



How can academics generate great research ideas? Inspiration from ideation practice [☆]



Stefan Stremersch ^{*}

Erasmus School of Economics, Rotterdam, Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

First received on 09 May 2023 and was under review for 2½ months
Available online 27 October 2023

Area Editor: Roland T. Rust
Accepting Editor: Martin Schreier

Keywords:

Research
Ideation
Innovation
Scientometrics
Marketing

ABSTRACT

How can academic scholars come up with great ideas, such that their research becomes even more important, relevant, and interesting? Based on ideation practices of sophisticated companies, this paper triggers academic researchers to self-reflect on: (1) the source used for ideation, (2) the scope applied to ideation, (3) the sharing of ideas during ideation, and (4) the selection of ideas. The paper also offers concrete improvements that researchers can implement in their ideation practices on ideation processes, tools, and methods along three ideation phases: domain exploration, domain immersion, and research project design. It reviews recent advances in AI and how researchers can leverage AI in their research ideation. The paper aims to stimulate more research on (academic) research ideation (i.e., “more research on research”) and advances a research agenda.

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Generating great research ideas is fundamental to scholars. In an ideal world, marketing scholars produce great answers to great questions (Roberts et al. 2014) and produce research that is important, i.e., has a strong influence on senior decision-makers making high-stakes decisions (Kohli & Haenlein, 2021; Stremersch, 2021). Stremersch, Winer, and Camacho (2021) demonstrate that the pursuit of great research ideas is not only important to individual scholars, but also to other stakeholders such as the business schools and universities that employ scholars, as well as their funding organizations.

Idea generation and *ideation* are synonyms and refer to the process of identifying and developing an idea (as per Toubia, 2006). An *idea* is a possible solution to a problem (Girotra, Terwiesch, & Ulrich, 2010) and is initially vague and immature; over time, it *matures* into an *academic research project*, which is the final stage of developing an idea, after which a scholar *selects* the projects s/he wants to execute. The scope of this paper is on research ideation and not on research execution post-ideation.

[☆] This contribution is greatly indebted to Elio Keko and Nuno Camacho. Elio Keko and Nuno Camacho helped to develop and refine the methods propagated in this article and were instrumental in putting them in the format of this paper in a structured manner. Elio Keko, Nuno Camacho, Isabel Verniers, Elke Cabooter, Marnik Dekimpe, Martin Schreier, the AE, and two reviewers provided valuable feedback while developing this article. This paper was invited from the author upon being awarded the 2020 EMAC Distinguished Scholar Award. The author is thankful for feedback provided by research ideation workshop participants at EIASM, University of Munster, Ghent University, Hasselt University, UC Louvain, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, ULiège, University of Namur, Université Grenoble Alpes, IESEG School of Management, Ben-Gurion University, and Tel Aviv University, where several of the tools contained in this paper were tried and tested.

* Corresponding author at: Burg. Oudlaan 50, room E02-04, 3062 PA Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

E-mail address: stremersch@ese.eur.nl

This paper is intended to be a companion for scholars as they aim to generate great research ideas and propagates the adoption by academic scholars of ideation practices used by sophisticated firms. It addresses the following questions: (1) What can we learn from sophisticated ideation practices in companies?; (2) What ideation process steps can we discern?; (3) What are the tools and insights we can leverage along the way in academic ideation?; and (4) how can academic researchers leverage AI in their research ideation? To answer these questions I will leverage: (1) managerial and academic literature on ideation; (2) the direct involvement I had in such ideation processes with sophisticated companies over the last two decades; and (3) the application of these tools and methods in PhD training at universities across all sciences (such as social sciences, chemistry, life sciences, engineering, etc.) in the last 3 years as a spin-off activity (see <https://www.mti2.eu/academia/> for more tools).

2. What can we learn from ideation practice in companies?

Next, I highlight what sophisticated companies have learned on ideation practice, in the sense of what works and what does not work (anymore). The objective is to make marketing academics self-reflect on their own ideation practices, which may lead them to consider improvements in such ideation practices. I do so according to four ideation dimensions (see Table 1): (1) the *source* used for ideation; (2) the *scope* applied to ideation; (3) the *sharing* of ideas during ideation; and (4) the *selection* of ideas. To make these four dimensions of ideation dialectically spark conversation and introspection, I define them in terms of opposite ends of a spectrum.

2.1. Source: From isolation to immersion

Companies have left behind the isolated “lab” model of innovation and increasingly immerse themselves in the customer and stakeholder context in ideation processes. Immersion is the gathering of detailed knowledge by becoming completely involved in the respective innovation domain (e.g., “day-in-the-life-of”, voice of customer (VOC), or customer journeys). Immersion helps firms understand what the frustrations, needs, or wants of (prospective) customers are, and deeply understand the behavior and habits of customers and other stakeholders. (Marketing) academics in business schools have advocated the use of such techniques to better understand customer needs (e.g., Griffin & Hauser, 1993), and empirically demonstrated the benefits for firms (e.g., Blocker, Flint, Myers, & Slater, 2011).

Unfortunately, for their own research ideation, some marketing academics still isolate themselves in their office to ideate (Roberts et al. 2014). They do so, according to Muller (2019), based on prior literature (and its listed limitations), available data sets and, less so, the business press. However, limitations in prior literature may be research ideas of reviewers that the authors did not find useful or feasible, rather than the “X marking the treasure location”. Available data sets may offer solutions in search of a problem, while we have learned that a better way to innovate is from problem to solution (e.g., Brown, 2009). Business press has the benefit of being a window to the outside world, but companies increasingly prefer to step into the outside world themselves, rather than merely being an outside observer.

In isolation, marketing academics may drift from the “science of practice” (Stremersch et al. 2023) to imitate the lab-based, hard sciences model. However, also in the hard sciences, collaboration with practice and immersion in customer contexts is increasingly seen as pivotal to research success (e.g., the Technology Transfer Office model). Customers of academic marketing research are companies, consumers, policy makers, or the public at large and our journals and press coverage are successive channels to such end users of our research (Shugan, 2003). Marketing academics may consider to increasingly immerse themselves in their study context and to alternate between such immersion and the isolation they may need to elaborate on ideas with sufficient rigor (for immersion, see also Section 3.2 below.)

2.2. Scope: From few & narrow to many & wide

Companies have learned to drive up the volume of ideas generated and to expand the search space, which also enables them to be stringent in selecting the right idea from a larger set of ideas, rather than procrastinate on a bad idea. Generating many ideas and entertaining a wider scope leads to better ideas (e.g., Girotra et al., 2010; Osborn, 1953), higher creativity (Schilling & Green, 2011), and the inclusion of unusual and radical ideas (Lucas & Nordgren, 2015), as it enables new

Table 1
What We Have Learned Over Time From Ideation Practice in Sophisticated Firms.

Four Ideation Dimensions	Lessons From Ideation Practice		Considerations for Marketing Academics ...
	FROM TO	
Source	Isolate	Immerse	Immerse – Isolate iteration cycles
Scope	Few – narrow	Many – wide	Generate more ideas with a more open mind
Share	Late	Early	Share ideas earlier in protected circles
Select	Unstructured and slow	Structured and fast	Select ideas in a structured manner and kill bad ideas faster

combinations and high variance (Fleming, 2001). Companies expand the search space by: (1) ideating across domains for cross-fertilization (Hargadon & Sutton, 1997); or (2) the composition of teams with diverse backgrounds (Taylor & Greve, 2006) and involving outsiders (Chesbrough & Tucci, 2020).

Contrary to company practice, marketing academics are at risk of developing only one – thé – idea (Eureka!). Once thé idea is generated, scholars execute on it with a low self-imposed “kill-rate” (regarding idea selection, see below Section 2.4.). Marketing academics should learn to keep on generating ideas much beyond the first idea that they generated and across different search spaces. Performance pressure from bean counting and increased balkanization in specialization fields (see Stremersch et al., 2021) may cause marketing academics to focus on a very narrow problem and solution area (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). In sum, marketing scholars may benefit from becoming broader, boundary-spanning, and less locked up in ghettos (Stremersch, 2021), even if academic institutions have the wrong incentives in place for the time being (Stremersch et al., 2021).

2.3. Share: From late to early in the process

Companies increasingly encourage ideators to share their ideas earlier, especially inside the company, to reap collaborative benefits (e.g., see De Stobbeleir, Ashford, & Buyens, 2011). For example, seeing or hearing others' ideas can inspire ideators by stimulating the diffusion of good ideas (Mason & Watts, 2012) and help ideators overcome mental barriers (Kohn, Paulus, & Choi, 2011). Sharing can also make the ideation task more motivating for ideators (Nijstad, Stroebe, & Lodewijckx, 2002). In the absence of social feedback, ideators generate fewer and lower quality ideas and are more likely to pursue poor ideas (Singh & Fleming, 2010).

However, academic scholars face the risk that ideas are stolen when shared too early. The academic publication process in marketing is long and painful (easily five years between idea generation and paper acceptance), without much intellectual property (IP) protection. The average academic institution in social sciences has poor IP support and practices. IP protection in social sciences is harder than in hard sciences, as ideas are less codified and less tangible. Integrity in science has also been shown to be deficient. For instance, reviewers on grant applications or papers may recommend rejection to subsequently pursue the very same idea (Maddox, 1995). Therefore, academics are at risk of exposing their ideas to others late in the ideation process when it is already at least partially executed upon.

Marketing academics may configure ways in which ideas can be shared earlier in the ideation process safely. Conventional methods include to establish protected circles inside departments, across-department special interest groups (with brown bags), or intercollegial networks of collaborators. More novel to some are online collaboration tools such as Mural, Miro, or Microsoft Whiteboard. In such platforms, scholars can put sticky notes representing an idea and harvest feedback. Even the mere usage of such collaborative ideation tools in co-author networks may generate collaborative returns on ideation. For instance, it could force scholars to adopt an idea template and force themselves to come up with 10 ideas at least, rather than just stopping at 1 that they fine-tune.

2.4. Select: From unstructured & slow to structured & fast

In companies, (1) triaging good from bad ideas, and (2) killing bad ideas fast and cheap are seen as important capabilities (Klingebiel, 2021). For triaging, companies have learned to use structured processes, including pitch templates (to avoid bad ideas that are pitched well from winning over good ideas that are pitched badly) and scoring templates. Firms also aim to prevent bad ideas from lingering, as they take valuable resources away from more promising ideas that the firm wants to pursue (Boulding, Morgan, & Staelin, 1997). 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, Guler, & Nerkar, 2016); research on ideation shows that a natural outcome of ideation is that few ideas we generate are good (Asplund & Sandin, 1999).

In marketing academia, stopping an idea in early development may too often be perceived as a loss, rather than being a natural step in the idea funnel in which dropping bad ideas represents a gain. An often recommended behavior – my own advisor called it the three rules of top journal publishing: persist, persist, and persist – is to not drop an idea but persist with it. However, persisting with bad ideas that deliver suboptimal results is not what successful companies do. Academics may imagine their future “file drawers”. Would they like them to contain fully executed projects that never made it through review at a good journal, because they were bad ideas? Or, would they like them to be tens or hundreds of early-stage idea napkins that did not yet get prioritized for execution? Two solutions inspired by practice that researchers may employ are: (1) document ideas on templates and consider multiple ideas at the same time in an “idea selection process”; and (2) adopt a structured scoring process for your ideas. I suggest idea templates under Section 3.3.2. and Section 3.3.3. below, and scoring templates below under Section 3.1.5., Section 3.2.3., and Section 3.3.4. Such a selection process also enables killing or stopping bad ideas as they get replaced by ideas that are better. It is easier to select the best X ideas among a set than to stop a bad idea considered in isolation.

In sum, the logic of the above 4S's is that if marketing academics, thanks to immersion, have a better sense for the 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 the 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 academics would not be able to pursue them all, nor should they want to. But how should academics do this practically? The next section covers process guidelines researchers may adopt if the above call to self-reflect struck a chord and they wish to improve their research ideation practices.

3. Academic ideation in Marketing: Process guidelines

The ideation process consists of three phases: (1) domain exploration; (2) domain immersion; and (3) project design (See Fig. 1). 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. Each step leverages templates so the output of each step can easily be shared with others for feedback.

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 the stopping of ideas as a normal outcome. The usage of templates along the journey would foster sharing of ideas with each idea being presented on a level playing field. Next, I zoom in on each of these steps as a sequential process for ease of exposition; in reality, this process contains feedback loops and is nonlinear. In Section 5, I will also expand on how this process may depend on the maturity of a scholar (e.g., a doctoral student versus a researcher with 20 years of research experience under the belt).

3.1. Domain exploration

There are different sources of inspiration for scholars as they explore multiple domains.

3.1.1. Me, myself, and I

An academic publication trajectory is energizing and fulfilling, but also long, tedious, and frustrating. Therefore, your research should be in a domain that you're passionate about, you're good at, and serves your goals (in career or life). Fig. 2 shows some questions researchers may use to discover who they are by inventorying their interests, engagement, competences, and goals (making up your "persona"). For instance, you may be an avid video gamer (similar to Jeroen Binken, of the dissertation-based video game console paper, Binken & 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. You may also want to consider your goals, such as your preferred journals or employer. Journals and research groups typically inform researchers on the type of research they value; at times, such signals may be noisy.

3.1.2. Collaborators

Many marketing academics today entertain strong collaboration networks (e.g., Goldenberg, Libai, Muller, & Stremersch, 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 & Winer, 2019). Researchers could complete Fig. 2 for (present or intended) collaborators. For instance, doctoral students may consider their supervisor's interests and backgrounds, as well as the departments in which they intend to graduate. Or researchers may use the template in Fig. 3 to map out a collaboration team's knowledge, methodological competences, and data access (possibly adding relevant team characteristics, such as roles and time, especially if the team is mixed in terms of seniority).

3.1.3. Trends

Once a researcher has inventoried their own and their collaborator personas, it is time to look outside. Researchers in search of big ideas need to be trendwatchers and avoid "ivory tower" ideation. Prior research has shown that publications



Fig. 1. The Research Ideation Process.

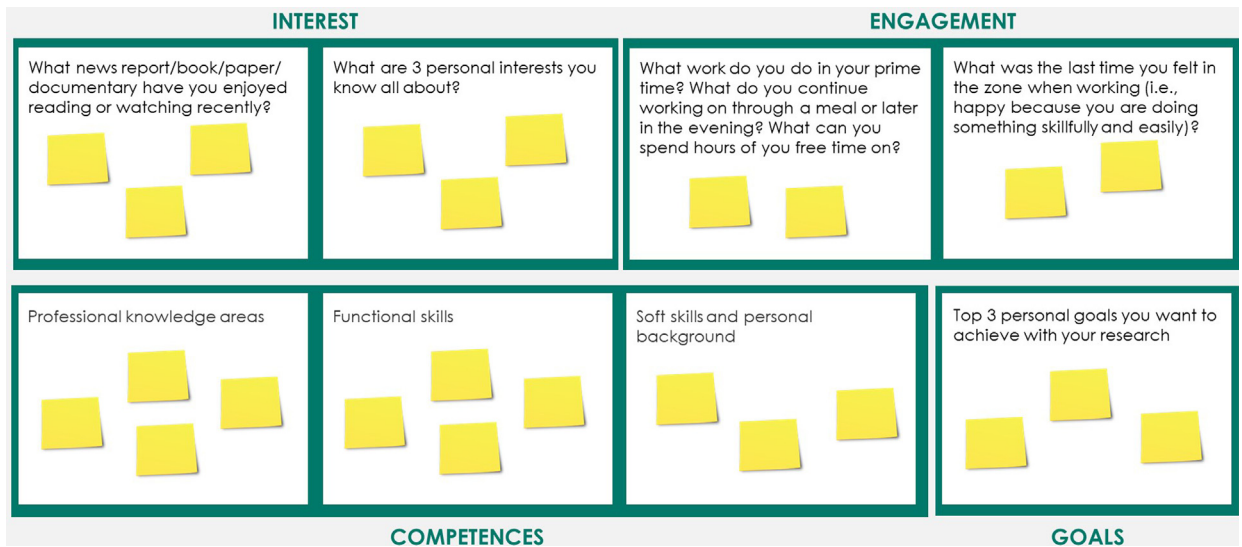


Fig. 2. Persona of “Me, Myself, and I”.

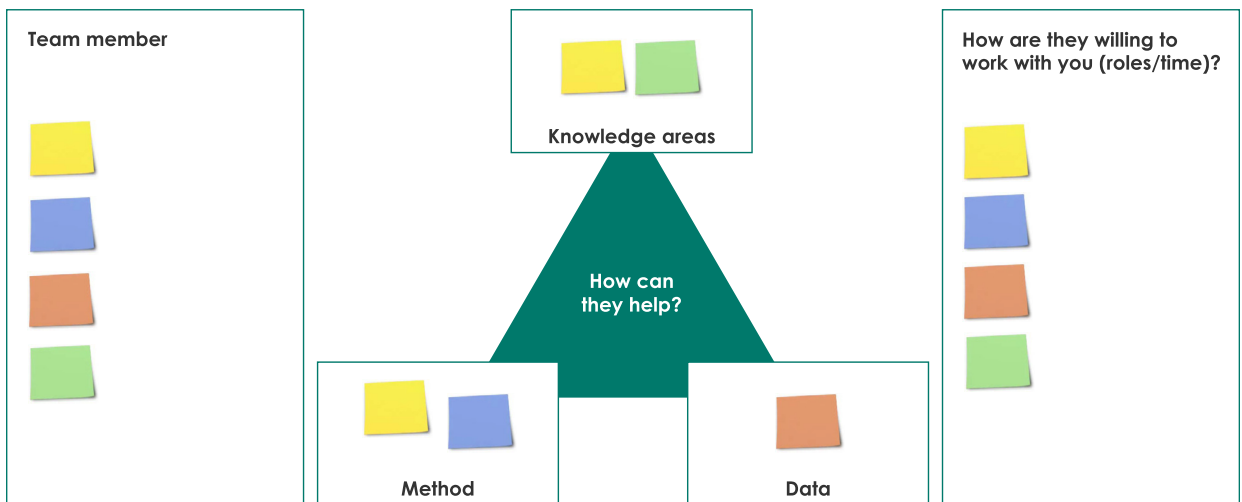


Fig. 3. Domain Exploration Needs to Consider Collaboration Networks.

on emerging trends have a greater scientific impact than others (Kwon, Liu, Porter, & Youtie, 2019). Of course, this is not the same as being the first one with a trendy paper to game citations (early papers on topics that become big are cited more, regardless of their quality). You want to be cognizant about the trends surrounding you and their maturity, so you do not make your life’s work on a domain of the past.

One way to look at trends is the use of frameworks such as PESTEL (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal). Another way is to study the evolution of research domains through backward and forward citation searches. A backward citation search examines papers cited by a focal paper on a topic (first generation), papers cited by a paper referenced by the focal article (second generation) and so on to higher generations. A forward citation search examines all papers that cite a focal article, all papers that cite a paper that cites the focal article, and so on. Also, organizations can help you as a scholar in gauging trends. Examples include the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (an inspiration for many research institutions) or, more domain specific, the bi-annual MSI (Marketing Science Institute) Research Priorities (www.msi.org). Also consulting leading-edge, potential, customers of research (“lead users”; Von Hippel, 1986) and outsiders that can challenge and offer new directions (“remarkable people”; Van der Heijden, 1997) may support the researcher in trend analysis.

Trends differ in their maturity or the available knowledge: (1) emerging (a trend is in its infancy and little is known), (2) growing (a trend is widening its influence and the knowledge is growing), (3) maturing (a trend is mainstream and a lot of knowledge already exists), to (4) fading (a trend is fading and much knowledge already exists). When a trend is just emerging (e.g., the use of AI in marketing and innovation), the knowledge that scholars can typically develop is limited and less reliable, but potentially more influential if the trend ends up being very impactful. As a trend matures (e.g., influencers on social media), the knowledge that scholars develop is more rigorous, but significant gaps in knowledge become scarce and newly developed knowledge may be less influential. The information sources used by researchers on emerging trends may be different from those of researchers on maturing trends.

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 and magazines, online platforms, social media). What triggers your interest and is there a red thread that forms a domain of interest? A (real or virtual) collage of different clippings may provide structure to clusters of (sub)domains. Also the academic literature can feature “news”, such as the invention of new methods or new theories, which may inspire ideation. My “collage” during my PhD in the end of the 90s was heavily populated by “commercialization of technology” with news on lawsuits against Microsoft for abuse of monopoly power in winner-take-all markets, the rise of the tech economy and Silicon Valley, and the release of the paradigm paper on marketing of high tech by two later collaborators, Shantanu Dutta and Allen Weiss (John, Weiss, & Dutta, 1999).

Also, conversations spark ideation. Think of conversations with supervisors or prolific professors at your own institution or at conferences. Or, 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. Conversations with freshly hired health economists and the dean of the Erasmus School of Economics (as well as the associated funding) inspired me to ideate on pharmaceutical marketing in the mid 2000’s and expand my interest into “commercialization of technology and science”. Also, conversations with “normal” people or chance meetings, outside academia, and outside the specialty may rewire or challenge your thinking, if not your “expertise”. At a dinner party of my PhD advisor in 2000, one of his friends (a Boeing Fellow¹) asked me “ah, so you are a specialist in predicting adoption of new technology? So, you will be able to tell me whether now is the right time to buy a DVD player?” Needless to say the question for relevance by a “normal” consumer took me a bit off-guard...

3.1.5. Domain selection

For PhD students, domain exploration ends with a first selection of domain(s) that the student considers immersing oneself in. For advanced scholars, domain exploration may be a periodic revisit whether one needs to immerse oneself in a new domain for research. 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 innovating in for the future. Thus, as firms are dynamic in their domain selection, so should scholars be. Fig. 4 brings the explored domains in one overview.

To select a domain for immersion, one can score (e.g., 1 = not at all; 5 = very much) each of these domains on the following aspects:

- *Personal interest*: Does the domain tap into my passion, competences, and career goals?
- *Feasibility*: Is it feasible for me (with collaborators) to enter this domain (given the required infrastructure, such as labs or MRI, contacts, databases, or financial resources that this domain requires)?
- *Timeliness*: Is it the right time for me to start working in this domain?
- *Impact*: Will I impact an important stakeholder when working in this domain?

Researchers can aggregate the scores across the different aspects and rank order on the total score (/20) or they can give different aspects different weights (e.g., ambitious scholars may weigh personal interest and impact more than feasibility). Scholars can also make up their own scoring instrument, as long as they harvest on a formalized evaluation among domains.

Researchers could also select multiple domains to immerse in as a next step (Section 3.2.), leveraging powerful novel connections of two domains previously disconnected (Uzzi et al., 2013). Bridging unconnected fields can make a cross-disciplinary team or a multi-specialist scholar uniquely situated to fill the gap. One leading science firm that I worked with prioritized ideas in a global innovation initiative that combined resources and capabilities in different pockets of the firm that did not co-occur in one firm elsewhere, because such ideas: (1) are less likely pursued by individual divisions on their own, (2) presented often blue ocean spaces for new-to-the-world innovation and (3) gave the company a unique right to play and right to win.

¹ The Boeing Fellowship program is a highly selective technical leadership career path at Boeing. The program includes only approximately 1.5% of Boeing’s workforce and represents some of the best engineering and scientific minds at Boeing and in the industry (source Wikipedia, accessed on 22/09/2023).

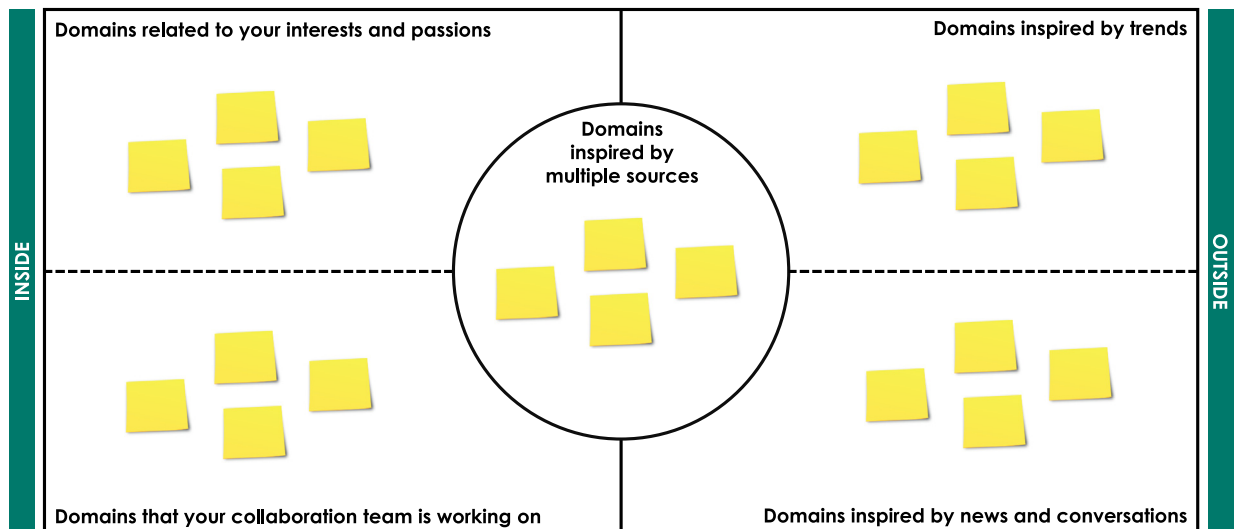


Fig. 4. Overview of Domains after Domain Exploration.

3.2. Domain immersion

Immersion is increasingly advocated in practice as a necessary condition to successfully ideate, under the denominators of Design Thinking (Brown, 2009) and Voice of Customer (Griffin & Hauser, 1993) methods. Proponents of such methods advocate empathizing with (potential) customers, to understand their routines (e.g., “day in the life”) and needs, define “How Might We’s” based on the customer insights obtained and consequently generate and prioritize innovation ideas. “How Might We’s” are questions that turn a broad customer insight into focused challenges that jumpstart the search for innovative solutions (Berger, 2012). In academic scholarship, (potential) customers of research may include journal editors and reviewers, firms, and policy-makers (for a value chain depiction, see Fig. 5 below).

3.2.1. From empathizing to stating insights

Empathizing is seeing the world from someone else’s perspective and understanding their thoughts, feelings, and motivations (Brown, 2009). 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 they also empathize with architects, city planners, and utility companies as indirect customers. Also, academics need to be cognizant of the value chain they belong to (e.g., Roberts et al. 2014). Mapping this value chain and empathizing with the different stakeholders may be a great exercise to understand the system at large that you are a part of, which may be different across subdiscipline silos (see Fig. 5 from the viewpoint of a typical empirical quant researcher in marketing).

For instance, young researchers should carefully read editorial statements of the journals that 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: the best of the best (e.g., award winners) or ones that you would have liked to have written yourself. Matching the template with your own content can be an effective way to position and write one’s own work.

For quite a few researchers, the end customers of their research are managers and companies, as their research is aiming to influence managerial practice (Schauerte, Becker, Imschloss, Wichmann, & Reinartz, 2023); thus, it pays off to empathize more with companies through: (1) practitioner conferences; (2) executive education programs; (3) guest speakers from practice in class; (4) consulting projects (Roberts et al. 2014); (5) working in a company’s facilities; (6) academic embedding programs (e.g., Amazon’s “researcher-in-residence” program); and (7) research centers that provides data and research questions (e.g., Analytics at Wharton (Fader and Bradlow), AIMark (Steenkamp)).

Customer personas and journeys are tools to visualize this outcome of customer and stakeholder empathizing. These tools in turn allow to clearly express *customer insights that detail the person, the need, and an interesting learning*, in a neutral manner without a solution in mind. For instance, in one of my own research projects (as published in Camacho, Nam, Kannan, & Stremersch, 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

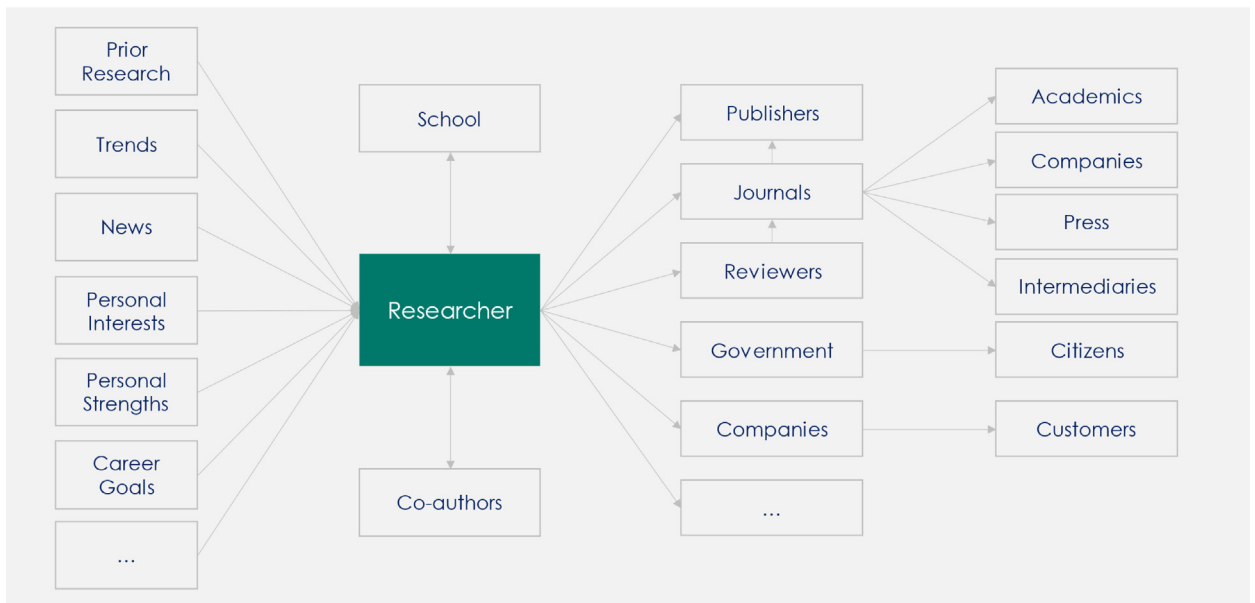


Fig. 5. A Typical Value Chain of a Researcher in Marketing.

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.”

3.2.2. From insights to “How Might We’s” and research questions

If the customer insight is appropriately stated, the next step is to formulate “How Might We’s?” (HMW’s). This method is used widely in companies like P&G, Facebook, Google, and IDEO. HMW’s aid in narrowing 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). In this manner, a problem is broken down into subproblems, which has been shown to lead to a greater number and originality of ideas (Rietzschel, Nijstad, & Stroebe, 2014). HMW’s (“How Might We’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):

- “How”: suggests a focal area without a preconceived solution and provides confidence.
- “Might”: enables creativity across solution spaces and suppresses feasibility concerns.
- “We”: brings in the collaboration team for a shared sense of purpose.

For the customer insight illustration above (Camacho et al., 2019), they are, *How Might We*:

- *Organize coaching occurrences that lead to higher participant engagement?*
- *Optimize 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?*
- ...

Fig. 6 visualizes templates one can use for stimulating the generation of How Might We questions, illustrated on the research in Camacho et al. (2019).

Each of these HMW’s may lead to different research questions from different theory lenses grounded in different literature streams and research traditions. *Research questions are preferably precise statements that question the relationship between specific constructs.* For instance, for the above example:

1. *How does feedback valence affect participation intensity in an innovation tournament?*
2. *How does timing of feedback affect participation intensity in an innovation tournament?*
3. *How does the source of coaching affect participation intensity in an innovation tournament?*

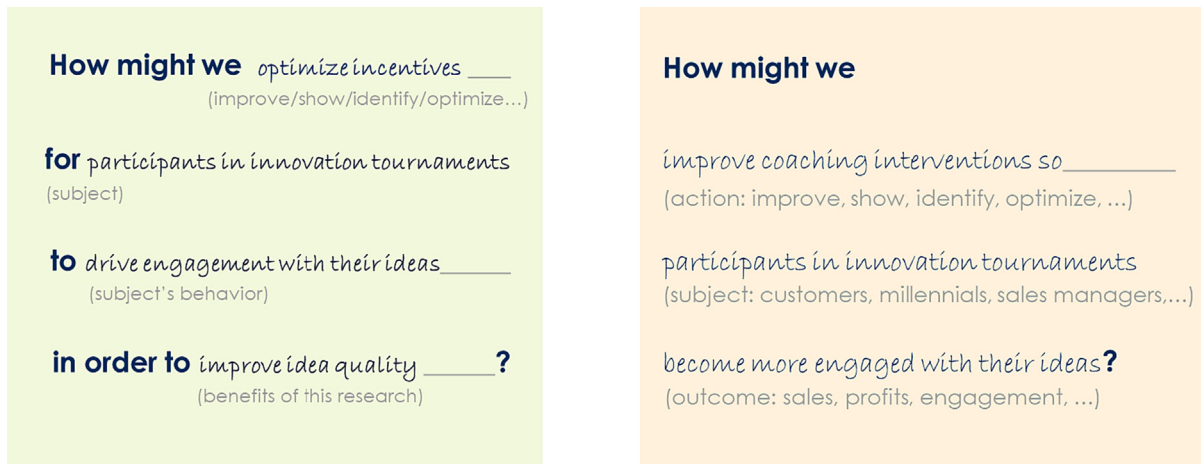


Fig. 6. How Might We Template for Academic Marketing Research, illustrated by Camacho et al. (2019).

4. How does the mode of coaching (oral or written) affect participation intensity in an innovation tournament?
5. How does feedback length affect participation intensity in an innovation tournament?
6. 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. Prioritizing and selecting HMW's and research questions

To prioritize and select HMW's and research questions, a short checklist would be if the question is "FIT" for further development by the respective scholar (again, researchers could sum across these three dimensions, or put differential weights on different aspects).

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?

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.

Timeliness: Is the question particularly timely? A question is timely as more knowledge development is needed and answers would be particularly impactful at that point in time.

3.3. Research project design

Companies set the bounds to an innovation challenge with Insights and HMW's and then ignite the process of generating ideas that contain solutions. In research, once we know which 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. Four 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), 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). We do so, because: (1) it is the path of least resistance (Rietzschel et al., 2014); (2) of cognitive fixation, i.e., the inability to see a problem from a fresh perspective and being fixated on solutions that have worked in the past (Butler & Roberto, 2018); (3) of fear of judgement, i.e., we look for safe solutions, because we are afraid of being judged and ridiculed when we raise creative and novel solutions (Kelley & Kelley, 2012).

Starting with white horsing is ok, but stopping there is not. In a series of experiments, Lucas and Nordgren (2015) 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 infeasible, but potentially great. In horse racing, the white horse stands for the horse that has good chances at winning, but the payoff of winning is rather small, while the dark horse stands for the unknown horse in the background with small

chances of winning but with a very large potential payoff. 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 crazy.

As ideation preferably occurs in collective meetings with collaborators, formally calling it dark horsing may reduce the 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); and (3) think in terms of analogies with other fields.

In my collaboration with Gerard Tellis at the start of my career (later published as Stremersch and Tellis 2002), I underwent Dark Horsing (15 years before I formally co-developed the concept with a consulting client). I had chosen product bundling as a dissertation topic and had done my white horsing, before Gerry came on board: “Could I explain the Microsoft (Internet Explorer) case to him? Why was Microsoft sued for Billions? Was what Microsoft did illegal? Why did they do it? What exactly did they do?” Our first submission almost read as a case study (quite a dark horse template) on Microsoft, spanned several disciplines (Economics, Law and Psychology) we were not trained in, and introduced new definitions for ancient constructs. A lengthy review process bleached our dark horse substantially, but the paper did make it through and was the recipient of the Maynard Award, recognizing the most significant contribution to marketing thought of that year in *Journal of Marketing*. Fear of judgement and ridicule of a young doctoral student ensured that I never presented the dark-horse paper anywhere, while I regard it as among my best work. Still today, the “norm” among many in the marketing field, regrettably, is that conceptual papers are not what doctoral students should work on, despite the field being short on conceptual contributions (Yadav, 2010).

3.3.2. Visualization with napkins

In practice, I found *idea napkins* a useful template to make ideas land; they depict the pain point of the customer, the solution proposed, and the benefits the solution offers. Sometimes idea napkins also include a sketch of the idea. Extending this concept to academic ideation, an idea napkin may contain the following: (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 (i.e., the original and novel aspect of the research that adds new knowledge to the field); (v) the intended impact of the study (i.e., how it will change the views or behavior of the specified target audience); and (vi) a graphical presentation of the conceptual model (i.e., a visualization of the idea to better convey it to others in one simple self-explanatory overview). Fig. 7 illustrates the idea napkin concept on a “dark horse”-paper that appeared in *Journal of Marketing* in 2021; such that the template comes to life a little easier than a blank version would.

Once a researcher has generated many idea napkins on multiple HMW's, it is time to select the most interesting ones (for selection, see Section 3.3.4.) and mature them more in full as concepts of research projects.

3.3.3. Maturing idea napkins into research projects

Companies will often mature an idea napkin to a value proposition or business model canvas (Osterwalder, Pigneur, Bernarda, & Smith, 2015). In a similar fashion, scholars may mature their research idea napkins to a one-pager that describes the academic research project in more detail (Fig. 8 shows a beta research project canvas inspired by Osterwalder's business model canvas, on the same example project as used above for idea napkins):

1. The right side (on the *why* and *what*) provides the audience for the research (customers in Osterwalder's canvas), the research questions by which the contribution statement is specified (the value proposition), and the outlets to reach the intended audience (such as scholarly journals but also popular media);
2. The left side (on the *how*) presents the team to work with (including team members' strengths or expertise), the data to gather, and the analysis methods to use (inspired by Osterwalder's partners, resources and key activities).
3. The bottom side (on the *when* and *how much*) details project practicalities, such as timing and resources needed (inspired by Osterwalder's costs and revenues). It is good to adopt a project manager logic and to ensure progress on a good rhythm given increasingly also academics are on “a clock” (Goffin and Koners (2011) show that managing resources and timelines well are critical to positive innovation outcomes).

Individual scholars may customize this figure to better suit their needs and context. Universally, a template allows to evaluate projects, comparatively speaking, on the same level playing field.

3.3.4. Selecting idea napkins and research projects

To select among idea napkins (ideally from many to a handful) and beta project canvases (ideally from a handful to one or two), one can self-compose quite a few scoring tools. One can adopt the criteria mentioned under Section 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:

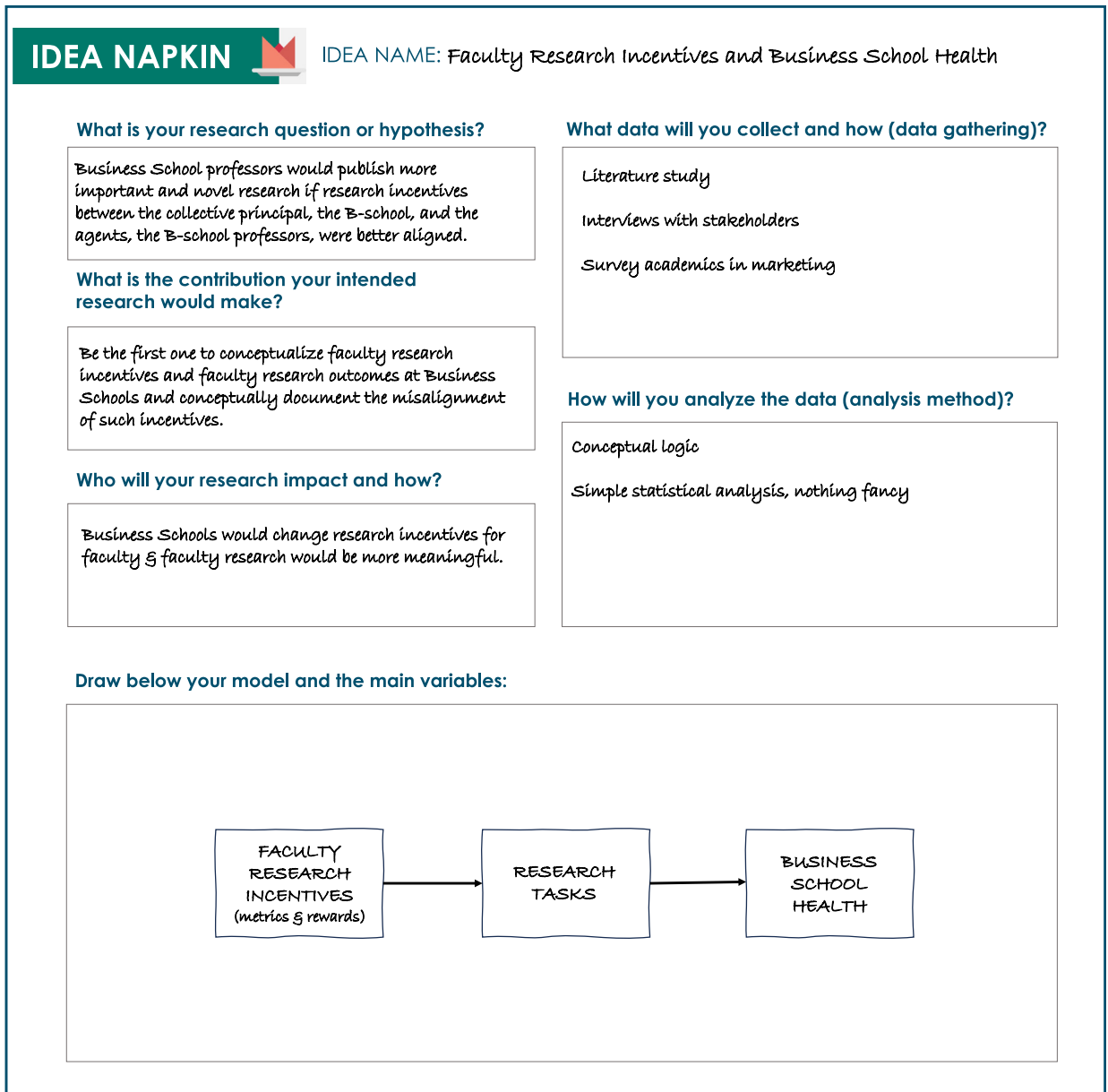


Fig. 7. Idea Napkin for Academic Marketing Research, illustrated by Stremersch et al. (2021).

- *Is it real?* Are the research questions or hypotheses sufficiently clear? Is the intended contribution really a sufficiently novel 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. Leveraging GenAI in scholarly research ideation

Above, I described the human process of ideation for scholars to ideate big ideas, using their own intelligence as well as collective intelligence with collaborators. While digital tools (e.g., Google, bibliometric analysis) have long existed to support such ideation process, a more recent evolution that deserves careful thought is the advent of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), as it promises to revolutionize the way scholars ideate. What are the areas in the above ideation process where we

BETA RESEARCH PROJECT CANVAS		IDEA NAME: Faculty Research Incentives and Business School Health		
TEAM I talked to Russ (Winner) when he was on a research audit committee at Erasmus, about bean counting and the search for really impactful research. Let us write some things down is what gets us started. After one round at JM (reviewers asked for more theory): Onboard one of the best theory guys I know: Nuno Camacho.	METHOD Conceptual logic stylized after Stremersch and Tellis (2002) and Stremersch and Van Dyke (2009).	CONTRIBUTION Conceptualize the faculty incentive system in business schools Offer evidence that, in many schools, incentives are misaligned which limited the impact of academic research Offer suggestions for improvement Propose a construct and measure for business school health	RESEARCH QUESTION(S) & EXPECTATIONS If incentives are bad, faculty will produce a higher quantity (Q2) of research and a lower quality (Q1) of research. Teaching quality, external support, and integrity of a B-School will be higher if research Q1 is higher and research Q2 is lower.	AUDIENCE Business school leadership (deans, research deans, PST committees, department heads) Business school professors & PhD students Funders of business schools (donors, grant organizations) Research centers and organizations Professional organizations (MSI, AMA, EMAC)
	DATA Literature review Qualitative interviews with deans and institution senior stakeholders Survey marketing professors (as in Roberts et al. 2014)		OUTLETS Journal of Marketing JAMS	
RESOURCES Our network of (associate) deans and senior stakeholders. A survey budget to incentivize response. Time and focus!		TIMING Start ASAP and make this project a priority. Present initial findings at EMAC Hamburg, May '19 and AMA Doctoral Consortium, NYU June '19. Incorporate feedback and finish first version for submission by end of 2019. Aim for publication during 2020-2021.		

Fig. 8. Beta Research Project Canvas, illustrated by Stremersch et al., 2021.

may expect a big impact of GenAI? (Cautionary note: this section is based on foresight instead of hindsight, in an extremely fast-moving field, and it is optimistically speculative).

4.1. Analyzing trends, news, and conversations with GenAI

A first area in which the use of GenAI may impact research ideation is its usage to analyze trends, news, and conversations. Large Language Models (LLMs) are able to gather and process vast amounts of text, from a variety of sources, and recognize patterns that may reveal emerging trends and research topics, tailored to initial interests as prompted by the researcher. In bibliometrics, scholars develop machine learning algorithms to move from identifying to predicting emerging research topics, i.e., determine the future popularity of research topics (Liang et al. 2021). Topic modeling, which has taken off on published science articles, can also reveal how trends relate to each other and other objects. Sentiment analysis, e.g., run on data from X (before known as Twitter) or LinkedIn, may reveal how “hot” certain trends are in certain communities (e.g., Ballestar, Martín-Llaguno, & Sainz, 2022). AI applications that focus on visualization of such trends, for instance in mind maps, will prove very useful to organize and label the trend and topic information.

A good example of developments in this area is Mühlroth and Grottko (2020), who develop an approach to identify emerging technology trends before they first appear in the Gartner Hype Cycle. Future developments on AI may show that some types of trends are easier gauged than others and that AI engines may differ depending on the type of trend one is interested in. For instance, sociological trends may be more difficult to gauge than regulatory or technology trends as they are semantically more ambiguous. In the future, it is also very conceivable that AI will monitor trends of interest to the researcher and suggest new ones that are on the rise on a continuous basis as a personalized research recommendation engine in real-time. Such engines may dynamically detect the topical interest of the respective researcher (especially if the researcher would upload different versions of work-in-progress) as well as the research methods s/he masters and the styles that fit the researcher preferences well.

News and conversations are increasingly digitized and can be effectively mined for patterns and trends to identify important and relevant domains as they rise and fall. Automated text analysis of news and conversations in social media (think of the likes of Dataminr) for research ideation, similar as we today already do for brands and consumer preferences (e.g., Vermeer, Araujo, Bernritter, & Van Noort, 2019), is a promising catalyst to make scholarly social science research timelier. Further improvements in seasonal decomposition of time series and long-term trend forecasting may enable scholars to sail through the short-term fog in search of an early detection of long-term trends fueling nascent research domains. It is quite conceivable that in a matter of a few years, platforms focused on serving science communities will offer AI-enabled tooling to identify promising research domains; much alike the bi-annual MSI research priorities based on a survey of member companies, but then on a daily basis from the entire universe of online conversations between executives on LinkedIn (in which space, a MSI V2.0 has a likely useful, be it different, role to play as an expert curator, influencer and network architect).

4.2. GenAI to generate idea napkins

In [sections 2.2.](#) and [Section 2.3.](#) above, I reviewed techniques to generate research questions and idea napkins. Scholars can increasingly leverage GenAI such as LLMs to generate a higher volume and a higher quality of ideas than humans can, despite lower novelty (see [Girotra, Meinck, Terwiesch, & Ulrich, 2023](#)). For the generation of specific idea napkins, the lack of accuracy that is mentioned as one of the most common downsides of AI, represents a big upside as it enables variation without restraint, something expert humans can't easily replicate (even when ideation is framed as brainstorming); in creativity, the license to raise stupid and ridiculous ideas is the gateway to brilliance. For practical research ideation applications, it means scholars can feed "How Might We questions", for example, to LLMs and mine a large variety of white horse ideas quite easily. Human creativity and intelligence can particularly be suited to (1) dark horse, which LLMs are less capable of for now, (2) verify the feasibility or importance of a research idea, and/or (3) provide the right prompts to feed into LLMs. In the future, the prompting capability of humans will become likely more important ([Peres, Schreier, Schweidel, & Sorescu, 2023](#)) and take more the form of an oral dialogue with a chatbot, increasing the speed at which ideas can be generated, revised, and clustered.

For collaboration in the ideation phase, I recommend in [section 2.3.](#) collaborative platforms such as Mural, Miro, or Whiteboard. Increasingly, these platforms are enabling AI. For instance, as scholars populate a Mural with research questions, How Might We's, or idea napkins, the scholar can ask Mural to automatically (1) make mind maps between the different ideas or research questions; (2) cluster ideas and research questions in different categories of inquiry; and (3) start the ideation in certain areas with say 10 automatically generated post-its representing idea napkins (Mural launched a beta version of this in 2023, but took it offline again afterwards; source: Mural website; date of writing this text is 27/9/2023).

Today's graphical AI tools (e.g., Jasper, DALL-E, MidJourney, Illustroke) are not very good yet, but they will get better and can enable the creative visualizations of ideas. It is very conceivable that, in the future, researchers, for instance, will not draw conceptual frameworks anymore. Rather, they will feed text containing core constructs and their interrelationships into a visualization engine, which will then provide options of conceptual frameworks the researcher can select from.

4.3. GenAI to support prioritization decisions

LLMs promise to identify, compare, and prioritize trends and research domains. It is very conceivable that in the future GenAI will help researchers prioritize trends and research domains based on their own personal interests (e.g., as derived from the persona "me, myself, and I" exercise in [Fig. 2](#) above) and that GenAI will formulate personalized recommendations regarding which trends to pay more attention to (a bit like a recommendation engine on Netflix provides us with personalized recommendations for content based on our styles and recent viewing behavior). Moreover, it may do so even based on a scholar's available collaborator network. It will become likely feasible that GenAI tools will suggest collaborators to scholars to work on certain trends or idea napkins, given their documented expertise (e.g., from topic modeling on bibliometric content) and the structure of the scholarly network.

Repeatedly across the ideation process, the researcher is looking for ideas and potential contributions that are novel and different enough from the current state of the literature (e.g., [Section 3.3.2.](#) above). To scrutinize the novelty of an intended contribution (as in [Section 3.3.4.](#)), AI tools will become increasingly useful to filter relevant papers to position the new idea (based on the content in an idea napkin) against the vast and expanding universe of scholarly work. Such AI tools (think of Semantic Scholar as early example) use semantics and semantic similarity to detect relevant articles that a researcher should screen; it can also organize this literature in a useful, easy-to-navigate manner. It is conceivable that in the future a scholar could feed an imaginary abstract that was "ideated" and get a novelty score before the work is actually executed. Similarly, it is conceivable that AI in the future predicts the potential impact of a research idea prior to execution (similar to AI predicting consumer preferences for a product and finding them to match well with the preferences elicited from real human consumers; [Brand, Israeli, & Ngwe, 2023](#)). While today LLMs show inaccurate referencing behavior and some (such as ChatGPT) have taken its referencing function offline, a new specialized set of platforms will dive into AI applications with high bibliometric reliability.

5. Discussion

This paper aims to be a trigger for researchers to self-reflect on their research ideation practices, grounded in observations from ideation in sophisticated practice. It offers methods, tools, and templates along the ideation process, grounded in paradigms such as Design Thinking. It also elaborates on how AI can be leveraged by researchers in research ideation.

Three prominent questions remain as an afterthought for discussion. First, how may ideation practices vary across a scholar's lifecycle? Second, 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? Third, 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.

5.1. The evolution of ideation over a scholar's lifecycle

When reflecting upon ideation over a scholar's lifecycle it can be useful to examine how domain exploration, domain immersion, research project design, and selection decisions vary for doctoral students, pre-tenure assistant professors, tenured professors, and disciplinary switchers (i.e., researchers from different fields migrating into our own field, either as a fresh PhD from a different field or at an advanced stage of their career as they expand beyond their own field).

In domain exploration, making a “me, myself, and I” persona (Fig. 2) seems especially useful for PhD students as they explore and discover who they are; they can also benefit significantly from devoting greater effort to understand the personas of others who they are collaborating with, such as their (prospective) advisor. Disciplinary switchers may also want to introspect who they are and who they want to become, if they are serious about embracing their newly found discipline. For novice and new-to-the-field scholars, it is important to engage in a lot of in-discipline conversations and exhaust the formal channels to explore research domains; organizations such as MSI and AMA, editorial statements of premier journals in marketing, citation searches and template papers. For more experienced scholars, informal and unusual conversations with people outside their focal research domain may keep their domain exploration fresher and less “blinded by experience”.

Doctoral students and disciplinary switchers also would preferably choose only one research domain for immersion to gain sufficient depth in their inquiry. More experienced scholars that have immersed in only one domain need to start exploring others, to ensure that they do not get bored or boring; they need to become apt at immersing in several domains at once. The vehicles by which one immerses can vary also. For doctoral students, consulting and exec. ed. opportunities are limited. Local, low-cost practitioner conferences and networking events are great alternatives. Connecting with professors of practice or research professors with strong exposure outside academia is another.

As one hones in on the generation of specific idea napkins, senior scholars may find it helpful to use Mural, Miro, or Whiteboard as a collaborative platform in work with doctoral students or junior colleagues. One can set up idea napkin and research project canvas templates beforehand and fill these with post-it notes collaboratively online to equalize the playing field and build upon each other's ideas. Junior scholars and doctoral students may have more problems with dark horsing, and figuring out a dark horse is not exactly a champion in the making; thus, when they are dark horsing, it is best to do it guided by someone with dark horsing experience. Senior scholars typically welcome young scholars to ideate with, even without being a co-author on papers, as it introduces newness to their own thinking, such that it does not turn obsolete. Sharing of idea napkins with researchers central to the field and soliciting their feedback is also an important step for disciplinary switchers, to see how some of their ideas may catch on in the new community they joined. To protect from idea theft early in the game, scholars may consider hiding unique ingredients of their idea and gauge the general interest in the area instead; just like the secret ingredient of Coca-Cola was never disclosed.

Young and new-to-the-field scholars should aspire to formulate at least 10 idea napkins and at least 3 distinct research project canvasses to choose from. Experienced scholars may be able to do with fewer as they may have implicitly adopted the process in their mind; just like Mozart, as depicted in the movie *Amadeus*, wrote down his masterpieces without corrections as he perfected them in his head before writing them down. However, as science has shown, in reality, even Mozart made many rough drafts which he subsequently edited; thus, also for experienced scholars, formalizing ideas in a napkin that can be edited may be valuable. More generally, one can also imagine especially experienced scholars potentially adopting only a selection of the tools above, but not necessarily every single one.

5.2. Research for which this ideation 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 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., 2022) 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). 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.

5.3. Future research to validate the suggested ideation 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, Verniers, & Verhoef, 2007).

One path is to survey academics and inventory their ideation practices and connect them to the 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, McAlister, & Staelin, 2011) reflecting on the most positive and the most negative ideation experiences and how the two compare on the above 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 inventorying 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 are likely to be more active on social media. Or, scholars that immerse rather than isolate likely have had more exposure over time to practice. Connecting such data mined from resumes or LinkedIn profiles that serve 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 records 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.

Extending beyond ideation, one may also wonder whether a stream of research could develop on improving other scholarly research approaches, again inspired by professional practices. 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?

5.4. 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 in the core of what we do and that is to ideate on great 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. It also advocates to “do more research about research”.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

References

- Asplund, M., & Sandin, R. (1999). The survival of new products. *Review of Industrial Organization*, 15, 219–237. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007708612713>.
- Ballestar, M. T., Martín-Llaguno, M., & Sainz, J. (2022). An artificial intelligence analysis of climate-change influencers' marketing on Twitter. *Psychology & Marketing*, 39, 2273–2283.
- Berger, W. (2012). The secret phrase top innovators use. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Binken, J. L., & Stremersch, S. (2009). The effect of superstar software on hardware sales in system markets. *Journal of Marketing*, 73(2), 88–104. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.73.2.88>.
- Blocker, C. P., Flint, D. J., Myers, M. B., & Slater, S. F. (2011). Proactive customer orientation and its role for creating customer value in global markets. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 39, 216–233. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-010-0202-9>.
- Boulding, W., Morgan, R., & Staelin, R. (1997). Pulling the plug to stop the new product drain. *Journal of Marketing research*, 34(1), 164–176. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224379703400114>.
- Brand, J., Israeli, A., & Ngwe, D. (2023). Using GPT for market research. *Working paper*, July 7.
- Brown, T. (2009). *Change by design: How design thinking transforms organizations and inspires innovation*. Harper Collins.
- Butler, A. G., & Roberto, M. A. (2018). When Cognition Interferes with Innovation: Overcoming Cognitive Obstacles to Design Thinking: Design thinking can fail when cognitive obstacles interfere; appropriate cognitive countermeasures can help disarm the traps. *Research-Technology Management*, 61(4), 45–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08956308.2018.1471276>.
- Camacho, N., Nam, H., Kannan, P. K., & Stremersch, S. (2019). Tournaments to crowdsource innovation: The role of moderator feedback and participation intensity. *Journal of Marketing*, 83(2), 138–157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242918809673>.
- Chesbrough, H. W., & Tucci, C. L. (2020). The interplay between open innovation and lean startup, or, why large companies are not large versions of startups. *Strategic Management Review*, 1(2), 277–303. <https://doi.org/10.1561/111.00000013>.
- Day, G. S. (2007). Is it real? Can we win? Is it worth doing. *Harvard business review*, 85(12), 110–120.
- De Stobbeleir, K. E., Ashford, S. J., & Buyens, D. (2011). Self-regulation of creativity at work: The role of feedback-seeking behavior in creative performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 54(4), 811–831. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2011.64870144>.
- De Villiers, R. (2022). Creative Thinking, Problem Solving and Ideation Tools. In R. De Villiers (Ed.), *The Handbook of Creativity & Innovation in Business: A Comprehensive Toolkit of Theory and Practice for Developing Creative Thinking Skills* (pp. 197–221). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Fleming, L. (2001). Recombinant uncertainty in technological search. *Management science*, 47(1), 117–132. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.47.1.117.10671>.
- Girotra, K., Meinck, L., Terwiesch, C. & Ulrich, K. T. (2023). Ideas are dimes a dozen: Large language models for idea generation in innovation. *Working paper*, July 10, 2023.
- Girotra, K., Terwiesch, C., & Ulrich, K. T. (2010). Idea generation and the quality of the best idea. *Management science*, 56(4), 591–605. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.1090.1144>.
- Goffin, K., & Koners, U. (2011). Tacit knowledge, lessons learnt, and new product development. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 28(2), 300–318. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5885.2010.00798.x>.
- Goldenberg, J., Libai, B., Muller, E., & Stremersch, S. (2010). Database submission—the evolving social network of marketing scholars. *Marketing Science*, 29(3), 561–567. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.1090.0539>.
- Griffin, A., & Hauser, J. R. (1993). The voice of the customer. *Marketing science*, 12(1), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.12.1.1>.
- Hargadon, A., & Sutton, R. I. (1997). Technology brokering and innovation in a product development firm. *Administrative science quarterly*, 716–749. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2393655>.
- Hoffman, D. L., Moreau, C. P., Stremersch, S., & Wedel, M. (2022). The rise of new technologies in marketing: A framework and outlook. *Journal of Marketing*, 86(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429211061636>.
- John, G., Weiss, A. M., & Dutta, S. (1999). Marketing in technology-intensive markets: Toward a conceptual framework. *Journal of Marketing*, 63(4), 78–91.
- Kelley, T., & Kelley, D. (2012). Reclaim your creative confidence. *Harvard Business Review*, 90(12), 115–118.
- Khanna, R., Guler, I., & Nerkar, A. (2016). Fail often, fail big, and fail fast? Learning from small failures and R&D performance in the pharmaceutical industry. *Academy of Management Journal*, 59(2), 436–459. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2013.1109>.
- Klingebiel, R. (2021). *Research: How to Get Better at Killing Bad Projects*. HBR Online.
- Kohli, A. K., & Haenlein, M. (2021). Factors affecting the study of important marketing issues: Implications and recommendations. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 38(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2020.02.009>.
- Kohn, N. W., Paulus, P. B., & Choi, Y. (2011). Building on the ideas of others: An examination of the idea combination process. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 47(3), 554–561. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2011.01.004>.
- Kwon, S., Liu, X., Porter, A. L., & Youtie, J. (2019). Research addressing emerging technological ideas has greater scientific impact. *Research Policy*, 48(9). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2019.103834>.
- Lehmann, D. R., McAlister, L., & Staelin, R. (2011). Sophistication in research in marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 75(4), 155–165. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.75.4.155>.
- Liedtka, J. (2015). Perspective: Linking design thinking with innovation outcomes through cognitive bias reduction. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 32(6), 925–938.

- Lucas, B. J., & Nordgren, L. F. (2015). People underestimate the value of persistence for creative performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 109(2), 232. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000030>.
- Maddox, J. (1995). Plagiarism is worse than mere theft. *Nature*, 376, 721. <https://doi.org/10.1038/376721a0>.
- Mason, W., & Watts, D. J. (2012). Collaborative learning in networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 109(3), 764–769. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1110069108>.
- Muller, E. (2019). *On Research Ideation in Marketing*, at the Conference Presentation at EMAC Annual Conference.
- Mühlroth, C., & Grottko, M. (2020). Artificial intelligence in innovation: How to spot emerging trends and technologies. *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management*.
- Nijstad, B. A., Stroebe, W., & Lodewijckx, H. F. (2002). Cognitive stimulation and interference in groups: Exposure effects in an idea generation task. *Journal of experimental social psychology*, 38(6), 535–544. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-1031\(02\)00500-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-1031(02)00500-0).
- Osborn, A. F. (1953). *Applied imagination*. Charles Scribner, New York: Scribner's.
- Osterwalder, A., Pigneur, Y., Bernarda, G., & Smith, A. (2015). *Value proposition design: How to create products and services customers want*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Peres, R., Schreier, M., Schweidel, D., & Sorescu, A. (2023). On ChatGPT and beyond: How generative artificial intelligence may affect research, teaching and practice. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 40, 269–275.
- Rietzschel, E. F., Nijstad, B. A., & Stroebe, W. (2014). Effects of problem scope and creativity instructions on idea generation and selection. *Creativity Research Journal*, 26(2), 185–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2014.901084>.
- Roberts, J. H., Kayande, U., & Stremersch, S. (2014). From academic research to marketing practice: Exploring the marketing science value chain. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 31(2), 127–140. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2013.07.006>.
- Schauerte, N., Becker, M., Imschloss, M., Wichmann, J. R. K., & Reinartz, W. J. (2023). The managerial relevance of marketing science: Properties and genesis. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*.
- Schilling, M. A., & Green, E. (2011). Recombinant search and breakthrough idea generation: An analysis of high impact papers in the social sciences. *Research Policy*, 40(10), 1321–1331. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2011.06.009>.
- Shugan, S. M. (2003). Defining interesting research problems. *Marketing Science*, 22(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.22.1.1.1284>.
- Singh, J., & Fleming, L. (2010). Lone inventors as sources of breakthroughs: Myth or reality? *Management Science*, 56(1), 41–56. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.1090.1072>.
- Stremersch, S. (2021). The study of important marketing issues: Reflections. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 38(1), 12–17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2020.09.009>.
- Stremersch, S., Verniers, I., & Verhoef, P. C. (2007). The quest for citations: Drivers of article impact. *Journal of Marketing*, 71(3), 171–193. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.71.3.171>.
- Stremersch, S., Winer, R. S., & Camacho, N. (2021). Faculty research incentives and business school health: A new perspective from and for marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 85(5), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429211001050>.
- Stremersch, S., & Winer, R. S., (2019). Academic Research in Marketing and Business School Health: Limiters and Improvement Opportunities. *ERIM Report Series Reference: ERS-2019-007-MKT*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3391402>.
- Taylor, A., & Greve, H. R. (2006). Superman or the fantastic four? Knowledge combination and experience in innovative teams. *Academy of management Journal*, 49(4), 723–740. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2006.22083029>.
- Toubia, O. (2006). Idea generation, creativity, and incentives. *Marketing Science*, 25(5), 411–425. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.1050.0166>.
- Uzzi, B., Mukherjee, S., Stringer, M., & Jones, B. (2013). Atypical combinations and scientific impact. *Science*, 342(6157), 468–472. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1240474>.
- Van der Heijden, K. (1997). *Scenarios: The art of strategic conversation*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Vermeer, S. A. M., Araujo, T., Bernritter, S. F., & Van Noort, G. (2019). Seeing the wood for the trees: How machine learning can help firms in identifying relevant electronic word-of-mouth in social media. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 36, 492–508.
- Von Hippel, E. (1986). Lead users: A source of novel product concepts. *Management Science*, 32(7), 791–805.
- Yadav, M. S. (2010). The decline of conceptual articles and implications for knowledge development. *Journal of Marketing*, 74(1), 1–19.