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An international perspective of the academic-practitioner divide in advertising: an exploratory study into its causes and solutions

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ABSTRACT

In our international study of seven countries, we found that the academic-practitioner divide is as real today as it was three decades ago. The divide, which is more pronounced in some regions, is likely to worsen as society becomes more digitally complex, exacerbated by the lack of industry experience among young scholars entering academia in some quarters. Many bridging solutions were explored in this study, but the most important solution is for academia to produce relevant research, one that is useful for the industry. This should be widely and innovatively disseminated in a way that is easy to understand without dumbing it down. Practitioners generally do not like or know how to collaborate with academics, suggesting a need to develop a culture or mechanism that can raise awareness and foster mutual respect and trust between academia and industry. Bridging the divide will be challenging because of the existing academic reward structures. This situation needs to change. The discovery of two successful research institutes in the Netherlands and Australia shows how this divide can be bridged.

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Academic-practitioner divide; bridging solutions; research collaboration; knowledge transfer; rigor versus relevance

Introduction

The debate about the academic-practitioner divide (henceforth, APD) in both marketing and advertising is not new (e.g. see AMA Task Force 1988 report; McKenzie et al. 2002; Nyilasy and Reid 2007), but it still generates heated arguments among scholars (Wieland, Nariswari, and Akaka 2021). At the heart of this debate is the persistent observation that scholarly research is short of managerial relevance, poorly

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designed, and lacks external validity, hence alienating practitioners' interest (Rossiter and Percy 2013; De Pelsmacker 2021). As a result, much of the publications generated by marketing and advertising academics are not read nor applied by practitioners (Kitchen, Kim, and Schultz 2008; Nyilasy and Reid 2012), policy-makers, or decision-makers in government (Biswas and Kirchherr 2015). This lack of practical impact represents an unfortunate reality because academic research can help practitioners better conceptualise issues, providing theories or approaches that can inform a practitioner's thinking and decision-making and potentially help to solve problems (Cornelissen and Lock 2002; Southgate 2006).

At the same time, insights from practitioners do not find their way to academia either. Practitioners often apply their own intuitive or implicit advertising theories when solving real-world problems (e.g. Kover 1995; Nyilasy and Reid 2012, 2019). Alternatively, they generate new knowledge learned from campaigns or have direct access to useful customer data that allows the testing of hypotheses (Gillespie, Otto, and Young 2018). Unfortunately, such knowledge is seldom disseminated to academics, which is regrettable because this can be of great value in improving the discipline. In education, such knowledge can also be used to improve the quality of the advertising curriculum. By not interacting with each other, both parties lose out.

Whilst the lack of interactions between advertising academics and practitioners is undesirable, one fact is inescapable: taxpayers' money funds academe's research and teaching activities. This funding system implies it must be publicly accountable and aligned with principles of academic quality. Therefore, the academe has responsibilities to multiple stakeholders, not just practitioners (Hunt 2002; Wieland, Nariswari, and Akaka 2021). If the duties of academe are not properly fulfilled, then it ultimately calls into question academics' role in society. Furthermore, since practitioners are not likely to initiate the bridging of the divide, the responsibility must fall on academics. Inspired by the 40th anniversary of the *International Journal of Advertising* and the special issue on the Perspectives of Advancing the Field for Academics and Practitioners, we want to adopt an international perspective in understanding what drives the current divide and search for solutions that are supported by practitioners. In our quest, we are guided by three overarching questions. The first is to understand the current drivers of the academic-practitioner divide:

RQ1: What are the drivers of the APD in this era of advertising?

The APD can be studied from the perspective of academics and practitioners. There is a multitude of explanations for practitioners' lack of interest in marketing or advertising knowledge (Ottesen and Grønhaug 2004). The five most cited reasons formulated by Nyilasy and Reid (2007) are (1) limited advertising knowledge dissemination, (2) the form or content of advertising knowledge, (3) how advertising knowledge is not utilised by practitioners, (4) organisational structures of academia, and (5) philosophy of science. However, these reasons were not empirically derived but, instead, resulted from their review of the literature, which is now more than a decade old. Moreover, the divide may also vary in scope across different countries because of differences in social-economic development; this has not been studied. Of the five reasons outlined by Nyilasy and Reid (2007), the first three are the most relevant to our investigation. Focusing on these reasons can potentially provide advertising academics with concrete tools for interacting with practitioners about their research-based knowledge. All these issues are addressed in our study by directly asking practitioners located in different geographic areas how useful academic knowledge is to them and what academics can do to make academic knowledge more valuable.

Academic journals can play a bridging role by keeping practitioners abreast of the latest knowledge in the field because their understanding of advertising usually comes from their early exposure to textbooks at university. Moreover, as digital tools and strategies develop in increasing sophistication, practitioners need to update their knowledge. Therefore, new knowledge published in journals could be important. Academic journals could also take a more active interest in the implicit theories or concepts used by practitioners. By implicit theories, we mean practitioner knowledge used in solving a problem (Kover 1995). For instance, the concepts of positioning (Trout 1969; Ries and Trout 1981) and unique selling proposition (USP; Reeves 1961) were originally popularised by practitioners before they were widely adopted in academia.

Taking an interest in such theories can help 'reverse the flow' of ideas from industry to academia in various forms of marketing knowledge – concepts, structural frameworks, strategic principles, and research principles (Rossiter 2001). This will allow the 'practitioner marketing knowledge' to be appropriately codified and empirically verified. Thus, in our study, we also seek the views of scientific-oriented academics, that is, editors and associate editors of advertising journals. They possess a wealth of knowledge that should be mined (Okazaki 2008; De Pelsmacker 2021; Taylor 2020) but rarely are (c.f., Stewart and Ladik 2019) to inform what academics can do to make academic knowledge more useful.

Besides investigating *what* academics can do to stimulate the dissemination of academic knowledge, we also investigate *how* they should do this. Not enough is known about how attractive and effective various forms of communication (e.g. case studies, journal articles) and sources of information (e.g. webinars, conferences) are. Even less is known about how academic knowledge can be disseminated innovatively, especially in the modern digital era dominated by innovative, interactive, and user-friendly formats, which are far from the traditional 'paper' style. Some associations (e.g. AMA and JAR) regularly invite academics to give webinars, although we do not know how appealing this would be to practitioners. Similarly, with the rise of social media, new knowledge can also be shared via this channel which may or may not be appealing to practitioners. Therefore, our study will explore innovative ways of what and how knowledge should be disseminated. This leads to our second research question.

RQ2: How can the academic community bridge the divide by effectively disseminating advertising knowledge?

Knowledge is not only the outcome of research, as knowledge is also created through collaboration. Therefore, the third research question focuses on interaction and collaboration as a way of bridging the divide. Collaboration requires both parties (i.e. academic and practitioner) to contribute with shared benefits. In the case of a research project, an academic can contribute to the project by providing different theoretical perspectives, while a practitioner can contribute to the project by providing a practice-based application of knowledge that takes context into consideration. Parties do not only learn from each other through collaboration but might have a shared financial benefit as well (Pettigrew and Tropp 2011).

To gain further insight, practitioners with a so-called 'intermediary' role in their organization may play a crucial role in bridging the divide. An intermediary can be defined as someone who sits at the boundary between academia and industry, while an intermediary activity is one that helps bring both parties closer together and help build relationships. Therefore, an intermediary knows the realities of the commercial world but also (partly) understands the academic research culture. A typical intermediary is a person who is familiar with research, data, and theory, like a consultant. Alternatively, she may be an academic who runs a research firm possessing extensive consulting experience. A number of scholars have pointed to intermediaries playing an active bridging role in the diffusion of knowledge as well as innovations (Roberts, Kayande, and Stremersch 2014; Lilien 2011; Randhawa, Wilden, and Akaka 2022). We thus raise a third research question:

RQ3: How can intermediaries help in bridging the divide through collaborations with academics?

Methods

Seven countries were included in the investigation. These were Australia, Brazil, Chile, Japan, South Africa, The Netherlands, and the United States of America. The research journey took five months to complete, from November 2021 to March 2022. Forty-two participants from these seven countries were interviewed, including four editors-in-chief or associate editors of top-ranked journals from four different countries. Each interview lasted for about 60 minutes, and all respondents were fully cooperative. For more details of our methodology (i.e. sampling frame, preliminary preparation, interviews, coding frame, and analysis), please see Appendix 1 (online supplement), and our interview guide can be found in Appendix 2 (online supplement).

The rest of the paper outlines our findings organised in three parts, answering RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3. Throughout these sections, we include verbatims of our respondents to better convey how they think and feel about issues arising from these questions.

Results

RQ1: What are the drivers of APD in this era of advertising?

It was found that the APD currently exists in all the different countries. The respondents from the different nations agree that there is a genuine gap between the academic world and the advertising industry,[1] which is identified as quite large. In fact, typical words used to describe the divide are 'enormous', 'completely', 'extremely wide', or 'oceans wide'. Among our respondents, there was a feeling that academia does not meet the 'demands of their daily discipline'.

Nevertheless, the scale of the APD is not equally observed among countries: in some of them, the divide is quite entrenched (i.e. Australia, Brazil, Chile, Japan), while in others, the APD seems to be more bridgeable (i.e. South Africa, The Netherlands, United States). In developing countries like Brazil and Chile, the divide can be described as a total 'disconnection' because advertising as an academic discipline, until recently, is absent in most universities, but rather taught in professional institutes, which tended *not* to value academic research. The research is also more *ad hoc* and conducted more broadly in related disciplines (e.g. sociology, business, and psychology departments), lagging behind in quality compared to what is published in top-tier advertising journals. The discipline is slowly changing as more PhD-trained marketing-communication scholars begin to populate the higher education sector in these countries and the universities offering advertising programs.

What are the primary drivers of the APD?

According to our respondents, the APD is an issue that derives from several tensions between the academic research world and industry. In this vein, the lack of relevance of journal contents is often cited as a major problem: practitioners (and the organizations they work for) perceive academic research as only occasionally useful for their daily work. Studies conducted by advertising researchers are perceived as being based on the interests of the scholars rather than a genuine need that stems from practice. To convince advertisers, practitioners demand evidence based on real-world data (which is hard for scholars to access). Moreover, they mention that these scholars tend to obtain their evidence focusing on information processing frameworks, using artificial-looking ads, and unrealistic experimental procedures. Many practitioners also failed to pick up a journal to read for most of their careers. In The Netherlands, for instance, all practitioner-respondents mention that they hardly ever, or even never, read an academic paper in their career. The few who occasionally do read an academic paper conceded that they were the only ones in their organization to do so. Moreover, when an academic article is sent around to colleagues or their clients, the emphasis is always on the abstract, results, and managerial implications, but not on the theory and methods. Occasionally, practitioners share papers with their clients; when this occurs, they only '*highlight some key results and sentences in the discussion*' and even translate the main findings for them. Some practitioners mentioned that they only consider such a deep dive into academic research when they want more robust ideas to win a new business, develop a new consultancy product, or reposition brands for long-standing clients.

A second major source of APD mentioned in all countries is the perceived difficulty in understanding and evaluating the quality of material written in academic journals. It is firstly related to the language used in academic publications. Even practitioner-consultants trained in research (e.g. with PhDs) find it challenging to follow journal articles at times because of how they are written and structured. A practitioner respondent complained that the narrative building up to a hypothesis is often difficult to comprehend, making understanding the implications of the research even harder to grasp, expressing that '*by the time you get to implications, you don't understand shit*'. One associate editor-respondent concurred: '*we write in the most obscure language with a bunch of p-values thrown in*' insisting that academic journals have moved firmly towards internal validity and statistical sophistication in recent years. Another difficulty in understanding academic material is the nuanced academic communication style. Practitioners prefer articles with disruptive ideas expressed in an assertive, clear, and confident way showing their link to practice instead of relying on rhetoric or trusting what the academic-author says. Furthermore, even if a practitioner is interested in reading a journal article, there is an additional problem: there are so many journals to choose from, and practitioners feel limited in their ability to evaluate the article or journal quality. Language is an extra barrier in some countries like Brazil, Chile, and Japan. This barrier should not be underestimated because English is the *lingua franca* for almost all scientific publications, so practitioners in these countries rely on extra resources to gain access to academic knowledge.[2]

Therefore, it is not surprising that practitioners find it demotivating to read a journal article, characterising it as 'hard going' and requiring a heavy time commitment. The articles are often too complex and filled with technicalities, and one practitioner humorously proclaimed, '*I don't want to get married. I just want a poke*'. Another respondent echoed this idea: '*I am not interested in going deeply [when reading academic research]. Sometimes, you just need to get something quick; a highlight/spark from this research [that could be easily applicable] helps me a lot*'.

A third element related to the APD relates to the narrowness and hyper-specificity of the research findings usually published in journals. There is an abundance of publications researching particular aspects of advertising and/or focussing on one single market (e.g. '*when a study is conducted in Thailand, you ask yourself whether findings are applicable here'*). In this context, those practitioners more interested in papers find overview studies (i.e. meta-analyses) more insightful, valuable, and useful. For instance, articles that review 'state-of-the-art' knowledge are especially attractive to practitioners because they guide practice: '*academics should help us process practitioners' knowledge and understand it neutrally. Academia is the one called to generate 'the state-of-the-art', to [describe] the learnings, serve as our lighthouse, and guide us'*.

We find that practitioners and academics differ in their worldviews regarding what they consider important and relevant issues, hence influencing their focus of interest. Urgent business goals drive practitioners, and research is but a means to help achieve this. Practitioners are only interested in research that helps them persuade their clients and win businesses. That is why they value consulting companies in this regard. The kind of research carried out by consulting companies is commercial in nature, designed to answer specific questions for their clients rather than 'seeking the truth'. For consultants, they only strive to be better than their competitors in answering those commercial questions.

Academics, on the other hand, are not concerned about serving clients' interests. Instead, they develop their research agendas related to certain theories of their interest or find some fundamental truths by seeking empirical generalisations of a phenomenon under investigation. Academics also view research more personally as critical to their promotion and a way to build their reputation. One practitioner remarked, '*if a model does not work, we simply move on…we are too precious about it*'. In contrast, an academic may not feel the same way, especially if it is a model he or she developed. Nevertheless, practitioners see academia as a relevant player with an essential role in countering misinformation or often-promoted false theories.

Consequently, practitioners see academics as '*slow and over-ceremonious*' when it comes to research, as one of the respondents (an agency-side strategy director) remarked. The perception is that academic research is out of touch with the needs or shifts in the industry. Conversely, academics are not flattering about practitioners either. They see practitioners as '*swift and agile and perhaps too flippant*' and that agencies just use research – any research – as a crutch to support their own argument. Fundamentally, academics and practitioners are on a '*different wavelength and speak a different language; it is like, Men are from Mars, and Women are from Venus*', a practitioner remarked.

As a result of these tensions, practitioners are not interested in accessing academic research or journals. Instead, they find books more appealing because they tend to summarize knowledge and are easier to understand. Along this line, a practitioner mentioned that '*when one thinks about the big issues and the current state of knowledge, it is quite difficult to get them from journals. If I subscribe to a scientific journal, the problem is that they don't prioritize the type of knowledge. That's why I prefer to look at the abstracts or -in general- buy books […] because I don't have the rigor to look at the details*'. In contrast, articles in Harvard Business Reviews and WARC (World Advertising Research Center) are sometimes mentioned as examples of good writing that is easy to understand. In the case of WARC, relevant articles are also easy to locate – so the sheer volume of published material is no hindrance. One respondent very much appreciates that they provide summaries of a bundle of studies and categorize studies around different topics or themes: '*when I want to know what is known about a certain topic, I go to WARC*'.

Is APD set to widen in the current times?

We also asked our interviewees whether and how they perceived the APD has changed in the current times, characterized by the rapid change of technologies. In this regard, one of our respondents remarked that the divide '*has always been quite large*' but is '*set to widen*' as society becomes ever more digitally complex. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, is academics' lack of access to the industry's digital data. Omni-channel growth allows consumers to interact with companies using multiple offline touch-points. To get a complete 360-degree view of the consumer, online, offline, and mobile data must be merged. All this information, however, is now in possession of advertisers, their research partners, or various third parties. Because of proprietary or privacy issues, data collected by practitioners often cannot be released to academics unless there is a formal agreement for collaborative research. This restriction implies that academic research has become more irrelevant to an industry that values data-driven, ready-to-use research findings. However, advertisers (and their research partners) have access to such data and therefore are better positioned to exploit this data to create new knowledge perceived to be more relevant. Amidst these changes, the way academic advertising research is conducted has largely remained unchanged.[3]

Secondly, the accelerated speed of technological change compared to the general slowness of academic research makes it less and less relevant for business. As one practitioner remarked, '*every business will grapple with the massive digital change, but* *somehow academia will be less able to*'. In other words, the fast pace of digital and technological developments is always ahead of academic research, enlarging the substantive divide as relevant knowledge remains lacking. A case in mind is the growth of new technologies in advertising pretesting, consumer interviews, online and mobile phone tracking, and data fusion, which are constantly evolving. In the US, the digital change is even faster – the focus is on driving digital media innovation, whether it is via platforms or content. In Japan, data scientists and media planners who deal with data also feel that many academic advertising papers are outdated or not useful to practice. This is exacerbated by the increasing use of artificial intelligence and other technologies in the industry.

Thirdly, the rise of digitization means monitoring and evaluating the advertising performance will now be quicker, de-emphasizing the need for rigorous research and theoretical development. For instance, digitization increased the accessibility of data, allowing for real-time effect studies and analyses (e.g. A/B testing of ad executions). The downside of this trend is that it partially replaces the need for rigorous research on the practitioners' side. As mentioned by one of our respondents who accepted this limitation, if there are '*a few data points, then it's fine, and it doesn't have to be fully scientifically substantiated; we just steer on the data we have*'.

The consequence of this is that advertisers may become even more short-term and less concerned with theoretical niceties. For instance, in the past, academic research in Japan was done in collaboration with advertising agencies. That collaboration does not occur so often anymore. In other words, by focusing on short-term optimization of content and campaigns, advertising practice became (more) result-driven, with less time and less devoted to generating academic insight; as one Dutch practitioner remarked: '*we used to conduct research once every few months or once a year. Then, at some point, I got those weekly trackers… Now we have data to optimize on a day-to-day basis*'.

Apart from these technological reasons, the current postgraduate educational programs are also likely to widen the gap. One practitioner-respondent expressed concern that the number of young, newly-minted PhD graduates do not have any industry experience, which is increasingly observed in research-focused universities. The perception about these young PhDs is that they tend to focus on building an academic career and have little motivation to reach out to practice or gain skills in much-needed fields like data and behavioural sciences. Thus, it is also likely that their research would also lack business relevance. One associate editor-respondent predicted that the APD is '*expected to get worse, not better*', leading to even more irrelevant journal articles.

Even if one were to dismiss the above discussion as alarmist, one fact remains. It is unlikely the APD will be bridged in the coming years because the underlying causes have not been addressed. Many of these causes are systemic because academia is fundamentally slow in adapting to change. A senior consultant from a large research organisation sanguinely remarked that this divide is '*only natural*'; unless academia can adapt faster, the divide will never close. Notwithstanding this pessimism, the growing digitization can serve as a 'wake-up call' which might help spur the bridging of the divide. It also represents new opportunities.

Summary of RQ1 results

- The academics-practitioners divide (APD) exists in all the studied regions though not necessarily equal in size. The uneven distribution of highly-trained researchers around the globe and the different interaction levels between academics and practitioners seem to contribute to this divide.
- Four main elements are identified as the primary sources related to the APD: 1) the lack of relevance of journal contents, 2) the perceived difficulty in understanding and evaluating the quality of published academic research, 3) the narrowness and hyper-specificity of the findings usually published in journals and 4) a cultural gap between practitioners and academic research (and academia in general).
- As a result of these tensions, practitioners are not interested in retrieving advertising research or journals.
- The problematic character of the APD is not experienced with the same intensity between practitioners and academics. While academics perceive the APD as a significant issue (as their work might become increasingly irrelevant to the industry and society), practitioners are usually less worried about academic advertising knowledge (since it does not meet the 'demands of their daily discipline').
- It is expected that the APD will widen during the current era, given the accelerated speed of technological change compared to the general slowness of academic research. Also, because monitoring and evaluating the advertising performance will now be quicker due to digitization. Finally, the lack of practical training for young PhDs is an element that contributes to making the APD hard to bridge.

RQ2: How can the academic community bridge the divide by effectively disseminating advertising knowledge?

It is pretty clear from findings to RQ1 that much of the advertising knowledge published in journals does not make its way to practice. It implies that the traditional way knowledge is disseminated through written publications must be altered to reach the practitioners. Below are some principles distilled from our interviews with the academic community that can be used to improve knowledge transfer. We explored various suggestions with our respondents (see attachments A1 to C2 in our interview guide, available in Appendix 2, online supplement).

- Prioritize relevance

To practitioners, the relevance of the content must come first. Or else, nothing matters, including other ideas such as using innovative disseminating methods or speeding up the academic publication rate. One interviewee directly expressed that '*[it is] not about time, it is [about] relevance*'. This idea means the connection between the research and current practical problems must be central to the academic work, that is, to tackle the current big issues of the industry. One respondent expands on this idea: '*It's all about content for me, so I think these [e.g. podcasts, webinars] are all once again quite plausible initiatives, provided that the content is for the right forum and is relevant to the audience. Academics don't do this well. Normally, they say, 'I have a PhD, I am really smart', but then say nothing that can help practitioners*'.

- Prioritize new, provocative, or integrative content that could be useful and credible

Although most advertising professionals are very busy, they are always open to provocative thinking that can help their clients and businesses. That is why they find trends and new research techniques attractive, along with frameworks that can help them manage their business better. Generally, practitioners are sceptical that academics can provide credible trends for practitioners. Nevertheless, they believe that scholars may provide solid syntheses of research's state-of-the-art about several issues and aspects of advertising only intuitively understood by the industry.

One academic-cum-practitioner, however, takes issue with teaching 'best practices' because, in principle, practices change, and practice can only be contextually 'best' at a point in time. An associate editor also remarked that 'best practices' are not credible when academics develop them. Academics are perceived as people who do not know what a turbulent environment is; therefore, updating principles of advertising effectiveness holds no credibility. Instead, it is better to strive for 'best principles', which might be perceived as more durable, universal, and credible than some highly-specific or contextual-dependent practices.

- Look for new formats and avenues that allow broader research dissemination

We find a consensus that academics need to disseminate their work more widely, which means that outlets should explore new complementary formats and avenues. Wider dissemination of academic work actually has two significant benefits. First, it raises the academic's profile which is important since practitioners generally have little exposure to academics. Second, it helps prevent their work from being misappropriated by third parties. One academic-cum-practitioner complained about a few instances in which this happened to her work – a consultant published her work on social media without explicit attribution.

Our respondents provide several ideas about how to reach wider dissemination of academic research. The video format is welcome because the '*… reality is that people in the industry do not read*', according to a practitioner-academic-respondent. Podcasts are also attractive because they can still listen in bite-size while multitasking and are less cognitively taxing than reading. However, practitioners also caution that the podcast content must be attractive because of clutter. As one informant said, '*I love podcasts, but there are so many out there. But you have to get the content right – like helping practitioners solve a problem. Or else it will not work*'. Also, special theme-related issues associated with webinars have some appeal among practitioners, provided it is short (e.g. once a week over three months) and is focused on solving specific problems centred around a theory. The bonus will be if the course can help the agency-practitioner explain concepts better to their clients. Such an initiative is consistent with the philosophy of life-long learning.

Finally, it has been suggested that academic work can be submitted to professional conferences or trade publications. Both ideas appeal greatly to practitioner-respondents as long as they may provide compelling, digestible, relevant information that can help decision-makers. Nevertheless, this idea is more problematic for scholars because trade publications and meetings are not academically prestigious and will negatively affect their promotions.

- Keep it simple but rigorous

Academics must learn to present better to practitioners, which usually means simplifying the research findings so that it gets across quickly, like a succinct pitch.

However, in doing so, the research findings must remain accurate. Academics should not shy away from explaining tried and tested models and theories of well-known scholars, but it must be packaged better in terms of format and language to resonate with practitioners and provide immediate value. Therefore, it makes sense for an academic to 're-think' how a professional might review their work. As a respondent put it, '… *if you (as an academic) were having to go through a review process that was being done by professionals, you might realize much more quickly what you're talking about is not clickable'.*

Practitioners are time-poor and like to get to the research's essence quickly. Long case studies are, therefore, not attractive. One respondent pointed out how some management consultancies are quite clever in conveying research findings as they are '… *very apt at designing their white papers to e-sound bites, accessible, portable … you can take them apart and understand quickly'.* A journal editor-respondent also warned that '*if you cannot say it in a short amount of time, no one is going to listen to you. Sell me in two minutes. Take out more involved approaches and get to the heart of it immediately; otherwise, we might as well send them a whole article, and then we can forget about practitioners reading it'.*

To also make academic journals more accessible and to be of immediate value, an academic-respondent suggested that the abstract should already include professional or managerial implications and that the weight of contribution of these implications, usually found at the end of papers, should increase. Practitioner-respondents also mentioned that the power of the abstract is to grasp the output for practice immediately. This idea is in line with recent criticism of academic publishing, calling for urgent change to a 'broken system' (Akmal, Gauld, and Podgorodnichenko 2022; De Pelsmacker 2021).

These time-saving solutions seem to imply that practitioners are simple-minded and do not understand data or technical language, which they resent. Therefore, information should be structured so that practitioners can 'get it' immediately without losing its sophistication. Research summaries using simple, non-jargonistic language are highly attractive.

- Participate in and promote academic-practitioner integration activities

Greater awareness and use of academic research can be achieved by disseminating it more widely and making it digestible. However, establishing relationships with practitioners is equally important for gaining access to it. Respondents from The Netherlands expressed that relationships can only be built and maintained if scholars and their research are made more *visible* and *approachable*. Relationships are also important in Japan, perhaps even more so than in the United States or Europe.

It is generally difficult for practitioners to reach out to academics to get access to knowledge. They do not know where to go with their questions, as universities do not have a 'service desk' or 'booth' for practitioners to ask. A collaborative association with universities to organize a hub, desk, or platform to access useful information could be a potential solution. All other strategies that make researchers visible and approachable would also help, such as their presence at marketing and advertising conferences (preferably via a booth too) and their appearance in popular outlets and professional press.

Alternatively, academia may also reach out to the industry. Here, the idea of sponsoring an academic 'shadowing' a practitioner holds some interest because it signals an academic's interest in understanding the business world and not being stuck in the 'ivory tower'. This practice can take the form of short internships in which academics shadow practitioners for a week or a day (similar to the visiting professor program of the Advertising Educational Foundation [AEF] in the US). According to our respondents, this initiative will benefit young academics by increasing their business exposure, understanding what practitioners do, and building collaborative relationships. However, they also highlight that this initiative risks violations of confidential issues for the organization involved. Sensitive business issues may have to be curtailed during the visit. There is also no immediate tangible benefit for the organization to want to go through the trouble. Finally, the practitioners shadowed by an academic, however junior, may still feel like being judged.

A less intimidating way of reaching out is for academia to invite selected practitioners to participate in research-related activities at the University. For instance, in The Netherlands, several industry organizations or networks enable relationships to blossom between academia and practice, commonly via advisory boards, roundtables, and events, featuring academics on their award panels.[4]

Additionally, sponsoring or endorsing guest lecturing or collaborating through student projects holds almost universal value for practitioners and academics. This practice is a well-worn path but still has much appeal. Practitioners seem to care for students and want to contribute to their learning, ultimately benefiting the industry when they join the workforce. It also improves the students' employability. With student projects, practitioners also have the opportunity to evaluate the students' talent before hiring them (for an internship or upon their graduation). For academics, student projects create an opportunity for them to get to know the sponsoring practitioner. It ultimately helps build relationships essential for collaborative research (see RQ3, later).

Our respondents also feel that participating in anything that can add value by making it easier to conduct research or exchange research ideas is welcome. For example, the web portal to share ideas, problems, and unpublished work and facilitate collaboration was welcomed by academics and practitioners alike. In this space, an academic journal may have active participation. One academic-respondent called it an '*aca-prac portal*' that can serve as a 'one-stop-shop' to speed up academic output and simplify it for practitioners with easy-to-find topics. It is also a portal where practitioners can share their thinking and industry insights and possibly invite collaboration. Such a portal could provide good value for both parties, although some practitioners also think that the WARC website already fills this space.

RQ3: How can intermediaries help in bridging the divide through collaborations with academics?

This research question is about collaborations – a form of knowledge exchange – between practitioners and academics, which is the process of working productively together to achieve mutually desired outcomes. While research collaboration is common among academics, it is rare between academics and practitioners. We find that, more often than not, academics and practitioners tend to avoid collaborating because

Summary of RQ2 results

- Since practitioners highly value the relevance of the content, connection with the practice must come first. Therefore, any initiative from the academic community that intends to increase the appeal of advertising research should explicitly consider how it is relevant for the practitioners.
- Relevance is increased if the research's content focuses on attractive components of the research, such as its currency and findings about the contemporary problems of the industry. In addition, those content that challenges traditional assumptions of the industry's practices may also be particular attention-getting. Finally, it is also valuable to consolidate information spread across hundreds of studies, such as literature reviews and meta-analyses.
- Respondents also highlighted the importance of new formats to present information. In the digital era, information outlets have implemented several new and more friendly ways to transmit content, and academic journals should not be the exception. In this regard, ideas like implementing podcasts or video clips could be interesting avenues to explore in reaching professional audiences.
- An important trade-off of implementing a strategy to reach practitioner audiences is to avoid oversimplifying or trivializing the research activity and outputs. The assumption that people in the industry are busy does not mean they are incompetent in understanding the complexities of academic research and valuing scientific rigor.

of previous bad experiences, or it takes too much effort, often with unclear outcomes, or sometimes, they simply do not know who to partner with. An issue is how people in the position of intermediaries, if properly incentivised, can take the first steps towards creating a culture and practice of mutual respect and collaboration between scholars and practitioners. In this regard, some critical elements about the role of intermediaries emerged in the interviews.

- To increase closeness with academics and their particular expertise

One area in which intermediaries perceive an urgent need is increasing the closeness between academic research and industry. In this regard, it is interesting to notice that practitioners from different countries who have *not* collaborated before with academics expressed that they are open to exploring some industry-academia collaborations. Since many practitioners have an academic background, they see the association with academics recognized for their excellence in a particular subject as a good deal for both executives and scholars. As one respondent recognized, '*we should, actually, learn from each other*'. Along the same line, another respondent pointed out the potential for a win-win exclusive partnership: '*I think an academic that went around to all the companies, and you know, seeding their ideas is an excellent starting point for academics who want to do this is…. to go out and meet companies. But at some point, there would then have to be some sort of relationship of exclusivity… talk about their expertise and talk about commercial collaborations*'. However, to maintain independence, academics may resist forming any exclusive relationship with one company.

Practitioners generally do not know which academic has the right or specific expertise. Here, the endorsement or recommendations from people like intermediaries (or similar) as insiders (meaning people working in the advertising industry) may play a significant role: '*For me is to find the individuals and to [consultant] KR's credit, he is* *the one who introduced us to [professor] LJ who is willing to collaborate with whom you can form a rapport and relationship at a one-on-one level which ends up really trusting…'*, a respondent said.

Practitioners recognize that not all academics are willing or able to collaborate: '*I think that there'll be some academics that don't want to do this… they say, 'you know my voice, see what I'm doing and I'm fantastic'. They are the ones to avoid'.* Academics who want to collaborate are usually willing to learn from the practitioners. This inclination can lead to a 'reverse transfer' of knowledge from industry to academia. But this positive outcome is less likely to occur with guru-type academics with big egos. Top practitioners are especially critical of such academics: '*If an academic were to show an interest and willing to mutually learn from each other that probably works better… I don't think that some academics are willing to accept that there can be learning both ways… their profession is always teaching somebody, isn't it?'.*

- To overcome industry prejudices and some unsatisfactory past experiences of collaboration

Despite the general willingness to learn about the scholars' work, the past failed experiences of some practitioners colour their desire for future collaborations. In practice, these problems have been related to issues such as the delivery timing or the excessive specialization of academics, which hampers progress. As one respondent posited, '*collaboration with academics – 'forget it'. They have a poor reputation for delivering anything on time. They also don't know how to cost a project. If you want to do this seriously, then someone else must be in charge'.*

Alongside this perception, practitioners also hold certain prejudices against academics, like their lack of motivation to put in any effort since they already have a 'cushy' life – collecting salaries without having to work too hard. Such beliefs are particularly entrenched among practitioners who are advancing the field: '*There is also no motivation for academics to change because they are already living an easy salaried life. Why change? With their professorial salary… They get to retire without any sort of problem. Academia is easy'.*

In this context, intermediaries may help to overcome this problem in several ways. First, they may participate in collaborative projects with scholars since they are sensitive to their needs (and vice versa), and second, these projects may serve as examples for other practitioners. Third, successive collaborations help promote the value of academic research in the industry. Generally, commercial organizations that have research and innovation in their 'DNA' tend to exhibit an interest in academic knowledge and want to form relationships with academia.

- To develop a fair exchange and commercial protection of data with incentives attached

The rise of digitization has caused an explosion of data, giving rise to new opportunities to collaborate between academics and practitioners, which seldom occurs successfully. Practitioners often have a large amount of data that belongs to their clients (e.g. advertisers), which they can share, but do not wish (or are unable) to. One limitation is the lack of incentive; as one respondent said, '*What's in it for me?'*.

On the other hand, if the collaboration can lead to a mutually attractive outcome, like winning an award or competition, then practitioners may be more inclined to collaborate because it brings fame to both parties; as one respondent posited, '*I like this because there is value exchange here in winning the competition. There is something for me if I win*'.

However, the notion of fair exchange of value becomes difficult to assess if the outcome is long-term or evolving. Therefore, any effort in this vein should start with pilot projects in which progress can lead to something bigger. Also, piloting is necessary as disagreements may exist as to who owns the eventual intellectual property or the outcomes of these collaborations. These elements must be worked out to be commercially fair for everyone, including the cost and affordability of the project.

In addition, there is a practical but important issue of confidentiality and the need for legal protection; as one respondent said, '*Giving client's data away is fraught with problems – they would not want to – so you need to dot the i's and cross the t's. Get a legal agreement. But it is a very powerful method of collaboration*'.

Related to this issue is that of trust. Since practitioners are sceptical of academic data management practices, they may also be reluctant to share them. A respondent manifested this concern, saying, '*Partnering with academics is good, but how do you deal with confidentiality? What would be the commercial arrangements for things to be done on time? And who will do it? A lot of trust [issues] there*'. In this space, an understanding of the ethical aspects of academic research will help build trust among practitioners.

A final word

The APD in advertising has been a long-standing issue for more than 30 years now. It still exists today. Our study showed that it is hard to talk about *the* gap since the APD turned out to be multifaceted and its causes are multifactorial. As a result, no easy, single-dimensional solution is possible. So, it is not as if the academic community is unaware of this long-standing issue; instead, given its complexity, it is hard to take concrete steps as individuals. At the same time, maybe there even seems to be a lack of will to want to mend a 'broken system', as a senior academic-participant admits. As a result, there is a tendency for academics to take the easy path, that is, leaning towards theory-based research rather than trying to source real-world datasets to investigate a much harder and more complex phenomenon. In this concluding section of our paper, we boldly suggest four changes are needed before this divide can be bridged.

Summary of RQ3 results

- Academics and practitioners avoid collaborating because of previous bad experiences or because it takes too much effort, often with unclear outcomes, or they simply do not know whom to partner with. Through successful collaborations, intermediaries can help overcome industry prejudices.
- There is a need for closer proximity between academia and industry. People in the position of intermediaries may help to take the first steps towards developing a culture and practice of mutual respect and collaboration between practitioners and scholars.
- Finally, the rise of digitization has created new opportunities for collaboration. However, fair exchange and commercial protection should be in place during the collaboration. Understanding the ethical aspect of academic research helps build trust.

First, there must be a clear and frank acknowledgment that the divide is deeply problematic and *must* be bridged. This means accepting the premise that advertising is an applied discipline and that its research must ultimately improve practice. As one editor-in-chief remarked, '*Research for the sake of research is not what we're all about. It's research for the sake of aiding the industry that needs it… We should be most concerned with: Are we giving practitioners what they need? How are we going to help? Our whole purpose is to help practice*'.

As such, there should be closer cooperation between academia and industry. Therefore, like medicine with its *raison d'être* of 'saving lives', the goal of academic advertising research must be to make an *impact on practice*. In medicine, we see the impact of academic research so clearly during the COVID-19 pandemic, where in the space of eight months, two vaccines (i.e. Pfizer and AstraZeneca) were able to be developed because of close cooperation between academia, pharmaceutical companies, and government bodies (Ball 2021; Gallagher 2020). Of course, this successful cooperation is driven by the urgency of the situation, making each party dependent on the other. Whilst the academic community in advertising may never be called upon to avert such a crisis, it can still take this lesson to heart – the immense value that can come from close cooperation.

Second, the academic community in advertising must reach out and build relationships with the industry. Some countries like South Africa, Japan, and The Netherlands are lucky to already have a strong network in place. However, this is not the case in the Latin American region, where the relationship network is weaker; thus, interactions between academics and practitioners are scarce, short-termed, and usually unproductive. Relationships are important because we tend to work with people we know and interact with. It is also essential, however, to collaborate with practitioners who *value* academic research; here, it may help to work with 'intermediaries' who can see 'both sides of the coin' – that is, the relevance of the research topics and the requirements of academic standards. Furthermore, as previous research has shown that these intermediaries are closer to decision-makers in organisations (Lilien 2011; Roberts, Kayande, and Stremersch 2014), they are also better positioned to influence practice. Institutions that can encourage such intermediaries are more likely to bridge the divide. The late Giep Franzen, who started SWOCC (an acronym for Foundation for Fundamental Research on Brands and Brand Communication) at the University of Amsterdam 25 years ago, is a classic example of an influential intermediary who achieved this.

Giep was an enterprising practitioner who co-founded the Dutch advertising agency FHV in 1962 (which later became BBDO) and always had a strong interest in evidence-based campaigning and research. He was also the first advertising scholar at the University of Amsterdam. He founded SWOCC to make existing scientific knowledge accessible to practitioners and, at the same time, stimulate new academic research relevant to practitioners. Through SWOCC, practitioners can stay informed of the latest academic research and provide involved scholars with a rich network of professionals who can be approached for collaborative research (e.g. access to industry data) and guest lecturing. All universities should search for their own 'Giep Franzen' in order to emulate the success of SWOCC. In particular, Latin American universities which are beginning to develop their advertising programs should have the courage to emulate the success of SWOCC. In particular, growing digitization throws up new opportunities for industry collaboration, but this must be guided by the desire to achieve a fruitful and respectful partnership.

Third, building a research infrastructure that can formalise the interactions between academia and industry is essential. That way, greater efficiencies can be achieved, and large-scale research project successes are more likely to occur. Here, we can learn from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute at the University of South Australia. Their corporate sponsorship program, where benefactors contribute financially to a pool of research funds, strikes a balance between academic rigour and industry relevance. This is achieved by adhering to the principle of generalizability and ensuring that the research topic under investigation is relevant.[5] Therefore, like the engineering discipline, the overarching objective is to solve 'real world' industry-wide problems in all their complexity. A summary of how the institutes of SWOCC (from The Netherlands) and Ehrenberg-Bass (from Australia) have bridged the APD is provided in Appendix 3 (online supplement).

Fourth, the above-suggested changes must be underpinned by the right incentives, including the incentive for academics to disseminate and publicise their research findings, a critical plank in bridging the divide. This knowledge transfer is more effective if the research can be conceptualized and translated in a way that is not lost on practitioners. This is because, very often, the wrong research question was being asked, and then the results were poorly communicated. In this regard, academics also have the opportunity to educate our students on how academic research can be translated into better practice. Many of our students will become practitioners and decision-makers (and return as guest lecturers). Exposing them to this line of thinking will increase their appreciation of academic research, a responsibility all academics must all uphold.

Fundamentally, since the academic community must lead the charge in bridging the divide, the current reward system in academia must change, or else nothing will happen. This shift may be slowly happening in academic publishing. For instance, the *Journal of Industrial Marketing Management* has recently done this, giving specific boundary-spanning guidelines; including joint authorship with practitioners, outlining clear business challenges, validating practices and tools for businesses, demonstration of alignment with the practitioners' agenda, and good readability score (van der Borgh et al. 2022). These guidelines suggest that there is still a standard to uphold but a different one. Also, it would encourage academics to publish in the journal without fear of being looked down upon, as is often the case with the trade press. It would also quarantine the journal from any loss of prestige.

Whereas these good practices at the journal publishing level seem worthwhile, we also believe that changes should occur at the institutional and national levels. For instance, in The Netherlands, new initiatives such as the 'Recognition & Rewards programme[6] are being developed to modernise the system of academic recognition and rewards to improve, in a reciprocal way, the quality of education, research, impact, and leadership. Similarly, their Higher Education and Research Act (WHW[7]) stipulates that universities should not *only* provide scientific and educational programs and conduct scientific research but should also transfer knowledge (called valorisation) for the benefit of society. This may entail research collaborations with private parties, cooperation with industry in education, participation in professional networks and boards, and science communication.

Changes are also occurring at the funding level. Recently developed funding schemes around societal issues have encouraged scholars from different disciplines to work together on the same societal problem.[8] As an example, research into climate issues is addressed by climate scientists, while communication researchers can tackle communication interventions to stimulate green behaviour. Social impact, as a criterion, is now an important factor in the assessment of funding schemes in the EU.[9] In short, ultimately, the reward system within academia (including research funding) has to change to encourage the bridging of the divide.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that there will be resistance to any major change. Since the divide is entrenched, we do not expect changes to occur overnight, and advertising scholars – a small group within marketing – may already feel disadvantaged, let alone having the will to fight the system. Many will continue to 'play the game', for instance, when supervising PhD students. Some academics may also counter-argue that the existence of the gap is not an issue in the name of upholding lofty academic standards – the raison d'être of academic work. This goes to the heart of the rigour-versus-relevance debate (Katsikeas, Robson, and Hulbert 2004), although we argue that there is no point in being rigorous if the research question is irrelevant, to begin with.[10] Two leading research institutes (SWOCC and the Ehrenberg-Bass) have shown a balance between relevance and rigor can be achieved (see Appendix 3, online supplement).

We, therefore, conclude with a solemn wish that 30 years from now, we do not have to revisit this issue again and that *the* gap is no more!

Notes

1. Although the divide is traditionally conceptualised as a gap between academics and practitioners in relation to their outlook of research and knowledge, some respondents interpret this gap differently, for instance as institutional (i.e., teaching content) or relational (i.e., social interactions).
2. In Japan, the widespread use of translation software has at least mitigated this obstacle.
3. One exception is in The Netherlands. In this country, academia and industry have developed amicable practices. Further stimulated by legislation requiring industry cooperation, digitization manifested itself clearly in the partnerships between academia and the industry, for example, through sharing data sets related to online advertising across media platforms as well as the setting up of a graduate course in digital analytics.
4. Some examples include Genootschap voor Reclame (society for advertising), VIA (a network for professionals working in data, media, creation and technology) BVA (association of advertisers, DDMA (data-driven marketing association), SAN (an association awarding advertising awards), MOA (market research association)
5. An institute worth mentioning is the UCT Liberty Institute of Strategic Marketing at the University of Cape Town (South Africa). Their research is partially funded by a financial services company, called Liberty Holdings. The institute produces market reports, primarily for practitioners, which are almost exclusively about the markets in South Africa. These reports cater first to the needs of the practitioners, and then on the building of academic theory. As one respondent remarked, "…our primary focus is actually on making the practitioners happy first and then filling gaps in academic literature. We believe that both can happen with the right approach" These reports represent a way of bringing academia and practitioners together. For more information of the institute, see UCT Liberty Institute http://www.libertyinstitute.uct.ac.za
6. For more information see https://recognitionrewards.nl/
7. For more information (in Dutch) see https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0005682/2021-09-01

8. As an example of recent development of sectoral funding and collaboration (in Dutch) see https://sshraad.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/361/2022/03/BIJLAGE-2-SSH-Sectorplan-versie-maart-2022.pdf
9. The European Union, for instance, has created a research fund of nearly 100 billion euros for research into global challenges, but with clear stipulation that industry partners are necessary. For more information see: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en
10. It is often assumed that academic research, being more scientific, tends to weigh more heavily on rigor. Practitioners, on the other hand, are assumed to be more concerned with relevance and thus may compromise on such standards. However, this is not always true. For instance, one leading practitioner, who was formerly an academic, said: *"Not all practitioners are skin deep. A lot of products and a lot of practitioners apply rigor to their thinking and to their products, and that's what we do as a business. We have a philosophy around excellence relative to academic literature and also excellence around computer vision knowledge, so we have tight standards around our technology and our methodologies around rigor."*

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