How Can Academics Generate Better Research Ideas? 
Inspiration from Ideation Practice

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Abstract

How can academic scholars come up with better research ideas, such that their research becomes even more important, relevant, and interesting? This paper seeks to infuse academic research idea generation with ideation (best) practices in companies. As a trigger for academic self-reflection, it compares how academics in marketing typically ideate and how practitioners do so, along four dimensions: the source used for ideation, the scope applied to ideation, the sharing of ideas during ideation, and the stopping of ideas. To aid academic scholars in marketing to transition from self-reflection to concrete improvements in their ideation process, the paper also advances practical tools and methods. It does so along three ideation phases, namely domain exploration, domain immersion and research project design. The paper aims to stimulate more reflection and research into academic research ideation and advances specific research suggestions.

Keywords: research, marketing, ideation, innovation, scientometrics.
1. Introduction

Marketing scholars have expressed that the research business school academics generate may not be important (Kohli and Haenlein 2021), relevant (Reibstein et al. 2009), or interesting (Lehmann et al. 2011). Stremersch, Winer, and Camacho (2021) argue that this is more likely a problem of production (i.e., what research is done), than translation (i.e., how research is communicated). In essence, we may not pursue the right research ideas, such that we do not produce the right answers to the right questions (Roberts et al. 2014).

The reason for this misalignment could lie in the motivation of scholars. For instance, Kohli and Haenlein (2021) point to limits in intrinsic motivation of scholars entering marketing as a field and recommend scrutinizing scholars’ identification with marketing as a field. Stremersch, Winer, and Camacho (2021) examine the extrinsic motivation of business school academics (such as compensation and promotion) and find factors such as creativity, importance, and relevance to receive too little weight in the metrics by which scholars’ performance is measured and incentivized.

Another reason could lie in the ability of scholars to come up with important, relevant, and interesting research ideas. For instance, Stewart (2020) and Lehmann et al. (2011) suggest doctoral programs to improve their PhD training on research ideation. Indeed, change is only possible if agents have the methods and tools to support the requested change (Coughlan, Suri, and Canales 2007; Kellogg 2011). If we want research to become more important, relevant, and
interesting, we will not only have to address scholars’ motivation, but we will also need to improve the methods scholars use to come up with better research ideas, as advocated by Lehmann et al. (2011) and Stremersch, Winer, and Camacho (2021).

The main thesis of the present paper is that, rather than to reinvent the wheel, we can learn a lot from how companies ideate, as they seem to be more advanced in leveraging ideation methods than most marketing academicians (which likely generalizes to business academicians at large). Ironically, (1) many of these ideation methods were invented or studied by business academicians; and (2) such company ideation processes may involve academicians in fields such as chemistry, physics, medicine, or engineering.

Next, I identify the key differences between how companies ideate and how academics in marketing typically ideate – taking a people perspective on how academics do and may behave. These differences may present improvement areas for academics and, at least, prompt marketing academicians to self-reflect. Then, I leverage those insights to formulate improvements to the academic ideation process, by tailoring tools and methods used in ideation practice. In the discussion section of this paper, I review which types of research areas could benefit most from the insights presented and how to test some of the underlying assumptions of these insights.
2. Ideation in Marketing Academia: The Contrast with Ideation in Practice

Next, I compare how academicians in marketing typically ideate with the ideation of sophisticated practitioners in companies. There are several reasons such comparison risks to be unfair, or at least imperfect: (1) it compares the average marketing academician with firms that perform above average on ideation, as they are good ideal cases to learn from; (2) average marketing academicians are more resource-constrained than average companies; (3) average marketing academicians have less to gain financially from better ideation than typical firms (e.g., marketing academicians see an average return of $1,500-4,500 in salary from a top journal publication; see Mittal et al. 2008).

Having recognized this qualifier, I identify 4 S’s to guide our comparison (see Table 1): (1) the source used for ideation; (2) the scope applied to ideation; (3) the sharing of ideas during ideation; (4) the stopping of ideas. To make these 4 dimensions of ideation dialectically spark conversation and introspection, I make them into dilemmas or contrasts between rather diametrically opposite ends of a spectrum; I recognize that most academics or companies are not on the extremes of this spectrum, nor should they necessarily be.
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**Table 1: Differences Between Academic and Practitioner Ideation along 4-S’s**

2.1. **Source: Isolation Versus Immersion**

Companies increasingly immerse themselves in the customer context in ideation processes (“day-in-the-life-of”, voice of customer (VOC) or customer journeys) to pursue innovations that match customer needs. They seek to understand what the frustrations, needs, or wants are of (prospective) customers and deeply understand the behavior and habits of customers. Many of these techniques originate from or are studied by (marketing) academicians in business schools who advocate the use of such techniques to better understand customer needs (e.g., Cayla and Arnould 2013; Griffin and Hauser, 1993), and empirically demonstrate the benefits of such understanding for firms (e.g., Blocker et al., 2011; Kuehnl, Jozic, and Homburg, 2019).

Unfortunately, marketing academicians do not typically practice these techniques themselves in research ideation and increasingly isolate themselves in their office to ideate (Roberts et al.)
In this manner, they seemingly drift from the science of practice (Stremersch et al. 2023) that marketing once was, to replicate the old, lab, version of the hard sciences model. However, in the hard sciences model, such as chemistry, biology, and physics, collaboration with practice and immersion in customer contexts is increasingly seen as pivotal to research success (e.g., the Technology Transfer Office model). In a “science of practice”, immersion in the context of the customers of our research seems even more pivotal and the lack thereof may explain the lack of relevance or importance cited above. Such customers of (derivatives of) our academic marketing research ideally may be companies, consumers, policy makers or the public at large (Shugan 2003). Our journals as well as press outlets are ideally successive channels to such end customers of our research, rather than end customers in their own right.

More typical sources than customer immersion used today for ideation are: prior literature (and its listed limitations), available data sets and, less so, the business press (Muller 2019). While these sources can add value to an ideation process, they have critical shortcomings. The (list of limitations of) prior literature in a paper may deliver research ideas raised by reviewers that the original scholars did not find useful or feasible to study themselves, rather than the “X marking the treasure location”. Available data sets offer solutions seeking for a problem, while in company practice, we have learnt that a better way to innovate is from problem to solution (e.g., the design thinking logic; see Brown 2008). Business press can be a good start, but it is only a window on the world outside, which is different from stepping into the outside world.
To get out of the office and immerse, marketing academics can be consultants, attend practitioner conferences, meet policy makers, or gain actual work experience in a company, as a sabbatical, as work on top of their faculty life, but in the future – why not? – as an essential part of their faculty life. Quite likely, the ideal world would be that academics organize themselves through cycles of immersion with practice and isolation in science to really deliver science of practice that is important and relevant. Some marketing academicians do this already and attest to its value. Roberts et al. (2014) interviewed authors of high-impact papers and found symbiosis with consulting to be a prime factor in coming up with the idea for their breakthrough research.

2.2. Scope: Few and Narrow Versus Many and Wide

Generating many ideas is better than generating few ideas (e.g., Girotra, Terwiesch and Ulrich 2010; Terwiesch and Ulrich 2009) and generating more ideas leads to better ideas (Osborn 1953). Why? The chance of having a good idea in the set just goes up with the number of ideas you generate. It is a logic that underlies the wisdom of crowds, which has shown to lead to superior ideation results (Terwiesch and Ulrich 2009). Second, enforcing to generate more ideas can stretch the idea generation to include unusual and more radical ideas (Lucas & Nordgren 2015). Third, one can be more stringent in selecting the right idea from a larger set and avoid procrastinating on a bad idea; thus, the shape of an innovation funnel is preferably very wide initially and narrows towards the end.
A growing body of literature supports the view that a wider scope in the search for good ideas leads to higher creativity and better innovations (Schilling and Green 2011), as it enables new combinations and high variance (Fleming 2001), despite also more waste. Companies widen their search space in ideation in multiple ways: (1) ideate across domains for cross-fertilization (Hargadon and Sutton 1997); (2) compose diverse teams with different backgrounds (Taylor and Greve 2006); (3) involve outsiders (e.g., start-ups, other firms, experts) for “outside-in” inspiration (Chesbrough and Tucci 2020); (4) adopt hybrid approaches of independent ideation and team convergence (Girotra, Terwiesch, and Ulrich 2010).

Contrary to the push of companies to go ever larger and wider in their search for great ideas, academics remain typically focused on generating rather few ideas in a confined, narrow, space. Companies in an ideation process routinely generate 100 or more ideas. Marketing academics don’t; they rather anchor on developing only one – or thé – idea. Once thé idea is generated, they execute on it, with a rather low “kill-rate” (by the author, irrespective of reviewers’ or editors’ feedback). Dropping an idea may feel like a loss in the academic idea generation process, rather than being a natural step in the idea funnel. Therefore, almost all ideas get executed, but as we know from ideation research (Asplund and Sandin 1999), few ideas are good. Thus, in consequence, if few ideas that are executed on are good, then few papers are good. Thus, academics could benefit from generating more ideas and only execute the best ones (for selection criteria, see below).
Marketing academics may also benefit from a wider search space. With a higher standard on rigor for publishing in top journals, performance pressure by counting publications in career evaluation in schools, and increased balkanization in specialization fields (see, Stremersch, Winer, and Camacho 2021), marketing academics risk of focusing on a very narrow problem area with a very limited set of solutions (i.e., the one-trick pony problem). However, the best ideas surface when we search widely for connections across fields (Uzzi, Mukherjee, Stringer, & Jones, 2013). Thus, marketing academics may benefit from becoming broader, boundary-spanning and less locked up in ghettos (Stremersch 2021) to avoid becoming too narrow and boring in the ideas they generate. It is better to accept a lower productivity in numbers, but an increase in relevance, importance, or interestingness, even if academic institutions have the wrong incentivizes in place for the time being (Stremersch, Winer, and Camacho 2021).

2.3. Share

Companies increasingly encourage ideators to share their ideas to reap strong benefits (e.g., see De Stobbeleir, Ashford and Buyens 2011). For example, seeing or hearing others’ ideas can inspire ideators by stimulating the diffusion of good ideas (Mason and Watts 2012) and help ideators overcome mental barriers (Kohn, Paulus, and Choi 2011). Sharing can also make the ideation task more motivating for ideators (Nijstad, Stroebe, and Lodewijkx 2002). In the absence of social feedback, ideators generate fewer and lower quality ideas and are more likely to pursue poor ideas (Singh and Fleming 2010).
Marketing academics typically hoard early-stage ideas. The academic publication process is long and painful (easily five years between idea and paper acceptance), without much intellectual property (IP) protection, which discourages sharing. The average academic institution in social sciences has poor IP support and practices, and IP protection in social sciences is harder than in hard sciences, as ideas are less codified and less tangible. Integrity in science is also at a low level. For instance, reviewers on grant applications or papers may recommend rejection to subsequently pursue the very same idea (Maddox 1995). Therefore, the more common behavior among marketing academics is to generate an idea in relative isolation and share the idea at conferences when it is already at least partially executed upon.

Marketing academicians may consider improving their ideation approach by sharing very early-stage ideas prior to execution in protected circles, such as departments, intercollegial networks of collaborators or classes of doctoral students. Such sharing may be facilitated by the great collaboration tools we all discovered during the COVID 19 pandemic, such as, for instance, Mural, Miro, Klaxoon, or Microsoft Whiteboard. In such platforms, scholars can put sticky notes representing an idea and harvest feedback. Of course, this approach still requires trust that someone would not steal your idea early on or leak your idea to others outside the network, (un)intendedly. Even if marketing academicians would utilize such collaborative ideation tools, including idea templates, in limited circle (such as intended co-authors for a paper) more effectively (e.g., forcing themselves to adopt an idea template and forcing themselves to come up with 10 ideas at least, rather than just stopping at 1 which they fine-tune), they would benefit from collaborative returns on ideation. At present, however, from personal experience,
the knowledge on such collaborative platforms is below par. An alternative path to sharing is with people outside academia, such as personal friends, as well as practitioners one may know.

2.4. Stop

In companies, killing bad ideas fast and cheap is seen as an important capability (Klingebiel 2021). When bad ideas keep on lingering, they take valuable resources away from more promising ideas the firm wants to pursue (Boulding et al. 1997). This is key to the lean startup movement that is very influential among companies (Blank 2013; Ries 2011). Companies combine the “skill to kill” ideas fast increasingly with tolerance for failure. Failing in pursuit of an idea is increasingly seen as a normal outcome (Khanna et al. 2016).

In marketing academia, other rules typically apply. The more recommended behavior – my own advisor called them the three rules of top journal publishing: persist, persist, and persist – is to not drop an idea but persist with it. Of course, also in company innovation, persistence can be an important quality, but at the same time, persisting with bad ideas that deliver suboptimal results is not what successful companies do. Thus, academic file drawers are typically containing fully executed projects that never made it through review, instead of tens or hundreds of early-stage idea cards that did not yet get prioritized for execution.
Marketing academicians may wonder when and how to stop pursuing ideas earlier in the process. The capability to stop early and not let bad ideas linger is critical, together with the other recommendations above. If marketing academicians thanks to immersion have a better sense for ideas that can be relevant, important, and interesting, generate more ideas across a wider spectrum, and harvest on collaborative feedback more effectively, then the result will be a wider idea funnel at start and better information to select. These factors will enable early stopping. Early stopping will also be needed as the idea funnel will now be so rich that most marketing academicians would not be able to pursue them all, nor should they want to.

3. Academic Ideation in Marketing Research: Process Improvements Inspired by Practice

The contrast between innovation ideation in practice and marketing academia enables academics to benchmark themselves against other academics or against a desired ideal (one could even make the above 4 S’s into a scoring matrix), to subsequently derive steps for improvement. To help such improvement trajectories, I now examine ideation as a process, including methods and tools, inspired again from processes observed in practice. I adopt the lens of doctoral students that start from scratch in search of a dissertation topic but see the advocated practices as useful also for more advanced academics.

I distinguish three steps in the ideation process: (1) domain exploration; (2) domain immersion; and (3) project design. In domain exploration, the researcher explores which domains there are that could potentially be of interest and provides an initial description that aids in domain
prioritization and selection. In domain immersion, the researcher immerses in a select domain to generate insights that can steer a research direction and generate research questions. In project design, a researcher generates ideas based on such insights and matures research designs over successive steps to successfully filter promising research projects from less promising research projects. In between each step, the researcher engages in selection and prioritization, possibly based on input of others. Each step leverages templates so the output of each step can easily be shared with others for feedback.

**Figure 1: A Proposed Academic Research Ideation Process**

These process steps can easily be linked with the recommendations in Table 1. The consideration of multiple domains in an open mind would enable a wider search for ideas beyond the normal boundaries. Explicitly immersing in considered domains would drive academics out of isolation and force immersion by process. The express consideration of prioritization and selection by default means some ideas would not be pursued, which would enforce the generation of more ideas and consider stopping of ideas as a normal outcome for some. The usage of templates along the journey would foster sharing of ideas with each idea being presented on a level playing field. Next, I provide detail on the three steps, each in turn.
3.1. Domain Exploration

The first step is to explore multiple domains that could be of interest and cast a rather wide net. There are different sources of inspiration that may guide scholars in domain exploration.

3.1.1. Me, myself and I

When you are to embark on an academic publication trajectory, which is long, tedious, and frustrating, it should be in a domain that you’re passionate about, you’re good at, and serves your goals (in career or life). Thus, scholars need to engage in a multifaceted exploration on what makes them as a scholar uniquely positioned. Figure 2 shows some questions one may use to trigger the inventory of your interests, engagement, competences, and goals. For instance, you may be an avid video gamer (similar to Jeroen Binken, of the dissertation-based video console paper, Binken and Stremersch 2009). In terms of competences, you want to work in a research domain that plays into your strengths, not so much into your weaknesses (an athlete chooses a sport they have talent in). You may also want to consider your goals, such as your preferred journals or business schools. The “persona” template in Figure 2 can help you discover who you are.
3.1.2. Collaborators

Many marketing academicians today entertain strong collaboration networks they need to consider also when exploring relevant domains (e.g., Goldenberg, et al. 2010). The number of single-authored papers, for instance in Journal of Marketing, has declined from over 50% (1975) to under 10% (2015) in 4 decades (Stremersch and Winer 2019). Definitely, doctoral students will have to consider their supervisor’s interests and backgrounds, as well as the departments in which they intend to graduate. Collaborators’ interests, engagement, competences, and goals may cause some domains to be more relevant than others. One could use the tool in Figure 2 for collaborators also or, as in Figure 3, map out your collaboration team’s knowledge, methodological competences, and data access. One could add other relevant team characteristics, such as expected tasks and time devotion.

Figure 2: Domain Exploration: Me, Myself and I
3.1.3. **Trends**

To generate research that is important, relevant and interesting, it is wise to analyze trends around you and your (potential) collaboration team and not to “ivory tower” ideate completely void of what is happening around you. Prior research has shown that publications on emerging trends have a greater scientific impact than others (Kwon et al. 2019). Of course, this is not the same as jumping on trends to be the first one to have a paper on that trend, purely incentivized by a gaming logic on citations (by default early papers on topics that become big are cited more, regardless of their quality). You want to be cognizant about trends surrounding you, so you do not make your life’s work on a domain of the past, not befitting the modern world.
One way to look at trends is the use of frameworks such as PESTEL (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal). At times, it may be useful to consider the maturity stage of a trend or the knowledge available on it, e.g., from (1) emerging (a trend is in its infancy and little is known), (2) growing (a trend is widening its influence and the knowledge on it is growing), (3) maturing (a trend is mainstream and a lot of knowledge already exists), to (4) fading (a trend is fading away and much knowledge already exists). When a trend is just emerging, the knowledge that scholars can typically develop is more limited and less reliable, but potentially more influential if the trend ends up being very impactful. As a trend matures, the knowledge that scholars develop is more rigorous, but significant gaps in knowledge become more scarce and newly developed knowledge may be less influential.

Another way to examine maturity of trends is to study the evolution of research domains. One can do this through backward and forward citation searches. In a backward citation search, one examines papers cited by a focal paper on a topic (first generation). One may continue the search beyond the first generation and examine papers cited by a paper referenced by the focal article (second generation). One may go on and conduct higher generation searches, for instance, to find the original paper in a research domain. In a forward citation search, one does the opposite. One searches for all papers that cite a focal article, all papers that cite a paper that was cited by the focal article, and so on.
Also, organizations can help you as a scholar in gauging trends and their maturity. For instance, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals has shaped the research agenda of a lot of research and university institutions. The Marketing Science Institute (www.msi.org) sets a research agenda based on surveying trends spotted by marketing academics and practitioners.

3.1.4. News and Conversations

Another useful way in which to explore and gauge research domains is to track news coverage (e.g., newspapers, popular magazines, online platforms, social media). What is trending in the world around you that triggers your interest? Is there a red thread? That red thread could be a research domain that you wish to explore further. One useful way in which to create an overview thereof is to make a collage of different clippings, which you possibly cluster in subdomains. Often, a domain that is in the news may drive important, relevant, and interesting research.

Also, conversations can be a great visionary input. Think of conversations with supervisors or prolific professors at your own institution or at conferences. In futures thinking, one often recommends carefully documenting conversations with remarkable people, experts with an outspoken, unusual view that do not avoid extreme positions. In our current context, this may mean to engage in conversations across silos (e.g., consumer behavior, marketing management, quant modeling), with experts in other disciplines (such as finance, economics, or psychology), or with students in completely different areas such as philosophy or engineering.
3.1.5. Domain Selection

Domain exploration ends with a first selection of domain(s) one may consider immersing oneself in. For advanced scholars, domain exploration may be a continuous exercise to wonder whether one needs to immerse oneself in a new domain for research beyond the ones already immersed in. Many firms act in a similar fashion. They may have coined some domains “established” innovation domains for the firm – i.e., domains that the firm has strategically prioritized and has allocated substantial innovation resources to – and some others “nascent” innovation domains – i.e., domains the firm considers to innovate in the future. Thus, firms are dynamic in their domain selection. Scholars should likely entertain the same dynamic logic. Figure 4 provides a template to bring the explored domains in one graphical overview.

Figure 4: Overview of Domains after Domain Exploration
Next, one may consider scoring each of these domains on the following aspects:

- **Personal interest**: to what extent does this domain tap into my passion, my competences and my career goals?
- **Feasibility**: to what extent is it feasible for me to enter this domain? (e.g., what infrastructure does this domain require, such as behavioral labs, MRI, etc., or specialized databases from third party providers, and do I have access to those?)
- **Timeliness**: is it the right time for me to start working in this domain given who I am, want to be and what the context is like?
- **Impact**: which stakeholders will I impact when working in this domain? What kind of impact will my current or future employer, funder, or other stakeholder like me to make?

When assessing such scores, some scholars may be more independent and will heavily weigh personal interest and impact; others may be less ambitious and put more weight on feasibility. Scholars can also add or cut scoring aspects, as long as they entertain the logic of an open and wide search with a rather formalized evaluation and selection among domains.

### 3.2. Domain Immersion

Immersion is increasingly advocated in practice as a necessary condition to successfully ideate, under the denominators of Design Thinking (Brown 2008; Gruber et al. 2015) and Voice of Customer (Coviello and Joseph 2012; Griffin and Hauser 1993) methods. Such methods advocate empathizing with (potential) customers, to understand their routines (e.g., “day in the life” methodology) and needs (e.g., probing, observing), define how might we’s based on the
customer insights obtained and consequently generate and prioritize research questions. They also advocate divergent thinking in the empathizing phase (i.e., not having a solution in mind, but really depart from the VOC), while defining how might we’s and research questions as a gradual convergent thinking process (Beckman and Barry 2007; Dayan and Di Benedetto 2011).

Translating to academic scholarship, scholars should empathize with audiences they want to reach with their research (e.g., journal editors and reviewers, firms, policy-makers) to better understand how specific research ideas could be the right ones to pursue. From such understanding, one can generate higher-level how might we’s on how research may address the interests of a particular audience, from which one can derive more specific research questions, which one can subsequently prioritize.

3.2.1. *Empathize with potential audiences and stakeholders*

Companies empathize with direct customers as well as other stakeholders in the value chain. For instance, in the construction industry, a piping company can empathize with plumbers and builders as they are the direct customers, but at the same time they need to sufficiently empathize with architects, city planners and utility companies as they indirectly affect which water management solutions are desired. Also, academics need to be cognizant of the value chain they belong to (e.g., the marketing science value chain as in Roberts et al. 2014). Mapping this value chain may be a great exercise to understand the system at large you are a part of, which may be different across subdiscipline silos (see Figure 5 from the viewpoint of a typical...
Empathizing with the different stakeholders in the value chain may provide researchers with great insights. For instance, young researchers should carefully read editorial statements of the journals they seek to publish in, and attend meet the editor sessions of such journals to understand what type of vehicle the journal wants to be. They can also read award winning papers in these journals carefully as they supposedly represent the best of the best and can help young scholars understand what type of contributions the journal likes to publish. It can also be useful to identify “template” papers; these are papers that represent the best among a certain type of paper in positioning, writing, etc. Matching the template with your own content can be an effective way to position and write own work.

Figure 5: A Typical Value Chain of a Researcher in Marketing
The end customer of your research deserves some additional attention. For quite a few researchers the end customers are companies (as the presence of managerial implications in many marketing journals demonstrates). Therefore, it pays off for many researchers to empathize more with companies, as advocated by Bartunek (2007) and Roberts et al. (2014). Researchers can visit practitioner conferences to hear what issues they find important and struggle with (looking at practice conference agendas online can give you a gist of what matters). Involvement in executive education programs can do the same. Consulting projects are another way in which one can empathize with companies as potential customers of your research (Roberts, et al. 2014). An alternative to consulting is to request a company in your domain of interest if you can now and then work at their facilities; the coffee corner chat and integration in the network of the firm is a great way to directly experience “a day in the life” of the potential customers for your ideas.

One way to visualize this outcome of customer and stakeholder empathizing is tooling such as customer personas or customer journeys. These tools in turn allow to clearly express customer insights as a Point-of-View (Cayla and Arnould 2013; Lemon and Verhoef 2016) that detail the person, the need, and an interesting learning. For instance, in one of my own research projects (as published in Camacho et al. 2019), I consulted with firms on ideation processes and studied their journey as they deploy innovation tournament software. I also partnered with one platform provider on one specific ideation project with a multinational engineering firm. This trajectory – void of any research plans at that point in time – gave me the following insight:

“Firms routinely deploy innovation tournament software to crowdsource innovation from their
own employees and a suite of various software providers exists that are easily deployed. However, many companies struggle with maintaining engagement of their people to such tournament platform software and do not harvest substantial results in terms of business value. At the same time, platform providers differ in their business model in the coaching they offer to employees and the tools and templates they provide.” Such customer insight is best stated as neutral as possible and void of any solutions you may have in your mind, i.e., is open minded. And of course, immersion in a research domain may yield multiple customer insights.

3.2.2. Define “How Might We’s” and Generate Research Questions

If the customer insight is appropriately stated, it yields many directions for you to ideate on possible research questions at a very granular level. An in-between meso-level are the so-called “how might we’s?” (HMW’s) that are an instrumental part in design thinking methods. This method is used widely in companies like P&G, Facebook, Google and IDEO. HMW’s allow to narrow the challenge (i.e., solution space) by triggering ideators to consider a broad range of solutions while being guided by a clear direction that ensures such solutions are not boundless (De Villiers 2022). Focusing ideation on one topic at a time does not mean disregarding insights. In practice, one can come up with several ‘how might we’ questions to tackle separate insights. Research has also shown that sequentially addressing subproblems leads to a greater number of ideas and more original ideas (Rietzschel et al., 2014). HMW’s are short questions that help ideators reframe customer insights which then serve as seeds into the discovery of opportunities to solve problems or develop improvements (De Villiers 2022):

Electronic copy available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=4466478
• “How”: to suggest a focal area but without already detailing a preconceived solution, rather merely to signal an opportunity area and provide confidence.

• “Might”: to enable creativity across multiple solution spaces and to suppress feasibility concerns.

• “We”: to bring in the collaboration team for a shared sense of purpose.

From the customer insight stated above (from Camacho et al. 2019), one can think of several how might we’s, such as: How might we:

• Organize coaching occurrences that lead to higher participant engagement?
• Design incentives that lead to higher participant engagement?
• Design tools that lead to higher participant engagement?
• Customize tournaments to the specific company context to get higher participant engagement?
• ...

Each of these HMW’s may lead to very different meta-theoretic lenses on the phenomenon of participant engagement and the respective work that ensues would be vested in very different literature streams and research traditions. Underlying each of these HMW’s are different research questions. Research questions are preferably precise statements that question the relationship between specific constructs. For instance, in the above example, one can define from the first HMW above the following research questions:

• How does the valence of feedback (positive or negative) affect participation intensity in an innovation tournament?

Electronic copy available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=4466478
• How does the timing of feedback (early versus late) affect participation intensity in an innovation tournament?
• How does the identity of a coach (internal versus external) affect participation intensity in an innovation tournament?
• How does the mode of coaching (oral or written) affect participation intensity in an innovation tournament?
• How does feedback length affect participation intensity in an innovation tournament?
• How does feedback frequency affect participation intensity in an innovation tournament?

In this research, we chose for a combination of research questions 1 and 2 and left the other ones to future research, which brings us to the next consideration, how we prioritize and select HMW’s and research questions.

3.2.3. Prioritize HMW’s and Research Questions

To prioritize HMW’s and research questions, a short checklist would be if the question is “FIT” for further development by the respective scholar.

1. Feasibility: Does studying the question seem feasible for the scholar and her research collaborations, because of the knowledge, skills or assets one needs in this domain?
2. Importance: Is the question sufficiently important and to whom? A question is more important as it has more impact on a larger group of more senior stakeholders (e.g., see Stremersch 2021).
3. **Timeliness**: Is the question particularly timely? A question is timely as more knowledge development is needed and answers to the question are particularly impactful at that point in time.

### 3.3. Research Project Design

Research questions are a way to home in on a phenomenon and to set the conceptual bounds of the constructs at play. Companies set the bounds to an innovation challenge and then ignite the process of generating potential solutions. In research, once we know what research questions to focus on, we can come up with multiple research designs that may differ in the variables to include, metrics to use, data collection methods to use, or models to estimate. Building sufficient divergence in the process helps to approach the phenomenon from multiple angles and see the value of each of these angles comparatively. Three techniques inspired by practice can be useful and uncommon to academics.

#### 3.3.1. White and Dark Horsing

When we think about a problem, our mind typically comes up with the most conventional solutions (white horses), as it is the path of least resistance (Rietzschel et al., 2014). Examples are the most common theoretical framework (as opposed to the most relevant or interesting), the most easily available metrics (as opposed to the most suitable metrics), or the most acceptable data collection method or model (as opposed to the most accurate; or a triangulation thereof). Beyond the path of least resistance, we may also do so because of cognitive fixation, i.e., the inability to see a problem from a fresh perspective (Butler and
Roberto 2018); we look for solutions that have worked in the past, that fit a certain category or merely tweak existing concepts rather than generating fresh ones. Another reason may lie in fear of judgement (Kelley and Kelley 2012); we look for safe solutions and kill potentially creative solutions because we are afraid of being judged and ridiculed.

Starting with white horsing is ok, but stopping there is not. One needs to persist in ideation to ultimately land great ideas. In a series of experiments, Lucas and Nordgren (2015) showed the role of persistence in idea generation leading to higher quality ideas. The authors found that “ideas generated while persisting were of higher quality than ideas generated initially” (p. 241). Thus, when the white horse ideation process is almost exhausted, it is time to let the dark horses out; unconventional solutions that may seem unfeasible, but potentially great. The horsing analog comes from horse racing, in which the white horse stands for the horse that has good chances at winning, but the payback of winning is rather small. The dark horse stands for the unknown horse in the background with small chances of winning but with very large potential payback. Dark horsing – as a formal stage in ideation after white horsing – gives you permission to say unusual things and come up with solutions that at first seem (a little) crazy.

As ideation preferably occurs in collective meetings with collaborators, formally calling it dark horsing may reduce fear of judgement and may push you to a fresher perspective. In dark horsing, academic ideators could adhere to certain principles, such as: (1) don’t be afraid of going beyond your expertise (that is where many great ideas are born), (2) let go of
assumptions you may have, defer judgement and fight negativity why something cannot work (breakthrough innovation is often showing something works which was believed to be impossible); (3) think in terms of analogies with other fields. While, of course, many dark horses will actually show to be infeasible – for which careful selection is even more important – some will be extraordinarily successful.

3.3.2. **Visualization with Napkins**

To carefully select and to prioritize which ideas should be elaborated further, ideators need to shortly and clearly explain their ideas and “visualize” it to others. In practice, I found presenting simple ‘idea napkins’ (that depict the pain point of the customer, the solution proposed and the benefits the solution offers) to be highly effective. Sometimes idea napkins also include a sketch of the idea. Extending this concept to academic ideation, an idea napkin may contain the following (See Figure 6): (i) the research questions or hypotheses of the research, (ii) the data collection method, (iii) the method employed to analyze the data; (iv) the intended contribution statement; (v) the intended impact of the study; and (vi) a graphical presentation of the conceptual model. Visualizing the idea can help greatly in conveying your idea to others.
Figure 6: Idea Napkin Example for Academic Marketing Research
Maturing Research Projects

Companies will often mature an idea napkin to a value proposition or business model canvas (Osterwalder et al. 2015). In a similar fashion, scholars may mature their research idea napkins to a one-pager that describes the academic research project in a bit more detail (Figure 7 shows a beta research project canvas inspired by Osterwalder’s business model canvas):

1. The right side provides the audience for the research (customers), the research questions by which the contribution statement is specified (the value proposition in Osterwalder’s canvas) and the outlets to reach the intended audience (such as scholarly journals but also more popular media);

2. The left side presents the team to work with (including team members’ strengths or expertise), the data to gather and the analysis methods to use.

3. The bottom side details project practicalities, such as resources needed or timing. Here it is best to adopt a project manager logic and to imagine “project managing” the scholarly project to make sure it progresses on a good rhythm given increasingly also academics are on “a clock”. In innovation practice, Goffin and Koners (2011) have shown that managing resources and timelines well are critical to positive innovation outcomes.

In summary, Figure 7 allows you to inventory (1) why and what you intend to study (the right panel), (2) how you foresee to execute your study (the left panel); and (3) the time and resources you need to execute your study (the bottom panel). Of course, individual scholars may choose to customize this figure to better suit their needs and context. Universally, creating
a one-page overview may be helpful at this stage to better evaluate the potential of projects, also comparatively speaking, all on the same level playing field.

**Figure 7: Beta Research Project Canvas**

3.3.3. *Selecting Napkins and Projects*

To select among idea napkins and beta project canvasses, one can self-compose quite a few scoring tools. One can adopt the criteria mentioned under subsection 3.2.3. above (feasibility, importance, and timeliness). At times, I have also introduced the innovation idea selection framework introduced by Day (2007): (1) is it real? (in terms of market and potential innovative solution); (2) Can we win? (can the solution be competitive? Can the firm be competitive?); (3) Is it worth doing (will the innovative solution be profitable at an acceptable risk? Does launching make sense strategically?). Applied to academic research studies they could be as follows:
• *Is it real?* Are the research questions or hypotheses sufficiently clear? Is the intended contribution really a contribution given the stance of the literature?

• *Can we win?* Is the data collection and analysis method feasible for us? Do we have an advantage in this space over other research teams?

• *Is it worth doing?* Is the research sufficiently important for someone to make an impact? Could the study outcomes be sufficiently novel or surprising for an informed audience? Are the risks in the project manageable?

4. **Discussion**

At the start of the paper, I diagnosed that today’s scholarly research in marketing suffers from lack of importance, relevance, and interestingness. While acknowledging other determinants for today’s state of affairs, such as bad incentives (as in Stremersch et al. 2021), I focus particularly on scholars’ abilities that likely fall short to produce better research. Inspired by ideation in practice, I develop two interconnected perspectives on this gap between what the desired state of affairs and the actual state of affairs is: (1) *People*: how do marketing academics typically ideate and what may they consider doing differently? and (2) *Process*: what processes and tooling do practitioners routinely use for ideation that academics may consider adopting?

For *People*, the main insights are that academic scholars in marketing may consider to isolate themselves less and immerse more in their study context, they may enlarge the scope of the
ideas they generate from few in a narrow space to many in a wide space, they may consider sharing more their ideas earlier rather than hoard their ideas, and they may consider to fail fast on bad ideas, rather than to kill bad ideas slowly.

These considerations on the People side of things, may lead academics that consider changing their behavior to process improvements by using tooling inspired by Design Thinking and Lean Startup in practice. Think of, a more conscious ideation domain exploration and more careful domain selection, followed by a deep immersion in the domains under consideration by empathizing with stakeholders and defining “how might we’s?” from which research questions can be derived. Consequently, scholars can use white and dark horsing techniques and visualization aids (such as idea napkins or beta research project canvasses) to make more careful selection decisions which ideas to pursue and which ideas to kill fast.

Two prominent questions remain as an afterthought. First, is the perspective offered equally suitable for any type of research inquiry or are there special types of research that are particularly amenable to the approaches propagated in this paper? Second, can the perspective that seems to be conceptually appealing and work in a limited number of trial occasions be solidified academically as a superior approach and how could one possibly establish the required evidence for such claims? Next, I turn to these final questions, each in turn.
4.1. **Research for which this approach may be especially useful**

As the tooling and process above are inspired by Design Thinking practices in ideation, the type of research these tools and process steps are most appropriate for shares some similarity with the conditions in which Design Thinking is believed to be most appropriate. First, very likely the approach propagated above is probably more useful the more ambiguous the problem and its context is (e.g., Gruber, et al. 2015); so-called ill-defined or wicked problems. As a corollary, the approach likely serves very novel, breakthrough, thinking the most, as the context and problem are then often not clearly defined yet (Michelli et al. 2019). For example, managing new technology for marketing (e.g., see Hoffman et al. 2021) leads to ambiguous problems such as: How do new marketing technologies change marketing's role within the firm? What are new marketing strategies that are enabled by new technology?

Second, it likely serves practical problems better than theory-derived problems. The study of practical problems can lead to very high dual-impact (i.e., practice and academia) papers, as expressed in Roberts et al. (2014). In such papers, immersion is often a required antecedent of scientific breakthroughs (Roberts et al. 2014; Golder et al. 2023). Beyond new technology, today’s commercial departments face the rise of Customer Experience and Customer Insights as new thinking frameworks. How should firms integrate Customer Experience and Commercial Excellence/Operations workflows? How to manage the transformation to a Customer-Centric organization where Customer Experience is key? How to feed customer insights to commercial and innovation processes? And in today’s world with new technology arising and commercial
functions tectonically shifting, what commercial competencies should firms develop in their commercial functions? These are all questions that require scholars to immerse deeply into practicing firms to provide answers that are relevant to such stakeholders.

Third, the propagated approach likely becomes more valuable the more scholars may become trapped in their own worldview and their own predisposed beliefs (Liedtka 2015). Scholars may easily get trapped because of their own past (e.g., findings they reported in prior studies or methodologies previously employed), their preferences or opinions (e.g., the belief they have about phenomena or relationships they study), or their prior training (e.g., theories or methods they master). For instance, generative AI promises to be highly impactful to the field of marketing, very likely even more than the advent of the Internet and E-commerce. However, marketing scholars may get trapped in their own worldview and be overly critical on its usefulness... For instance, lack of accuracy is readily and rightly named as a shortcoming of Generative AI, but at the same time, scholars may overrate the average accuracy of human-generated (including scholarly produced) information and underestimate the rate at which Generative AI may improve in accuracy. Likewise, scholars may point to IP issues with Generative AI, given their own work in heavily IP-protected contexts. By doing so, they may make the mistake of excessively dismissing Generative AI (for a nuanced discussion, see Peres et al. 2023).

4.2. Future research that may be especially useful to validate the suggested approach
The scholarly evidence for the principles and approach suggested above is thin. While it is grounded in conceptual logic, prior theorizing and prior evidence in different contexts, its main “empirical testing” was through deploying the suggested approach and tooling in doctoral seminars in about 12 different institutions and merely observing the process. Therefore, it would be useful to develop some more conclusive tests of the above logics as well as thinking about new research areas on academic research ideation, a field that could be equally impactful as citation research has been in the last two decades (Stremersch et al. 2007).

One path is to survey academics and inventory their ideation practices and connect them to academic productivity of such scholars. For instance, one could inventory with multi-item scales how a sample of non-anonymous academics ideate on the dimensions in Table 1 and tie that method of ideation to the scholar’s productivity, as well as specific dimensions of productivity such as creativity or relevance (as in Stremersch et al. 2021). Such design could also be coupled to a critical incidents’ method (as in Lehmann, et al., 2011) reflecting on the most positive and the most negative ideation experiences and how the two compared on the above 4 dimensions and the tooling provided. One can expand on such idea by running a survey across disciplines, e.g., disciplines that are typically more distant (e.g., economics) versus closer (e.g., chemistry) to practice in terms of ideation.

Another way would be to do a sample matching of highly influential papers and a random set of not so influential papers and inventory the ideation process behind both sets of papers from
the respective authors. If the papers sampled are only from top journals in marketing, one would obtain a certain level of comparability on quality, but both sets may be distinct on other dimensions such as importance, relevance, and interestingness. Influential papers could be identified based on awards won, citation metrics obtained or an exploratory survey of academics inventoring influential papers. Such research would be similar in spirit to the survey among dual-impact scholars as in Roberts et al. (2014).

An alternative to surveys would be to examine or text-mine scholars’ resumes and LinkedIn accounts to derive how the scholar scores on the dimensions in Table 1. For instance, scholars that share rather than hoard also likely are more active on social media. Or, scholars that immerse rather than isolate likely had more exposure over time to practice. Connecting such data mined from resumes or LinkedIn profiles that serves as (distant) proxies for ideation practices can then be connected to research outcomes.

Another way would be to design lab-size experiments with doctoral students where a test group is exposed to certain tooling (e.g., white and dark horsing to produce idea napkins) and the control group is not (e.g., generate ideas for your research). Consequently, one can compare ideation results across both groups on idea quantity and quality by a knowledgeable panel of evaluators (among which one can cross-validate). A related research idea would be to inventory the stated likelihood of success in a conjoint study where one varies the scholarly ideation process or the scholar’s characteristics across conjoint profiles. Experienced
researchers with proven track record would then be able to assess which profiles would lead to academic work with higher relevance, importance, or interestingness. Possibly, researchers could enrich the conjoint profiles, in terms of information acceleration, by videotaping the suggested ideation approach, performed by actors as doctoral students.

Still another way could be more observational or descriptive. When exposing young scholars to the above suggested ideation approaches, scholars could observe the ideation process that is followed and meticulously describe it. For instance, when using dark and white horsing towards idea napkins, what is the behavior and sequence of idea formation they observe. And why does it work or not? Scholars could even utilize techniques such as fMRI scans to document which areas of the brain are triggered when using certain tooling and which consequences (e.g., creativity) could be connected to it.

At a higher level, one may also wonder whether a stream of research could develop on improving our own scholarly research approaches, inspired more by professional practices in practicing firms. Very likely, there is potential for developing a better understanding, improving our practices, as well as improving our outcomes, in scholarly terms, but maybe also in terms of social valorization. For example, academic scholars typically have limited formal training, tooling and experience in project maturation and project management. Could we accelerate the learning curve of young scholars on these competencies and what are the outcomes thereof on quantity and quality of academic research? Or, can we replicate the “pitching”
competencies that innovators in companies build in academia, especially towards practice audiences? Can we learn how to convince practicing managers better on the importance and relevance of our research? More widely, can we train academic young scholar audiences better in how to bridge academia with practice?

4.3. Envoy

Typically, we think of practice as an ultimate destiny of our research; at least the managerial implications included in our papers give the impression that we do so. This paper advocates to see practice as a stronger source of inspiration, even to the core of what we do and that is to ideate on new research. Maybe not only practice can learn from academia, but academia can learn from practice. In recognizing practice more fully as a source of knowledge and inspiration, we may build a stronger symbiosis with practice, which is increasingly essential to our long-term legitimacy.
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