Managers´ Views on Narrowing the Relevance-Gap in Brand Research – Results from an Exploratory Study

Joern Redler, Dr.
Mainz University of Applied Sciences
Sascha Gres
Harwin

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Abstract:

The paper refers to the relevance gap between research and managerial practice in the field of branding. It reports a study that draws on qualitative interviews with marketing managers to explore ideas on ways to narrow the gap. The results also identify interfaces between managers and research, their perceptions of the gap, and the reasons for its existence. The findings contribute to research on relevance of brand research and urge better engagement with managers and modified dissemination of results to the managerial community. The study takes a consistent managerial view, making it one of the first of its kind.

1. Introduction[1]

The question of how academic knowledge relates to practice has been addressed in several debates in the field of business (e.g., Roberts et al., 2014; Kauppinen-Räisänen and Grönroos, 2014). Elaborating on the academic-practitioner relationship, many authors have diagnosed an existing "gap" between the research world and the world of practical management (e.g., Empson, 2013). The divide has also been referred to as a gap between rigour and relevance, or between theory and practice.

Within the management context, the existence, the extent and the widening of a gap between practice and science has even been highlighted as the most important challenge for scholars (Banks et al., 2016). However, efforts to shorten or even close the gap have not yet been successful. Rather than narrowing, some authors perceive it as widening (e.g., Thrassou et al. 2019). Looking at the discipline of marketing, awareness of the research-practice divide has increased, and debates about ways "return to relevance" have emerged. The discipline of brand management has not yet explicitly addressed this challenge; only a few branding papers have so far explored the syndrome. One of these is the recent study by Alpert et al. (2021), which supports the gap´s existence in the branding domain. A study by Redler and Schmidt (2022) found that within the group of brand managers, there was no awareness about brand management schools, no systematic approach to link with brand theory or research, and no expectations left to learn from current brand research.

Against this background, our study addresses the following key research questions:

- Which interfaces, if any, do managers have with brand research or researchers?
- Do brand managers feel a disconnect between brand research and their own work? If so, what related problems are seen?
- From the manager´s perspective, what has led to this gap, if it exists?
- What ideas do managers have to bridge the gap?

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[1] This text is the abridged version of the research paper, and it focuses on the most important aspects necessary to evaluate the research.

2. Methodology of the Study

The research follows a qualitative, exploratory approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 experienced marketing managers from Germany, from April to June 2023. The sample included interviewees from different industries, different company sizes; with variance in age and education, and half of the sample worked for international companies. Care was taken that there was no relationship between the experts included. All experts were in a leading marketing position and had 15 years of marketing management experience at minimum.

All interviews were organised according to a deductively developed and pre-tested structure which allowed for a flexible exploration of topics related to the research questions. The average length of the interviews was about 50 minutes.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed according to Kuckartz´s (2014) structuring qualitative content analysis by using MAXQDA. Inductive open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of the total data generated a system of categories with eight main categories and 32 first-level subcategories at a higher level of abstraction which served as the basis for data interpretation.

3. Main Results

The themes that emerged from the analysis can be grouped into three main areas: (1) managers´ current points of contact with brand research including their lifelong learning activities, (2) managers´ awareness of a gap in the relevance of brand research, and (3) managers´ views on how to bridge the gap. A summary of all superordinate themes that emerged form the study is exhibited in Fig. 1.
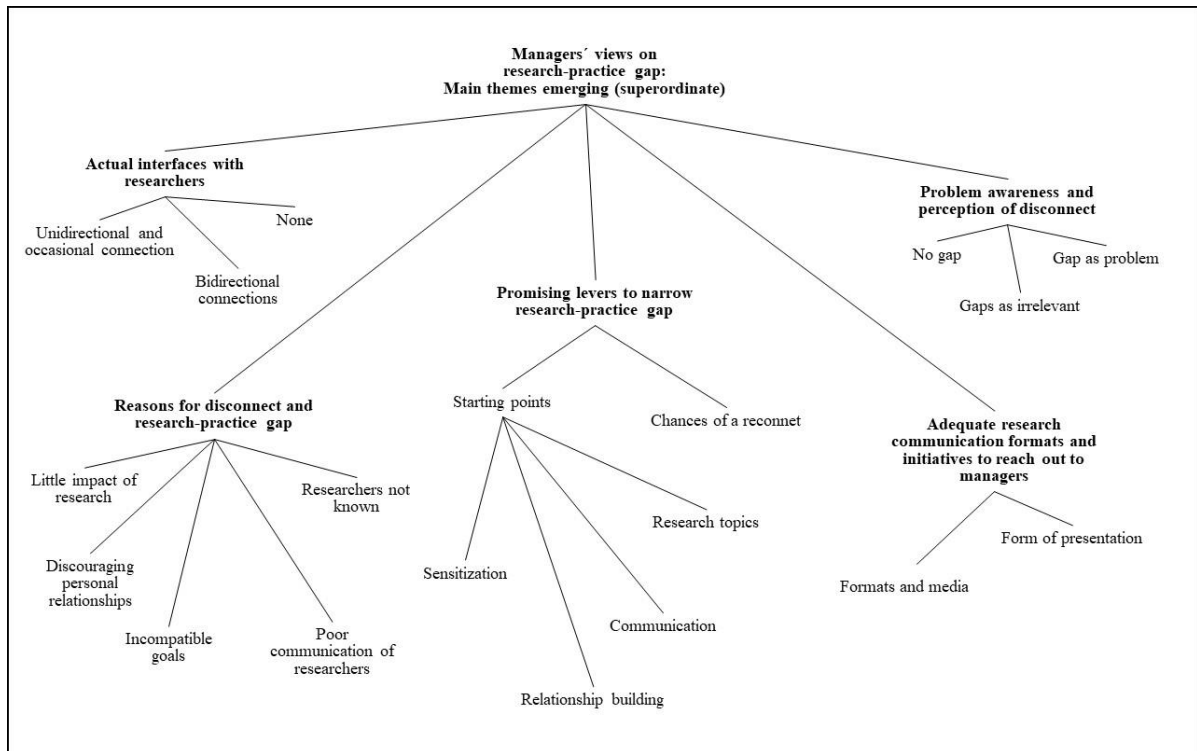
Figure 1. Main themes emerging from the study

Within the first group, it became evident that there are a variety of links that managers have with brand research, although some managers reported that they do not have any at all. Clusters of links refer to (a) own research activity, self-study initiatives and personal contact with brand researchers, (b) more or less intense cooperation with universities, institutes or agencies, (c) individual lifelong learning contacts, management training or conferences.

The second set of themes included a range of very different perceptions about a gap in the relevance of brand research. While some managers see no gap between the management reality and brand research, others emphasise the separation between the world of brand research and the world of management. Where there was a perception of a gap, quite diverse evaluations became apparent, e.g., views that see the gap as very problematic. Interestingly, the divide did not appear a problem for some because expectations of research are low and because managers have found other ways of doing their practical work than by looking at scientific results. When elaborating on how current management challenges are met, none of the interviewees even mentioned the input of brand research and researchers.

The analysis of the reasons for such a gap resulted in the following main categories or themes: (a) poor relationship between the parties, (b) divergent goals and orientations of the parties, (c) poor marketing and communication by researchers, (d) low level of awareness of

researchers and their research, and (e) by far too little benefit from research results for managers. For each theme, several sub-categories appeared in the data. As an illustration, a look at the last theme (e): there, four sub-clusters emerged. One of these was a lack of actuality and too little agility in academic research activity. Another one relates to a perception of research as too descriptive rather than formative in creating recommendations. Managers also feel that research is clearly lagging behind practise and that brand research does not take up current problems as its research issues. There is also a perception that academia, in its role as an educator of future managers, is removed from current management reality, and that what is taught is a replication of earlier theory.

Turning to managers´ views on how to bridge the gap (Fig. 2), four main themes became apparent. The first relates to improved "offerings" for the practical side (increased agility and faster provision of answers, for example). A second theme revolves around improving the relationships between managers and researchers (regular bi-directional exchanges and personal discourse, proactive networking, joint projects, as examples). A third theme is about raising awareness of the scientific contributions that need to be addressed by researchers. The fourth theme focuses on enhancing researchers´ communication design used to reach out to managers. One category here concerns the presentation of content (e.g., short and precise, more interesting, language and visuals). Another one revolves around the format and the media deployed. Most of the issues that emerged in this context call for more digital, unidirectional formats. To illustrate, contributing to serious but entertaining blogs, podcasts, videocasts and providing short textual and visual summaries is seen as key for researchers.

4. Limitations of the Study

Like any study, this one has several limitations, some of which are addressed in the following. First, the study is exploratory, adopts a qualitative research paradigm and is intended to provide a deeper understanding of the issue. Moreover, the analysis is based on a German sample only. These two points underline that the findings cannot be easily generalized. However, relevant issues are identified which provide insights for future research, theory development, and also necessary changes in current research management.
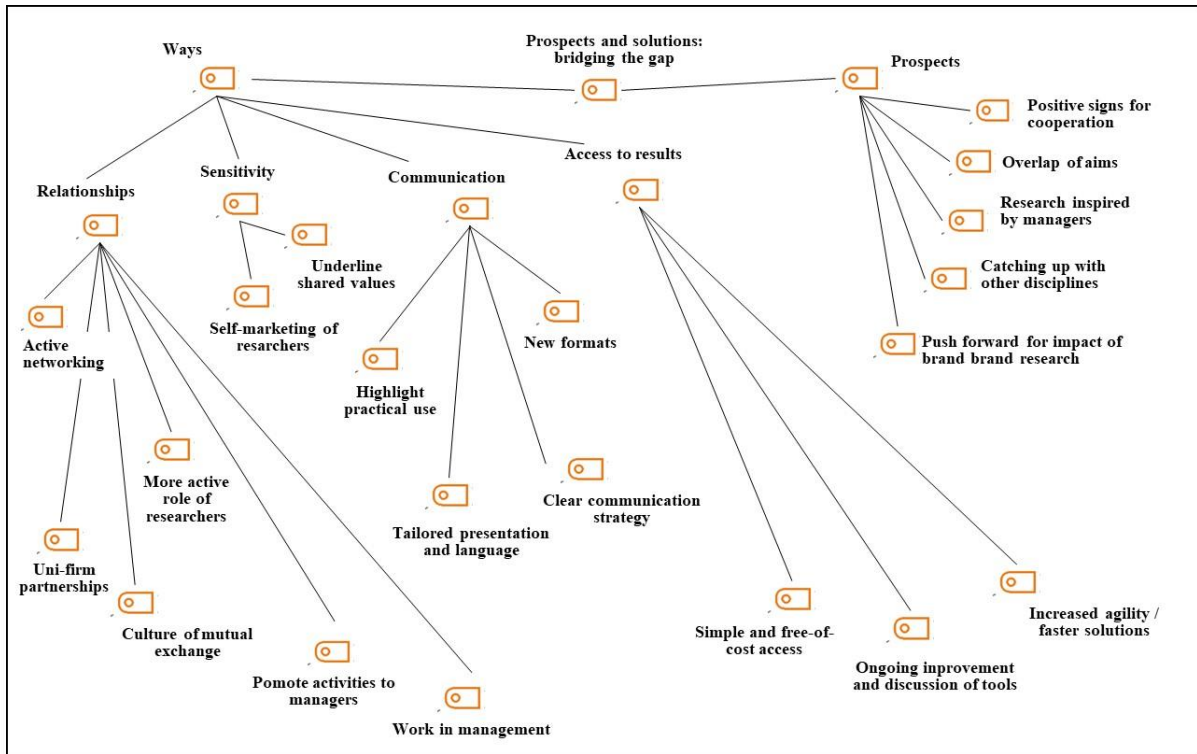
Figure 2. Hierarchical Code-Subcode-Model for Chances and Solutions to Narrow the Gap

Second, although the coding and interpretation of the data was argued between two researchers, a possible researcher bias cannot be ruled out. Bias during data collection should not have been a problem here as a semi-structured and pre-tested interview guideline was used.

Third, a smaller sample was used, recruited from researchers´ networks and through social media or recommendations. The selection criteria for the interviewees were rooted in the ideas of Gläser and Laudel (2010), and care was taken to ensure that participants were from different industries, company sizes and regions, and heterogenous in terms of age and experience. However, the selection and appropriateness of the participants used for the study could be a point of discussion when assessing the overall methodological quality.

5. Implications for Theory and Research

Consistent with the findings of Alpert et al. (2021) and Redler and Schmidt (2022), there is support for a disconnect between brand researchers and managers. Our research highlights

that managers generally do not take into account the findings from academic research in the field of branding as relevant to their work.

Looking at the results, it is clear that the relevance of brand research is under doubt from a managerial view. Going beyond this, the study extends the research on ways to overcome the disconnect by providing some insights into managers´ expectations and recommendations. The themes that emerged offer starting points for further research, such as effective and efficient communication formats for reaching managers, the appropriate style of communication or the extent of storytelling required. Another avenue emerges from the discussion on the role of transfer and science communication as part of researchers´ work.

The need to examine more sophisticated networking mechanisms is another theoretical implication. A further issue is the current and future role of consultancies and agencies as transfer agents in this context. Finally, the findings call for a rethink of the way in which young researchers and PhD students are currently trained. It is also clear that debates about whether brand management is to be considered an applied science, and about the scientific status of the discipline in general need to be stimulated.

6. Implications for Research Practice

The findings provide some suggestions for the practice of research in branding. Three main approaches can be addressed. A first implication is that researchers need to devote time and energy to actively developing and maintaining a network with brand managers as part of their work. Connecting and fostering exchanges, have feedback loops and ongoing managerial discussions seems inevitable if the managerial relevance of brand research is to be enhance.

Secondly, researchers are challenged to develop strategies for communicating their own research to the managerial community. This will require the development of fruitful forms of face-to-face exchange and the use of new and tailored channels and formats (which are often currently unthinkable to researchers because they are not seen as necessary).

A third implication is that brand researchers need to redefine their own job profiles to include research-management-transfer as an integral part.

From a pragmatic point of view, the following guidelines for brand researchers can be derived: To enhance the impact of their work on brand managers, brand researchers need to…

….actively involve in networking with brand managers.

… be open to self-marketing and work on a communications strategy for their work.

… promote the use of their ideas.

… use contemporary and digital learning and education formats.

… set up new channels to disseminate their results, such as blogs, social media and postcasts.

… focus on short, visual and small bites of information.

… use language appropriate for a management audience in non-scientific publishing and incorporate storytelling techniques.

7. Conclusive Summary

The study contributes to research on the managerial relevance of current brand research. The results encourage critical reflection on the improvements needed in the link with managers and the dissemination and communication of research results to the managerial community. It also touches upon the question of whether brand management should be an applied science, and if so, what this means for the conduct of research.

The study is one of the first to look at the syndrome from a consistent managerial view, and it takes a rather solution-oriented approach, focusing on ways to narrow the gap between research and practice.

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