Marketing Inscribed: A Corpus Linguistics Comparison of Academic and Practitioner Marketing Publications

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***Abstract*—Differences in intent perpetuate well-established gaps between academics and practitioners. Strategic determinations manifest distinctive positionings situated along the spectrums of theory/praxis and rigor/relevance. Comprised of elements of art and science, marketing is a domain uniquely situated for examining this gap. Such an understanding holds international relevance as business competition is increasingly global. Once inscribed, marketing publications lend themselves to scrutiny and provide a point for assessing discontinuities in content between scholars and professionals. Through an application of corpus linguistics approaches frequently used bigrams and themes emerged which illustrate significant gaps in content. Specifically, this research suggests that where both groups focus on marketing themes, practitioners focus on media, technology and temporal positioning, and academics focus on customer relations, economics and scientific rigor. Such an understanding assists those engaged in marketing to refine their search for information and potentially enhance their marketing efficacy.**

***Index Terms*—Advertising, analytics, business, semantics.**

I. Introduction

What marketing *is* rests in part on who is involved in its inscription and enactment. Differences in intent perpetuate well-established gaps between academics and practitioners. Such gaps hold consequences for the content of written texts. As Derrida explained, “from one discourse to another, the difference lies only in the mode of inhabiting the interior of a conceptuality” [1]. Viewed from such a perspective, the *conceptuality* of marketing is contingent upon differences in how academics and practitioners live it. Understanding this in a general sense is a productive first step for understanding marketing as it provides insight into fundamental differences which exist in how these two groups operationalize and articulate domain insights. Exploring this dynamic is useful.

The “gap” between academics and practitioners is well established through research [2]-[5]. Historically, these two groups have staked different strategic positions along the spectrums of theory/praxis and rigor/relevance. Kieser and Leiner explained that differences exist between academics and practitioners in terms of “defining and tackling problems” [6]. Linguistic aspects of such differences have been neglected and inadequately understood. According to Bartunek and Rynes, “there has been very little empirical study of dialectics associated with academic-practitioner relationships” [7]. Increasingly, these dynamics play out internationally and are relevant as competition among firms is progressively global.

Understanding the potential divide between marketing academics and practitioners is important to an international audience because the rate and extent of knowledge transfer continues to increase. Eugster, Giang, Jaumotte and Piazza contend that “with globalization and advances in information technology…the potential for knowledge to travel faster and further has increased dramatically” [8]. Globalization also has been found to affect a wide range of activities in business practice and learning, including how business is taught in institutions of higher education [9], the management of supply chain uncertainties [10]-[11], inflation propagation [12], innovation [13], and most directly to the purpose here, marketing [14]-[17]. Collectively, research suggests that business concerns in general and marketing concerns in particular are addressed and understood beneficially in an international context. This is particularly the case since the marketing publications on which the corpora are created include marketing texts from around the globe.

Marketing texts provide a revealing point of analysis for understanding this complex phenomenon. Once inscribed marketing publications lend themselves to scrutiny and critique and provide one with a focal point for assessing discontinuities in content between scholars and professionals. Doing so effectively benefits from a rigorous and repeatable process. Corpus linguistics techniques analyzing bigrams found in author-created academic and practitioner marketing corpora illustrate significant gaps between the two cohorts.

The paper consists of a survey of literature (Section II) focusing on marketing perspectives which are helpful in contextualizing the established gaps between academics and practitioners. This is followed by the development of the research methodology (Section III), which contains an overview of the key corpus linguistic approaches used along with the types of descriptive and statistical analyses conducted. The paper concludes with a presentation of results (Section IV) followed by some limitations and extensions of this study (Section V). Collectively these results should assist those engaged in marketing to refine their search for information and enhance their marketing efficacy. The survey of literature is presented next (Section II).

II. Marketing Perspectives

In 2017, the American Marketing Association (AMA), a premier association of marketing academics and practitioners, put forth their definition of marketing as: "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" [18]. Prior

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to this definition there was the idea of the marketing concept, which Keith, in an article about its application to the Pillsbury company, described as "…to satisfy the needs and desires, both actual and potential, of our customers" [19]. This description placed the emphasis on first discovering customer wants and needs (even those wants and needs not yet known by the customers), prior to developing products and services for sale to satisfy those wants and needs. In 1953, Neil Borden introduced the idea of the marketing mix, which E. Jerome McCarthy later refined into the 4P's of product, price, promotion, and place [20]. According to the popular literature, the marketing mix is the means by which marketers go about satisfying the needs and wants of customers (ie. "…the creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers…" as promulgated by the AMA). These basic ideas are what define marketing as a field of study and practice.

Practitioners of marketing tend to focus on one category of the marketing mix over the course of their careers, such as discovering what value customers need and want (ie. marketing researchers) or creating value (ie. product and service development) or communicating value (ie. advertising and sales) or delivering value (ie. distribution), etc. Marketing academics may also specialize or may approach the marketing mix as a whole in developing and testing theories of how marketing works. A marketing theory, as defined by Dang and Koshy, is an empirically testable statement that purports to explain, or predict, a marketing phenomenon [21]. Theories in most disciplines tend to evolve into law-like generalizations. According to these 2 researchers, academic study of the discipline of marketing has yielded very few formalized theories. They also stress that very little of marketing theory makes its way into use by marketing practitioners. If this is true, what is it about marketing, as studied by academics, that makes it of so little use to actual marketing practitioners?

One idea as to why this occurs is the incentive system used by many universities to tenure and promote academics. This system stresses publication in journals with high Journal Impact Factors (JIF's), as reported in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), as a means of advancing one's career through the academy. These types of journals tend to publish quantitative and positivistic research which may be less appropriate for the study of social and behavioral sciences, such as marketing [22]-[24]. The contention is that this system results in studies of marketing at the academic level that put too much emphasis on technique and not enough on practical relevance. In an article by Lee and Greenley, on the theory-practice divide published in European Journal of Marketing, a proposal is made for the marketing academy to allow both, practical and pure marketing scholarship, to be practiced at academic institutions [25]. Interestingly enough, the article goes on to poll the senior advisory board of the journal as to their opinion on whether marketing academic publishing is too theory oriented or not. Five board members claimed no, it was not too theory oriented and contained plenty of relevance to the practitioner community, while 7 believed that yes, it was too theory oriented and of little use to practitioners. Some scholars believe that this divide should not be bridged. Their opinion is that academic research would sacrifice some of its rigor if it is made too responsive to practitioner needs [6].

To be fair, this academic-practitioner divide does not only exist in the field of marketing. In a 2008 meta-analysis on the topic of the academic-practitioner divide in management studies, Fendt, Kaminska-Labbe, and Sachs identified 19 explanations as to why the gap exists and 17 ideas to close the gap [26]. Returning to the marketing field's academic-practitioner divide, different scholars have used various means to examine, explain, and suggest corrective actions to narrow the gap. Jennifer Rowley believes the gap is a result of 4 barriers: relevance, access, time, and language [27]. Through the use of evidence-based marketing (i.e., marketing decisions based on the latest and best evidence – whether practically derived or academically derived) she proposes 10 different methods to narrow this divide. Some scholars do not focus much on why the divide exists, but instead proceed to suggest ways that it may be fixed. Abduction (i.e., the stating of the simplest explanation as being most plausible, given a set of observations) is the preferred method of Storbacka, Nenonen, Brodie, and Peters [28]. Their study goes on to describe 4 different cases in which practitioners and academics worked together, using abduction, to develop generalizable marketing theories. This work was not without its difficulties though; the main being the length of time it took to recruit practitioners to participate in the research projects.

III. Methodology

Comparing academic and practitioner marketing publications benefits from both descriptive and statistical analyses. While the advantages of statistical analysis are well established [29], [30], the utility of descriptive analysis is often overshadowed. Black explained that descriptive analysis is "at the foundation of statistical techniques and numerical measures that can be used to gain an initial…understanding of data" [31]. While such an analytic approach can be used in isolation, there is often power associated with combining descriptive analysis with additional methods. According to Loeb *et al.*, "descriptive analysis can stand on its own as a research product," but that "in many instances…quantitative description is part of a broader study" [32]. In this study, the combination of approaches is facilitated through the incorporation of corpus linguistic techniques with the application of descriptive analysis and statistical hypothesis testing. The description of this methodology is divided into three subsections: a) corpora construction, b) descriptive analysis approach and c) thematic hypothesis test construction. Since the corpora are foundational for subsequent analysis it is presented first.

A. Corpora Construction

Specific, synchronic corpora were created for both academic and practitioner marketing publications. Since samples from the respective populations of articles were used to build the corpora, it was important that the selected articles were representative. This was achieved first through the identification of appropriate sources for articles and then subsequently through a random selection process. Size is an essential aspect of ensuring the overall representativeness of corpora, but as Brezina explained, “corpus size depends on the research question and the kind of linguistic features we want to investigate” [33]. Since the focus of this research is on a bigram-based thematic comparison between academics and practitioners, as opposed to an analysis of grammatical construction and syntax, relatively small corpora were appropriate. The specific process used is presented next.

The academic corpus was created through a random selection of marketing articles for years 2010 through 2019, obtained from EBSCOhost (https://www.ebsco.com). The practitioner corpus was created by combining articles from two sources: a) AdAge (https://adage.com) and b) MarketingSherpa (https://marketingsherpa.com). AdAge had articles for the years 2010 to 2020 where MarketingSherpa contained articles for the years 1999 to 2020. A random sample was conducted for each of the three sources, with the sample size for each source determined at the 95% *c.l.* with a margin of error of 10%. The number of articles in the population for each source were listed sequentially from oldest (1) to most recent (n). A random number was assigned to each article using the random number function in Microsoft Excel. Each list was then sequenced using the assigned random number. The first *n* articles (where *n* is the sample size) from each list were then selected and downloaded as either an PDF or text file. These files were uploaded into #LancsBox 5.1.2 to create and analyze the corpora [34]-[36]. Key aspects of the descriptive analysis of the author-created corpora are presented in the following section.

B. Descriptive Analysis Approach

Once the corpora were created in #LancsBox 5.1.2 they were assessed in terms of the number of files, tokens, types contained in each. Type-token ratios (TTRs) were created for each and were calculated by dividing the number of word types by the number of tokens (i.e., total number of words). The TTR provides a measure of lexical variety within a corpus While the TTR is a straightforward and useful way to compare lexical variety, one should note that the TTR is “very sensitive to the length of the text; it decreases as the text becomes longer and more words get used again (recycled)” [37]. So, while TTRs were calculated and compared between the academic and practitioner corpora, the weight given to the value accounted for differences between the two in terms of overall corpus size. Corpus size was again considered in relation to the analysis of bigrams.

Given the potential difference in terms of size between the two corpora, the bigram analysis was conducted in terms of relative frequencies, as *X* number of occurrences per 10k words. This approach allows one to compare across corpora when significant differences in terms of size exist. Bigrams are a specific form of n-gram containing a contiguous sequence of two words and are a potentially useful unit of analysis [38]. Examples of bigrams are *carpe diem* and *question authority*. To analyze the bigrams effectively and coherently common filters were applied to the two respective lists of bigrams.

The first filter was used to reduce the bigrams to only those which can be generally considered as frequently occurring, which is defined here as those appearing at least once per 10k words. A second filter was used to filter out those bigrams which contain common words (e.g., a, for, if, is, to). This allows one to identify and focus on bigrams containing uncommon, and therefore potentially interesting and contextually rich, bigrams. The last filter was used to remove any bigrams which contained numbers, pagination errors or editorial phrases (e.g., p. 1, *et al.*). Prior to conducting the thematic analysis of the bigrams, a cross comparison was conducted to identify any duplications existing between the two groups.

Once the final list of bigrams was determined for the academic and practitioner corpora a thematic analysis was conducted to determine if overarching areas of focus emerged. Thematic analysis can be understood as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” through the process “it minimally organizes and describes…data…in (rich) detail” [39]. Thematic analysis has proved useful in understanding business-related phenomenon [40]. The themes were coded and independently assessed for face validity. Thematic analysis allows one to aggregate the specific bigrams into something which is more generalizable. This was particularly useful here as the themes allowed for the determination of the relative density in topics between academics and practitioners. In order to accomplish this the proportion of observed bigram phrases by thematic category were calculated and compared. The descriptive comparison of thematic density is based on observable relative commonality and divergence. Within each of the themes a statistical analysis was also conducted to determine if average relative usage is different between academics and practitioners. The formal development of that analytic approach is presented next.

C. Thematic Hypothesis Test Construction

Since the exact number of themes emerged through the analytic process, and in the interest of conserving space, the thematic hypothesis tests are presented here in a generalized form. The specific number of hypothesis tests and application was adjusted based on the results of the thematic analysis.

Ho: *No statistically significant difference exists between academics and practitioners in terms of the within theme, average relativity bigram frequency*

Ha: *A statistically significant difference exists between academics and practitioners in terms of the within theme, average relativity bigram frequency*

The specific approach to the hypothesis test depended upon the content of the theme. When a particular theme contained multiple bigrams for both the academic and practitioner corpora, a two-sample t-test assuming unequal variances was used. When one of the two corpora had multiple bigrams and the other contained a single bigram, a t-test was conducted against the single observed value. If one of the two corpora did not contain a bigram within a given theme, that t-test was conducted against the value of zero. Given that these bigrams are a social phenomenon, based on a relatively small sample size with a relatively low degree of power, the level of significance can be higher than that conventionally used [41]-[42]. Hypothesis tests were conducted at α values of 0.05, 0.1 and 0.2. Collectively the results of the hypothesis tests enable one to establish if the observed results are statistically significant. This adds additional insight and weight to the results. With the methodology established, it is possible to present the results.

IV. Results

The results of this research are presented in two subsections. The first subsection of results covers descriptive aspects associated with the two corpora and a comparison of the count and content of bigrams within the respective themes. The second subsection contains the results of the hypothesis tests focused on the key marketing themes identified in the descriptive analysis. Given the foundational quality associated with the initial findings, the descriptive results are presented first.

A. Descriptive Results

The academic corpus was comprised of 95 files which contained 997,248 tokens and 50,043 types (TTR = 0.05), where the practitioner corpus was comprised of 187 files which contained 91,647 tokens and 11,998 types (TTR = 0.13). Based on the TTR, the practitioner corpus contains greater lexical variety than the academic corpus. This finding is potentially an artifact of the significant difference existing between the two corpora in terms of size. Bigrams for both the academic and practitioner corpora were obtained.

Common filters were applied to the two respective lists of bigrams. There were initially 386,018 bigrams in the academic corpus and 60,424 bigrams in the practitioner corpus. The application of the first filter resulted in 505 academic bigrams and 569 practitioner bigrams. Removing the bigrams consisting of common words through the application of the second filter resulted in 84 academic and 38 practitioner bigrams. The last filter removed bigrams containing numbers, pagination errors or editorial phrases. The final bigram cohort for this study consisted of 35 academic and 26 practitioner bigrams. Prior to conducting a thematic analysis of these 61 bigrams a cross comparison was conducted to identify any duplications existing between the two groups.

Between the 35 academic and 26 practitioner bigrams only the bigram *social media* was shared in common. This finding itself is suggestive that there is potentially a lack of commonality between the way academics and practitioners make sense and articulate marketing to their respective audiences. The results from the thematic analysis are constructive for understanding points of similarity and divergence between the two.

The themes were coded and independently assessed for face validity. In total, eight themes emerged: a) business, economics & politics, b) customer focus, c) events & things, d) linguistic phrases, e) media & technology, f) scientific research and g) traditional marketing. Of the eight themes, two were determined to be artifactual and incidental to this study. The theme of events & things contained among others the bigrams of *romance movies*, *weight watchers*, *grand prix*, and *super bowl*. The theme of linguistic phrases contained the bigrams of *less likely*, *even though*, *make sure*, and *would say*. This last set of bigrams would have been excluded had a longer list of common words been used in the filtering process. Since these bigrams were not considered to be essentially focused on the conceptualization or presentation of marketing these themes were excluded from the subsequent results.

In terms of the proportion of observed bigram phrases by thematic category points of commonality and divergence emerged between the academic and practitioner corpora. These results are illustrated in Fig. 1.

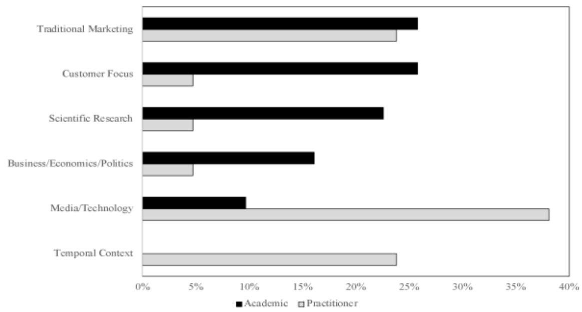

Fig. 1. Proportion of observed bigram phrases by thematic category.

Traditional marketing is the theme with the highest degree of consistency in terms of the proportion of observed bigrams between the academic and practitioner corpora. Given that marketing is the focus of this study such a finding is reasonable. However, it is worth noting that while the proportions are relatively similar, the actual content varies between the two. Reflective bigrams from the academic corpus include *advertising literacy*, *mixed emotions* and *social psychology*, where the practitioner corpus contained *ad spending*, *creative director* and *lead generation*. So, even when academics and practitioners in marketing have the similar proportions of bigrams data from this study suggests they aren’t necessarily focused on similar aspects of the domain. Such divergence is amplified further when significant difference exists between the two corpora in terms of relative proportions. The three themes of scientific research, media & technology and temporal context are used to explore this point further.

The academic corpus had proportionally more observed bigrams within the scientific research theme than the practitioner corpus. In fact, the practitioner corpus contained a single bigram, *case study*, within this theme, where the academic corpus contained among others the bigrams of *construal level*, *dependent variable*, *main effect* and *prior research*. It is perhaps not surprising that the academic corpus produced more and generally more rigorous bigrams within this theme than that found in practitioner publications. However, such consistency with expectation provides some support for the view that corpus linguistic techniques can be applied beneficially to marketing as a means for assessing content. This technique provided more novel insights for the theme of media & technology.

The practitioner corpus had proportionally more observed bigrams within the media & technology theme than that of the academic corpus. Among the bigrams observed in the academic corpus were the bigrams of *media power* and *social network*. Bigrams from the practitioner corpus included *blog entry*, *web site*, and *email marketing*. While the academic corpus did not contain any bigrams within the temporal context theme, the practitioner corpus contained *last year*, *last month*, *last week* and *right now*.

Collectively, the results from the bigram analysis suggest points of commonality and divergence in how academics and practitioners contextualize and inscribe marketing. The proportion of bigrams within the theme of traditional marketing was comparable between academics and practitioners. However, the specific content was different. These differences were even more observable in the themes of scientific research, media & technology and temporal context. With these descriptive results presented, it is now possible to examine the results from the six hypothesis tests.

B. *Thematic Hypothesis Tests Results*

Hypothesis tests comparing the average relative frequency values by theme between the academic and practitioner bigrams for the six themes related directly to marketing were conducted. The results from the hypothesis tests provide a useful adjunct to the descriptive results previously discussed. While those results show an observable difference in the proportion of observed bigrams and discernable distinctions in terms of both content and rigor, they don't provide much insight into the statistical difference in average relative frequency. While the density in terms of the number of bigrams resident within a particular theme could differ between the academic and practitioner corpora, the mean relative frequency may or may not vary significantly. Hypothesis tests are required to establish the degree to which observed variations are statistically significant. The results of the six hypotheses tests are presented in Table I.

TABLE I: COMPARISON OF AVERAGE RELATIVE FREQUENCY BY THEME

Observed Bigram Theme	**t-value**	**ρ value**
Temporal Context	4.206	0.014*
Customer Focus	2.005	0.085**
Business/Economics/Politics	1.897	0.131***
Scientific Research	1.155	0.292
Traditional Marketing	1.096	0.296
Media/Technology	-0.091	0.929

*significant at: * α = 0.05, ** α = 0.10, *** α = 0.20*

As illustrated in Table I, three of the six themes exhibited a statistically significant difference (at various levels of significance). The theme of temporal context was compared to a value of zero since the academic corpus did not contain any bigrams within that theme. The null hypothesis was rejected indicating that the average relative frequencies practitioner value was statistically different from zero (α = 0.05). Additionally, a statistically significant difference was observed for the themes of customer focus (α = 0.1) and business, economics & politics (α = 0.2). While there are observable differences in the number of bigrams and the content for the themes of scientific research and media & technology, neither of these themes produced a statistically significant difference in the average relative frequency within the themes. Traditional marketing was not found to be statistically different, which further suggests that in terms of this particular theme academics and practitioners are similarly focused on core aspects of marketing.

Collectively the results of this study are suggestive of points of commonality and divergence between academic and practitioner inscriptions of marketing. The theme of traditional marketing exhibited the highest degree of commonality, while the themes of temporal context and customer focus exhibited the least. The results associated with the theme of scientific research are consistent with the expected gap in how marketing is contextualized differently between academics and practitioners. With these results in mind, one is able to conclude this research and point to possible limitations and extensions. These are presented in the following section.

V. CONCLUSION

Marketing consists of both art and science. Those engaged in marketing, either as academics or practitioners, attempt to make sense [43]-[44] of the discipline and communicate essential aspects of the craft to those interested in learning or enacting. Once inscribed, marketing texts are amenable to analysis. Corpus linguistic approaches were used in a comparative analysis of academic and practitioner corpora. Specifically, frequent bigrams which excluded common words and numbers were compared and used as the basis for the identification of broad, emergent marketing themes. Between the two corpora, only the bigram *social media* was shared in common. This lack of commonality between the two corpora is suggestive of a gap between academics and practitioners [2]-[7].

Descriptive results from this study revealed that the proportion of bigrams within the traditional marketing theme was comparable between academics and practitioners, where the specific content within that theme was discernably different. Pronounced differences were observed in the scientific research, media & technology and temporal context themes. Statistically significant differences between the average relative frequencies were observed between the academic and practitioner corpora for the themes of temporal context (α = 0.05), customer focus (α = 0.1) and business, economics & politics (α = 0.2). While informative these results would benefit from refinement and extension.

The results of this study are based on the most frequently occurring bigrams (i.e., those occurring at least once per 10k words) within the academic and practitioner corpora. While this approach provided a useful starting point for analysis and understanding, there could be benefit derived from delving more deeply into these bigrams. While frequently used terms reveal much, novel insights are often discoverable within the obscure and infrequent. Additionally, in terms of the element of focus this study was narrowly focused on bigrams. Again, while this provided a useful fulcrum point of study, benefit could be derived from incorporating additional corpus linguistic approaches to include collocations and semantic ontologies. Lastly, the corpora themselves would benefit from further development. The academic corpus was comprised of 95 files (997,248 tokens), and the practitioner corpus was comprised of 187 files (91,647 tokens). While sufficient for initial analysis, building on these corpora through the incorporation of additional files would make the results more robust and generalizable. Even with these limitations in mind, these results offer value for those engaged in marketing.

The results of this study suggest that in terms of common bigrams, academics and practitioners inscribe marketing differently. For those seeking a unified construction of marketing such divergence in themes and content can be confusing and potentially frustrating. However, those engaged in the production and consumption of marketing insight potentially benefit from these two distinct, specialized sources of information. While both groups address marketing, they do so differently. The results of this research suggest academics focus on elements of scientific rigor and customer dynamics where practitioners focus on media & technology and take temporal context more into account. Understanding these distinctions enables those engaged in marketing to enhance their selection of sources to inform decisions and enhance performance.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

T. Bode developed the idea for this study, collected the data, researched and wrote the survey of literature section and edited the paper for publication. R. A. Jackson developed the methodological approach, analyzed the results, wrote the introduction, methodology, results and conclusion sections and created the data visualization. Both authors approved the final version of the paper.

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