‘To Be or Not to Be’ – ‘Top’ or ‘Tenure Track’ Journals?


Abstract

The ‘top’ journals of the marketing discipline tend to be identified and ranked mainly based upon two foundations such as: citations and scholarly perceptions. The objective of this paper is to describe other aspects to be considered in the foundations of ‘top’ journal rankings. A conceptual discussion of journal rankings is provided. It is limited to a selection of so-called ‘top’ journals belonging mostly to the field of mainstream marketing. The ‘top’ marketing journals in focus no longer appear to be the preferred forum or outlet for ground-breaking and challenging themes from leading marketing scholars worldwide. On the contrary, they appear to have become an arena for US-affiliated scholars on ‘tenure-tracks’. The possible ‘tenure-track’ arena in the ‘top’ marketing journals in focus may explain the frequent absence of reputable and widely recognized marketing scholars; these are often dedicated to cutting edge themes and scholarly efforts beyond contemporary knowledge and wisdom. The ‘top’ marketing journals may not be seen worldwide as the ‘top’ ones for non-US scholars. Scholars worldwide may consider them rather to be part of the domestic scholarly structure in the US, and of less relevance to their own research community. The question is raised whether some of the ‘top’ marketing journals have mainly become ‘tenure-track’ journals.

Key words: marketing, journal, citation, ranking, discipline.

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Introduction

Scholarly journals devoted to marketing have increased over recent decades (Baumgartner and Pieters, 2003). Cabell (2006) lists 261 journals that publish articles in this discipline. One reason for the plethora of scholarly marketing journals is that each journal positions itself within certain sub-disciplines within the wider subject area of marketing (Baumgartner and Pieters, 2003; Malhotra, 1999). Another reason for the large number of scholarly journals is the requirement placed upon most scholars to publish their research (Moxley, 1992). Publishing in scholarly journals enables scholars to communicate their endeavours to colleagues while simultaneously enhancing their own careers (Mort et al., 2004). Scholarly journals thus provide an essential means of communication within (and between) various research disciplines and research communities.

Scholarly journals in marketing have become important to the academic community. Therefore, scholarly evaluations of these journals have been a frequent issue in marketing literature (Bakir et al., 2000; Clark 1985; Fields and Swayne, 1991; Ganesh et al., 1990; Niemi, 1988; Petry and Settle, 1988; Pol, 1991; Spake and Harmon, 1998; Trieschmann et al., 2000). However, questions have been raised about the appropriate approach to evaluating journals (Polonsky and Whitelaw (2005) and the precise parameters that should form the basis of such an evaluation (Beed and Beed, 1996; Hawes and Keillor, 2002; Parnell, 1997; Rice and Stankus, 1983; Zinkhan and Leigh, 1999; Svensson and Wood, 2006 and 2008).

In this regard, Parnell (1997) suggests a taxonomy of journal quality based upon: (i) expert opinion surveys; or (ii) citation counts; or (iii) a combination of both variables. Rice and Stankus (1983) suggested variables in such terms as: (i) citation analysis of the journal (e.g. Social Sciences Citation Index); and/or (ii) acceptance rate of the journal (e.g. Cabell’s Directory); and/or (iii) sponsorship of the journal (e.g. American Marketing Association); and/or (iv) objectives of the journal (e.g. methodological approaches and readership); and/or (v) fundamentals of the journal (e.g. authors, editor, review board, and their affiliations). Svensson and Wood (2008) propose another taxonomy based upon: (i) journal criteria (e.g. the editor, the editorial board, the editorial objective and the authors
affiliations); (ii) article criteria (e.g. research implication, practice implication, readability and originality); and research criteria (e.g. process, paradigm, representation, readership and contribution).

Other authors have suggested other (less frequently used) variables; these suggestions have included evaluation on the basis of ‘accessibility’ (Polonsky et al., 1999), ‘ethnocentricity’ (Czinkota, 2000; Rosenstreich and Wooliscroft, 2006; Svensson, 2005), and ‘methodological approaches’ (Svensson, 2006), ‘research designs’/‘scientific identity’ (Svensson and Wood, 2007), and ‘empirical characteristics’ (Svensson, et al., 2008). In fact, potential ‘biases’ in ‘top’ marketing journals have been addressed by Svensson and Wood (2006 and 2008).

Despite this wide range of possible criteria for evaluating journals, two foundations towards making such evaluations can be delineated (Mason et al., 1997; Kim, 1991). The first is to evaluate citations in one way or another (Baumgartner and Pieters, 2003; Jobber and Simpson, 1988); the second is to evaluate the journals on the basis of scholarly perceptions (Mylonopoulos and Theoharakis, 2001; Nisonger, 1999; Hult et al., 1997; Luke and Doke, 1987). However, a third alternative could possibly be the examination of the actual content of academic journals (Svensson and Wood, 2006 and 2008). Consequently, the ‘top’ journals of a research discipline (e.g. marketing) tend to be identified and ranked mainly based upon two of these three foundations, namely: a) the perception-based one, and b) the citation-based one.

A series of studies have explored patterns of referencing and citations in different journals (e.g. Bettencourt and Houston, 2001a/b; Cote et al., 1991; Goldman, 1979; Hamelman and Mazze, 1973; Leong, 1989; Muehling et al., 1987; Phillips et al., 1999; Sivadas and Johnson, 2005; Sprott and Miyazaki, 2002; Swan et al., 1991; Tellis et al., 1999; Zinkhan et al., 1992; and Zinkhan and Leigh, 1999). A series of other studies have also looked into the scholarly perceptions of journals (e.g. Mylonopoulos and Theoharakis, 2001; Nisonger, 1999; Hult et al., 1997; Luke and Doke, 1987).

Consequently, the actual content of journals is not per se a foundation to support the journal rankings, but they tend to be based upon limited and rather superficial foundations. In consequence, the objective of this paper is to describe other aspects to be considered in the foundations of
‘top’ journal rankings. This paper is organized as follows: a) initially; the foundations and some deficiencies of journal rankings are discussed; b) the relationship between ‘top journals’ and ‘leading scholars’ is raised; and c) the distinction regarding ‘top’ and ‘tenure track’ journals is also addressed; and d) finally, some concluding thoughts are described.

Foundations and deficiencies of Journal Rankings

‘Top’ marketing journals should serve as a benchmark for marketing scholars and the worldwide scholarly community in marketing. They should also communicate the status of the marketing discipline to other subject disciplines and their research communities.

As mentioned previously, two foundations have mostly been used to rank journals (see Figure 1). One of these foundations is citation-based (e.g. ‘Social Science Citation Index’ – ‘SSCI’), while the other is perception-based (i.e. scholarly-oriented surveys based upon measures such as perceived prestige or reputation). A third one based upon actual content is neglected. One starts to be doubtful regarding these journal rankings, because the other two foundations will hardly reflect the content quality of a journal and each paper published. Some papers may make a significant contribution, while others in the same journal may make relatively insignificant ones. In other words, each paper should be judged individually and add its own scholarly value to the marketing discipline. Presumably there is a minimum but ambiguous standard of quality that varies between papers of a journal.

Figure 1. Foundations of Journal Rankings
The foundation based upon SSCI is derived from an underlying algorithm that generates a so-called ‘impact factor’, which is a measure of the citations to scholarly journals. It is frequently used as an estimate for the importance of a journal within its field. The impact factors are calculated each year for those journals which the SSCI indexes, and the factors and indices are published in a so-called ‘journal citation report’. The impact factor of a journal is based on a three-year period, and can be viewed as an approximation of the average number of times published articles are cited in the two calendar years following publication. For example, a journal’s articles that on average are cited once for each article published has an impact factor of 1. It should be stressed that some articles may have a high ‘individual impact factor’, while in others is much lower and therefore only reflects an aggregated estimate. (Thompson Scientific, 2007; Wikipedia, 2007)

Svensson (2008) contends that there are some concerns that may cause potential bias when journal rankings are based upon SSCI and its impact factors. He also argues that SSCI and its impact factors will not benefit the scholarly community of the marketing discipline worldwide in the long-term perspective. In fact, he argues that there is an insufficient ongoing debate regarding its potential misinterpretation, misuse and manipulation. Unfortunately, this metric measure (and others as well) tend to be perceived as absolute and unquestionable estimates, which is far from true.

The other foundation based upon perceptions is per se commonly interpreted as more subjective and questionable, because of its sole reliance on measures such as prestige and reputation rather than impartial measures of content quality (if there are any!). There is no obvious link between perception and quality, perception and impact, etc. For example, an analogy – because the president of the USA is seen by many people worldwide as one of the most powerful political leaders of the world, it does not mean that the same people necessarily consider him or her to be important to them in their own political society. The same thing may appear among marketing scholars that are dedicated to research. Their scholarly focus may be dedicated to sub-disciplines of marketing, ‘less-appropriate’ research values and research designs, and therefore less interesting to the
mainstream and ‘top’ ones discussed in this paper. It is not uncommon that
many leading marketing scholars prefer the ‘top’ ones of sub-disciplines
when their work is disseminated in journals and where they may consider
their work will find a better home from a scholarly point of view. In oth-
er words, they may have moved away from scholarly considerations rela-
ted to their academic careers of development and progress to determine
freely and optimally where to disseminate their work.

Svensson and Wood (2006) examine two groups of criteria regarding
‘top’ marketing journals, such as: 1) research criteria (i.e. affiliation of
authors; empirical research data; national research data; continental asso-
ciation of research data; and methodological approaches; and 2) journal
criteria (i.e. affiliation of editors and affiliation and composition of edito-
rial boards. They conclude that there appears to be a kind of ‘Pareto plus
syndrome’. Pareto’s Law often refers to the theory that a small percentage
of a total is responsible for a large proportion of the total outcome. It is
commonly known as the 80/20 law or principle. In ‘top’ marketing jour-
als it is 90/10 on their examined criteria!

‘Top Journals’ and ‘Leading Scholars’
There is a common denominator and consensus in the mentioned founda-
tions of journal rankings, such as the citation- and perception-based ones,
that the ‘top’ three ones appear to be Journal of Marketing, Journal of
Marketing Research and Journal of Consumer Research. Some may con-
sider these journals as the ‘best’ of the ‘best’ – the ‘icons’ of the marketing
discipline. Other journals that are frequently considered to be among the
‘top’ ones are: Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Marketing
Science, and Journal of Retailing. Interestingly, it should be noted that
these are all US-based journals – none from other parts of the world. One
wonders why? Are there none? Of course, there must be some, but they
tend to be omitted or neglected for one reason or another.

Accordingly, marketing scholars worldwide tend to consider a few or
all of these journals as the ‘top’ ones of the marketing discipline. These
journals have a perceived history (e.g. prestige and reputation) or assumed
influence (e.g. SSCI and its impact factors) of excellence in making impor-
tant contributions to knowledge and theory generation in marketing. For example, a series of seminal works have been published in the past in some of them. But there are also numerous articles that remain for the most part unknown and marginal, and in consequence appear to make insignificant contributions to the marketing discipline.

One would expect to find the leading marketing scholars in their specific fields of expertise to be visible in these ‘top journals’ – i.e. prioritized outlets of their work and scholarly efforts (see Figure 2). However, this appears rarely to be the case in recent years – and one starts to wonder why?

Figure 2. ‘Top Journals’ and ‘Leading Scholars’

In fact, there may be doubts about whether some of these journals should be viewed as the ‘top’ ones of the marketing discipline at all. For example, there appears to be a pattern in some of these journals that most authors – at the time when their papers are accepted for publication – tend to be relatively unknown to the worldwide research community of the discipline. This may indicate that a well-functioning editorial review process (i.e. blind review) is in place. It may also indicate that all authors initially have an equal chance to succeed.

It is not uncommon (Svensson and Wood, 2006), however, that the authors’ geographical affiliations are US-based (i.e. approx. 80-90% of published papers). Here again, one can wonder why? Is there a potential bias in the submissions or the editorial review process? In addition, these authors often tend to be in the earlier stages of their academic careers. Once they become (if they become!) well-known and distinguished scholars of the worldwide research community of marketing there tends to be a change of priority with regard to where, what and how to publish their work and research efforts. One wonders why the frequency of journal pub-
lications in ‘top journals’ for established, successful and reputable scholars tends to diminish or disappear from this arena of communication outlets.

‘Top’ or ‘Tenure Track’ Journals
Where are the well-known and distinguished marketing scholars selecting, attempting and finally finding outlets to communicate their work and scholarly efforts? At minimum, it is not often in the supposedly ‘top’ marketing journals in focus.

This is peculiar, because these recognized scholars tend to be prolific in other arenas of communication and publishing. Why? Well, it is not uncommon that the leading marketing scholars target other journals (e.g. the ‘top’ ones of the sub-disciplines of marketing). If they do appear in the ‘top’ journals it may be as co-authors with doctoral students. Furthermore, they dedicate their efforts to communicate their work and expertise in books, workshops, seminars, speeches or forms other than the ‘top’ journals. Again one must ask the question - Why?

Is it because the well-known and distinguished marketing scholars have lost their capacity to manage and succeed in the editorial review process of these journals? Probably not! On the contrary, their accumulated experience and expertise have undoubtedly achieved more advanced and sophisticated levels of excellence in many cases. So, why do they not appear in the ‘top’ journals? It is of course possible that they do not consider the editorial review process meaningful, constructive and fair – and therefore select other outlets for their work and research efforts.

It may also be a matter of personal convenience. For example, there is no need to expose themselves to the potential hassles, whims and negative feedback that may occur in the review process. It should be kept in mind that they are already well-known and distinguished, having maybe demonstrated an appealing publishing record in the past, and often a highly attractive publishing record in other arenas of communication too!

Furthermore, there may also be a lack of scholarly or professional necessity, as they have most likely already qualified for the criteria of gaining ‘tenured’ positions in higher education institutions. It is widely recognized that publication in the ‘top’ journals of the discipline is often
required in order to achieve and be awarded ‘promotion and tenure’ in leading US-based higher education institutions.

**Figure 3. ‘Top’ or ‘Tenure Track’ Journals**

![Diagram showing 'Top' and 'Tenure Track' journals](image)

Interestingly, as mentioned previously the majority of authors that contribute to the ‘top’ marketing journals tend to be relatively unknown to most of the worldwide research community. Consequently, it is not unreasonable to argue that these journals should not necessarily be seen as the ‘top’ ones of the worldwide marketing discipline, but rather the principal arena of US-affiliated scholars on ‘tenure-tracks’ and their surrounding (see Figure 3), very limited research community. It is likely one reason why the seminal works and groundbreaking research efforts tend to be rather rare in recent volumes of these ‘top’ marketing journals. Of course there are some of them, but often they tend to emerge elsewhere which may be unfortunate to the marketing discipline, or maybe it is not as other forms of outlets gain recognition.

**Concluding thoughts**

The likelihood of success in the editorial review process is troublesome and keen in the selected ‘top’ marketing journals. The acceptance rates tend to be very low due to the large number of submissions to some of them. Manuscripts need to: (i) meet the journal expectations, (ii) correspond to editorial requirements, and (iii) adhere to the paradigmatic values of what is seen as appropriate research, of the targeted journals. Therefore scholars need to adapt their work and endeavours to the reigning format and research values of these journals if they are to stand a chance of being successful. In fact, it may lead to their making decisions based upon biased grounds of their research problems –potentially erroneous ones. For exam-
ple, why are qualitative approaches very often used as a pre-phase to the quantitative ones— and not the contrary?

Nevertheless, these journals appear not to be the preferred forum or outlet anymore (i.e. relatively speaking) for ground-breaking and challenging themes and endeavours from current leading marketing scholars, as they may have been in the past for contemporary ones at the time. In fact, there appears to have been a gradual change since the 1970s and 1980s – from highly readable contributions with good insight, to those of questionable and limited readability.

Possibly, there was a successive change through the 1990s as new IT-based and user-friendly statistical software packages emerged and facilitated the use of advanced statistical analyses on human phenomena, human perception and human behaviour. Nowadays, the ‘top’ marketing journals in focus have the emphasis on, and conviction in, statistical technicalities that penetrate all levels of the research designs and processes – from research problems to suggestions for further research. The crucial question is whether these statistical techniques are appropriate to mirror marketing phenomena in order to generate valid, reliable and generalised knowledge and theories. In fact, one wonders if research based upon these statistical approaches will ever be truly ground-breaking or just of temporary and narrow values through time and across contexts.

Scholars on ‘tenure-tracks’ in the US research community of marketing have to play safe by staying mainstream and within paradigmatic acceptable boundaries in their work and research efforts. For example, they: (i) apply quantitative methods, (ii) follow a strict format of research designs and research processes, (iii) collect domestic research data, (iv) give references to other similar research efforts and (v) in mostly US-based journals. One wonders what has happened with: (i) the pluralism of research designs (ii) methodological considerations, (iii) the thoroughness and completeness of theoretical frameworks, and (iv) the variety of analytical approaches. It hardly benefits the marketing discipline.

Is it a symptom of ‘self-proclaimed myopia’ or a ‘self-chosen straight jacket’? Or have the easy accessible IT-technology and user-friendly statistical software packages made some of the journals in focus go astray in
their effort to stay in the forefront? It may have been a strategic mistake that has influenced the tactic and operative reality aspects of some of these journals. The relevance of using advanced statistical techniques on marketing phenomena may be over-estimated. That these journals may have entered a ‘dead end’ as marketing phenomena does not equal the phenomena often researched in natural sciences.

The pointed out ‘tenure-track’ arena in the journals in focus may also explain the frequent absence of reputable and widely recognized marketing scholars that are often dedicated to cutting-edge themes and endeavours beyond contemporary knowledge and wisdom. It is unfortunate, as these scholarly efforts are clearly disseminated elsewhere in other forums and outlets. One wonders if some of the selected ‘top’ marketing journals will lose their credibility and status of being the ‘icons’ within the marketing discipline in the future. It is quite possible.

The question is therefore raised for further debate whether some of the ‘top’ marketing journals in focus have mainly become the predominant arena of US-affiliated scholars on ‘tenure-tracks’? If that is so, should they really be seen as the ‘top’ ones for other scholars worldwide or should scholars worldwide reconsider them rather as part of a domestic scholarly structure in the US, and of less relevance to their own research community? This is a concern that should be truly scrutinized.

In consequence, the marketing journals in focus may well be the ‘top’ ones for some scholars, but they may not necessarily always be the ‘best’ outlets for their work and endeavours, depending on the contextual circumstances of career progress and status. In sum, the question regarding these journals is: To Be or Not to Be – ‘Top’ or ‘Tenure Track’ Journals?

References


