

Lost in retraction: The curious case of a misidentified investigation and a missing retraction notice

Salim Moussa

Abstract: This commentary examines the unusual retraction record of an article in the *Journal of Marketing Research*, an elite marketing journal, that was originally retracted in 2014 but whose retraction notice went missing from Sage Publications' scholarly record until a second retraction in 2022. To make matters worse, the retraction notice incorrectly identified Tilburg University as the investigating institution, rather than Erasmus University Rotterdam. These discrepancies raise serious questions about editorial oversight, transparency, and academic record integrity. By analyzing this case, the author emphasizes the need for stricter retraction protocols to maintain scientific integrity.

Introduction

Retractions are a bitter pill, but they are critical to maintaining the integrity of the scientific record (Joshi & Minirani, 2024). They act as a corrective mechanism for flawed or fraudulent research. (COPE, 2019; Boudry et al., 2023; NISO, 2024; Koo & Lin, 2024; Kovacs et al., 2024; Moussa, 2022a; Moussa, 2022b; Teixeira da Silva, 2022; Yang et al., 2024). However, when the retraction process itself is marred by errors, inconsistencies, or procedural failures, it raises concerns about the reliability of academic publishing (Thorp, 2022; Moussa & Charlton, 2024). This commentary picks up where Moussa and Charlton (2024), in their recent *Accountability in Research* article, left off and examines a particularly troubling case: the retraction of an article from the *Journal of Marketing Research* (JMR).

Launched in 1964, JMR is one of the five publication venues sponsored by the American Marketing Association (AMA), the marketing discipline's most powerful academic and professional association. JMR is a top-tier journal included in the famous-yet-controversial Financial Times' list of the top 50 business and economics journals¹ (Moussa, 2021). The JMR was published by AMA up to October 2018 when Sage publications started publishing AMA's fleet of journals.²

The JMR article under scrutiny was published online on April 1, 2010. It was co-authored by Dirk Smeesters, a Belgian-born social psychologist who served, until June 21, 2012, as a professor of consumer behavior and society at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University

¹See <https://www.ft.com/content/3405a512-5cbb-11e1-8f1f-00144feabdc0> (Last accessed 10 March 2025).

²<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/press/sage-publishing-and-the-american-marketing-association-partner-to-publish-ama-journals> (Last accessed 10 March 2025).

Rotterdam (EUR) in the Netherlands. Smeesters became the central figure in a widely documented research misconduct scandal, first uncovered by behavioral scientist and whistleblower Uri Simonsohn. Simonsohn identified suspiciously improbable results in one of Smeesters’ papers and requested the raw data. Two investigations led by EUR revealed that Smeesters manipulated datasets to produce favorable outcomes, prompting the retraction of seven articles (Seadle, 2022; Moussa & Charlton, 2024; Crone & Green, 2025). The report of the first investigation³ was released on June 1st, 2012 while the one for the follow-up investigation⁴ was made public on March 5th, 2014, explicitly recommended the retraction of the JMR article.

The long-awaited retraction notice

On December 1st, 2022, AMA’s JMR finally issued a retraction notice for Smeesters’ fraudulent article. Details about this retraction notice are provided in Table 1.

Digital Object Identifier of the retraction notice	https://doi.org/10.1177/00222437221139856
Date of issuance of the retraction notice	December 1, 2022
Verbatim of the retraction notice	<p><i>On March 19, 2014, the Journal of Marketing Research and American Marketing Association (AMA) issued a retraction related to Jia (Elke) Liu and Dirk Smeesters’s (2010) article, “Have You Seen the News Today? The Effect of Death-Related Media Contexts on Brand Preferences” (Volume 47, Issue 2, pp. 251–62), at the recommendation of then–Editor in Chief Robert Meyer.</i></p> <p><i>The retraction was issued following the recommendation of a report dated March 5, 2014, from Tilburg University. A Tilburg committee conducted an intensive investigation into the data collection and analysis of this article and concluded that it should be retracted.</i></p> <p><i>Although the retraction was made public in 2014, when the AMA entered into a partnership with SAGE Publications to produce and distribute the Journal of Marketing Research in 2018, the retracted version was not included in SAGE’s scholarly record due to a clerical error. This notice serves to correct the error.</i></p>

Table 1: Retraction notice for Smeesters’ fraudulent JMR article

³An English version of that report is archived at: https://web.archive.org/web/20120707062725/http://www.eur.nl/fileadmin/ASSETS/press/2012/Juli/report_Committee_for_inquiry_prof_Smeesters.publicversion.28_6_2012.pdf

⁴See an archived version of that report at: https://web.archive.org/web/20170311224705/https://www.eur.nl/fileadmin/ASSETS/press/2014/maart/Report_Smeesters_follow-up_investigation_committee.final.pdf

A vague claim about a previous retraction

A first troubling issue is the retraction notice's vague claim that a retraction for Smeesters' article "was made public in 2014" without specifying where. Was the retraction posted on JMR's website, or was it formally published in one of its volumes? If it was merely posted online, this would deviate from standard practice, which requires a formal retraction notice (Xu & Hu, 2023). If it was officially published, the 2022 notice should provide precise details — volume, issue, and page numbers — to ensure proper documentation and accountability (Bakker et al., 2024). Such ambiguity undermines transparency and raises questions about the integrity of the retraction process.

Institutional misidentification

More troubling is the fact that the retraction notice erroneously attributes the investigation to Tilburg University. The correct institution responsible for investigating Dirk Smeesters' research misconduct was EUR. Given the weight that institutional investigations carry in cases of research misconduct, naming the wrong university introduces serious concerns about editorial diligence and accountability. This mistake is not a minor clerical error; it misdirects responsibility and potentially damages the reputation of an uninvolved institution.

If the first retraction notice was indeed published on March 19, 2014, and the 2022 notice for the same article contains this error, it is reasonable to question whether the original "lost" notice also misidentified the institution.

Such an error also raises concerns about the process that retraction notices undergo. Journals, particularly those with an "elite" status, have a duty to ensure accuracy in their official statements. If fundamental details such as institutional involvement are incorrect, how can readers trust that the retraction process was conducted rigorously? This case exemplifies why retraction notices should be subject to the same scrutiny as published research (Xu et al., 2023; Tang, 2024).

Clerical error or editorial negligence

According to the retraction notice, Smeesters' JMR article was originally retracted in 2014, yet it did not appear in Sage Publications' scholarly record until late 2022. This negligence — whether due to flawed record-keeping or a breakdown in the transition between publishers — raises serious concerns about the reliability of academic documentation. For context, Smeesters' article was the first ever retracted by JMR. Failing to communicate this lone retraction notice to the new publisher is not just an oversight—it is a troubling lapse in accountability. As a result, for over four years, a fraudulent article remained publicly accessible as legitimate, persisting through JMR's transition to Sage in October 2018. During this time, it continued to be viewed, downloaded (after paying a fee), read, and cited, reinforcing its false legitimacy until its retraction notice was finally issued on December 1st, 2022.

A striking consequence of this negligence is that a recent JMR article, published online on August 1, 2023 (see <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222437231194950>), cites Smeesters' JMR paper

as a legitimate source in its limitations and future research section—without acknowledging its fraudulent nature/retracted status. Hence, JMR cited its own retracted article despite officially retracting it “twice”.

No apology

The retraction notice notably lacks any apology to JMR’s readership — a glaring omission that raises serious ethical concerns. Readers, researchers, and institutions relied on this article as a legitimate contribution to the field, potentially shaping their own work based on fraudulent findings. A formal acknowledgment of this failure, along with an apology, would have been the bare minimum in maintaining trust and accountability in academic publishing.

Conclusion

The case of Smeesters’ JMR article exemplifies a concerning failure in the retraction process (Thorp, 2022), allowing a fraudulent article to remain publicly available and influential for several years. The retraction was lost, delayed, poorly documented, and full of errors, jeopardizing the integrity of academic publishing. The lack of an apology raises questions about editorial responsibility and accountability (see Meyer, 2015). If retractions are handled incorrectly, how can scholars trust the scholarly record? This is more than just an oversight; it is a stark reminder of the systemic flaws that allow misinformation to thrive unchecked in environments intended to protect research integrity. The AMA, JMR, and Sage must immediately correct this retraction notice to ensure that it is both accurate and comprehensive. Anything less reduces transparency and accountability in the retraction process.

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Salim Moussa (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2589-0719>) is a researcher and lecturer in marketing at the Institut Supérieur d'Administration des Entreprises (ISAE), University of Gafsa, Tunisia. His research focuses on scholarly communication, publication ethics, and the integrity of the academic record.