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## Improving UK retail academic-practitioner research: insights from relationship marketing

### Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper explores the reasons for the continuing 'gap' between UK retail academic research and practice. A Relationship Marketing (RM) lens, focusing on relationship antecedents, is used to develop a deeper understanding of the barriers to collaboration and propose new solutions to close the gap.

**Design:** The paper adopts a qualitative methodology to compile the evidence, using multiple data sources to identify the dynamics of the retail academic-practitioner divide.

**Findings:** The research illustrates a marked absence of the majority of the customer-focused, seller focused and dyadic antecedents, essential for effective relational exchanges, and highlights that at the heart of the problem lies a lack of shared understanding of mutual *relationship benefits* with academics currently neither motivated nor incentivised to develop such relationships.

**Research implications:** Further research is needed to explore what characterises a successful sustainable research relationship. There is also a pressing need to understand the experience, skills and knowledge of 'boundary spanners' who operate successfully in both academic and business cultures.

**Practical Implications:** Universities should adopt a strategic approach towards building relationships with retailers based upon relationship antecedents. Reward structures should be developed to encourage academics to develop research relationships. Resources should be allocated to better defining and communicating the benefits of a university research relationship with retailers.

**Originality/value:** There has been limited empirical research on the academic-practitioner gap within the context of the UK retail sector. The RM lens draws attention to new insights about barriers to successful relationships and generates concrete ideas for closing the gap moving forward.

**Keywords:** Retail, academic-practitioner gap, impact, relationship marketing

**Paper type:** Research

**Word count:** 8077

### Introduction

The 'gap' between research and practice is not a new phenomenon but the case for improving UK academic-practitioner research relationships in retailing is particularly compelling. With annual sales totalling £311bn (equivalent to 20% of UK GDP), employing one in nine working people, and the 6th largest retail sector in the world by sales, UK retailing is considered to be central to the economic and social wellbeing of the nation and one of the world's most competitive and innovative industries (BIS, 2012; 2013). In recent

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3 years, there has been the demise of some well-known retail brands due to a slow response  
4 to the dramatic social and technological changes taking place within the retail environment.  
5 Most notable has been a failure to respond to the multi-channel challenge presented by the  
6 growth of the internet as well as significant demographic changes impacting the competitive  
7 shape of the global retail marketplace. UK Retailing has been described as a sector 'in crisis'  
8 (Guardian, 2011) in need of a strong research capability to generate strategic insights and  
9 innovative business models to enable managers to confront the challenges head on.  
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12 The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the UK's largest social science research  
13 funding body, has commissioned two studies in the last seven years to scope contemporary  
14 and future management challenges in the UK Retail Sector. Both studies identified that  
15 although there is a significant level of academic research, which is of relevance to retailers,  
16 more value is placed on research produced by commercial consultancies than academic  
17 departments (Wood et al, 2008). The ESRC funded Retail Knowledge Navigator project  
18 documents the existence of several barriers to research collaboration attributed to  
19 academic attitudes and behaviour as well as retailer ambivalence towards academic  
20 research (Cassidy et al, 2013). Despite the importance of research 'impact' within the  
21 Research Excellence Framework (REF) very little progress appears to have been made  
22 getting academics and practitioners to work together on collaborative retail research  
23 activity.  
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### 27 28 **Aim and Objectives**

29 The aim of this study is to develop our understanding of the continuing 'gap' between retail  
30 academic research and practice. The objectives are to:

- 31 • Identify the barriers to effective retail research relationships as articulated by  
32 academics and practitioners.
- 33 • Generate new insights about the 'gap' by considering these barriers through a  
34 'relationship marketing' (RM) lens.
- 35 • Identify potential solutions to help close this gap and enable relevant academic  
36 research to meaningfully impact current and future retail practice.  
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39 To achieve these objectives a qualitative, exploratory research approach was adopted  
40 drawing on two data sources; a review of relevant secondary literature including retail  
41 policy and practice documents, and findings from in-depth interviews with a sample of eight  
42 retail executives and nine senior retail academics. The data is analysed using a template  
43 derived from the RM antecedents defined in the Relational Mediator Meta-Analytic  
44 Framework (RMMF) developed by Palmatier et al (2006).  
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48 The paper is structured as follows. An outline of the characteristics of the retail context and  
49 what we know already about the research problem i.e. the barriers to research  
50 collaboration is provided. This is followed by a discussion of the relevant RM theory and  
51 framework used to explore the case and then an outline of methodology. The findings and  
52 discussion tease out relevant issues supported by evidence from the dataset. The conclusion  
53 and implications for practice outlines action for Universities to develop relationships  
54 between academics and retailers and highlights directions for further research.  
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### The Retail context and the 'research' problem

The retail sector is the largest private sector employer in the UK and includes a wide range of different professions such as marketing, logistics, finance, law and human resource management. The sector employs around 3 million people, over 10% of the UK workforce and is therefore seen by the UK Government as an important social force (Burt, Sparks and Teller, 2010). The sector plays a 'vital role in our communities as a provider of employment, of the goods and services people want and need and a force for social cohesion'(BIS, 2013, p.2). Retailers are currently facing significant environmental, economic and social challenges brought about by change in consumer behaviours stimulated by technological innovation. There is intense competition amongst retailers for a profitable share of consumers' disposable and 'low inflation means downwards pressure on margins' (*Racontuer - Future of Retail* 21 June 2015, p1). The BRC-Nielsen Shop Price Index (SPI), a monthly measure of UK shop price inflation, reported 28 consecutive months of falling shop prices to August 2015. ([www.brc.org.uk](http://www.brc.org.uk)). This is a significant challenge at a time when UK retail is faced with additional costs, for example from the introduction of a National living wage, increase in business rates and apprenticeship levy which will add £14bn of costs onto the retail industry in the next four years – amounting to approximately 20% of industry profitability (*Racontuer - Future of Retail* 29 May 2016, p1). The British Retail Consortium report that between 2004 and 2014, costs in the UK retail industry rose 33.8% but consumer spending only increased by 2% (*Racontuer - Future of Retail* 29 May 2016, p1).

On-line shopping is now an integral element of consumers' repertoire, accompanied by regular use of on-line reviews, comparison sites and discount voucher or code sites (Mintel-Oxygen, 2011). 70% of UK shoppers own a smartphone ([Talk-retail.co.uk](http://Talk-retail.co.uk)) and are comfortable using this device to shop. However, despite the rapid expansion of this new multichannel reality, only 29% of UK retailers consider themselves to be omni-channel (*Racontuer -Future of Retail* 21 June 2015, p.3), with many appearing to have been reluctant (and slow) to embrace the commercial opportunities opening up in the digital space. Other retail trends, including annual discounting events such as Black Friday in late November, and Cyber Monday in early December, have added to the challenge of matching supply to demand. Further challenges facing the sector include skills shortages, security concerns and demands for more sustainable and responsible retail practices.

As noted by Wood et al (2008) there is a great deal of academic research being carried out which could potentially help retailers confront these challenges head on. They claim that 'academic work is vastly underutilised in the retail commercial context' (section 3.9). The potential for collaboration was highlighted further by Cassidy et al (2013) who illustrated how the retail challenges could be readily mapped onto the generic research priorities of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Their research highlighted seven key retail agendas, which presented opportunities for collaborative research investment including sustainable and responsible retailing, omni channel retailing, internationalisation, consumer insights, retail employment (skills and development), the future of the high street and the changing structure of physical retail space and innovation (Cassidy et al, 2013, p.31). All of these agendas linked in some way to the ESRC priorities. Despite the synergy between the two sets of research priorities however, there remains a perceived lack of a strong

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3 retailer/academic research relationship with very little collaborative research taking place in  
4 practice.

### 5 **The Academic 'Gap'**

6 A number of barriers have been identified to explain the lack of strategic research  
7 collaboration. First; there appears to be a *lack of awareness of the existence of large clusters*  
8 *of retail related research amongst the retail practitioner community*. As Wood et al (2008,  
9 p.66) note, it 'is misguided to believe that retailers or the wider interested community ever  
10 pick up an academic journal. In the main, the industry does not have time to search around  
11 for such potentially relevant information'. Much research within the sector tends to focus  
12 on commercialisation with less awareness of the potential impact and value of other  
13 services i.e. data capture and development and network facilitation and development.  
14 Faced with a research problem, retailers turn to commercial data providers for information  
15 rather than academics. Retailers also appear to be uncertain about how to access academic  
16 research, i.e. to identify which universities have expertise in which areas. For their part,  
17 academics readily admit to this 'access' problem. The pressure to publish in high ranking  
18 academic journals, reinforced through the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which  
19 focus primarily on theoretical contributions (Nkomo, 2009), often means that findings are  
20 inaccessible to practicing retailers and does not reflect current issues or priorities. As well as  
21 the fact that academics appear to be using inappropriate channels to communicate research  
22 to practitioners, there is a concern about how the messages are formulated and presented.  
23 In most cases the format and presentation of research material conforms to the style  
24 protocols of academic journals stressing rigor over relevance, which renders it  
25 incomprehensible to practitioners (Baron et al, 2011).  
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31 Second; and possibly a more problematic issue, is a *perceived scepticism amongst practicing*  
32 *retailers about the relevance, impact and timescales associated with much of the traditional*  
33 *academic research*. Complaints from retailers that academic outputs are overly theoretical  
34 and abstract and do not deal with the operational problems retailers are facing on a day to  
35 day basis are commonplace. The abstract nature of content is often combined with  
36 concerns over the length of time it takes for the results to be produced. In their defence,  
37 academics claim that it takes time to produce high quality, rigorous outputs but leads to  
38 superior benefits in the long term in terms of better quality of decision making. The result of  
39 this is that in the 1960's, practitioners in the marketing field authored or co-authored over  
40 40% of research articles published in leading academic journals but, according to Hubbard  
41 and Lindsay, by 2002 this figure had dropped to 14% (see Geuens 2011p.1104) and the  
42 perceived relevance to practitioners of academic research had 'decreased in almost direct  
43 proportion to improvements in rigour' (Bartunek 2011, p. 555).  
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48 As noted above, these barriers are not unique to the retail sector and have been put  
49 forward to explain the existence of an academic-practitioner research divide more generally  
50 in Marketing and Management. The views of the academic members of the editorial board  
51 of the *European Journal of Marketing* were represented in an editorial in 2010 focused on  
52 nature of the 'long debated 'theory-practice' divide in marketing scholarship (Lee and  
53 Greenley, 2010). Although there was disagreement at a philosophical level about the role of  
54 academic research, there was widespread agreement that the content of scholarly journals  
55 was largely inaccessible to managers and practitioners and that academics were facing  
56 increasing pressure from funding bodies to demonstrate the social and economic impact of  
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3 their research endeavour moving forward, making collaboration and co-operation highly  
4 desirable.  
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7 The different views held by practitioners and academics about the role, value and relevance  
8 of research has frequently been referred to in the management literature as the 'research  
9 to practice' knowledge gap which limits the transfer of academic knowledge to  
10 practitioners. The 'gap' has been given a variety of labels including the 'academic-  
11 practitioner' gap (Hughes et al, 2008) 'the 'science-practice' gap (Rynes et al, 2007) and the  
12 'knowing-doing' gap (Pfeffer and Sutton 1999). Markides (2007) refers to two translation  
13 gaps, with one, lost 'in' translation highlighting dissemination problems and the second lost  
14 'before' translation referring to research which does not relate appropriately to practice.  
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17 According to the recent Dowling Review of Business-University Research Collaborations  
18 (2015) 'despite the fact that there are many successful examples of research collaborations  
19 between business and academia in the UK, overall, performance in achieving such  
20 collaborations is patchy, meaning that the UK is potentially missing out on both the new  
21 research insights and the productivity benefits that collaboration can bring' (p.65) Although  
22 the academic-practitioner research gap is not a new problem our contribution in this paper  
23 is to investigate research collaborations in the UK retail sector, a major contributor to UK  
24 productivity. Our novel RM lens generates a deeper understanding of the issues, offers a  
25 number of new insights about the barriers to collaboration and provides new suggestions  
26 about ways to close the gap.  
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### 29 30 **The effectiveness of relationships: the marketing perspective**

31 Relationship marketing (RM) has been defined as 'establishing, developing and maintaining  
32 successful relational exchanges' (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p.22). In a recent review of  
33 empirical and academic perspectives on RM, Sheth (2015, p.4) identified five areas which  
34 have been the focus of academic attention since its appearance in the marketing lexicon;  
35 loyalty programmes, customer satisfaction, bundling and share of wallet, key account  
36 management and industrial marketing. These represent very specific marketing activities.  
37 Hunt (2010) however presents RM (or relational strength) on a more strategic level as a  
38 potential resource advantage for a firm. Vincent and Webster (2013) note that RM  
39 constructs have been applied to a variety of relationships including service relationships;  
40 buyer and seller relationships; not-for-profit relationships; organisational relationships;  
41 channel relationships; business-to-business relationships; and employee relationships.  
42 Academics have also explored the value of RM in a variety of contexts, from membership  
43 associations (Vincent and Webster, 2013) to marriage (Tynan, 1997).  
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48 The Dowling Review (2015) identified 'strong personal relationships' to be 'at the heart of  
49 any successful collaboration'. (p.28). A relationship marketing lens, with an emphasis on  
50 personal constructs such as trust, commitment and integration, was considered to be  
51 particularly appropriate here to generate new insights about barriers to effective  
52 collaboration.  
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54  
55 Palmatier et al (2006) provide an integrated understanding of RM from a meta-analysis of  
56 RM studies from 1987 to 2004 resulting in The Relational Mediator Meta-Analytic  
57 Framework (RMMF) Table 1 below highlights the key antecedents to relationships identified  
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3 in the original framework. Palmatier's research highlights the link between antecedents,  
4 relational mediators and moderators and performance outcomes and demonstrates that  
5 the most effective antecedents for RM are expertise and dyadic communication followed by  
6 relationship specific investment. Whilst acknowledging the complexity of relationships, our  
7 interest with this exploratory project is simply to assess the existence of customer and seller  
8 focused and dyadic *antecedents* in the context of the retail academic-practitioner  
9 relationship, the left hand side column of the framework. Reference to the RMMF is  
10 considered particular appropriate here as Palmatier's research stresses the importance of  
11 acknowledging the exchange *context* of the relationship, in this case, the dynamic and  
12 turbulent UK retail environment as discussed above. In the context of this paper, 'sellers'  
13 are defined as those institutions, research groups and academics involved in retail research.  
14 The 'buyers' or 'customers' are represented by UK retail organisations, retailers and senior  
15 retail practitioners. Drawing on the customer focused, seller focused and dyadic  
16 antecedents outlined in the RMMF, Table 1 highlights the range of questions which might be  
17 explored in the context of the retail academic-practitioner research relationship.  
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24 This study explores the implications of using RM theory for the development of an effective  
25 and sustainable long term research exchange relationship between retail academics and  
26 practitioners and the potential of a RM focus to guide strategy development and provide a  
27 resource advantage for a firm (Morgan and Hunt 2010). The justification for the adoption of  
28 this approach therefore lies not only in the recognised need for strong relationships  
29 between both parties but the potential of the RM lens to generate new insights into what  
30 continues to be an enduring issue at a time when the case for improving UK academic-  
31 practitioner research relationships in retailing is particularly compelling.  
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### 35 **Methodology**

36 The aim of the study was to develop our understanding of the 'gap' between retail academic  
37 research and practice and to evaluate the issues and identify potential solutions to close this  
38 gap using a RM lens. To achieve this we adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach as this  
39 places emphasis on examining participant interpretations and takes account of the research  
40 context (O'Donnell and Cummins, 1999; Fisher, 2007). Qualitative research also enables the  
41 researcher to gain a detailed understanding of the complex phenomena to be investigated  
42 in order to build theory (Bryman, 2008). The study used two data sources. First, information  
43 obtained from relevant retail policy and practice publications, including company reports  
44 and websites. Of particular note here was the information from two ESRC studies  
45 commissioned since 2008, which have explicitly explored the retail academic-practitioner  
46 divide, the Retail Navigator project (2012-2014) and the Business Engagement project  
47 (2008). Second, and more significantly, the findings study involving in depth interviews with  
48 nine senior retail academics and eight practitioners, selected using purposive sampling. The  
49 academic sample represented nine different UK Universities, all of whom are prominent in  
50 the field of UK retail academic research. The eight retail practitioners, who were identified  
51 through professional and personal contacts, were all in senior management positions and  
52 represented large retail organisations operating in different markets ranging from health  
53 and beauty, furniture, confectionary, fashion and games as detailed in Table 2. Academics  
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3 are only identified as 1-9 in the study as to reveal any detailed information around their  
4 position and University could breach confidentiality.

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8 The instrument used to collect the data were semi-structured interviews with both sets of  
9 participants. Eight of the nine academic interviews took place face to face with one  
10 interview conducted by telephone. The eight retail practitioner interviews were all  
11 conducted in face to face meetings. The interviews, which were around 45 mins duration,  
12 were undertaken by one member of the research team to provide consistency of data  
13 capture.  
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15  
16 All participants were provided with details of the purpose of the study and an outline of the  
17 interview. The interview guide included questions relating to definitions of academic  
18 research, its role in contributing to knowledge, its relevance to retail practice, how both  
19 parties communicated and related to each other and the ways in which academic research  
20 could be used to inform retail practice. Specific questions explored the existence of the RM  
21 antecedents in Table 1. These included questions about the benefits and importance of  
22 research collaboration and barriers to effective interaction. Data from the in-depth  
23 interviews, which were all recorded and transcribed, amounted to over 150 pages of text.  
24 Then, Template Analysis was used to identify key themes in the data (Crabtree and Miller,  
25 1999), using the detailed categories provided in the RMM framework outlined in Table 1  
26 Template analysis was considered to be appropriate as an analytical approach suited to  
27 comparative evaluation of different groups of people, or individuals, within a specific  
28 context (King, 2004). The list of codes (the 'template') helps the researcher make sense of  
29 large amounts of rich textual data via the use of structured and systematic analytical  
30 methods (Waring and Wainwright, 2008). Each research team member read the data sets  
31 several times and segmented the text into sections relating to the nine antecedent of the  
32 RMM framework. In depth examination of the sections then followed to generate line by  
33 line coding and categories, which were assigned to the relationship marketing antecedents  
34 identified in Table 1. Finally, relying on the multiple sources of evidence detailed above, the  
35 data was converged and triangulated to address the questions detailed in Table 1.  
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#### 40 **Findings and discussion**

41 In the original RMMF, although there is widespread disagreement about which combination  
42 of relational antecedents, mediators and moderators affect which performance outcomes,  
43 there *is* some consensus around the antecedents required for effective relationship  
44 development. These antecedents provide the focus for the discussion of the findings. The  
45 discussion draws on the full dataset and Table 3 (included as an appendix) provides quotes  
46 from interview respondents which relate to the key antecedents.  
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#### 50 **Relationship benefits and dependencies**

51 According to the Dowling Review, (2015) business-university research collaborations provide  
52 'a myriad of *benefits* to their participants'. For business, these could include improved  
53 business performance through the application of new technologies, better decision making  
54 and enhanced internal research capability and expertise. For academics, the benefits cited  
55 include access to new skills, and the opportunity to address challenging research questions  
56 with real world applications and see research have a tangible impact (p.2). The findings here  
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3 however suggest that many of these benefits are neither recognised nor appreciated by  
4 academics and businesses in the retail sector. This lack of mutual understanding is succinctly  
5 articulated in the following:  
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8 *'I don't think there's an awareness of what one could do for the other, and that's a two way*  
9 *street. The gap exists because I don't think there's an awareness of what the benefits might*  
10 *be'* (Retailer 4).  
11

12 Furthermore although academic participants can articulate what characterises high quality  
13 academic research in terms of *'robustness and defensibility of its own conclusion'* and  
14 research which *'extends a body of knowledge'* and gives a *'theoretical contribution'*, there  
15 was no strong evidence that these particular qualities are valued by the retail business  
16 community. Indeed the issue of theoretical contribution continues to be seen as a potential  
17 barrier by some.  
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21 *'My view on academic research is perhaps not very well informed but I see it as distant from*  
22 *reality'* (Retailer 3).  
23

24 Academics clearly recognise that this is a perception held by many retailers. Academics  
25 themselves admit that much academic research *'bears little relationship to the real world of*  
26 *retailing'* (Academic 5) and that *'by and large (retailers) will find the research outputs of*  
27 *retailers fairly obscure'* (Academic 1).  
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30 From an academic perspective the potential to collaborate to generate tangible research  
31 impact, although recognised, appears not to be universally valued. Although the Research  
32 Excellence Framework (i.e. REF 2014) highlights the importance of academics being able to  
33 co-create knowledge with 'impact', the rewards associated with this engagement are  
34 limited. For example, research published in outlets accessed by retailers receive little  
35 reward in the current REF and other research publication acknowledgment systems. As  
36 Academic 1 noted: *'If you get anything that's remotely of interest to practitioners then its*  
37 *ranked very, very low in terms of academic journal output'*. For academics publishing in the  
38 retail area, the problem is exacerbated by the limited number of retail journals classified as  
39 'internationally excellent' in quality ranking lists. *'At the end of the day it comes back to*  
40 *reward and how you get on in academia and it's still very much balanced towards this*  
41 *academic publication'* (Academic 9)  
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45 In terms of *dependency*, it is clear that in most cases academia is not the first port of call for  
46 Retailers trying to access research resource. As well as their own expanding 'big' datasets on  
47 consumer behaviour drawn from loyalty cards and transaction data, they increasingly have  
48 access to an extensive array of research and information supplied by commercial  
49 consultancies, trade publications and conference organisations. Commercial consultancies,  
50 such as Experian, IGD, PwC and Deloitte, who have established reputations in retail  
51 consultancy, appear to have appropriated a 'middle ground' between academia and  
52 practice by offering a wealth of relevant retail data presented in a rigorous yet easily  
53 digestible format as articulated by Retailer 8  
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3 *'We use a number of industry wide sources...we are very data rich in terms of our sources'* ,  
4 with Retailer 5 adding that *'If we need an insight on marketing for example we would not go*  
5 *to an academic for that, we would go to an agency'*.  
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7  
8 Linked to the discussion above, the benefits of academic research over commercial outputs  
9 have not been clearly articulated or 'sold' to retailers. Although the added value of  
10 academic research in terms of quality and interdisciplinary insight might be well understood  
11 within the academic community, retailers clearly assess quality differently, looking for  
12 information to support fast decision making rather than a contribution to knowledge at a  
13 more abstract level.  
14

15 As Academic 5 commented *'Retailers I think are much more solutions focused, they're by*  
16 *necessity more short-term in the way that they think about things. And they're much more*  
17 *focused on achieving solutions on time, within budget, and with ... yeah, and are prepared to*  
18 *accept caveats to the quality of what's done as a consequence of that'*.  
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21 In addition to commercial retail consultancies, most major retailers have expanded their in-  
22 company research capability to work on the increasing volumes of market and consumer  
23 data now being generated by via their own mobile applications and online shopping  
24 consumer datasets. In theory this should increase the retailers' dependency on academia, as  
25 a potential source of graduates and postgraduates with digital skillsets. The value  
26 proposition lies more in providing students who can help retailers to analyse their own data  
27 rather than doing the research for them and presenting it to retailers. Retailers have always  
28 valued the academic relationship as a recruitment arena for the students and is something  
29 that could be developed within the research space. The recently established ESRC Consumer  
30 Data Research Centre (CDRC) a collaboration between UCL and Leeds University appears to  
31 be responding to this switch in emphasis. In recognition of the fact that retailers now have  
32 access to their own datasets they are offering collaborators access to skilled researchers  
33 (data analysts) to work on projects in exchange for anonymised data. The benefit for  
34 retailers focuses on getting access to highly specialised academic researchers with superior  
35 data analysis skills rather than research per se.  
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### 39 **Incentives and expertise**

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41 As noted above the incentives for academics to invest time in research collaborations with  
42 retailers are limited. As well as the lack of rewards for publishing research in practitioner  
43 journals there appears to be little support or encouragement for 'secondments' or  
44 placements with retailers to access new skills and knowledge. This appears to be a situation  
45 which had deteriorated rather than improved. *'When I came into academia we would take*  
46 *people from business backgrounds and turn them into academics. Most universities don't do*  
47 *this now because they are geared to purely academic writing for academics'* (Academic 2) It  
48 is certainly not the case currently that *'for academics in relevant disciplines, spending time*  
49 *in industry should be seen as a mark of esteem that enriches their career, analogous to*  
50 *gaining international experience'* (Dowling p.35)  
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54 Despite the increasing use of external research agencies it is clear that retailers do value  
55 academia for certain types of expertise. *'I have used academic research for something very*  
56 *specific and which required specialised knowledge'* (Retailer 6). For example *'there is quite a*  
57 *healthy engagement between major retailers and academics on store location analysis but*  
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3 *they (the retail staff involved) are modellers, numbers guys, operational researchers and so*  
4 *they have a natural affinity with that kind of thing'* (Academic 2). These links have led to the  
5 establishment of a number of well- regarded retail research centres and units at certain  
6 Universities such as Southampton and Oxford. (Cassidy et al 2013). Academic 5 recognised  
7 that *'there are a few Universities recognised as key centres with established links to retail'*.  
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10 However, there is a concern that many of these centres, tied logically to business schools,  
11 are unable to showcase the full range of research being carried out in other university  
12 departments which might be relevant to retailers. Despite calls for more interdisciplinary  
13 collaboration many academics working outside business schools do not seem fully aware of  
14 (or indeed in some cases, motivated to consider) the value of their work to retailers.  
15 (Cassidy et al 2013). Even where there was an established relationship between a retailer  
16 and an individual academic researcher or research group, there appeared to be little  
17 evidence of any purposeful or active "cross selling" to that retailer of other relevant  
18 specialist research skills from the same University or Business School.  
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22 Interestingly, a number of retailers valued academic expertise which they could source  
23 locally. *'We don't use academic research in the organisation but (if we did) I would naturally*  
24 *look at universities in the local cities* (Retailer 7). A small number of universities have  
25 capitalised very successfully on local research collaborations with key retailers e.g. Leeds  
26 University/Marks & Spencer and Nottingham Universities/Alliance Boots but this remains an  
27 area for further development.  
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30 It is clear that as well as recognised centres of expertise, retailers have located individuals  
31 who they trust to operate effectively in both retail and academic environments. Our  
32 respondents named these individuals and it was clear that they were critical 'boundary  
33 spanners', driving collaboration and relationships in both contexts. They clearly possess a  
34 unique skill set, developed often through practical experience in both environments. For the  
35 most part however, our respondents considered there to be very little similarity between  
36 academics and retailers with both operating in very different cultural contexts, with  
37 different drivers, timescales and priorities. Retailers are generally interested in research to  
38 help drive sales and profit and ultimately improve financial performance. The academic is  
39 motivated to publish in high level academic journals. The retailers in our study considered  
40 academics to be 'distant from reality' and academics admit that they can be seen as having  
41 'their heads in the clouds'. The differences are captured in this observation  
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46 *'If you knew a practitioner you wouldn't invite them along to an academic conference, unless*  
47 *you were very sure that they were a particular type of person who was interested in that*  
48 *kind of academic approach'* (Academic 3).  
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50 The development of critical personal relationships is undoubtedly hampered by relatively  
51 high staff turnover in the UK retail sector. The extremely competitive nature of the UK retail  
52 sector means that many senior staff move from one retail organisation to another on a  
53 frequent basis. As these are often the individuals charged with developing research, the  
54 movement can be quite disruptive. Time taken to harness and cement a relationship with a  
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specific retailer can come to nothing when the key contact leaves for a different role in the same or another retail organisation.

### Communication and speed of response

For retailers, a clear benefit from any research relationship is that findings can be delivered at speed and serve as a stimulus for action. Once again, the evidence suggests that academic research seems to be failing to deliver here. *'You have got a very fast moving (retail) environment. You can't afford to wait for 6 months of academic research: you need to get into a market at the time that it is needed'* (Retailer 2).

Again, academics themselves recognised this issue blaming slow response times on a lack of institutional resource and bureaucratic processes and procedures: *'A lot of the information requirements that companies have, they want them satisfied in a short timescale and we just don't have the resource and the flexibility to be able to deliver within their timescale'* (Academic 6)

The research reinforced the existence of poor and inappropriate communication as a major barrier to effective collaboration. There are limited occasions where retailers and academics meet face to face to discuss research collaboration with meetings typically take place within their own communities. *'I've personally organised conferences that were supposed to bring together retailers and they have only been attended by academics'* (Academic 3). As noted above not only are most academic research outputs published in academic journals, to which retailers don't have access or time to read, but the findings are not presented in retail friendly language or in accessible formats. Although some journals provide a translation service for managers and highlights the key outputs in practitioner language e.g. Journal of Services Marketing, these are not publications retailers would normally access.

In addition, interestingly, our findings demonstrate that retailers view effective communication as an academic responsibility:

*'Academics need to promote to business the benefit they can bring' if you don't tell people, they won't know. Academics need to be able to speak our language and understand what drives us as a business. Without that, no pitch would work'* (Retailer 3) and as observed by Retailer 1 *'At the end of the day unless academics have a good story to tell and unless they are providing some guidance or innovation, then it's going to be very hard to stimulate the interest of the retailers'*

Although academics may not like to see themselves in the role of seller in the exchange relationship it is clear that this is a position that retailers feel they should adopt i.e. the onus is on the academic to forge the research relationship.

### Conclusion

The overall aim of this study was to develop the understanding of the continuing 'gap' between retail academic research and practice. The analysis of the data with a RM lens has drawn attention to the persistence of many of the well documented barriers to effective collaboration as well as generated new insights. These new insights appear in all three areas of the discussion; relationship benefits and dependencies, incentives and expertise and communication and speed of response. In terms of *benefits*, it is unlikely that retailers will ever assess the quality of research in the same way that academics do. Their interest in

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2  
3 rigorous methodology and theoretical development will always be overtaken by concerns  
4 for immediate impact and obvious 'take outs'. However the changing data landscape  
5 suggests that there is an opportunity for academics to refocus the benefit of a relationship  
6 around capacity development, providing a constant stream of highly skilled research  
7 graduates to enable retailers to better analyse their own big datasets. In RM terms, to  
8 become a valued supplier academia needs to reaffirm the distinctiveness of its research  
9 proposition. Either in terms of focusing on the potential impact of high quality research on  
10 decision making or on its position as a source of supply of researchers skilled in advanced  
11 data analytics. In terms of *incentives*, the evidence suggests that despite the focus on impact  
12 within the REF framework, many academics remain sceptical about the benefits of research  
13 collaboration. There is a widely held perception that internal reward structures are heavily  
14 skewed towards outputs in academic journals rather than retail publications. Although this  
15 in itself is not new, what is surprising is the lack of motivation or apathy towards any change  
16 to the situation. The fact that this perception is so prevalent and enduring suggests that  
17 drastic action is required by HEI's make any significant change. This is a point reinforced by  
18 the Dowling which called for Universities 'to ensure that recruitment and promotion criteria  
19 for relevant disciplines reward rather than penalise academics who have achieved  
20 excellence in translational and collaborative activities' (p.30). On a more positive note the  
21 research highlights the critical role played by 'boundary spanners' within the retail research  
22 context and the fact that certain pockets of expertise are highly valued by the retail  
23 community. In particular universities are perceived to play a valuable role as a local source  
24 of supply for many retailers. All of these issues offer potential avenues for further research  
25 as well as platforms to promote academic excellence to retailers. In terms of *communication*  
26 perhaps the most interesting finding relates to the fact that retailers view this as the sole  
27 responsibility of the academic community. Academics are expected to be able to present  
28 their research in the lexicon of retail. Again this suggests that institutional resources need to  
29 be invested to support and reward effective translation and dissemination activities of  
30 academics.

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40 Through the use of a RM lens, the contribution of this study has been to draw out new  
41 insights into the potential causes of the weak research relationship between retail  
42 academics and practitioners. These include insights about relationship benefits and  
43 dependencies, rewards and expertise and communication. The findings here also support a  
44 number of the key barriers to collaboration already identified in the mainstream  
45 management literature which is testament to their enduring nature. The fact that there are  
46 problems identifying almost all of the requisite relationship antecedents, suggests that  
47 significant and urgent action will be required if significant progress is to be made closing the  
48 gap. The Dowling Report (2015) identified many of the same problems highlighted in our  
49 research. The Report sends out a call to arms and recommends that individuals who can  
50 work in both business and academia and who are able to achieve collaborative and  
51 translational activities need to be valued, and recommends that for an academic, gaining  
52 experience in industry should be considered career enriching recognising that 'crossing the  
53 divide' requires skill but builds expertise and experience, (p.34)

### 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 **Implications for Practice**

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3 Based on our research we suggest several urgent actions are needed. The most important of  
4 which is that Universities actively adopt a relationship marketing strategy to foster  
5 engagement between academics and retailers focusing on the key relationship antecedents  
6 identified in this research. Communication from academics should emphasise the benefits  
7 which are valued by retailers. These might include, for example, specialist expertise in data  
8 analysis, access to the wider resources available in universities, including cross-disciplinary  
9 and international research links. In addition, key 'boundary spanners' who are currently  
10 active and respected within the academic and practitioner communities need to be  
11 identified and rewarded. As yet there does not appear to have been any systemic attempt  
12 to profile these individuals to identify relevant skill sets and experience to guide future  
13 recruitment. Consideration also needs to be given to reshaping the reward structure  
14 associated with the impact agenda to balance the reward awarded for output published in  
15 academic and practitioner journals. Academics should also consider proactively developing  
16 relevant research projects to promote to practitioners, based around the known key  
17 challenges facing UK retail. Recruitment of retail academics should also favour those with  
18 industry experience who can communicate with practitioners in relevant terms and  
19 language. Finally, the appointment of relationship (account) managers within UK  
20 Universities or Business Schools would help ensure long term, more frequent interactions  
21 with all areas of business (including retail) and the higher education community.  
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27 In addition to the implications for practice, our study has generated a list of interesting  
28 research questions which require further examination. First; in what ways does research  
29 provided by commercial agencies differ from that offered by academics? There is clearly a  
30 perception amongst academics that academic research is of higher quality, but what exactly  
31 does this mean and how might these differences be meaningfully communicated to  
32 retailers? Second; what characterises a successful sustainable research relationship  
33 between retail academics and practitioners? Is it due to the leadership of those involved,  
34 the nature of the topic or the level of institutional support and encouragement? It is clear  
35 that such relationships do exist but there is little evidence that they have been empirically  
36 investigated. Third; 'boundary spanners' clearly exist who have the necessary skills sets to  
37 operate effectively in both cultures. Yet again we know very little about the nature of the  
38 skill sets and experience which make these individuals so effective  
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#### 42 **Limitations**

43 The primary data was limited to a small sample of academics and practitioners and as such  
44 the findings are not necessarily generalizable.  
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**Table 1 RM Antecedents and Retail Relevance** (adapted from Palmatier et al, 2006)

Antecedents	Representative Papers	Relevance to retail academics and practitioners
<b>CUSTOMER FOCUSED</b>		
Relationship benefits	Morgan and Hunt 1994; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Gremler 2002	To what extent do academics feel the need to develop a relationship in the first place? i.e. how important is it? To what extent do retail practitioners understand and appreciate the benefits of research collaboration?
Dependence on seller	Morgan and Hunt 1994; Hibbard, Kumar, Stern 2001	How important is the research relationship to retailers? What are the alternative sources of supply? How are they perceived relative to academic sources? What benefits are offered by alternative suppliers? How effectively are these benefits articulated and communicated by academics to retailers?
<b>SELLER-FOCUSED</b>		
Relationship investment	Ganesan 1994; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, Iacobucci 2001	How much time and effort do academics devote to developing the relationship? What incentives are used to encourage and develop exchange relationships?
Seller expertise	Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Lagace, Dahlstrom, Gassenheimer 1991	How do retailers rate the knowledge and expertise of academic researchers? Are there particular areas of specialism which are valued more highly than others?
<b>DYADIC</b>		
Communication	Morgan and Hunt 1994; Mohr, Fisher, Nevin 1996	What form does research communication take? How effective is it? What do we know about the quality of information being 'shared'/communicated?
Similarity	Morgan and Hunt 1994; Doney and Cannon 1997	How much do individuals involved in undertaking and commissioning research have in common? Do they have similar backgrounds, lifestyles, experiences? Are there many cultural similarities between the two sets of organisations?
Relationship duration and interaction frequency	Anderson and Weitz 1989; Doney and Cannon 1997 Crosby, Evans, Cowles 1990; Doney and Cannon 1997	How long have relationships existed? How long do they tend to last? How frequently do research partners get together? How long do interactions last?
Conflict	Anderson and Weitz 1992; Kumar, Scheer, Steenkamp 1995	What are the areas of disagreement between the two parties? How does this conflict manifest itself?

**Table 2 Retail Participant Companies**

Participant	Market Sector	Role
1	Health and Beauty	Director
2	Clothing	Chairman
3	Confectionary	CEO
4	Children's Clothing	Director
5	Furniture	CEO
6	Toys and Games	CEO
7	Shoes	Director
8	Opticians	Director

Table 3 Retail Practitioner and Academic Commentary

Antecedents	Definition	Evidence from retailers (customers)	Evidence from Academics (sellers)
<p data-bbox="79 311 323 370"><b>Customer focused</b> <i>Relationship benefits</i></p> <p data-bbox="79 646 323 704"><i>Dependence on the seller</i></p>	<p data-bbox="331 311 604 493">Perceive value in a relationship: time saving, convenience, companionship, and improved decision making</p> <p data-bbox="331 646 604 799">Customers evaluation of the value of resources for which few alternatives are available from the seller</p>	<p data-bbox="613 311 1381 370">'Retail is very fast paced; its very quick moving; academic research has this image of being very slow'</p> <p data-bbox="613 376 1381 435">'A research application process that takes 26 weeks to approve is inconsistent with our timescales'</p> <p data-bbox="613 441 1381 500">'If we (retailers) need an answer, if there's a problem that we need an answer to, we need it next week or we need it yesterday'</p> <p data-bbox="613 646 1381 704">'We use a number of industry wide sources...we are very data rich in terms of our sources'</p> <p data-bbox="613 711 1381 769">'So the timelines that you guys (academics) run to are not the timelines that a consultant might run to so you're not particularly relevant for us'</p>	<p data-bbox="1390 311 1875 435">'By and large (retailers) will find the research outputs of retailers fairly obscure, very difficult to understand so there's a need for that interpretation'.</p> <p data-bbox="1390 441 1875 623">'One of the key drivers for all academia but our institution as well included, is to gain outputs in peer reviewed journals' 'The perception is that the research we are involved in is abstract and bears little relationship to the real world of retailing'</p> <p data-bbox="1390 646 1875 704">'Retailers want short projects for which they are using consultants'</p>
<p data-bbox="79 896 323 980"><b>Seller focused</b> <i>Relationship investment</i></p> <p data-bbox="79 1045 323 1071"><i>Seller expertise</i></p>	<p data-bbox="331 896 604 1039">Investment of time, effort, spending, and resources focused on building a stronger relationship</p> <p data-bbox="331 1045 604 1130">Knowledge, experience and overall competency of seller</p>	<p data-bbox="613 896 1381 954">'Academic research not always relevant to a specific business and involves a lot of time invested that was of limited value'</p> <p data-bbox="613 1045 1381 1071">'Used academic research for lean management input'</p>	<p data-bbox="1390 896 1875 954">'They're not addressing the day to day needs of the industry'</p> <p data-bbox="1390 1045 1875 1130">'Retailers appear to hold a general level of respect for the research skills and expertise of academic'</p>
<p data-bbox="79 1169 323 1227"><b>Dyadic</b> <i>Communication</i></p> <p data-bbox="79 1292 323 1318"><i>Similarity</i></p>	<p data-bbox="331 1169 604 1286">Amount, frequency and quality of information shared between exchange partners</p> <p data-bbox="331 1292 604 1346">Commonality in appearance, lifestyle,</p>	<p data-bbox="613 1169 1381 1227">'Academics need to be able to 'speak our language, understand what drives us as a business. Without that no pitch would work'</p> <p data-bbox="613 1292 1381 1346">'My view on academic research is perhaps not very well informed, but I see it as distant from reality if I was to be crude about it'</p>	<p data-bbox="1390 1169 1875 1227">'Retailers do not want a 'rated journal speak'</p> <p data-bbox="1390 1234 1875 1292">'In my opinion most retailers don't have much idea of how to access academia'</p> <p data-bbox="1390 1299 1875 1346">'It's a bit of an uphill struggle though because the mindset of a lot of guys in this area is that academics have their heads in the clouds'</p>

	and status between individual boundary spanners or similar cultures, values, and goals between buying and selling organisations		'There are some retailers who are very engaged in academia but others who would never talk to an academic'
<i>Relationship duration and Interaction frequency</i>	Length of time that the relationship between the two has existed and the number of interactions or number of interactions per unit of time between exchange partners	'Academic research not always relevant to a specific business and involves a lot of time invested that was of limited value'  'I don't have any dealings with the local University'	'There are a few Universities recognised as key centres with established links to retail'  'Retailers tend to move from post to post so difficult to retain contact'
<i>Conflict</i>	Overall level of disagreement between exchange partners: termed perceived or manifest conflict	'Research in the retail sector is implemented by the retailer. The objective is quite different'	'Divergence of academic and business agendas-different timescales and conceptualism'

### Letter to Reviewers

First of all we would like to thank both reviewers for their positive feedback about significant aspects of the manuscript, in particular the support for our view that there is a lack of empirical evidence for the reasons why 'academics undertaking retail-related research have found it extremely hard to 'penetrate' the retail sector' (Reviewer 2)

There appear to be two areas of concern for the reviewers. These relate to the contribution of the paper and the use of the relationship marketing lens as our framework for analysis. We have addressed both of these concerns as follows:

#### The contribution of the paper

Both Reviewers are seeking clarity of the contribution and added value of the paper beyond the existing debate. Reviewer 2 asks us to 'do more to demonstrate the added value of the paper' and Reviewer 1 urges us to 'to make clear what the paper delivers beyond what was already well known'. Although we believe that our research has generated new insights we agree with both reviewers that these were not communicated very effectively in the original manuscript. We have taken both sets of comments extremely seriously and therefore made the following changes to the manuscript.

First; we have totally restructured and represented the material from pages 9 to 15. The discussion now centres on three new headings; relationship benefits and dependencies; incentives and expertise; communication and speed of response. We believe these new headings, (which bring together the key RM antecedents in a similar way to the Customer Focussed, Seller Focused and Dyadic groupings in Pamatiers 2006 Framework ) help emphasise and reinforce the contribution of the paper and distil the new insights we have found. These headings replace the original narrative, which as you will recall followed the same key RM antecedents headings as those used in Table 1. We hope that with this new representation that we have addressed the concerns of Reviewer 2 that our discussion was 'brief' and the presentation of results read like a 'summary'

In addition, the contribution as detailed on page 5 now provides a clearer statement of our contribution and justification for the use of the RM lens.

We have now also included relevant evidence and extracts from the 2015 Dowling Review of Business-University Research Collaborations (on pages 5 and 9) as the messages from this major and recent review, commissioned by Government, reinforces the timeliness and significance of the contribution of our paper

Following advice from Reviewer 2, we have now extracted some of the original quotations from the interviews, included in Table 3, and incorporated them into this now more in depth and expanded discussion section In the discussion where we have also articulated more clearly which aspects of our research findings represent new insights; for example, the fact that retailers place more value on academia as a source of highly skilled research graduates, helping them to analyse their own big datasets, rather than in the ability of academia to carry out specific pieces of research.

#### Justification of the interview research instrument's relationship with the relationship marketing

We have expanded the methodology section, on pages 7 and 8, to more clearly explain the relationship between the research instrument used in the interviews and the RM framework. This reflects a specific request made by Reviewer 1 who asked us to specifically explain how 'the instruments relate to the mapping of relationship marketing presented in Table 1. It is worth noting



1  
2  
3 here that the data from the interviews forms only part of that used in our discussion where we have  
4 drawn on other significant sources of secondary data i.e. the recommendations made in the Final  
5 Report from the ESRC-funded Retail Navigator Initiative in 2013. We have also highlighted on page 5,  
6 and hopefully in much clearer terms, that the use of a RM lens to examine this academic-practitioner  
7 gap issue is both novel and highly relevant.  
8

9  
10 Finally to ensure the continued and contemporary relevance of the paper we have inserted some  
11 new evidence from page 1 of the most recent edition of the *Raconteur Future of Retail* which was  
12 published on 29 May 2016 which highlights some of the key profitability challenges facing the UK  
13 retail industry moving forward.  
14

15 Can we thank both reviewers for the time taken to review this papers and for your considered and  
16 constructive comments and hope this revised paper now addresses your points.  
17

18 Best wishes

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20 The Authors  
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