

Commentary on the Mort et al. Paper

Journal Rankings: How Much Credence Should We Give Them?

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1. Ranking Journals

Mort et al.'s (2004) list of top-tier marketing journals includes the *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR), the *Journal of Marketing* (JM), the *Journal of Marketing Research* (JMR), the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (JAMS), and the *International Journal of Research in Marketing* (IJRM). This is not a surprising list. All these journals are strong, academically. If they were brands they might be described as having high-levels of equity: high brand awareness, positive brand associations, broad appeal, wide distribution, etc. A few of the top-tier journals are more specialist; for instance, *Marketing Science* (MS) and the *Journal of Retailing* (JR). These are highly rated journals, although not all academics are either aware of these journals or feel confident evaluating them. The high "can't rate" percentages for these journals capture these factors. Again, there aren't any major surprises here.

That there are so few surprises gives face-validity to the journal ranking. Moreover, given the plausibility of the ranking, it would seem safe to use it for all the purposes described by Mort et al.: to evaluate the research performance of academics, to inform appointments and promotions decisions, to guide publication plans, to direct research funding, and so forth. At an institutional level, the ranking might be used to assess departmental reputations, attract top-notch research students, and obtain and maintain AACSB accreditation. In principle, I see no problem with any of these uses. If we must evaluate the research performance of academics, the quality of the journals in which the work has appeared would seem to be relevant. If we must accredit institutions, taking some account of where staff have published makes sense.

But, there are dangers. All journal rankings suffer from limitations and imperfections. Simple rankings – such as the one with which we are presented – fail to recognise the

diversity of journals and journal types. There are many ways to convey research ideas, principles and findings – a journal article is just one communication vehicle among many alternatives. Ultimately, what really matters is the quality of the research – does it add to the sum of marketing knowledge? Journal rankings *should* have some relationship to research quality, but the relationship isn't going to be perfect. I elaborate on these points.

2. The Imperfections of Journal Rankings

Mort et al. recognise many of the limitations and imperfections of ranking procedures. However, the problems are more severe and more pervasive than they imply. There are at least three reasons for this: the problem of journal selection, the problem of respondent familiarity, and the problem of respondent confusion.

The problem of journal selection

Drawing up the initial list of journals is fraught with problems. Quibbles over inclusions and exclusions will always arise. Why isn't the excellent *Journal of Product Innovation Management* (JPIM) on the list? With its focus on product innovation and product development, this journal addresses themes of major importance to marketers. Is there a specific reason for excluding *Qualitative Market Research* (QMR), or was this a simple oversight, or is the journal too new and untested? If the latter is true, why include the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* (JCB) and *Marketing Theory* (MT) – both fledglings of the 21st century?

An additional problem is not knowing where to draw the boundaries of the discipline. Why include (and rate very highly) an international business journal (the *Journal of International Business Studies*), but exclude very reputable general management journals in which marketers publish (e.g., *Management Science* and *Organisational Science*)? Why include a couple of mid-to-low-ranking tourism and hospitality journals (*Journal*

of *Hospitality and Tourism Research* and *Vacation Marketing*), but exclude the far more reputable *Annals of Tourism Research*. Or, more controversially, why include any of these titles in a list of marketing journals? There are published lists and rankings of journals in these cognate disciplines, offering more complete information than can be provided by surveying marketers (e.g., see Dubois and Reeb 2000 for international business, and Pechlaner et al. 2004 for tourism and hospitality).

Potentially, a major category of exclusions arises from the decision to list only English-language journals. Most well-known rankings are deficient in this respect. Tellingly, even a recent study of publications by staff at Asia-Pacific universities does not include a single Asian-language journal in its list of top marketing journals (Cheng, et al. 2003). One interpretation is that no worthwhile research is published in French, German, Mandarin, etc. (which is not the case). Alternatively, it is just too hard to include non-English titles, which means we may be resigning ourselves to an unhealthy degree of cultural bias.

Inevitably, it seems, there will be controversy in drawing up the initial list of journals. The underlying difficulty is one of market definition. It is a familiar problem in brand management. Tim Tam and Tiny Teddy appear among the top ten biscuit brands in Australia (Retail World 2003). The former is most definitely a biscuit, whereas the latter could be classed as a biscuit or a snack – perhaps in competition with Sakata rice crackers. Where the line is drawn between these categories, and how brands are allocated, will be open to dispute. Attempting to categorise journals shares some of the same difficulties.

The problem of respondent familiarity

MS and JR are ranked equal 4th, but one third of respondents are not able to rate these journals. There would seem to be two problems here. First, it is somewhat remarkable (disturbing even) that so many of those identified as senior academics and leaders in the discipline are unable to rank these major journals. The research traditions represented by these journals may not be to everyone's liking, but the issues addressed lie at the core of the discipline – product development, pricing, distribution, promotions, services management, etc. For this reason alone we would expect the bulk of senior academics to be able to rank these journals.

Second, and more generally, any ranking exercise must make allowance for varying degrees of respondent familiarity. Having a “can't rate” response category

begins to measure lack of familiarity. But this precaution still allows anomalies to arise. Consider the case of the *Journal of Travel Research* – a journal believed to be number one among US academics in the field of tourism and hospitality and ranked in the top three by non-US academics (Pechlaner et al. 2004). In the present study it is ranked equal 58th, with 76% of respondents saying “can't rate” – this is well below the *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research* which is ranked equal 38th in the present study, with 64% saying “can't rate”. These results tell us more about senior marketing academics' ignorance of tourism and hospitality journals than they do about the quality of these journals.

In general, we are left wanting to know much more: do respondents subscribe to the listed journal, are they on the editorial board or do they serve as occasional reviewers, how often do they request or download articles, do they routinely read the journal, do they actively use articles from the journal (which isn't the same as making token citations to classic, but unread, articles)?

A measure of respondent confidence in the ranking would be useful too. Conceivably, the one third who cannot rate MS and JR say this, not because of lack of familiarity, but because they do not have the technical toolkit to judge the quality of the research published in these journals. Just as some of those who possess a marketing science toolkit might have difficulty judging the quality of interpretive articles in JCR.

The distinction that branding theory makes between descriptive and evaluative attributes has relevance here (Hoek et al. 2000). It might be expected a majority of leading marketing academics are able to assess journals in terms of descriptive attributes (e.g., we have been told so many times that JM is a major journal that few would say otherwise), but only users would be able to make a sound assessment in terms of evaluative attributes (e.g., that papers published in JM possess adequate levels of internal and external validity). The evaluative task is hard enough when faced with top-tier journals (although, as discussed later, proxies are used), but it becomes harder as respondents move down the list (there is, then, even uncertainty about the proxies).

The possibility of respondent confusion

Allied to the problem of respondent familiarity is that of respondent confusion. This is to be expected if senior academics have only a passing acquaintance with many of the journals on the list. The problem is exacerbated by the similarity of some of the journal titles. It is easy to

confuse the following titles: *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR), *Journal of Consumer Marketing* (JCM) and *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* (JCB). Curiously, JCB had a rank of 23 in the Mort et al. study (yet, at the time of the survey, it had only been in existence for two years), whereas JCM had a rank of 38 (despite being well-established for over 20 years). Perhaps respondents were confused about the journal titles, because it really was far too early for most senior academics in the region to make any kind of meaningful assessment of the content of JCB. Doubtless, in the fullness of time, JCB will become a fine and worthy journal, but that will be for others to judge.

Consider another example: what used to be called the *Journal of the Market Research Society* (JMRS) has been re-labelled as the *International Journal of Market Research* (IJMR), which is not dissimilar to the title of the *International Journal of Research in Marketing* (IJRM). The rankings (28th and 8th respectively) suggest senior marketing academics are clear about the relative merits of these journals, but the potential for confusion exists. Of course, there really shouldn't be any confusion – names and ranks aside – because these journals serve completely different purposes: IJMR assists market researchers and fieldworkers, whereas IJRM is a generalist research journal of an academic society.

In branding terminology, there are potential “me-too” or “lookalike” problems here. It is unlikely that titles have been deliberately chosen to confuse and deceive readers, but undoubtedly confusion can reign on assessment and appointments panels, particularly when those sitting on multi-disciplinary panels have only fleeting knowledge of marketing journals and, in haste, confuse titles such as JCR, JCM and JCB (I have seen it happen).

3. Journal Diversity

Respondents to Mort et al.'s survey were asked to rate journals in terms of “research quality”. This would have been taken to mean the perceived thoroughness of the research published in the journal (e.g., the internal and external validity of the research studies). Proxy measures would have been considered too, such as the perceived rigour of the double-blind review process, the perceived quality of the editor and editorial team, and known or perceived rankings from ISI Journal Citation Reports.

These are all relevant criteria for evaluating academic journals, which is why most journals are committed to a peer review process, put together expert editorial teams, and strive to raise awareness and access thereby

increasing citation rates. But let's be clear, there are other ways to rate a journal: we could assess the robustness of the research studies, the face-validity of the models and the plausibility of the results; we might weigh up the insights offered and the innovations made; or we could consider the readability and clarity of published papers, and the practical relevance and usefulness of the research.

Arguably, some of these evaluative criteria correlate. Thus, JM not only upholds peer-review processes, it also invests editorial resources in making papers readable and accessible (often with executive summaries printed in *Marketing News*). At the other end of the scale, it is not unknown for lower-ranked journals to carry academically weak papers that also score poorly on measures of relevance and accessibility – I am sure we all have had the misfortune to read abstruse and badly written papers in lower-ranked journals.

Notwithstanding these caveats, there are some very real differences between journals that are not easily captured by simple rankings. Journals serve different purposes and are aimed at different readers – researchers, educators, consultants, practitioners, students, etc. – and it may be unwise to force this diverse array of journals into a single ranking scheme. Indeed, we could envisage several rankings based on differences such as the following:

- Generalist coverage (JM, IJRM, JAMS – also the *Australasian Marketing Journal* [*amj*]) versus specialist coverage (MS and JR). The desired position of the specialist journals is to be a niche brand (i.e., limited penetration, but highly regarded and frequently read/cited); in practice, many of the specialist journals that appear further down the ranking are likely to be merely small (i.e., limited penetration, not highly regarded and infrequently read/cited).
- Non-aligned journals versus those serving professional purposes. IJRM has a role to play as the official journal of EMAC, as does the *Journal of Marketing Management* [JMM] for the Academy of Marketing or the British Journal of Management for the *British Academy of Management*. As the official journal of ANZMAC, *amj* is a catalyst for research in Australia, New Zealand and the Asia-Pacific region. A local/national brand effect appears to be at work here. This, in part, explains some of the regional differences in journal rankings; for instance, UK academics have high regard for JMM (Easton and Easton 2003), yet this is ranked 31st in the US-oriented study by Hult et al. (1997).
- Academic-oriented journals versus consultant-oriented

journals (*Sloan Management Review*, *California Management Review*, *Harvard Business Review* [HBR], *Business Horizons*, *Long Range Planning*, *Columbia Journal of World Business*). Typically, this distinction carries across into the classroom: research students are expected to read JCR articles, whereas coursework masters students are set HBR articles. Both types are of use.

- A distinction might be drawn between journals that publish “safe” or “sanitised” research and those that welcome controversial and critical papers. A few journals very explicitly call for critical papers in their editorial statements (e.g., MT and JCB). Of the top-tier journals the level of discourse appears to be greater in JCR and JBR, and increasingly in MS. The willingness to publish commentaries, short notes, replies, re-inquiries, etc. provides something of a litmus test in this regard.
- Finally, there are practitioner journals. It is not that the AMA’s *Marketing News*, *Marketing Management* and *Marketing Research* are “bad” and deserve low rankings (which is how they are placed in Mort et al.’s scheme). They are quite simply different. The same applies for regionally important practitioner journals, such as *Marketing Magazine* in New Zealand, *Professional Marketing*, *B&T Weekly* and *AdNews* in Australia, and *Marketing* in the UK. Interestingly, while these publications merit little consideration in academic circles, for most marketing managers these would be the only journal sources they would ever consult. In addition, such journals provide many marketing educators with case material and topical stories. A few of these journals attempt to bridge the two worlds – notable examples are the *Journal of Advertising Research* and *Admap* in the area of marketing communications and *Interfaces* in management science.

Is any of this remarkable? No, of course not. Market partitioning is a familiar enough concept to marketers: we don’t think of special vehicle brands (sports brands such as Ford’s Mustang, Mercedes Benz’ AMG and BMW’s “M”) in the same way as a regular family Holden, Ford or Toyota. In two-car households there might be duplicate purchasing, but that doesn’t mean we would want to put all these brands into a single quality-ranking scheme. If this is true of vehicle brands, there is no reason to treat diverse journal brands any differently.

4. Diverse Means of Dissemination

Wisdom in the arena of marketing communications

suggests that to build brand awareness a number of media vehicles should be used – in a coherent and integrated way. Carried across into the arena of research, this idea implies use of diverse means of dissemination. Securing publication in top-tier journals might be the equivalent of buying prime-time for your TVCs, but we know that non-prime TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc. have their uses too.

A couple of anecdotes illustrate my point. Ten years ago *The Marketing Society Review* carried a 3-page article of mine. This practitioner journal isn’t on Mort et al.’s list, nor would I expect it to be. Nevertheless, the article was influential, having significant practical consequences for British retailers and giving rise to follow-up research. Numerous requests for offprints came to me for several years after publication. More recently, a jointly authored article of mine appeared in JCM – ranked equal 38th on Mort et al.’s list – clearly, this is not a top-tier publication, nevertheless there were roughly 4,000 full-text downloads in the first six months after publication, the article was reprinted in *CRM Today* and summarised in *Professional Marketing*. In both cases these were dissemination success stories.

Dissemination of research can be achieved in varied ways: through workshops and conferences, in proceedings and specialist reports, through the immediacy of media coverage or by long-term investment in the nurturing of PhD students and junior staff. Research can be captured through software and on video, film and DVD, as well as the written word – something now explicitly recognised by the Association of Consumer Research and recently discussed in the pages of *Marketing Science* (Lilien 2004). In most scientific disciplines research monographs play an important role. In marketing, despite a plethora of textbooks and popular guides, there are surprisingly few monographs. Yet, taking an historical perspective, some of our most influential ideas have been disseminated as books/monographs (e.g. Alderson *Dynamic Marketing Behavior*, Ehrenberg *Repeat-Buying*, Gabor *Pricing Principles and Practices*).

Nor should dissemination be confined to a single discipline. If we believe we have something to say to other researchers, why not reach broader audiences – *Nature* in general science, *Journal of Applied Psychology* in psychology, *Administrative Sciences Quarterly* in management, *Transportation Research* in transportation, or the *Australian Journal of Management* with a multi-disciplinary audience? This, in fact, is what many in

marketing do already. A key finding from Easton and Easton's (2003) survey of marketing journals in the UK was: "... articles are spread across a vast number of journals many of them not obviously related to marketing. Indeed, what comes across strongly is how permeable the boundaries of any academic grouping are" (p21). This, of course, makes assessment even harder. To tackle the problem of evaluating non-marketing journals some schools rely on ISI Journal Citation Reports; this has the effect of discouraging publication in anything other than heavily cited non-marketing journals – a practice that gives rise to selectivity, although some might see it as overly restrictive and potentially myopic.

The general message here is to think of dissemination in broad terms – to use a variety of communications vehicles, ideally as part of a coherent portfolio of publications and activities (Polonsky et al. 1998). This will include, but not be confined to, highly-ranked academic journals.

5. The Generation and Dissemination of Knowledge

Ultimately, what really matters is having papers that make a contribution to the process of generating and disseminating knowledge. That is, having "important" papers; important in terms of describing an idea, principle or finding that makes a contribution conceptually, methodologically and/or empirically. In a discipline such as marketing we might expect these contributions to have applicability too, but perhaps there should be some room for basic research as well.

This way of thinking shifts attention away from journal ranking per se. More meaningful questions are:

- Does the journal publish interesting and intriguing work?
- What proportion of papers could be classified as important?
- Over what domains do these papers make a contribution?
- With what authority are the claims to knowledge generation made?
- Is the work part of a sustained programme of research?

Having answered these questions it ought to be possible to correlate contribution to knowledge and journal ranking. I would expect a positive correlation, although by no means a perfect one. Armstrong goes as far as to suggest the link between quality of journal and quality of

paper is so weak that journal rankings are an invalid proxy, and that the scientific process may be harmed if too much reliance is placed on this proxy (Armstrong 2003a and b). This, I believe, is an over-statement. Nevertheless, his comments alert us to the dangers of blindly relying on journal rankings as a proxy for contribution to knowledge (Armstrong 2004).

The concern is that too few papers and, therefore, too few journals make enough of a contribution. Some commentators feel the problem lies in the conceptual domain – that more of a contribution is needed in terms of defining constructs, measuring them and theorizing causal relationships between them (Rossiter 2003). Others focus on the empirical and applied aspects, arguing that far too many papers lack practical insights and therefore they are unlikely to be of any value to those engaged in the practice of marketing (November 2004). Despite these criticisms, it is possible to find papers in our top journals that offer applicability, informed by sound concepts, proven methods and empirical facts. The finalists in the ISMS Practice Prize Competition illustrate this – these studies have been written up in *Marketing Science* (e.g. Roberts et al. 2004).

6. Conclusions

Should we dispense with lists and rankings? No. Indeed, it is inevitable that lists will be constructed – the temptation to rate, rank, compare and contrast is too great for most of us to resist. Moreover, if we have these rankings as tacit knowledge there might be value in making the knowledge explicit and transparent.

But, we should not allow these rankings to dominate our research activities and our assessment exercises. The larger project is to generate knowledge – important knowledge – and then disseminate it effectively using a variety of communications media and channels to the audiences we most want to reach, including researchers, educators, consultants, practitioners and students.

Rigid and obsessive adherence to lists is for those with a bean-counting mentality, or for those who are unable to judge when a contribution to knowledge is being made and who feel they must instead fall back on a proxy measure. There are just too many limitations and imperfections for us to give too much credence to journal rankings, especially simple ones that fail to acknowledge the diversity of journal types and the different target audiences that most researchers are trying to reach.

To continue the branding analogy, if we are fortunate enough to have a great consumer product it is likely we

will want to feature it in prime-time TVCs and distribute it through reputable mass retailers (the equivalent of top-tier journals). But that doesn't mean we wouldn't also be interested in other mass media, direct marketing, B2B/institutional sales channels, and so forth. Comparatively, some of these other media and channels may prove to be very effective, even more effective. That's what the folks at Krispy Kreme Donuts appear to be telling us!

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Biography

Mark D. Uncles is Professor of Marketing, School of Marketing, UNSW. He was a respondent to the original Mort et al. survey. As Head of School, Co-editor of *amj* and a member of six other editorial boards, and a frequent member of selection and promotion panels, he has often had to consider the question of how much credence should be given to journal rankings.

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