

BETWEEN ADVERTISING PRACTITIONERS AND ACADEMICS IN NIGERIA: BRIDGING THE GAP.

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Abstract:

The existence of the academic and practitioner gap is readily acknowledged and discussed in some advertising literatures. This paper analyses key writings on the nature of the rift and proposes a new approach to complement the literature. While the paper identifies some prevailing explanations why miscommunication exists between academics and practitioners, it concludes that practitioners' knowledge about how advertising works is an autonomous construct. The study also complements the existing literature by basing the review on firm theoretical grounds. Finally, advocacy for implementation in the Nigerian environment is offered and future directions for research investigation suggested.

Introduction

Academics with specialty in advertising and advertising practitioners in the industry seem to live in different worlds. The gulf between these two groups, commonly referred to as the academic–practitioner gap Hunt (2002), would not be too alarming if it only denoted the fact that there are always discrepancies between theoretical modelling and practical applications. The gap in the case of advertising, however, is much wider and is manifested on deeper levels than would be expected in the case of occupations such as engineering or law.

The importance of the subject is reflected in a recent online newspaper publication by the Advertising Practitioners' Council of Nigeria (APCON). In a statement by the Corporate Affairs Officer, he advised unqualified practitioners in management position to take professional examination or resign in order 'to create more connections between advertising practitioners and those in academia' Charles (2010).

This suggests that training help to build and strengthen the relationship between the academic producers and the applied users of advertising knowledge. The body went further to approve the operation of an ad-hoc scheme for registering as Advertising practitioners, persons who do not possess the prescribed academic qualifications; namely degree/HND in Advertising, Mass Communication, Advertising or Graphic Arts. This review offers another means of continuing the dialogue and seeks to promote the discussion of the 'gap' problem between the academic and professional communities of advertising with a view to finding an understanding and common ground.

The objective of this paper is twofold: (a) to give a structural review of the academic–practitioner literature in advertising in order to move the discussion forward and (b) to proffer a new approach that will narrow the gap in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper analyzes key writings from the advertising literature that discuss the nature of the academic–practitioner rift and why it exists and suggests that the reviewed literatures suffer from a shortcoming: the explanations offered are incomplete.

Consequently, the paper recommends for the production of a new explanation that would complements the existing literature; and it maps out directions for future empirical investigations. Not without inherent limitations, the research reviewed literature from online databases such as International Journal of Advertising, Journal of Advertising Research, APCON Newsletter, following reference links, consulting colleagues, among others. It is possible that some potential sources may have been inadvertently missed out. Finally, though the reviewer's claim about the nature of academic–practitioner relations may be limited

geographically, it is quite possible that some dynamics of the relations have strong flavor in other countries, especially in Africa.

The first part of this paper appraises the existing literature. Next it introduces a new approach which places the discussion in an appropriate theoretical context and draws out future directions for experimental inquiries.

The Review

The presence of the academic–practitioner gap is acknowledged and widely discussed in advertising and marketing; disciplines that share a lot in common in terms of knowledge and practice. As Hunt (2002) argues: “Throughout its 100-plus year history, one of the most recurring themes has been that there is a ‘gap’ or ‘divide’ between advertising academia and advertising practice.” Indeed, over the years, a sizeable volume of literature has developed focusing on this issue (See, for example, Peters 1980; Holbrook 1985, 1987; Preston 1985; McKenzie *et al.* 2002; Abiola & Hensen 2004; November 2004).

Most scholars define the gap as a communication problem between academia and advertising practice. According to this view, while academics continually add to a body of abstract knowledge about advertising phenomena, practitioners do not seem connected to this information. Practitioners do not read journals, and they do not even consider academic knowledge very relevant Obijole (2002).

While few commentators question the existence of the gap, they offer radically different explanations, and consequently suggest different potential solutions. Most frequently, the cause of the problem is attributed to four factors: (1) information dissemination; (2) knowledge content and form; (3) academic organizational structures; and (4) practitioner users.

Information Dissemination

To many, the divide is a ‘dissemination’ problem and exists because academics are not successful in disseminating the knowledge they generate. According to the American Marketing Association (AMA) Task Force on the Development of Market Thought, academic researchers do not communicate well with their constituencies, “most importantly with practitioners” AMA (2009). The Task Force – specifically brought together for assessing and potentially reducing the gap - described the classic ideal of a direct communication flow from academia to praxis: “Primarily, advertising knowledge is developed somewhat formally by academic researchers and commercial advertising researchers or consultants and more experientially by “practitioners” or users. Knowledge developed by academic researchers tends to be disseminated to the discipline through research journals or academically oriented conferences. (AMA Task Force, 2009). This suggests that it is the breakdown in academia’s knowledge distribution system that causes the divide. The assumption is that if only these systems improved, then the academic–practitioner problem would reduce or cease to exist.

Similarly, Abiola & Hensen (2010), fault advertising education for the fact that despite long decades of research, advertising is perceived to be the least accountable function in business: “One of the key findings is that advertisers are perceived to be “unaccountable” by the rest of the organization; they are seen as unable to demonstrate a return on investment in the activities they have control over” (p.66). They argue that this is especially embarrassing as there are useful tools out there that simply do not get to the practitioners. Some commentators, however, highlight that it is impractical to assume a direct flow from academe to praxis, and it is through the facilitation of indirect flows that the gap can be narrowed.

Brennan (2009), for example, argues that there is evidence that advertising practitioners do not read academic advertising/advertising journals. Perhaps the surprise here is not that practitioners eschew these journals, but that anyone would expect them to read such material at all.”

With the growing number of advertising agencies in Nigeria, one wonders if these practitioners consult or relate with academics for research findings in advertising practice for implementation. Some argue that immediate and obvious applications of academic research are neither possible nor desirable.

In his recent rejoinder to the APCON online newsletter, Ifeda (2011), agrees with this assessment: "The report implies that advertising knowledge is solely original research at the concept/theory level. Original research is surely needed in each of the knowledge levels, but also needed are re-synthesis, repackaging, and repetition of "old" knowledge for the new generation of managers."

Academic researchers or consulting or research firms need to develop this secondary form of knowledge to make academic research attractive for practitioners. Ifeda (2011), also acknowledges the importance of channels for indirect communication flows such as trade journals, textbooks, conferences, training and development courses.

Others, however, have disagreed with the assessment that no direct communication is necessary and express concern over the efficiency of indirect dissemination routes. Wells, Burnett & Moriarity (1998), for example, suggest: "The argument that we do not have to concern ourselves with how our work might be used, on the grounds that there is often a time lag between the development of underlying theory and its use in practice, is wearing increasingly thin." They argue that if academics do not concern themselves with the lack of direct flow, there will be no flow whatsoever, and academic research will quickly become obsolete.

Knowledge Content and Form

It is not only knowledge dissemination that is problematic but also the content of advertising knowledge itself. November (2004), for example, in his article, enumerates several reasons why practitioners should continue to ignore academic research: (a) academic research does not contain knowledge that is relevant or actionable for practitioners; (b) academics sometimes make false, misleading claims about the existence of causality where, in reality, it is not warranted; (c) academic research is often reductionist: "While a narrowly focused study is manageable and likely to lead to a definitive result, the results, assuming they have statistical validity, cannot be applied outside the scope of the study. This means that we can never generate any generalizations from a single reductionist study" November (2004); (d) measurement in advertising and advertising are imprecise: "Because our measurement systems lack precision in comparison with those used in classical sciences" November (2004); (e) knowledge is too general and therefore does not help; (f) there is little replication in advertisement and market research. In essence, November's view implies there is no useful knowledge in advertising academia and practitioners should not any.

In a similarly self-critical manner, the AMA Task Force (1988) pummels academic researchers for producing research that is not good enough for practitioners. The Task Force suggests that there are no real innovative ideas in academic research, only short payoff studies; only 'knowledge creep' and not 'knowledge spurt'. Further criticisms include the suggestion that academic research is very difficult to read and uses a lot of jargon (Brennan 2009; Ottesen, & Gronhaug 2004). Another potential reason is that academic researchers are not familiar with the problems practitioners face and therefore are unable to develop research programmes that are useful for this constituency (Stafford & Faber, 2006).

Stafford & Faber (2006), suggest that this detachment is aggravated by the fact that little practitioner input is sought or allowed in academic projects: "Lack of managerial involvement or at least some managerial emphasis at the theory development stage can greatly reduce the chances of the theory ever being applied in practice." Finally, Thorson (2006), argues that the problem may simply be topicality: if academic researchers are able to identify the relevant 'hot' topics for research, academia automatically ceases to be irrelevant: "Emphasis is placed on

identifying a number of “hot” topics worthy of future investigation.... It is hoped that the identification and discussion of these topics will spark greater research on fundamental advertising issues, and that the allied explication of research rigour will likewise enhance the efficacy of research in advertising.”

Organizational Structures in the Academia

Others point to the organizational context of the academic world and argue that the gap between practitioners and academicians can partly be explained by the fact that academic incentive and reward systems are not conducive to research that is of direct use for practitioners. One of the key findings of the AMA Task Force study was that the understanding of the sociological context of academia has predictive power when it comes to explaining the gap. The Task Force concluded:

The incentive and reward system, however, does truly deserve its appellation “publish or perish”. It produces some very strong and undesirable incentives toward knowledge development on the part of young academicians: it is extremely short-term in orientation, is almost entirely peer-reviewed, and is strongly directed toward achieving a maximum number of publications as a means to the end of promotion.

Similarly, November (2004), suggests that the prevailing human environment, in which academic knowledge is conceived, has a tremendous impact on the knowledge produced:

The relevance of this published material to practitioners has nothing to do with your promotional prospects or its chance of being published. At most universities, the critical factor is the number of publications and the type of journal in which they are published – not their relevance. The absence of relevance can readily be seen in the published products.

Brennan (2009) also claims that it is the organizational structure of research at universities, and not individual researchers, which is at fault: “It seems clear that although academics would like to get closer to practitioners, they are inhibited by institutional factors, such as academic reward systems and the ‘publish or perish’ culture.”

Practitioner Knowledge Utilization

So far we have discussed arguments placing the blame for the academic-practitioner divide on academics. Some reviewers, however, clearly charge practitioners as well for the existence of the gap. First, some critics point to the fact that practitioners often do not use academic information even if it is useful for them. According to this view, even if academia sometimes does have problems with communicating relevant information to practitioners, many times there is relevant information available, but practitioners simply do not use it.

Ankers (2009), for example, provide in-depth interview data with academics pondering on this issue:

The objective is to provide leading edge knowledge to society but if that society chooses not to use it I do not think it is our job to beat up on them and say ‘you’re idiots.’ You can put the water in the trough and bring the horse to the trough, but if they don’t want to drink then that’s not an academic’s problem.

Obiazi and Kwamu (2009) report survey data suggesting that, out of their sample population of practitioners ($n = 47$), not a single advertising manager in Nigeria reads academic journals: “It is clear from this survey that academic journals devoted to advertising are largely unknown and unread by advertising managers” (p. 20).

Related to the previous commentary, the gap may also be explained by negative attitudes held by practitioners (irrespective of whether or not there is any justification for it). The APCON Newsletter request to practitioners, points to the possibility that the whole issue of irrelevance maybe more of a practitioner perception than reality.

Holbrook (1987) suggests that there is a generalized negative attitude among practitioners (business people) against academia: anti-intellectualism. In this view, the problem does not have to do with opinions about advertising research *in particular*. Rather, the problem has to do with a general negative opinion among business people (globally) about the utility and value of academia. Holbrook (1987) argues that this is the main reason academia should *not* be concerned about practical relevance: business anti-intellectualism can only ruin academic advertising research.

Finally, some critics focus on individual cognitive capabilities rather than structural features. Ottesen and Gronhaug (2004) argue that part of the problem may be that professionals simply lack the necessary knowledge to be able to comprehend complex presentations of academic data. They might also have a limited attention capacity to process academic information. They suggest: “Also, the research information may not be understood, because the potential users lack the required knowledge”. From the forgoing, the findings of this review are summarized in the table below:

Understanding of The Advertising Academician-Practitioner Gap Based on Miscommunication Between Advertising Academia and Practice		
Causes	Who to Blame	
	<i>Academicians</i>	<i>Practitioners</i>
Knowledge dissemination	Failure to create adequate distribution system for academic advertising knowledge.	
Knowledge content/form	Too much focus on knowledge production with little relevance or presented in an incomprehensible format for practice.	
Academic organizational structure	Certain organizational characteristics of academia prohibit a practical focus.	
Practitioner knowledge utilization		Unwillingness and inability of practitioners to process advertising research results.

Table 1: The Blame Table.

Summary and New Directions

The growing literature on the academic-practitioner gap has expressed serious concern about the status quo. Commentators emphasize that the current situation is unfortunate and detrimental to the future interests of advertising academia and practice. Most define the problem as a communication issue and attribute the cause of the gap to academic research itself: the inability of academia to produce and disseminate relevant research knowledge to practitioners.

The consensus is that the discipline is by definition applied and not basic, therefore academics should conduct “problem-oriented research” Hunt (2002), or research that addresses general problems advertising practitioners are often confronted with. Some commentators also point to the possibility that – at least partly – practitioners should be blamed for their unwillingness or inability to process information that is practically useful and readily available.

The researcher’s contention is that this model understanding of the academic-practitioner gap has shortcomings on two fronts: (a) the explanations offered are incomplete; and (b) they do not have much experimental evidence. The researcher here considers each of these limitations and offers a new approach that strives to overcome them.

A New Explanation: Practitioner Knowledge Autonomy

What is striking from the reviewed literature is the extent to which the discussion is centered on academia. Most of the literature focus on academics themselves and identifies academic knowledge distribution, content/form, and organizational factors as the root causes of the problem. When practitioners are mentioned, they are conceptualized as empty vessels to be filled with academic wisdom. Despite bona fide attempts by academics, they are deemed unwilling and incapable of accepting a knowledge transfer.

This classic view does not allow for a very possible alternative scenario: practitioners may have their own autonomous knowledge structure about how advertising works. It is very conceivable that as a distinct social group, they have developed their own sets of beliefs about advertising, which in both content and form are independent of academic knowledge. Practitioners’ knowledge carry either one or more of the following:

- own set of theories
- unique forms of validity/reliability testing
- independent social systems to negotiate, distribute and consume
- Knowledge systems that ignore or may actively resist academic influence
- own method of thinking about what is acceptable vs. unacceptable

This is not to say that practitioners are entirely isolated from academia. Indeed, the history of advertising research offers great examples of academic–practitioner interaction. Some authors have actually been on both sides of the fence, practicing and publishing in academic journals.

Further, practitioners may, in fact use, without admitting, some forms of academic knowledge. Even though direct flows seem to be obstructed, in indirect ways some ideas may still percolate through. It seems that intermediaries (media planners, consultancies, research services and products, journalists, general educators) have a very instrumental role in these implicit transfers.

Nevertheless, the existence of interactions, dialogues and crossovers does not challenge the contention that there may be structural differences between academic and practitioner knowledge forms. Even though they may influence each other, the two forms of knowledge seem to represent different centres of gravity. The classic view clearly ignores the possibility of practitioner knowledge autonomy and implicitly or explicitly presupposes a unidirectional flow from academia to praxis. Some innovative thinkers, however, have already pointed to the possibility of a ‘reverse flow’. The most illustrative example is Zaltman, LeMasters, & Heffring, (1982) ‘theory-in-use’ approach. Others have also emphasized the legitimacy of a praxis-to-academe transfer. Ottesen & Gronhaug (2004), for instance, argue that “in order to enhance the usefulness of academic advertising and marketing knowledge to practitioners, we need to understand what types of information they perceive as useful as well as factors that might impair the transfer of research information from academia to practice.”

Similarly, Ifeda (2011) suggests: “To the extent possible, attempting to incorporate some managerial focus in the process of advertising theory development is a useful goal to strive toward...” He proposes that one potential way of overcoming the divide between academia and practice is back-engineering practitioner knowledge into academia: “What is circulating as ‘practitioner advertising knowledge’ must be codified and translated into the form of strategic principles, and this work will doubtless have to be done by academics.”

What the researcher argues for in this paper, however, goes beyond the idea of a simple reverse flow. It is possible that, precisely because of the postulated autonomy of practitioner knowledge, certain aspects of this knowledge do not lend themselves to easy flow back into academia. When thinking about knowledge flows, it appears inconsistent to conclude that the only difference between academic and practitioner knowledge is their topical content. It is quite possible that they are autonomous knowledge systems that differ in complex, multifaceted and interacting structural ways.

The Need for Trial Studies on Practitioner Knowledge

With a far-reaching turn, we need to start using our own scientific methods and observe the gap in Nigeria in an objective manner. If we truly want to understand what seems to be a key component of the issue, namely the autonomy of practitioner knowledge, we need to launch research projects to investigate. Such empirical studies can give support (or can refute) the new conceptualization of the academic-practitioner gap described above.

Sadly, with very few exceptions (Abiola & Hensen 2010) there are currently no empirical studies available to answer the question of whether there are knowledge autonomy-based discrepancies between academics and practitioners. The researcher does not know if the gap exists partly because of any of the following:

- i. Ad practitioners believe advertising works differently from what academics claim;
- ii. Whether it is even relevant for them to have such a theoretical knowledge base when dealing with clients.

Such an investigation is long overdue. Advertising professionals seem to love to write about their trade in the form of business books, trade articles and even crossover papers published in academic publications such as the *Journal of Advertising Research*, *APCON Online Newsletter*, *International Journal of Advertising* or *International Journal of Market Research*; such documents can be subjected to systematic analysis.

Finally, conference proceedings can be analyzed to content/textual analyses. When executing such empirical investigations, it is important to note that ‘practitioner’ is a heterogeneous construct. At the macro-level argument that has been presented in this paper, the practitioner clearly differs from the academic; on a more micro-level analysis, important differences are expected. It is very reasonable to assume that there will be important variations in the knowledge autonomies of advertising agencies (and even functional units within) as well as advertising personnel or higher management on the client side.

Conclusion

For advertising academics in Nigeria to advance advertising knowledge, while fulfilling their professional responsibilities to the academic and professional communities, investigations from the practitioner perspective are surely needed in order to accomplish three fundamental objectives:

- i. To narrow the divide between academicians and practitioners which endangers both academic research as a discipline and advertising as a profession: a necessary precondition for long term survival for both parties.

- ii. To aid advertising education by uncovering the types of knowledge advertising practitioners possess, use and expect from novices entering the academy.
- iii. To enable advertising educators benefit from this research by using these insights for the development of improved educational programmes – that will better anticipate the realities of advertising work and the needs of the industry.

To the benefit of all, research on what practitioners think about the workings of advertising will allow us to compare and contrast practitioner perspectives with academic ones, thus allowing us to understand the academic–practitioner gap in Nigerian advertising industry on a deeper level.

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