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RESEARCH NOTE



When cheap talk is not that cheap – interviewing the super-rich about illegal wildlife consumption

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ABSTRACT

Obtaining insights on the illicit consumption of endangered wildlife products is challenging, especially when the study objects are the super-rich. This research note draws upon my experience interviewing nearly 1,000 rhino horn consumers in Vietnam. Trust is crucial in such interactions. No interviews could have been conducted without good rapport between interviewers and respondents. Nonetheless, soliciting interviews requires skills that one cannot expect to teach enumerators in the short term. This includes a winning sense of humour, colourful life experience, and true grit. Once good rapport is established, the use of specialised questioning techniques or bias-mitigation tools becomes unnecessary. Instead I suggest a practical approach to study consumers of illegal and luxury wildlife products in an Asian context.

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Introduction

Consumer demand for illegal and luxury wildlife products such as rhino horn and tiger bone glue is the major threat to the conservation of these species (Veríssimo & Wan, 2019). There is a growing recognition that managing demand requires a better understanding of consumer attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours (Veríssimo et al., 2020), that goes beyond the scope of the natural sciences (Mascia et al., 2003). While social scientists are playing an increasingly important role in conservation (Bennett et al., 2017), they encounter a tremendous challenge in studying consumer behaviours that are considered sensitive or illegal (Nuno & St. John, 2015). In such cases, the validity of data collected from self-administered questionnaires or face-to-face interviews is often subject to considerable non-response bias (Groves, 2006), social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993), and hypothetical bias (Bosworth & Taylor, 2012). To address sensitivity bias (Blair et al., 2020), social researchers have developed bias-mitigation tools and specialised questioning techniques, including the Unmatched Count Technique, the Randomised Response Technique, and the Ballot Box Method (Arias et al., 2020; Nuno & St. John, 2015). In non-market valuation surveys, especially choice experiments, the *Cheap Talk* script is employed to reduce hypothetical bias (Mariel et al., 2021). The term *Cheap Talk* is borrowed from game theory, and refers to communication between players that do not have direct pay-offs implications (Crawford, 1998). In other words, talk is cheap (Farrell, 1995). However, interviewing rhino horn consumers in Vietnam, I found that talk is not cheap at all and that initiating talks with these consumers is quite expensive. I also started to question the validity of bias-mitigation methods and techniques to understand sensitive conservation behaviours. Although these methods and techniques have been proven able to elicit more honest responses about certain behaviours with conservation implications (Arias et al., 2020), the crucial

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question when studying rhino horn consumers is, ‘Why do they agree to be interviewed, in the first place?’

Reflexivity in the different stages of a research project has become a tradition in the social sciences and helps to facilitate learning and sharing experiences among researchers (e.g., see Lund, 2014; Wong, 2019). Data collection through face-to-face interviews requires a deep understanding of the specific context and cultural nuances. Regardless, in the literature about wildlife consumers, researchers often focus on the presentation of findings whereas details about the data collection process are commonly neglected (but see Wong (2019)). Making matters worse, consumer surveys are often outsourced to market research firms (e.g., Hanley et al., 2017; Kennaugh, 2015; Rizzolo, 2020), with little information provided on the interaction between enumerators and respondents and the context in which the interaction is embedded. The relationship between researchers and market research firms is bound by contractual agreements, in which researchers do not have direct control over the data collection process. Several researchers have raised concerns about this practice when studying consumers of illegal, luxury wildlife products such as rhino horn or tiger parts (Dang et al., 2020; Margulies et al., 2019). The reliability and validity of consumer surveys are brought into question because survey participants have been found to not match the typical profile of actual consumers, e.g., consumers who have used or intend to use rhino horn (Dang & Nielsen, 2020). Studying people who do not demand or purchase these products provides limited insights of value for policy development and the optimal design of demand reduction strategies (Dang et al., 2020).

This research note reflects on the challenges and lessons learned from own research on rhino horn consumers in Vietnam, including using choice experiment survey. A *Cheap Talk*-script was included in the interview guide enabling enumerators to describe hypothetical scenarios to respondents during interviews while reducing bias from respondents potentially wanting to exhibit socially acceptable behaviour or impressing enumerators (Mariel et al., 2021). However, I argue that sensitivity bias is not a major problem if respondents already agree to be interviewed. The main challenge lies in the process of identifying potential and reliable respondents and soliciting an interview. The next section outlines why techniques for asking sensitive questions in conservation do not work on rhino horn consumers. Then, I will describe my strategies and tactics for recruiting enumerators and conducting interviews with this particular group of consumers.

No trust, no interview

As part of my PhD project, I conducted a survey on rhino horn consumers in Hanoi, Vietnam’s capital, from October 2019 to September 2020. To prepare for the fieldwork, I advertised for field assistants and promised good salaries by Vietnamese standards. I recruited three enumerators, with high education (incl. one PhD, two Masters) and more than 10 years of experience collecting data during various surveys in Vietnam. Research agreements were signed, and data collection started. One month later, only 12 interviews had been completed. Given the expected sample size of about 1,000 respondents, I felt disheartened. I rushed to recruit more enumerators, but the outcome did not change. No enumerator could conduct more than 10 interviews per month. Some of them even gave up after a few interviews. To make matters worse, this was about the time that the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Wuhan, China.

In a conventional survey, researchers can knock on random doors or approach random persons for interviews. Researchers can use key informants and gate-keepers to obtain access to specific research populations. Sometimes, small gifts can facilitate participation in a survey. But my data collection extended beyond this conventional wisdom. Finding respondents to interview turned out to be extremely challenging. Although data was collected in Vietnam, one of the major markets for rhino horn (Truong et al., 2015), it does not mean that finding respondents who had purchased or consumed this product (i.e., drinking rhino horn powder mixed with water for health-related purposes) or had even heard about the benefits of rhino horn is easy by any standards. I tried to ask random persons I met on my way, such as taxi drivers, street vendors, owners of small business,

workers, and security guards. Most of the time, however, the response was, 'I don't know much about rhino horn,' 'I have never tried it,' or 'I just heard that it is traditional medicine but also that it is a contraband.' I asked many young people, and some of them even told me, 'Rhino horn is like human nails, it doesn't have any benefits,' or 'You will be jailed for buying rhino horn.'

In Vietnam, the use of rhino horn is particularly popular among a specific group of the population: middle-aged to elderly men in the high-income bracket (Dang & Nielsen, 2018; Dang et al., 2020). These men are notoriously averse to investigation of their sensitive behaviour, and they are fully aware of the illegal nature of using rhino horn (Dang & Nielsen, 2020). Vietnamese society is patriarchal and very hierarchical. Elderly and rich men do not keep company with young people or those of lower income brackets. As the saying goes in Vietnam, 'The wind at a level goes with the cloud at that level.' Upper-class Hanoians are very status-conscious. Details about one's job and assets are important in establishing and building relationships. Trust is based on what one does for a living and the fortune one possesses. Particularly visible assets such as real estate and cars. Without such visible indicators of status, it is impossible to enter the networks of the rich. Hence, my enumerators were constantly being turned down by the respondents, especially those working in government positions. Some outright refused to participate in interviews because of more 'urgent' tasks, while others dismissed us before we could proceed to the Cheap Talk script.

Strategies and tactics: hiring the 'right' enumerators and preparing for 'expensive' talks

While searching for more suitable enumerators, I decided to collect the data myself. Fortunately, I lived in a high-end residential complex, including villas and serviced apartments with many wealthy neighbours. Wherever and whenever possible, I approached them and asked whether they had used or knew about rhino horn. Being their neighbour made it easier for me to make friends and ask for interviews. I was a member of several sports clubs and organizations in my neighbourhood and used this to reach out to more respondents through snowballing. Being members of the same club or organisation greatly facilitated interviews. I spent time drinking tea with wealthy neighbours in their manicured gardens, wandered into coffee shops, bars, and restaurants where they often gathered. This was a painstakingly slow process requiring considerable time doing this kind of interaction before getting down to an interview. As a result, I eventually realised that my survey would only work if enumerators had good relationships with respondents. Enumerators must come from the same social networks or clubs and have similar hobbies or interests to pass as a trustworthy – or simply a worthy – conversation partner.

Learning from initial failures and my own experience interviewing, I finally collected the right team: a tennis coach, a notorious golfer-cum-tennis-player, and my flamboyant neighbour running a small seafood business. None of them had a higher education (no PhD or Master). And they had no research experience. Yet, my enumerators possessed true grit, with colourful life experience, a passion for fancy things, a winning sense of humour, and most importantly, extensive connections with the rich. Golf is considered a 'rich man's sport', while tennis is popular among the affluent class in Hanoi. Although elderly rich people might not be good at playing tennis, they like to gather at tennis clubs for beers and betting. The first enumerator – Dinh – was their favourite player. Most tennis players in Hanoi knew about him, not only because of his unique skills but also for his nerves of steel in betting matches. My second enumerator, Thanh, a physical education teacher and tennis coach, possessed excellent interpersonal skills thanks to his past experience selling life insurance to wealthy clients. He had won several tennis tournaments for amateurs and was welcome in all clubs. He had an innate talent for pleasing people and the utmost persistence of a predator waiting for its prey. The final enumerator – Van – a former journalist – could entertain and amuse anyone with his charm and humour. The last team member, me, a PhD student in Denmark, who would have had access to very few respondents had it not been for my ping-pong skills, my membership of several clubs, and my reputation as an avid collector of ping-pong paddles.

As the enumerators had no former experience conducting interviews, I provided a one-day training. Then each of them was asked to arrange five interviews with potential respondents in their networks. While I was interviewing these, they observed and learned from my interviews. I then accompanied each of them their next five interviews to provide instant support and discussed any problems or mistakes they made during the interviews. However, personal relationships were limited. And reaching out to more rhino horn consumers became challenging. We discussed all possible strategies and tactics. I handed over my neighbours to Van as he lived in the same neighbourhood and was more connected. Thanh traversed tennis clubs throughout Hanoi. Dinh focused on downtown clubs and golf resorts in the suburbs. I scoured ping pong clubs and accompanied Dinh to visit the super-rich in his networks. Together as a team, we were curious, snobbish, and objects of gossips.

A typical interview took place like this. Driving a US\$ 300,000 borrowed Porsche, Dinh picked me up early in the morning and threw a box of Cohibas into my Burberry bag. We wriggled out of the traffic jam in downtown Hanoi, moving slowly to the West Lake, an area most favoured by Hanoi's glitterati for its tranquillity and serenity. Villas and houses overlooking the lake are worth several million US dollars. Dinh hit the brakes by a boutique hotel. A security guard approached and guided us to the parking area. An old man walked out from the lobby and greeted us warmly. In an agile manner and with black-dyed hair, the man looked much younger than his 65 years of age. His secretary came and escorted us to the building. We stopped by a serviced apartment on the fifth floor for some tea. On the balcony with a fantastic view over the West Lake area, the man invited my friend to take a photo with him. While tea kept flowing, the man recalled, 'I purchased this land 30 years ago for just 60 taels of gold. Now it is worth more than 20 million US dollars. I turned the first four floors into a boutique hotel and rented out the upper floors as serviced apartments.' We then walked to a coffee shop where the interview started. In the smoke of Cohiba siglos, Dinh smoothly proceeded with the interview although it was sometimes interrupted by phone calls to the man and some neighbours passing by saying hello to him. Details about his illegal purchase of rhino horn was recited without hesitation. Proceeding with the choice experiment (Dang et al., 2021), the man brainstormed and explained to Dinh why he chose this alternative over the others without much reference to the description of hypothetical scenarios in the *Cheap Talk* script. He was quite familiar with the rhino horn market and much more sharp-minded than we had expected. Given the intimate atmosphere, I felt that the use of any bias-mitigation tools would have seemed odd and raised suspicion driving a wedge between our host and us. The interview ended, but we kept talking about health and wellbeing. Our conversation moved from tennis to golf to Dinh's Porsche. The man's face lit up when I pointed at his Patek Philippe and bragged about tourbillon and minute repeater in horology (the two most complicated techniques in watchmaking). We gently declined his invitation for lunch and rushed to the next interview. My borrowed Rolex showed 12:20 PM. Our day ended with just one more interview in the afternoon.

Discussion and recommendations

Aiming to interview the rich about their illegal behaviours you will encounter tremendous challenges. It is impossible to get access to these individuals through the panel samples of market research firms. The rich in Vietnam will never spend time filling out online questionnaires or talking with unacquainted enumerators over the phone. Nor are they lured into interviews by a small gift or abstract benefits such as helping to conserve rhinos. Yet, face-to-face interviews can work, provided that interviewees trust the interviewers.

Preparing for fieldwork collecting data on the illicit consumption of luxury wildlife products among high-income individuals requires specific methodological considerations. Selecting appropriate strategies and tactics to identify respondents and ask for interviews are much more important than the consideration of using any specialised questioning techniques. It took us – nine enumerators and me – more than 9 months of hard work to carry out 774 interviews. Being a local researcher

with vast experience from surveys of regular respondents is of no use for this kind of study. Data collection from super-rich rhino horn consumers require face-to-face interviews conducted by researchers and enumerators who are properly embedded in the right social circles. And staging an interview could be ‘expensive.’

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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