

Issues About Marketing Journals' Special Issues

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Abstract

A special issue (SI) of an academic journal is a collection of articles on a specific research topic or theme, guest-edited by experts in the field. These SIs are becoming increasingly popular among marketing journals. Surprisingly, this group includes the discipline's top-tier and top journals. But, what are the consequences of the profusion of SIs, particularly in marketing's most prestigious/reputable journals? What are the disadvantages of SIs' new incursion, and sometimes even dominance? In this paper, the author investigates the SIs published over the last five years (i.e., 2018-2022) in marketing's top and top-tier journals. The aim of doing so is to draw attention to SI-related issues such as space allocation, intellect left to rot, command economy of ideas, over-fragmentation/specialization of marketing, and publication ethics.

Keywords: Special issues; marketing journals; issues; publishing ethics.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

Already in 2003, Baumgartner and Pieters (2003, p.123) described marketing journals as products that evolve in a rapidly growing market. In their article on faculty perceptions of marketing journals, Hult et al. (2009, p.1) stated that “[e]ach journal fills a role in a marketplace where ‘publish or perish’ in journals is increasingly becoming a norm”. Based on data from Cabells' Scholarly Analytics, Moussa (2021a) estimated the size of the marketing journals market to be over 1,100 publication venues.

For over a decade, an act of monitoring the market of marketing journals has been undertaken. That market is worth watching because it is very dynamic and responsive to the needs of the times: New journals are constantly being launched (e.g., *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* was launched in 2015) while others have ceased to exist (e.g., *Journal of Marketing Behavior* published its fourth and final volume in 2020); some journals have changed their titles in order to gain a new status and identity (e.g., *Journal of Marketing Channels* was re-titled *Journal of Inter-Organizational Relationships* as of 2021) while others have merged (e.g., *Journal of Database Marketing and Customer Relationship Management* merged with *Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing* to form, in 2013, the *Journal of Marketing Analytics*); Some academic associations have distanced themselves from journals (e.g., The European Marketing Academy has separated itself from the *Journal of Marketing Behaviour*) while others have acquired some (e.g., The American Marketing Association [AMA] has acquired the *Journal of Interactive Marketing* in 2022).

Whilst monitoring the marketing journals market, it can be noticed that many journals, including the discipline's top-tier journals, are increasingly publishing special issues (hereinafter SIs). In this paper, an attempt is made to highlight five issues concerning SIs in marketing journals: space allocation, intellect left to rot, command economy of ideas, over-fragmentation/specialization of marketing, and publication ethics. The ultimate goal is to spark discussion about the use and abuse of SIs.

2. What is a special issue?

Marketing journals, like any other academic journals, publish from time to time SIs. An SI “usually serves the purpose of delving more deeply into a specific topic” (Repiso et al. 2021, p.593). It is a collection of articles that focuses on a specific research topic falling within the scope of a journal. There are also thematic journals where each issue is an SI, but the number of such journals in the marketing discipline is limited (e.g., *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*).

An SI is commonly edited by a guest editor (GE). A GE is “an individual who is appointed to edit a special thematic section [or] an issue of a journal, and who is responsible for the solicitation and initial peer review of its content” (Morris et al., 2013, p.77). Most SIs are developed when a subject expert identifies a demand for an SI in a particular research area and approaches a journal’s editor-in-chief to propose an SI (Leigh and Edwards, 2022). Some publishers, like Emerald Publishing (a publisher of 23 marketing journals), require the applicant and aspirant for GE to submit an entire dossier with a description of the topic, how it fits with the scope of the journal, arguments that support the demand for an SI on the topic, and a planning schedule (Emerald Publishing, n.d.).

In most cases, GEs take the place of editors-in-chief for the SIs and have entire autonomy and control over the peer review processes; that is, they appoint reviewers and decide on which papers to accept and which to rejected. For Sage Publishing (2022)—publisher of 12 marketing journals, AMA’s fleet of five journals included—a GE “should be an expert on the subject of the special issue and ideally will be sufficiently well-networked internationally to bring top authors and articles to the journal”. An SI, according to Sage Publishing (2022), “allows for a specialist to oversee the issue and bring in their contacts and networks”.

3. Proliferation of special issues in top-tier and top marketing journals

3.1. Special issues in top-tier journals

To get a glimpse at the proliferation of SIs in elite marketing journals in the last five years (i.e., 2018-2022), Table 1 was created. In this table, the six top-tier marketing journals are listed. An SI is represented by a red cell, while a regular issue is represented by a green cell.

Table 1. Special issues in the six top-tier marketing journals

Journal title (Year first published)	Ratio of SI	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<i>Journal of Marketing</i> (1934) ^{4*}	10%	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
<i>Journal of Marketing Research</i> (1964) ^{4*}	6.67%	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
<i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i> (1973) ^{4*}	23.23%	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
<i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> (1974) ^{4*}	6.67%	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
<i>Marketing Science</i> (1982) ^{4*}	10%	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green

<i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i> (1992) ^{4*}	10%	
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Notes: 4* denotes the journal rating (“Journal of Distinction”) as per the 2021 Academic Journal Guide of the Chartered Association of Business Schools. These six journals are also included in the Financial Times list of top 50 business and management journals (or FT50 for short).

Of the six top-tier marketing journals, the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (JAMS) is the one with the highest number of published SIs during the last five years (i.e., seven SIs). It is followed by *Journal of Marketing* (JM) and *Marketing Science* (MS) with three SIs each. The JAMS has the highest ratio of SIs to all issues published in the last five years, with 23.23%. Stated differently, nearly a quarter of what was published in JAMS in the last five years appeared in SIs. It is also worth noting that JAMS has published 17 SIs since its inception in 1973. This means that 41.18% of JAMS’ SIs were published in the last five years. The same could be said about the *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR) which published two SIs in the last three years. In its entire history, the JCR has only published five SIs.

To get an idea on the likely future trajectory of SIs in the investigated top-tier journals, these journals’ websites were examined along with their latest editorials. According to a recent editorial, JM is planning to publish three SIs in its upcoming volumes (see Sridhar et al., 2023, p.5). JMR is planning to publish an SI on “Mitigation in Marketing” in 2023 (see <https://www.ama.org/mitigation-in-marketing-call-for-papers-for-a-special-issue-of-the-journal-of-marketing-research/>). At the time of writing, on JAMS’ official website, there were two calls-for-paper for two forthcoming SIs. The first SI on “Enhancing Customer Engagement” (See <https://www.springer.com/journal/11747/updates/19810968>) and the second on “Reimagining Marketing Strategy” (see <https://www.springer.com/journal/11747/updates/18087648>). The JCR is planning to publish a 50th anniversary SI in 2024. To sum up, there will be at least seven SIs to be published in these four top-tier journals in the upcoming couple of years.

3.2. Special issues in top marketing journals

The profusion of SIs is even more pronounced in top (mainstream/generalist) marketing journals. As Table 2 shows, the three top journals that have published the largest number of SIs thus far are, in a decreasing order, the *Journal of Marketing Management* (JMM), the *European Journal of Marketing* (EJM), and the *International Journal of Research in Marketing* (IJRM) with 69, 38, and 20 SIs, respectively. The JMM also has the distinction of publishing the most SIs in the last five years, with 18 SIs. In other words, 26.08% of JMM’s SIs were published between 2018 and 2022. This is the result of JMM’s recent editorial policy of publishing five double SIs per annum (see <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjmm20/special-issues>). According to EJM’s digital archive, 423 issues were published between 1967 and 2022. The archive also shows that 38 out of these 423 issues are SIs. Fourteen of these 38 SIs (or 36.84%) were published in the last five years. *Marketing Theory* (MT), the youngest of these five journals, has published 86 issues since its debut in 2001 and up to December 2022. Seventeen of the 86 issues are SIs. In other words, nearly one out of every five issues of MT is an SI. Four out of MT’s 17 SIs (i.e., 23.53%) were published in the last five years. To summarize, 23.53% to 36.84% of the SIs in these three top marketing journals appeared between 2018 and 2022. For the IJRM and the *Journal of*

Marketing Theory and Practice, SIs published in the last five years represented 10 to 20% of the total number of SIs published in each of them, respectively.

Table 2. Number of special issues in five top marketing journals

Journal (Year first published)	Total number of SIs	Number of SIs for the 2018-2022 period	Year first SI was published	Year/Journal volume with the highest number of SIs (ratio of SIs to all issues)
<i>Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice</i> (1992) ²	15	3	1996	1998/Volume 6 (4/4)
<i>Marketing Theory</i> (2001) ³	17	4	2003	Multiple volumes with 2 out of the 4 issues are SIs
<i>International Journal of Research in Marketing</i> (1984) ⁴	20	2	1988	1995/Volume 12 (3/5)
<i>European Journal of Marketing</i> (1967) ³	38	14	1997	2019/Volume 53 (4/12)
<i>Journal of Marketing Management</i> (1985) ²	69	18	1994	2017/Volume 33 (6/9)

Notes: Journals are ranked in an increasing order of the number of published SIs. The numbers 4, 3, and 2 in the superscript denote the journal rating as per the 2021 Academic Journal Guide of the Chartered Association of Business Schools.

4. Issues about special issues

The five major issues concerning SIs are explained and discussed in this section.

4.1. Space allocation

The first issue about SIs is space allocation. This issue was raised about a decade-and-a-half ago in our sister discipline (i.e., management) by Priem (2006). Too many SIs, according to Priem (2006, p.385), will “squeeze out quality articles on other topics that otherwise would have appeared in regular issues”. The publication of SIs forces out regular submissions of high-quality that might have been accepted otherwise. As shown in Table 1, in JM’s volume 85 (i.e., 2021), two of the six issues are SIs. Four of the 12 issues in volume 53 (i.e., 2019) of the EJM are SIs. SIs account for one-third of the content published in these two journals in 2021 and 2019, respectively. Table 1 also shows that three of the six issues in MS’ volume 39 (i.e., 2020) are SIs. The same is true for JAMS’s volume 48 (i.e., 2020). SIs accounted for half of all publications in these two top-tier journals in 2020. As indicated in Table 2, two-third of what was published in JMM during 2017 (i.e., Volume 33) appeared in SIs. To sum up, SIs accounted for one-third to two-thirds of what was published in these journals in the last five years. The space (i.e., pages) available to publish regular papers is becoming smaller within these journals.

4.2. Intellect left to rot

Calls-for-papers for SIs typically advertise the volume/year in which the SI in question will be published (see <https://www.ama.org/journal-of-marketing-call-for-papers-marketing-impact-with-research-driven-apps/>). GEs will do everything possible to keep that promise. Papers submitted and accepted for publication in a regular issue may be held in the online queue for many months or even years (as “early view”, “online first”, or “ahead-of-print” papers) before being assigned volume, issue, and pagination information (Teixeira da Silva, 2022). SIs “can lead to backlogs in the publication of other articles because it interrupts the normal publishing flow” (Repiso et al., 2021, p.595). For example, on 7 December 2022, JM listed 26 “online first articles” and “accepted manuscripts”, with one of them published online on 15 July 2022. For the sake of information, JM published 51 articles in 2022. Hence, while JM is soliciting papers for its upcoming three SIs (Sridhar et al., 2023, p.5), nearly half-a-

volume is waiting on the online queue of accepted articles. An article slated for a regular issue is likely to take six months or longer to be published. Authors want to have their accepted papers published as soon as possible. They do not wish to see them perpetually left “in press”, in a limbo state (Teixeira da Silva, 2022).

4.3. A command economy of ideas

A journal is a marketplace of ideas (Moorman et al., 2022). A mainstream/generalist journal, like JM, is an open marketplace of ideas. SIs shift the open marketplace of ideas towards a “command economy” of ideas by prioritising certain topics over others (Priem, 2006). To have an idea on the topics that were chosen for focus in the top-tier journals, Table 3 was created.

Table 3. Topics of the SIs published in elite marketing journals between 2018 and 2022

Journal	Year	Volume/issue	Topics of the SIs
JMR	2022	Volume 59, Issue 1	Education and marketing
	2021	Volume 58, Issue 6	Marketing insights from multimedia data
JM	2022	Volume 86, Issue 1	New technologies in marketing
	2021	Volume 85, Issue 3	Better marketing for a better world
	2021	Volume 85, Issue 3	From Marketing Priorities to Research Agendas
JCR	2021	Volume 48, Issue 4	The Future of Brands in a Changing Consumer Marketplace
	2020	Volume 47, Issue 3	Consumer responses to external threats
MS	2020	Volume 39, Issue 6	Marketing Science and field experiments
	2020	Volume 39, Issue 3	Marketing science and health
	2020	Volume 39, Issue 1	Consumer protection
JAMS	2022	Volume 50, Issue 6	Creating customer, firm, and social value through cutting-edge digital technologies
	2021	Volume 49, Issue 4	Innovating in the Digital Economy: Leveraging Technology to Create Value for Consumers and Firms
	2020	Volume 48, issue 5	Managing Business and Innovation in Emerging Markets
	2020	Volume 48, issue 3	Generalizations in Marketing: Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
	2020	Volume 48, issue 1	Technology and Marketing
	2019	Volume 47, Issue 6	Marketing Strategy in Digital, Data-Rich, and Developing Market (D3) Environments
	2019	Volume 47, Issue 1	Consumer Journeys: Developing Consumer-Based Strategy
JCP	2021	Volume 31, Issue 3	Consumer Psychology for the Greater Good
	2018	Volume 28, Issue 2	Marketplace Morality

Though some topics chosen for these SIs seem to be prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, others are recurring themes. To get an idea on these recurring topics, the titles of the 19 SIs published in marketing’s top-tier journals were entered into a free online word cloud generator (<https://www.jasondavies.com/wordcloud/>). A word cloud is a visual representation of text data in which tags are single words, and their relative sizes and colors represent their weight/importance in the context of the considered text (Tellis and Tirunillai, 2021). The purpose of using a word cloud generator is to visualize the most prevalent/frequent words in the thematic names of the SIs under consideration (see e.g., Weinstein, 2022). As could be seen from Figure 1, the words “marketing”, “consumer”, “digital”, “technology”, and “technologies” dominate the word cloud. This is quite understandable since five SIs published between 2021 and 2022 in JM (Volume 86, Issue 1), JMR (Volume 58, Issue 6), and JAMS (Volume 48, issue 1; Volume 49, Issue 4; Volume 50, Issue 6) focused on technology, multimedia, and digital data. These same topics were also addressed in seven SIs that appeared in 2019-2022 in IJRM, EJM, and JMM (see Table 4). Thus, according to Tables 3 and 4 as well

(McKinley, 2007). This will eventually lead to the formation of silos (or compartments) with a small number of like-minded specialized scholars publishing articles by and for themselves.

Take, for instance, the topics related to technology, multimedia, and digital data. They all fall within the scope of such specialized journals as JIM, *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing* (JRIM), and *Electronic Markets* (EM). While each of the three specialized journals mentioned above provides an adequate/decent publication venue, researchers prefer to have their papers published in top-tier journals (Herndon, 2016; Moussa, 2022). Whether it's because of the "publish in elite journals or perish" way of thinking or not, SIs in top-tier journals shift submission flows away from specialized journals and toward the formers. By publishing SIs, top-tier journals are infringing on the territory of these specialized journals, jeopardizing their supply of high-quality submissions. Fearing a lack of good articles to fill the available pages (i.e., white pages fever) (Mowday, 2006), editors of specialized journals have two options: (a) to accept articles of a lesser quality; or (b) to publish SIs on topics that fall within their journals' aims and scopes. The first option could be disastrous for a journal's reputation and image. The second may eventually result in further fragmentation/specialization of the marketing discipline. SIs within specialized journals are indeed becoming commonplace. For instance, the JIM has lately published two SIs, one in 2020 (on "Big Data, Technology-Driven CRM & Artificial Intelligence") and another in 2022 (titled "Examining the Unanticipated Consequences of Interactive Marketing"). SIs could also be found in the latest volumes of JRIM and EM.

4.5. Publication ethics issues about special issues

4.5.1. Lack of publishing transparency

Previous research in other disciplines (e.g., psychology) indicates that papers published in SIs have peer review processes that were completed in too short time frames (see Sala et al., 2017). Article submission and acceptance dates must be made available in order to conduct similar analyses. Unfortunately, only a few marketing journals provide reception and acceptance dates for articles published in them (either in SIs or regular issues). For example, MS is the only journal among the top-six publication outlets that provides this information. Such a lack of transparency regarding article submission/acceptance dates is regrettable because it prevents any independent inspection of the peer review process for SIs' articles.

4.5.2. Fake peer review

For a not-to-be-named marketing journal, the author was able to perform that investigation as it provides submission/acceptance dates for its articles. For that journal, one article, published in an SI, submitted on 12 June 2018 and accepted on 14 June 2018 was found. The author's queries here are: Is 48 hours enough time for a paper to be peer-reviewed? Is this an instance of fake peer review? Fake peer review arises "when editors rely on authors' recommended reviewers. These names are often genuine but have a false e-mail address that enables the authors to write a favorable review of their own paper" (Gao and Zhou, 2017, p.33). These fake reviews are then returned very quickly, often within 24 hours.

4.5.3. Gift authorship

In that same marketing journal, the author has found another article, also published in an SI and co-authored by three scholars, where it is stated the following: "This paper *replicates* a keynote address delivered by [author 1]" (emphasis added). The following are the author's questions: Have the two co-authors made significant contributions to the paper? Have they critically revised it for important intellectual content? If the answer to either of these two

questions is no, then this is an instance of gift authorship. Gift authorship is perhaps the most common unethical behavior seen in academic publishing (Chawla, 2020). Gift authorship involves adding one or more authors to a paper when they have not actually made a contribution to the work, perhaps to reward a collaborator, to return a favor, or for some other gains (Teixeira da Silva and Dobránszki, 2016).

4.5.4. Questionable guest editorship

While searching the archive of the same unnamed marketing journal, the author also discovered four SIs on almost the same topic. Delving deeper, the author found that these four SIs were (co)guest-edited by the same scholar. This finding raises the following questions: Why is that scholar repeatedly (co)guest-editing SIs on the same topic? Is it motivated by a strong desire to help others? Or is it because that scholar/GE is using SIs deliberately to finally find a publication outlet for their papers? (Else, 2020). For readers' information, that scholar has (co)authored up to nine papers that have been published in the four SIs s/he co-guest-edited. It must be stressed that these nine papers are articles, not editorials for the respective SIs. In three of these nine articles, that guest editor is also the sole and corresponding author. The four SIs (co)guest-edited by that scholar contain 39 articles. To put it more clearly, 23.077% of the content of these four SIs was (co)authored by that GE/scholar.

Is this an isolated incident? Unfortunately, the answer is no. Another scholar who has co-guest-edited two SIs in the same marketing journal has co-authored up to five papers. There are 27 articles in these two SIs. In other words, that scholar co-wrote 18.518% of the content of these two SIs.

The White Paper on Publication Ethics by the Council of Science Editors in its subsection 2.1.7 (added on 6 September 2021) states the following (see <https://www.councilscienceeditors.org/resource-library/editorial-policies/publication-ethics/2-1-editor-roles-and-responsibilities/#217>):

- Guest Editors should avoid facilitating peer review of a supplement/special series paper in which they are also listed as a coauthor. In this instance, peer review of these papers should be done by someone else qualified to facilitate an objective review.
- Guest Editors who submit manuscripts for consideration in the proposed supplement/special series/call for papers must maintain the highest publication standards and ethical practices. Therefore, Guest Editors must recuse themselves from all handling of such manuscripts. Further, Guest Editors and the journal must utilize a predetermined independent review and decision-making process. In addition, the journal should disclose to the public how such papers were handled, if papers are accepted for publication.

Surprisingly, only one of the 14 articles (co)authored by these two GEs discloses information about the peer review process. The following statement appears in that article: "This paper has been reviewed separately by the [...] review board".

5. Concluding comments

SIs have always been a part of the academic publishing landscape. Though publishers and their journals can use Artificial Intelligence and Deep Learning models to automatically create virtual SIs of accepted papers (see Gündoğan and Kaya, 2019), SIs will most likely remain so indefinitely, despite the issues associated with them. The goal of this paper has been to bring attention to this publishing practice and the issues it raises. It is hoped that this commentary will spark discussion and debate among marketing scholars about the use and abuse of SIs.

Despite the fact that this paper has highlighted the profusion of SIs in top and top-tier marketing journals and its consequences, the causes of this profusion were not thoroughly investigated. One of the likely causes of this proliferation of SIs is that there is evidence suggesting that articles published in some SIs of some marketing (e.g., Kahn et al., 2020; Repiso et al., 2021) and management (Conlon et al., 2006) journals receive more citations than those published in regular issues. Publishing more SIs is commonly known as one of the most used ten publishing strategy to boost citation-based indicators such as Clarivate's Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and/or Scopus' Cite Score (Falagas and Alexiou, 2008). For example, JAMS, the top-tier journal with the most SIs published, saw its JIF (CiteScore) increase from 8.488 (11.9) in 2017 to 14.904 (15.2) in 2021. Are these significant increases in journal-level citation-based metrics due to the publication of more SIs?

Publishing more SIs is also one of the features of predatory journals (Meijer and Webster, 2022). Predatory journals publish anything for a fee (also called article processing charges or APCs). These journals often charge high APCs, but provide little or no peer review or editing services (Moussa, 2021a). All of the investigated marketing journals are hybrid journals; that is, journals that offer both open access and traditional subscription-based models for accessing its articles. In a hybrid model, authors can choose to pay APCs to make their article open access, while other articles in the same journal remain behind a fee-wall. This raises the question, is the increase in SIs in marketing journals a strategy to lure more submissions and ultimately generate more income through APCs?

The author leaves the two questions raised above to future researchers.

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