Editorial

As editors, we firmly believe that Marketing ZFP as a journal provides the Marketing community with an outlet to explore new forms of publishing in a high-quality environment. One new form of publishing is *registered reports*. Before giving an overview of the three papers in this issue (none of them are registered reports yet), we want to delve deeper into how we want to handle registered reports in Marketing ZFP.

Registered reports and Marketing ZFP

Registered reports differ from traditional studies by being submitted in two stages (e.g., Briker and Gerpott 2024, p. 589). In the first stage, researchers submit a completed front-end of the paper, including motivation, positioning, theory and hypotheses. Additionally, it needs to include a detailed plan of the empirical study the researchers want to conduct to test their hypotheses. Importantly – and in a clear distinction to traditional research – this happens before the empirical data has been collected. In a way, it is a very(!) detailed pre-registration. This "stage-1 submission" undergoes a regular review process. After this review process, the researchers may receive an "in-principle acceptance". This "... commits the journal to publishing the final paper regardless of whether the hypotheses are supported, provided that the authors adhere to their approved protocol and interpret the results in line with the evidence" (Chambers & Tzavella, 2021, p. 29).

The second stage of the submission process starts after the researchers have conducted their empirical study. Subsequently, they submit their manuscript to the journal again. It is then the reviewers' task to check whether the authors have faithfully adhered to the methodological plan they outlined in the paper that was accepted in principle. In a review round, the authors may be asked to clarify issues or conduct additional analyses. Very importantly, this is independent of the outcome of the research. If the study was conducted as planned, it will be accepted for publication.

Registered reports are part of the larger endeavor for reproducible research results (Munafò et al. 2017) to restore trust in the outcomes of the behavioral sciences, especially given the large numbers of not-reproducible results that are often-reported (and even more often encountered when trying to build on earlier empirical research in our labs and offices). Registered reports address at least two of the problems behind the reproducibility issues.

- They act like super-preregistration, where the research publicly commits to specific hypotheses and a detailed methodological plan. Hence, by strongly reducing the flexibility of researchers in their choices in data collection, analysis, and writing of the paper, they strongly reduce the risk of producing false-positive results (Simmons, Nelson, and Simonsohn 2011).
- They address the file-drawer problem (i.e., studies that fail to find significant effects are less likely to be published) because they create an environment where it is possible to publish null findings. It is pretty easy for researchers to produce null findings through lazy theorizing, unconvincing experimental stimuli, and sloppy execution. Therefore, reviewers are traditionally quite reluctant to accept research with null findings. Registered reports address this issue because research is not selected based on its results but on the merit of theory and empirical design.

Do registered reports change this? Initial evidence suggests that they do. For instance, Soderberg et al. (2021) asked researchers to rate several registered reports and a control group of traditional research articles to compare them along several quality criteria. They find that registered reports outperform the control group on twelve of nineteen quality criteria (e.g., methodological rigor and paper quality). At the same time, they do not differ regarding novelty despite this being a fear associated with registered reports (Soderberg et al. 2021).

Despite their obvious appeal, registered reports are much less prevalent in the marketing literature than they should be. Therefore, we focus on targeting registered reports as being standard in Marketing ZFP. To this end, we will also edit a special issue on "Customer Relationships in the Age of Generative AI" consisting only of registered reports (please see call for papers in this issue for further details).

What do we expect from registered reports? We ask researchers interested in submitting a registered report to adhere to the guidelines developed for journals in the "Nature" ecosystem, especially the journal "Nature human behavior" ("Registered Reports Nature Human Behavior" n.d.) – with a hint of flexibility stemming from our position as a smaller and more collegial outlet. Notably, instead of asking researchers to establish that their planned study comes with a statistical power of 95 %, we will work with the more conventional 80 % – reducing the sample-induced financial burden of publishing a registered report with Marketing ZFP.

Congratulations

The acting editors, in close cooperation with the senior editors, assigned the **best paper award for 2024** to Anne T. Coughlan, Michael Gerke, and Manfred Krafft: Drivers and Moderators of Direct Selling Business Outcomes: Why I Participate Affects How I Perform, published in Volume 46, Issue 1 (p. 4–19).

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Given Heribert Gierls' upcoming retirement, he received a **lifetime achievement award**. During his academic career, he has made outstanding contributions to Marketing ZFP. This is evident through his years of service as managing editor and as (co-)author of 36 scientific articles published in Marketing ZFP.

Papers in this issue

The first two papers published in this issue have been processed and accepted by the previous editorial team, Daniel Baier and Jörg Koenigstorfer, and the third one by Martin Klarmann. *Nadine Brauckmann* and *Heribert Gierl* are the authors of the first article entitled "Einfühlung: Overview of Theory Components and Test in Advertising Settings." The paper explores Einfühlung, a psychological concept rooted in 19th-century German philosophy, which describes achieving a sense of oneness with others through bodily and emotional imitation. Unlike empathy, Einfühlung emphasizes non-cognitive, imitation-based responses to the postures, movements, and emotional expressions of others, often leading to a felt unity or resonance with them. The authors synthesize historical, philosophical writings and contemporary empirical findings to construct a comprehensive theory of Einfühlung. The resulting model includes sensory recognition, cognitive decoding, bodily/emotional imitation, and affective unity with others. Furthermore, the paper proposes and tests the application of Einfühlung theory in mass-media advertising. The hypothesis is that viewers develop Einfühlung with actors in commercials when bodily and emotional imitation is possible. The study finds that ads enable greater imitation to evoke stronger viewer engagement and effectiveness.

The second article, by *Anastasia Mirow, Peter Kurz*, and *Winfried J. Steiner*, focuses "On the Use of Alternative-Specific Designs in Choice-Based Conjoint Analysis". This paper explores the benefits and application of alternative-specific designs (ASD) in choice-based conjoint (CBC) analysis within marketing research. While ASD is widely used in fields like transportation and health economics, its potential in marketing remains underutilized. The authors present: (i) a detailed theoretical and methodological overview of ASD, contrasting it with generic conjoint designs; (ii) a typology of ASD structures, including examples from various fields and use cases; (iii) an empirical case study based on a CBC survey of consumer preferences for electric SUVs in the UK, demonstrating how ASD allows for brand-specific pricing and richer modeling of consumer preferences; (iv) estimation techniques, including Hierarchical Bayesian modeling, and a discussion on interpreting willingness-to-pay (WTP) in ASD-CBC models; and (v) advanced modeling options, including hybrid choice models, nonlinear utility functions, and how artificial intelligence could further enhance CBC studies.

In the third article, *Amir Heiman, Lutz Hildebrandt*, and *Udo Wagner* are interested in "The Effect of Information on Money-Back Guarantees on Brand Attribute Perceptions and Choices in Competitive Markets". This research is motivated by the fact that the growth of online apparel shopping has led to increased return rates, which hurt profitability. Retailers attempt to mitigate this by adjusting money-back guarantees (MBGs) or offering discounts, but the impact of these strategies remains unclear. The authors investigate how comparative information on MBGs and pricing influences consumer perceptions on brand attitudes and brand choices in the apparel market, particularly in competitive and digitally evolving environments. An experimental study in Israel exposed participants to newspaper articles highlighting differences in MBGs or prices among eight fashion brands. The authors conclude that extending MBG periods beyond industry norms is costly and often ineffective; instead of overly generous MBGs, firms should focus on balanced return policies, possibly paired with technology (e.g., virtual fitting rooms), to reduce perceived risk.

A note of thanks

Marketing ZFP publishes peer-reviewed articles and heavily relies on editorial board members and ad-hoc reviewers. On behalf of the previous editors of Marketing ZFP, Daniel Baier and Jörg Koenigstorfer, we thank these scholars for their contribution as reviewers during the editorship of Daniel and Jörg, thus helping our journal keep high academic standards.

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Call for Papers: Customer Relationships in an Age of Generative AI – Special Issue of Registered Reports

Martin Klarmann and Udo Wagner

It has been less than ten years since we (could have) learned that "Attention is all you need" (Vaswani et al. 2017) to enable a gigantic leap in the performance of machine learning algorithms for analyzing and interpreting all types of human creative output. Coupled with the increasing availability of data for machine learning – possibly accelerated through the sharp increase in digital activities during the Covid 19 pandemic – this has made algorithms possible that can generate text, visuals, and sound at a fantastic quality.

Only future generations will be able to honestly tell whether these new algorithms are nothing more than "Stochastic Parrots" (Bender et al. 2021) or whether Sam Altman's (2025) prediction will be accurate that they are the stepping stone needed for reaching "Gentle Singularity". However, it is clear already that the advent of generative AI strongly affects how firms interact with their customers. Examples are everywhere:

- The costs of creating highly personalized content have dramatically decreased – opening paths to something some of our clever students call "hyper-personalization."
- Creating creative content for advertising or customer information can become highly automated – marketers becoming content controllers instead of content creators.
- Interactions with customers in sales and service processes can be delegated to chatbots or video avatars, providing new flexibility and availability at the cost of reducing human-to-human interaction.
- New forms of customer co-creation become possible because customers can experiment with virtual prototypes much more easily, for instance, by visualizing changes in the setting of their choice (e.g., testing out a new look in a Gen AI mirror). Coupled with AI-enabled, faster innovation cycles, this can accelerate product lifecycles and fashions.

In sum, these new possibilities allow firms to improve their customer relationships. However, these innovations also raise important questions about trust, privacy, ethics, and the evolving role of the customer in the marketing process. Will customers respond to AI content in the same manner as they respond to "authentic" human content? Will relationships become more fragile if human-to-human interaction is replaced with human-to-bot interaction? Will the importance of brands increase – in a world where it becomes more challenging to trust messages?

Therefore, this special issue of Marketing ZFP: Journal of Research and Management (https://rsw.beck.de/zeitschriften/marketing) invites submissions that explore questions surrounding firm-customer relationships in the age of generative AI. It is open to a broad set of topics embracing diverse perspectives on B2B or B2C relationships, reflecting the opportunities and challenges of this technological revolution.

We ask authors interested in contributing to this special issue to do so in the form of a registered report (e.g., Briker and Gerpott 2024). Registered reports are a publishing format in which the study protocol – including research questions, hypotheses, and methods – is peer-reviewed and accepted "in principle" before data collection begins. In doing so, we believe that such a process ensures that publication is based on the rigor of the methodology rather than the results, reducing publication bias. Initial evidence suggests that registered reports may be effective in this regard (Soderberg et al. 2021).

Specifically, when submitting such a registered report to Marketing ZFP, we ask authors to adhere to the guidelines for registered reports developed for the "Nature" journals ("Registered Reports Nature Human Behaviour" n.d.). More details on our policy regarding registered reports can be found in the *editorial of Marketing ZFP 47 (2).*

The deadline for submitting first-stage proposals for this special issue is **December 1, 2025.** To submit your manuscript, please email it to **martin.klarmann@kit.edu**. We aim to provide reviewer responses in January 2026 and final decisions on the first stage proposals in March 2026. We intend to publish this Special Issue at the end of 2026, giving authors about six months to conduct the experimental study described in the registered report and write up the results. If you are unsure about whether your research idea fits our special issue, please feel free to email us at *martin.klarmann@kit.edu* or *udo.wagner@univie.ac*.

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