Inevitably, the human factors of bias, incompetence and unreliability (Mahoney, 1982) are present in the current system to variable and changing degrees. Moreover, poorly informed or poor quality judgments of originality may, perhaps, be related to disciplinary variations in its definition (Guetzkow et al., 2004) and to the epistemological styles of the evaluators (e.g. constructivist, comprehensive, positivist and utilitarian) when assessing proposals or papers (Mallard, Lamont, & Guetzkow, 2009). Indeed, the history of science is marked with highly cited papers that have become classics in their field, in some cases even discoveries that have eventually been worthy of the Nobel Prize, but which initially were rejected for publication (e.g. Campanario, 1995, 2009). There is no record however of those important new findings that faced persistent rejection at the time and have subsequently been forgotten or lost. In this context, Armstrong (1997) contends that if the barriers that researchers face when trying to publish highly original research become too discouraging, they may not be incentivized to invest time working on original ideas.

So far the literature review suggests that highly original papers can pose potential risks for journals and that rejecting unconventional contributions in the face of uncertainty about their significance or future impact may be the resulting "default setting" for some editors (Siler, Lee, & Bero, 2015; Wang, Veugelers, & Stephan, 2017). According to Armstrong (1997), Dirk (1999) and Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) this risk aversion towards publishing works that might subsequently be discredited, and thus detrimental to the journals' (as well as editors') reputation, is especially likely to concern the more prestigious journals, which face greater potential reputational loss. This may lead them to favor incremental gap-spotting research which reinforces or moderately revises rather than being consensus-challenging. This is not irrational – on the contrary, it reflects the nature of science as being rational, progressive and built on predecessors' achievements (Siler & Strang, 2017). Nonetheless, peer review may be an obstacle to interdisciplinary, non-conventional (Langfeldt, 2006; Steinhauser et al., 2012) and consensus-challenging research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013).

Although there may be uncertainty about the more radically original papers, Siler et al. (2015) found that methodological issues and lack of originality were key reasons why top-ranking journals had rejected papers which eventually were accepted by other journals (see also McKercher, Law, Weber, Song, & Hsu, 2007 for tourism journals). They concluded that although "peer review was effective at predicting good articles, it simultaneously had difficulties in identifying outstanding or breakthrough work" (Siler et al., 2015: p.365). Moreover, in the context of the sharply increasing number of articles being produced in many disciplines and fields (including tourism), the identification of papers that add significantly to the discipline is becoming more elusive (Clark & Wright, 2009).

Both in practice and etymologically, originality is closely synonymous with novelty and is intrinsically difficult to evaluate (Boudreau, Guinan, Lakhani, & Riedl, 2012) since it is based on the individual reaction of a given subject. In general, familiarity is connected with a positive reaction and novelty with negative reaction since it brings uncertainty, which most individuals are averse to (Ellsberg, 1961; Tversky & Fox, 1995; Mueller, Melwani, & Goncalo, 2012). In fact, editors tend to operate on the boundaries between knowledge, risk and uncertainty especially in the case of highly original papers. Moreover, as noted by Styhre (2004), knowledge involves a combination of two complementary forms of thinking: intellect and intuition. While the intellect is analytic, slower and more effortful, intuition is rapid (likely to be relied on under time pressures), automatic and relied on by individuals with a substantial expertise in a focal domain (Dane, Rockmann, & Pratt, 2012), and often emotionally charged (Kahneman, 2003). This leads to the question of the extent to which there is a balance between these two modes of cognition when judging and making a decision about originality?

Another aspect external to the review process, relates to how universities assess individual researchers (Seaton, 1996; Hall, 2011; Cheng, Li, Petrick, & O'Leary, 2010): academic incentive/reward systems in many countries create and reinforce the need to publish on a regular basis to avoid consequences such as increased teaching hours, termination of employment, no promotion, or wage pits. This has enhanced authors' aversion to engage in more consensus-challenging – and perceived to be more difficult to publish – research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013).

Table 1
The interviewed academics ($N = 26$) per journal.

Role(s) of the interviewees/Journal	ATR	CIT	JOST	JTR	TE	TG	TM
Editor(s)	1	2		1	1	3	1
Former Editor	1		1				
Associate/Resource/Book Review Editor(s)	15		1			5	1
Special Advisors					3		
Editorial Board Members		8	7	8	4		7
Total:	17	10	9	9	8	8	9

Methodology

This study has approached key academics gatekeepers who make the decisions about paper acceptance versus rejection, that is, editors and members of the editorial boards of seven high-impact tourism journals. All the selected journals emphasize tourism research to a significant extent, thereby excluding, journals which entirely or largely focus on hospitality, recreation or leisure. The sample includes: *Annals of Tourism Research (ATR)*, *Current Issues in Tourism (CIT)*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism (JOST)*, *Journal of Travel Research (JTR)*, *Tourism Economics (TE)*, *Tourism Geographies (TG) and Tourism Management (TM)*. The selection draws on the list published by McKercher, Law, and Lam (2006) of high quality tourism journals, since journals with higher impact factors are expected to receive a substantial pool of high quality and original work but also to have high rejection rates. Three of the journals have broad and multidisciplinary approaches to tourism (ATR, CIT and JTR), while the remaining four have a disciplinary specialisation (geography in the case of TG, economics in TE and management in TM) or topic specialisation (sustainability in JOST). All these journals employ the standard practice of double-blind reviewing by referees chosen by the editor. The sample includes 26 academics, most of whom were associated with more than one journal (Table 1). The selection seeks diversity, drawing from the range of: 1) nationalities (twelve different nationalities); 2) professional age (PhD awarded, 1963–2009); and 3) disciplinary background, areas of expertise and methodologies used in their personal research.

Informed by the literature review, the interview schedules were organised around three key themes: 1) Originality in the tourism field with questions addressing both the definition, standards and degree (incremental/radical) of originality and also the importance given to originality; 2) Originality assessment including questions about the challenges in recognising originality and potential obstacles in the peer review system to publishing highly original papers; and 3) Recommendations for improving originality assessment in peer review.

In order to ensure reliability and rigour, the interview script was pre-tested with two editors to check the content validity and to estimate the time length of the full interview. All interviews were conducted in English, between December 2017 and March 2018, on-site when possible but given the geographical dispersion of the sample mostly via Skype. Appropriate ethical research guidelines were followed relating to consent and confidentiality. The interviews lasted on average around an hour, were recorded, fully transcribed and analysed. The interview process ceased when saturation of the revealed main themes was reached (Bowen, 2008). This happened when the team agreed that no new categories or themes were emerging and/or altering the previous codified data. The process of analysis followed six key stages: familiarisation with the data while transcribing, reading and re-reading; data coding; with codes subsequently being collated to identify potential themes; reviewing and refining the themes while ensuring they formed a coherent pattern; defining and naming the themes; extracts from the transcriptions were selected to support the validated themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The rigour of the research and trustworthiness of the observations and interpretations was reviewed throughout the process by all three research team members. For example, by undertaking internal checking of the descriptive accuracy of each interview both during and after the transcriptions. There was also cross-checking among team members of coding strategies to foster inter-coder reliability including memos of the coding and its modifications, and a common co-creation of meaning and understanding of the emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Analysis

Originality in the tourism field: definition, standards, degree and importance

The interviewees were asked to define originality and whether there were clear and commonly accepted standards within the system as to what constitutes an original contribution. Most interviewees found it difficult to provide a precise definition but could refer to the emotions that originality generated such as ‘excitement’, ‘stimulation’ or ‘astonishment’. Some also described it as ‘thought provoking’ or ‘something that does not leave you cold’, and all these clearly reveal an emotional and positive reaction towards originality.

Moreover, the analysis revealed the existence of a tacit understanding of the concept as these editors comment: “you just simply know what it is when you see it”, “we don't put in words very often but it is there” or “when someone has something unique you can feel it in the paper”. There is agreement on the idea that originality is “in the eye of the beholder” subject to each individual's knowledge, interpretation and application which makes it difficult to operationalize or to establish accurate measurement constructs. In fact, some interviewees revealed they had an intuitive way of grading originality whether that was a linear scale, for example, from

one to ten, or acknowledging clear and multiple levels of originality. However this is not perceived as problematic and, for example, most of the interviewed editors do not find it necessary or useful to provide more rules or guidelines for reviewers. As one editor explains:

> "I don't try to define or prescribe what originality is, I think it's a very amorphous term and if you try to somehow to nail it down in a few words you probably can't do justice to it. If you want to explain originality in its full complexity it would probably be so long that authors or reviewers wouldn't bother reading it anyway".

In broad terms, according to the interviewees, originality can be anything that leads to new significant knowledge but also anything that challenges conventional knowledge or wisdom leading scholars to think differently. Beyond this broad description the participants referred to different elements of a scientific work where originality can occur. These have been synthetized into five main, partly overlapping, categories: 1) *Approach.* This comprises new frameworks, fresh new ways or novel twists on a tourism phenomenon already known, or the introduction of new questions not asked before within a topic; 2) *Topic.* This would include the research of a new topic previously ignored or overlooked and the introduction of a new question not yet investigated; 3) *Method.* This type of originality would include a new research method, a combination of methods, a re-developed method from other areas but adding something new (variables, relationships, etc.) and applications of existing methods which can be innovative only for the discipline; 4) *Theory*. This would include the development of a new theory and the application of existing theories to tourism for the first time highlighting the uniqueness and different nature of the tourism disciplinary context, thus adding to/expanding that theory. A novel synthesis of literatures or systematic review that leads to new concepts or theories would also be considered original; 5) *Results*. This refers to new empirical results by bringing the research into a new context which provides a significant learning opportunity. The new results provide new insights into the theory and some of the assumptions that were only implicit or hidden in the original version. However this is the less commonly mentioned category and it needs to be utilised with caution since this can quickly degenerate into "salami slicing" as this editor warns:

> "Very important in this is seeing the paper in the wider context of what has come before – does it present some kind of 'break' or 'new trajectory' in an argument or body of work. If the paper is a case of salami slicing, i.e. it's just a variation on a theme or reworking of a dataset it is not original".

Perhaps the most striking finding in relation to definitions, is that most interviewees not only refer to novelty but also to the significance, or importance, of the new issue which has to be "big enough to warrant its investigation", as well as its relevance implicitly or explicitly to a larger community of academics and practitioners. Both criteria, significance and relevance, add additional dimensions to the notion of novelty in the definition of originality.

Further insights were provided when considering radical and genuinely novel to incremental knowledge. In relation to the different levels of originality, there was a commonly accepted distinction between the two extremes; on the one hand, what was considered purely original research, entirely new, not previously reported in any other field and, on the other hand, the lowest incremental originality or no originality at all (Fig. 1). Within the long spectrum of incremental originality, two levels were acknowledged: 1) originality within the tourism field, that is the application of well-established theories previously reported in the scientific literature in order to test their broader robustness in the tourism context; 2) originality in terms of a new empirical context within tourism, that is theories which are not new to tourism but this represents their first application in a specific context. This was considered the lowest level of originality and contribution to knowledge, and some interviewees did not even consider such work to be original. According to most participants, all these different levels of originality would have opportunities of being accepted in different tier journals, but the higher tiers had greater expectations in respect of originality. However, there is no absolutism in this because although higher tier journals target highly original research, in practice they may also accept major incremental research. As one editor commented, "you can only pick from what it is submitted". In contrast, it was also recognised that highly original research may be published in a low tier journal because of its unusual characteristics or lack of recognition by gatekeepers and referees in higher tier journals.

In terms of the predominant types of originality encountered in tourism, there was overall agreement that purely or highly original work ("Wow! I've never thought that before! I've never seen that data, that is great!") is "extremely rare", "only occasionally happening" and "hard to find". This was a major regret for a high tier journal editor who commented that "I am dying to see radically new work". There was also general agreement that most of what is called "original in tourism", even in the top tier journals, comes from the application and borrowing of concepts from other disciplines and therefore they "have the second level of originality" (Fig. 1). A range of interconnected reasons were used to explain these views. First there is the non-disciplinary status of tourism, which is a relatively young field of study with a strong multidisciplinary and applied character that can be studied from multiple perspectives and methods rooted in many core disciplines. The lack of tourism specific theories and techniques for theory testing and revision has driven tourism to concept application, and borrowing, from other disciplines. This is potentially positive in terms of originality: there were positive comments on "flexibility to borrow", "less constrained than some disciplines" and "scope for blue skies research". However, this practice which has helped to develop the credibility and legitimation of tourism as a field of study, was also considered by most interviewees to be the main cause of the incrementalism of the field. This is summarized by one editor:

> "We tend to borrow a lot of theories from a variety of fields. And I would say that is a good thing frankly but what we end up creating in tourism itself is not that original".

What is more problematic for the overall level of originality of a field is not borrowing per se but how the borrowing takes place and its outcomes. For example, many interviewees considered that what has been borrowed remains largely unmodified without

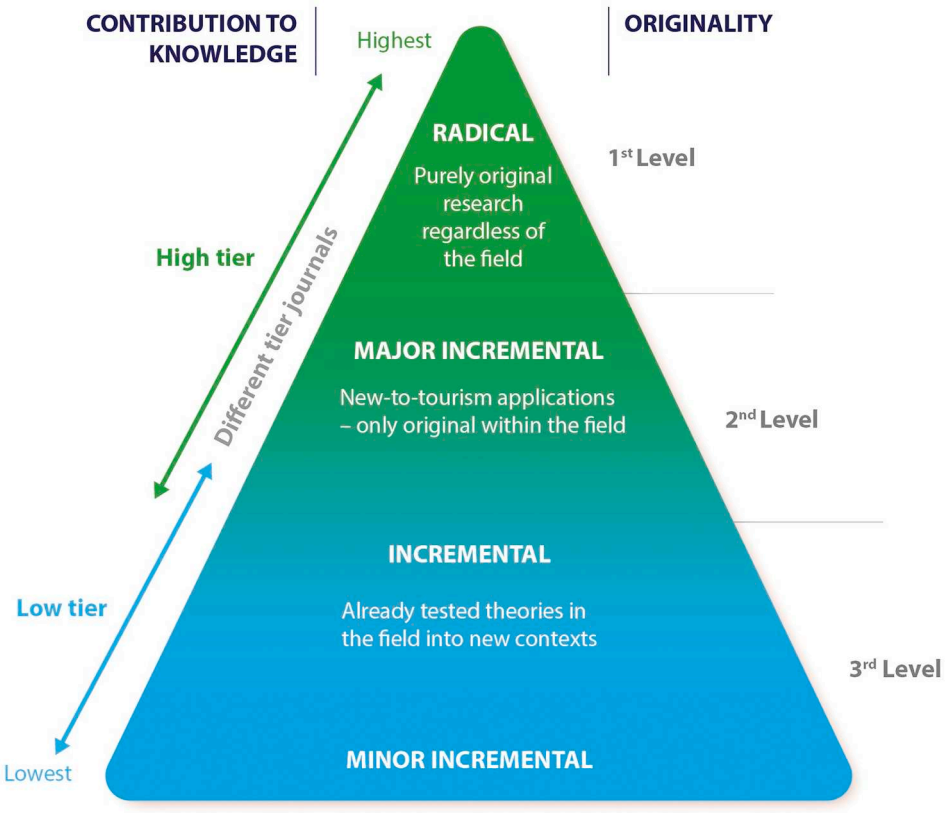

Fig. 1. Levels of originality.

considering the distinctive features of tourism which is a potential source of originality: that is, application without adaptation. This is also an impediment to being able significantly to contribute back to the core disciplines. Only one interviewee provided evidence that this was gradually changing in his/her particular sub-field of work, observing methodological advancements in tourism going beyond the field. Another practice identified is the application of "past their peak theories" in core disciplines with the consequence that "sometimes tourism research is a little bit behind" or involves pouring "old wine into new bottles". Also the character of tourism as a highly applied field, and context driven research, calls for case studies with a tendency towards a replication and reproduction to the detriment of new ideas and more theoretical contributions.

Some interviewees attributed this incrementalism to the influence of the larger academic system which pressurises or incentivises researchers to maximise their performance and productivity by rapid and high volume publication; this is the so-called "publish or perish syndrome" leading to "salami slicing". As one interviewee noted:

> "Research used to be all about ideas, but now it's just a numbers game and so you slice and dice research to produce the minimum publishable paper".

While there was broad consensus that originality in tourism was incremental, the interviewees were also asked to compare tourism with other fields or disciplines they were familiar with. Opinions were highly polarised between those who had a more critical view of tourism as being more incremental than other fields and disciplines, such as Economics, Marketing, Geography or Urban Planning, and those defending the idea that: "tourism is not worse than any other area, it is not … particularly bad". This latter group of interviewees do not attribute negative connotations to the idea that tourism research was incremental since this is the nature of the social sciences in general while even science tends to be "evolutionary" rather than "revolutionary". One interviewee commented that "originality can be small and come little by little" referring to how science is built on predecessors' achievement, citing Newton's famous quote about "standing on the shoulders of giants" to refer to the symbiotic nature of both incremental and breakthrough research. As this is a topic on which it is difficult to identify what may be termed sound evidence, these polarised groups draw on experiences and feelings which are framed by their disciplinary specialisms.

Further insights were provided by asking about the importance of originality when assessing a paper. All interviewees considered originality a very important factor so they weight it heavily in their internal evaluations. However, some would set the bar for the importance of originality differently depending on the journal they are making assessments for. As one participant states:

> "If I am reviewing for one of the top tier journals often I'm writing a comment that there's nothing wrong with this paper, but there's nothing new about it, either, and so it shouldn't go in this journal. If I'm reviewing for some lower tier journal then that

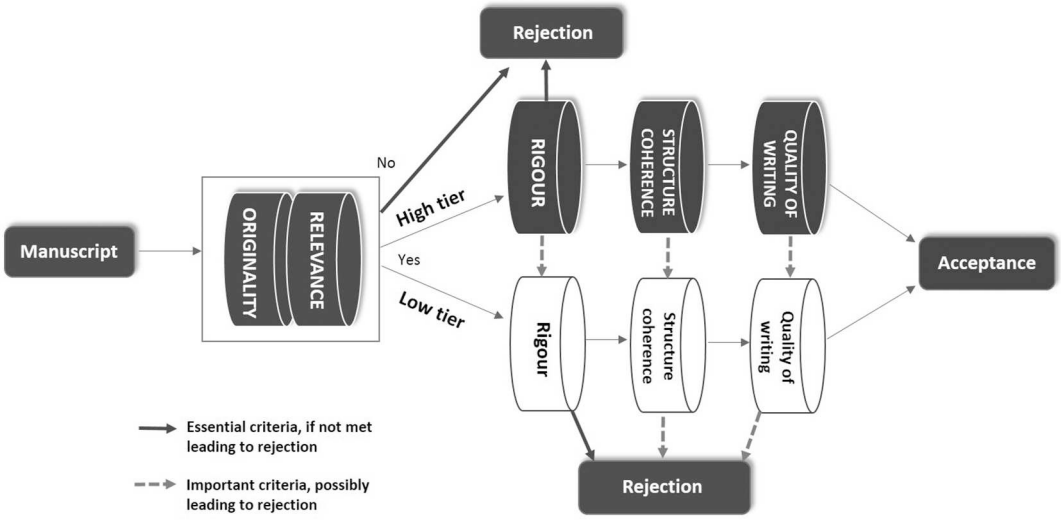

Fig. 2. Criteria in the assessment of a paper to be published.

threshold of originality isn't quite as high".

There is no consensus on the ranking of importance for originality among other factors since for many interviewees originality is an essential but not a sufficient criterion for publication. In addition to originality, other key factors need to be considered (Fig. 2) such as – especially for quantitative researchers - methodological rigour and soundness. Also important, especially for editors, are relevance (answering the "so what" question) and the significance or the "reach" of the paper in terms of "how many audiences it will attract, who would read this paper, what significant contribution would it make". Most interviewees look for all three factors (originality, significance/relevance and rigour) together, sometimes giving them equal importance but sometimes ranking originality first. There is a common agreement that they are all essential and have to be satisfactorily met; as one interviewee commented "if only two criteria are met then revision and resubmission". Rigour is also an essential criterion for an article to be publishable since "a great idea must be well executed" while originality will be the essential criterion to determine the tier of the journal where the article is likely to be accepted (Fig. 2). Other critical aspects to be added are the structural soundness and coherence of the argument, how well this is articulated and to what extent the paper is "beautifully and cogently written". As one participant commented, reflecting the views of many others: "structure and style to some extent can be upgraded if an effort is made while originality cannot be added or corrected".

Originality assessment: challenges and potential biases

As stated above, due to what they perceived as being prevalent incrementalism, most editors considered that only very occasionally did they receive genuinely original submissions (cf. Fig. 1). Therefore, some editors inverted our question on the challenges of recognising originality, stating that "the real challenge is in writing it", rather than recognition. In line with this, several interviewees considered that there are no major challenges in recognising originality: if the paper is clearly-written and well-justified, its (potential) originality will be identifiable. However, this view was not shared by all the interviewees. Instead, others commented on limitations to the knowledge and experience of the editors, who cannot be expected to be experts in many different fields. Assessing originality in interdisciplinary research was therefore viewed to be especially challenging: it is likely that most referees or editors can only review certain aspects of the paper, related to her/his own area of expertise, in an informed way. This resonates with Yalow's (1982) comment that "The truly imaginative are not being judged by their peers. They have none!". As one interviewee stated:

> "When assessing originality the major challenge is, do we actually have anyone who can properly assess the manuscript, if something really new comes up".

Where originality is expected (or more welcomed) and where it is easier to recognise, depends on disciplinary contexts: e.g. economists mostly referred to methods while geographers mostly referred to concepts and theories. It would of course be expected that editors would be aware of these differences and would take them into account when selecting the referees, and making judgments based on their reports. Also, commonly observed good practice among reviewers is to communicate to the editor their limitations to assess originality in some parts of a paper, or even decline to review if it falls outside their expertise. Nonetheless, these issues (disciplinary differences and the lack of knowledge beyond one's own narrow area of expertise) can lead to potential ("personal") biases towards, for example, particular methodological approaches: qualitative researchers disliking quantitative papers and vice versa.

In order to probe further some of the commonly made statements about how various biases might bear on assessments of

originality, we transformed these arguments, based on the literature review, into straightforward statements for the interviewees to agree or disagree with, as starting points to stimulate further discussion:

a) Reviewers have a stronger tendency to reject papers with unusual new findings or approaches compared to papers that support conventional beliefs (e.g. Siler et al. 2015)
b) There is an intentional or unintentional bias against highly original work when it contradicts or challenges the referees' own work (e.g. Thurner & Hanel, 2011)
c) Lower ranked journals are more likely to be willing to take risks and accept unusual or highly original papers (e.g. Dirk, 1999)
d) Novelty brings uncertainty and, in general, editors and reviewers are averse to uncertainty (e.g. Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013)
e) In general, the whole system is biased towards (good, but) conventional science (e.g. Steinhauser et al., 2012)

The statement that received the strongest support was that there is a bias against highly original work when it contradicts the work of the referee. The interviewees considered that many reviewers are sensitive to criticism, which sometimes leads to a tendency to protect their own work; this was considered an understandable trait of human nature even if it was not condoned, as stated by an interviewee:

> "If someone gets a paper to review and it is quite contradictory, saying they are wrong, I think they are going to resist, and they are going to push back".

Precisely because it is "hard to take bias out of reviewing", the interviewees considered that it is the editor's task to carefully choose reviewers who are not either directly involved or are not going to reject the paper because it challenges their own work, or at least aim to keep this potential source of bias in mind while assessing the referee reports. However, some interviewees were sceptical about this being a barrier to originality, maintaining that contradictory research is "very exciting" for editors and therefore more likely to be published.

The remaining statements also received support, but with lower levels of agreement. Moreover, the following discussion revealed that the issues under scrutiny in these statements are largely context specific, leading to a significant number of conditional "it depends" answers. It was stated that in general (and in tourism specifically) there is a tendency to follow Kuhn's paradigm (i.e. demonstrate resistance towards new ideas) but it was also argued that academics actually want to see diverse approaches and papers challenging the current state of knowledge. However, it was accepted that, for original work, the road from an idea to a published paper can be difficult. For example, what the authors are trying to convey may not be understood (since the topic, method, etc. is new to them) leading to rejection. Moreover, there is a tendency to be more critical towards papers that do not support the existing way of thinking. It was also noted that if a paper is rejected from a high-ranked journal it is likely to be resubmitted to a lower tier journal, and eventually published (cf. Fig. 2). However, although most interviewees considered that this does happen frequently, it does not make lower-ranked journals more likely, as a default, to publish original research. Contrarily, high-impact journals were considered to be very keen on publishing innovative research, since the editors are seeking to find original papers that will generate citations. As such, depending on the interviewee, editors were either seen to tolerate uncertainty associated with originality or, on the contrary, to be risk averse in order to protect the reputation of their journals. As such, it was considered by some interviewees that the system encourages originality rather than suppresses it, but it was also agreed that "it is easier to play safe". Finally, the interviewees (again) stressed that originality alone is insufficient for the paper to be published, since it also depends on the quality of writing, methods, etc. (cf. Fig. 2) and that the risk-averseness towards originality depends very much on the individual (reviewer/editor) in question.

Originality assessment: the gatekeepers' recommendations for improvement

Most interviewees recognised a general dissatisfaction with the peer review system in general, acknowledging that has many flaws; for example it is increasingly difficult to recruit reviewers, short, unconstructive and even rude reviews, and long waits for reviews. However, none could suggest a different or a better system, while some were evidently risk averse: "I feel that the weaknesses of the system are acceptable and if we change it we could end up having bigger weaknesses that probably could be more problematic". Major studies of the peer review seem to corroborate this view that "what we have is the best we can achieve" (Chubin & Hackett, 1990; Mulligan, Hall & Raphael, 2013: 146). In terms of originality, there is a general feeling that the system and, especially journals, do a fairly good job in terms of assessing originality and that: "it is unlikely that there will be any significant change given that originality is just one dimension in the paper game". However, there is some agreement on areas for improvement:

1) Greater openness to communication and discussion. Some more critical participants brought into the discussion the possibility of opting for an open review process, or promoting dialogue between reviewers as ways to bring greater transparency into the system. For example, there could be a pre-stage in the peer review process where reviewers see each other's comments and can discuss these before sending their final versions. However, there was a degree of scepticism among many participants stating: "but do we have time for this?" or "the open peer review systems, which I know, have failed".

2) Authors highlighting the originality of their research. Many participants recommended that authors, especially young researchers, should be reminded of the importance of underlining the originality of their papers (in different sections of the paper: introduction, conclusion and abstract) and 'selling' the originality of the work to the editor for example by using a cover letter. However, there is scepticism towards this notion as commented by an editor:

"Inviting people to submit original material often doesn't work, because of the academic game. Many would rather submit a relatively boring do not rock the boat piece of their research to a very high ranking journal rather than fight to get something really original published. The biggest problem is that most people do not want to rock the boat or disturb the system for fear it will harm their career, and that only serve to reinforce mediocrity".

3) Training reviewers and providing guidelines for the assessment of originality. Some participants suggested that clearer guidelines or the provision of a sample of good reviews to the reviewers would be beneficial in educating particularly new and younger reviewers in the task of originality assessment. However not all the participants are in favor of originality becoming "too rule based" and have doubts whether the participants would have time to read the material provided.

4) Encouraging early career reviewers. There was strong support for selecting reviewers who read the paper in terms of "what is the new stuff", while having complementary expertise and knowledge of the literature in tourism and other fields so as to reduce bias and barriers in respect to originality. Therefore, some participants suggested the need to encourage early career researchers (who, perhaps, are more open to new ideas and have more time to provide comprehensive reviews) to participate in the peer review system and, hopefully, refresh it.

Finally, some of the interviewees noted that journal articles might not be the most suitable platform for promoting original work. Rather, it could be more feasible to introduce original ideas in less rigorous publication formats such as monographs and book chapters, where less stringent word limits apply, and authors do not run the gauntlet of referee assessment.

Conclusions

This paper has adopted a monographic approach towards one of the most relevant criteria which decides the publication of scholarly work: originality. The analysis has sought to provide a comprehensive picture of the multidimensional nature of originality with overlapping dimensions such as novelty, significance and relevance. Different types and levels of originality have been recognised and discussion of how these are applied to peer review assessment has revealed the variable and highly intuitive basis of these assessments and how they also vary depending on the reputation of the journal. In particular, 'the spectrum of originality', from radical to minor incremental, introduced in this paper, in relation to different tiers of journals (Fig. 1,) enriches previous understanding of the topic. Originality is highly important in the assessment process, being an essential but not a sufficient condition which competes for importance with relevance and methodological rigour. Reconstructing the cognitive process of assessment described by many interviewees, we have sought to provide a roadmap of the relevant criteria to be met for paper acceptance (Fig. 2).

Despite some editors being open to discussion about better ways to improve the way research is assessed in terms of originality, the analysis does not reveal recognition of a compelling need to change how the system handles originality and there is certainly no consensus in terms of editors favouring the creating of more rules or guidelines. Rather, originality is considered to be an amorphous, fuzzy area and unless there is a way of more rigorously explaining and defining it, then the scope for improvements remains limited, and has to be left to the expertise and judgement of reviewers. Here is the paradox: the academic community aims for the peer review to be a "scientific process" but while the more technical aspects have a semblance of objectivity, evaluations are necessarily subjective (Teplitskiy, Acuna, Elamrani-Raoult, Körding, & Evans, 2018). When evaluating originality, a mix of elements plays a role: personal intuition, emotions, previous knowledge, personal interests and methodological/disciplinary preferences. The peer review process is not a 'purely' scientific or rational application of intellect and reason, but also simultaneously involves other intuitive processes (Styhre, 2004). Due to this highly intuitive nature of originality assessment, there is unlikely to be a return to attempts to significantly improve the system: instead, we need to accept that originality decisions are not, and cannot be, entirely based on explicit principles. Guidelines are probably the best that we can aspire to, and considerable scope exists for differences and biases in their application. For example the methodological disagreements between quantitative and qualitative researchers reported by the participants are ubiquitous in the social sciences where distinct epistemic communities coexist (Teplitskiy et al., 2018) and this is especially the case of tourism. If bias cannot be eliminated, then greater transparency and explicit reference to the guidelines may represent the horizons to realistic attempts to overhaul the assessment of originality.

Encouragingly, the analysis of the interviews did not support the argument that the system, and its flaws, are holding back highly original work even though some personal biases are acknowledged. In fact, the argument in the literature that the system is inappropiate for judging highly original work has been rejected by the vast majority of gatekeeers interviewed. Rather than (or sometimes, as well as) focussing on the challenges in recognising originality, the biggest concern of the participants seems to be the shortage of highly original articles submitted, which is also characteristic of many social science disciplines (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). However, it is likely that some authors would provide contrasting testimonies of the challenges of publishing their most original work; indeed this angle did emerge when some interviewees discussed their experiences as authors and could be subject of future research. Such research could seek to identify distinctive groups of highly original authors (perhaps a "rarity") across the full range of the career cycle (early career researchers versus more experienced) to determine their understanding of originality and to analyse their experiences of their journeys from ideation to publication, and the barriers and facilitators encountered, especially whether these were internal (e.g. lack of knowledge or resources) or external (e.g. disincentives of the system and pressure to achieve quantity targets).

Finally, the study also aims to raise awareness on the importance of originality for all the actors of the system but especially the importance of producing outstanding original research which might overturn conventional wisdom and assumptions by challenging

old beliefs. Many of the interviewees commented that contemporary academic assessment procedures encourage researchers to publish high numbers of papers instead of focusing on and allocating their time on working on truly original ideas. As such, originality is perceived as something rare and associated to positive values such as risk-taking, rebellion and non-conformity and consequently it is a quality that should be rewarded. In that sense, the perception of barriers to focussing on and publishing highly original research is a matter of academic substance. The interviews did provide a number of suggestions and guidelines for authors to facilitate originality including: 1) maximise the benefit of knowledge borrowing (characteristic of the tourism field) by testing hypotheses or theories from other fields, highlighting the uniqueness of tourism and feeding the results back to the mainstream disciplines (do they corroborate or contradict the status quo) and 2) not letting "the system dictate your passion" and instead selecting an original ("not done hundred times before"), relevant and exciting topic to be passionate about. However, these discussions reinforce our understanding that gatekeepers are only part of a larger academic system that determines the role that originality plays in research.

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