

Marketing agency – client relationships: towards a research agenda

Research
agenda

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to present the first systematic review of the literature relating to the relationships between organisations and their marketing agencies, the agency–client relationship, and presents a concept matrix that identifies the key areas of investigation, and topics where further research would be beneficial. As agencies play a pivotal role in operationalising marketing strategy, this relationship is central to marketing theory, management and practice.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic review of the literature was performed using key databases and search terms, and filtering on the basis of criteria relating, for example, to relevance and format, to create a core set of refereed papers on the agency–client relationship in the marketing and advertising domains. Bibliographic and thematic analysis was used to profile the literature in the dataset, and to draw out key themes.

Findings – The paper provides an analysis of the extant knowledge base, including key themes, journals and research methods. The following themes emerged from the literature, and are used to elaborate further on the existing body of knowledge: conflict, client account management, contracts and agency theory, cultural and international perspectives and co-creation. An agenda for future research is proposed that advocates a focus on theoretical foundations, research strategies and research topics and themes.

Originality/value – This is the first systematic review of the literature on agency–client relationships, which is scattered across disciplines and informed by several theoretical perspectives. Given the increasing complexity of agency–client relationships in the digital age, and increasing need to understand “marketing-as-practice”, the coherent overview offered by this paper is of particular value for guiding future research.

Keywords Relationship Marketing, Marketing management, Co-creation, Advertising Agencies.

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Advertising expenditures are seeing year on year increases, with the US advertising industry estimated to have spent up to \$170 billion this year, whilst advertisers in the UK spent £17 billion in 2015 (WARC, 2015). Agencies have a significant role in marketing strategy development such that any attempt to understand the processes associated with “how marketing happens” must take into account the contributions of marketing agencies. Furthermore, the importance of the agency–client relationship (ACR) has long been



recognised (Pollay and Swinth, 1969; Wackman *et al.*, 1986). An ACR has both contractual and relational aspects and involves two parties working together to achieve a successful creative campaign outcome. The power balance and the understanding of mutual roles is pivotal in determining whether the relationship is a partnership, or a battleground (Beard, 1996a; Zolkiewski *et al.*, 2008). In addition, both the agency and their client organisations are exposed to the consequences of contract termination and agency switching (Arul, 2002; Henke, 1995). Furthermore, the advent of digital and social media marketing has seen increases in the complexity of ACRs, with many organisations using several different advertising and marketing agencies (Komulainen *et al.*, 2016).

This paper presents the findings from a systematic review of the research literature on the ACR which has been published over the past 40 years. As there is no prior literature review on this topic, and the knowledge base is informed by a wide range of disciplinary perspectives and theoretical paradigms, there is a need to look back at the major themes that have emerged, as a basis for proposing a future research agenda and informing practice. By doing so, this paper seeks to advance understanding and responds to calls for a greater focus on marketing-as-practice (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.*, 2011; Skålén and Hackley, 2011). Central to the marketing-as-practice perspective is a focus on marketing actors and their work is viewed as an observable social practice (Svensson, 2007; Tadjewski, 2010).

In this paper, the term agency–client relationship refers to the relationship between an organisation and its marketing agencies. Traditionally, the agencies involved in these relationships were advertising agencies, but increasingly, organisations are also contracting with specialist digital marketing agencies (Komulainen *et al.*, 2013), which often leads to networks of relationships with multiple actors (Rogan, 2014).

The aim of this paper is to undertake an exploration of prior research on ACR, with a view to:

- profiling the literature, in terms of journals, dates time and methodologies;
- developing a concept matrix of the key themes;
- critically evaluating extant research within each of these key themes; and
- proposing an agenda for future research.

Method

To explore the extent of previous theory and research on the ACR, a systematic review of the literature was performed across a variety of databases. Such reviews differ from the more conventional, narrative literature reviews in that they adopt a replicable, scientific and transparent process (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003), in contrast to narrative reviews that typically gather together articles through assorted routes over a period of time. The purpose of systematic reviews of the literature is to identify key contributions in a field, and to identify patterns in the knowledge base, or as a way of analysing the past to prepare for the future (Webster and Watson, 2002). To do this, they are conducted using a specified search strategy based on appropriate search terms, in appropriate databases, at one or more given points in time. Typically, this initial search generates an article set that needs to be refined, before the remaining articles are used as a basis for developing a profile and concept matrix of the literature. In narrative reviews, authors make judgments on the most appropriate articles to cite for their purpose; this type of selection is not part of the process for a systematic review of the literature. As early indications were that literature on ACR was extensive, and scattered in terms of publication date, discipline and

theoretical lens, a systematic literature review was deemed appropriate for examining the literature relating to the ACR.

Search strategy

Initially, searches were performed using Google Scholar. These strings consisted of the primary keywords and phrases pertaining to the ACR, along with minor variations of these. Accordingly, multiple variations of search strings were employed. The initial search strings were as follows:

[...] [agency–client relationship *OR* client–agency relationship *OR* ad–client relationship *OR* client–ad relationship].

Consideration of the results from the first round of searches led to the identification of additional keywords, which were used in a second round of searches. Examples include the following:

[...] [agency–client relationship *OR* client–agency relationship] *AND* [marketing] *OR* [advertising] *OR*, [account management] *OR* [relationship management] *OR* [co-creation].

To ensure maximum identification of potentially relevant articles, Google Scholar searches were conducted on a year-by-year basis (e.g. 2003, 2004 and 2005) for all years between 1968 and 2016 inclusive. Finally, searches were repeated in additional databases, including Emerald, SCOPUS, IEEE Xplore, EBSCO Business Source Premier and ACM Digital Library. Very few additional documents were located in this final stage.

The search process generated a dataset of approximately 3,000 citations. Next, the dataset was downloaded into an Excel database and sorted to facilitate the identification and elimination of duplicates. This was followed by an assessment of the suitability and relevance to the topic by mentions of ACR relevant content in the titles, keywords and abstracts. This operation reduced the dataset to 550 titles. Next, citations to articles in the following categories were removed:

- conference papers, books, magazine articles and other non-peer-reviewed documents;
- articles with one or no citations;
- articles in a foreign language;
- articles outside of the disciplines of business and management; and
- articles that used the terms “agency” and “clients” but did not address the relationship between these two entities.

Articles with one or no citations and non-peer-reviewed documents (including practitioner literature) were not included in the final dataset because they were regarded as not being part of the established extant knowledge base. Exceptionally, the books by Halinen (1997) and Buttler and Michell (1996) were retained in the final dataset because of their exceptionally high citation rates. The final dataset comprised 114 articles.

The full text of each of the articles in the final dataset was downloaded, read and coded by the authors using the following thematic coding process, to develop a concept matrix (Braun and Clarke, 2006):

- *Code development*: codes were developed inductively through reading all titles and abstracts in the dataset.
- *Code definition*: a working description of the code was agreed.
- *Code allocation*: full texts were read and coded.

- *Multiple/conflicting codes*: agreement was reached regarding the primary code to be allocated to each article, although a few articles are discussed under more than one theme.
- *Checking*: coding was checked for accuracy.
- *Formal definition of code*: formal definition of code group with research question and overall assumption was agreed and finalised.

Themes and codes and the allocation of articles to themes were checked in a roundtable discussion between the authors and an independent reviewer, an academic with expertise in marketing research. The themes identified are presented in [Table I](#). All articles were allocated to one of the themes in the concept matrix. Articles which contributed to more than one theme were allocated primary and secondary codes and were, as appropriate, commented on in the thematic analysis under more than one themes.

Profile of extant agency–client relationship knowledge base

[Table II](#) shows the journals that have published the most articles on the ACR. These journals account for the majority of the total dataset. Four of the top five journals in the list focus on advertising and communications (e.g. the *Journal of Advertising* and the *Journal of Advertising Research*) and several other journals in this area also feature. Other key journals in the list are generic marketing journals, such as the *European Journal of Marketing* and the *Journal of Marketing*.

Next, [Table III](#) presents an overview analysis of the sources by decade and theme. Broadly, this shows that interest in the ACR has persisted since the 1950s, but interest escalated in the 1990s and continues at a similar level into the twenty-first century. Interest in the various aspects of client account management (from the advertising agency perspective) and in conflict with the issue of “switching” agencies dominates discussion throughout. From the 1990s onwards, there is an increasing interest in the cultural and international aspects of managing ACRs. Interest in the contractual perspective on the ACR saw an upsurge around the same time period. Finally, whilst the notion of co-creation is mentioned in one article in the 1980s, it is only in the past 15 years that this topic has attracted any significant attention.

Finally, [Appendix](#) presents an analysis of the theories and research strategies adopted in the sources included in the dataset. On theory, it is evident that only a few of the articles cite a specific theory. Theories that are adopted most frequently are agency theory and relationship management theory. On research strategies, significantly, 36 per cent of the dataset, many of which have been published in well-regarded journals and/or have been highly cited ([Bennett, 1996](#); [Bergen Dutta and Walker, 1992](#); [Halinen, 1997](#)) are not informed by empirical research. Amongst the highly cited articles (i.e. those with in excess of 100 citations), three are conceptual or theoretical ([Bergen et al., 1992](#); [Ojasalo, 2001](#); [Tahtinen and Halinen, 2002](#)), four are quantitative ([Doyle et al., 1980](#); [LaBahn and Kohli, 1997](#); [Moon and Franke, 2000](#); [Wackman et al., 1986](#)) and three are qualitative ([Halinen, 1997](#); [Haytko, 2004](#)). Within the whole dataset, most studies have used surveys (44 per cent of the total dataset) or interviews (24 per cent). A small number of studies examined the ACR using mixed methods within a case study context examining both sides of the agency–client dyad ([Armstrong, 1996](#); [Arul, 2010](#); [Beverland et al., 2007](#); [Halinen, 1997](#); [Lian and Laing, 2007](#); [Murphy and Maynard, 1996](#)). [Tahtinen and Halinen \(2002\)](#) also comment on the dominance of survey-based research in this field. Further analysis of research methods by research theme shows that questionnaire-based surveys are the dominant method for all themes except

Theme	Definition	Key research question	Assumption
Conflict (CON)	Conflict within ACR's and related processes of termination and/or switching of agencies	How can conflict be avoided, minimized or managed creatively?	There is conflict within the ACR
Client account management (CAM)	The characteristics and process of the management of client accounts	How can agencies manage their relationships with their clients?	Agencies benefit from long-term relationships with their clients
Cultural and international perspectives (CUL)	Managing the ACR in different countries and cultures	Do cultural factors influence the optimum management of the ACR?	Cultural differences affect the ACR
Contracts and agency theory (CAT)	The establishment of contractual arrangements, coupled with the use of the lens of Agency Theory	What are the consequences of the contractual aspect of the ACR?	The ACR involves a contractual relationship
Co-creation (CCR)	Agencies and clients working collaboratively on campaign planning	How can agencies and clients work together to their mutual benefit?	A collaborative ACR benefits both parties

Table I.
Concept matrix for ACR literature

Table II.

Prevalent journals in dataset

Publications	Total
<i>Journal of Advertising</i>	18
<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>	7
<i>Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising</i>	6
<i>Journal of Advertising Research</i>	6
<i>Journal of Promotion Management</i>	5
<i>Journal of Marketing Management</i>	4
<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	3
<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>	3
<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	3
<i>Journal of Marketing Communications</i>	3
<i>Marketing Intelligence & Planning</i>	3

Table III.

Breakdown of ACR articles by decade per theme

Theme	1950-1979	1980-1989	1990-1999	2000-2009	2010-2015	Total articles
CON	2	3	17	14	7	43
CAM	2	4	7	15	2	30
CUL	0	1	4	8	1	14
CAT	0	0	7	3	2	13
CCR	0	1	0	7	6	13
Total	4	9	35	47	14	114

contracts and agency theory, which was largely conceptual and co-creation where four of the studies are interviews.

The final column in [Appendix](#) identifies the populations that have acted as informants in the empirical studies in the dataset. Most empirical studies have focussed on the agency perspective (42 articles), with only 19 articles examining the client perspective and 17 articles seeking to gather insights from both sides of the agency–client dyad. [Tahtinen and Halinen \(2002\)](#) also suggest the need for further research on the client perspective.

Thematic analysis of extant knowledge base

This section provides further details of the extant knowledge base, discussing each of the themes in the concept matrix and identified in [Table I](#) in turn. It thereby seeks to provide deeper insights into the existing knowledge base and provide a basis for the identification of key areas for further research. The focus is on insights from empirical studies, but the contributions from conceptual articles that variously propose theoretical foundations for understanding the ACR, or reflect on and make recommendation with respect to best practice are also acknowledged.

Conflict

The level of research on conflict and its potential outcomes such as relationship termination ([Davies and Prince, 2011](#); [Ghosh and Taylor, 1999](#)), and related activities such as defecting ([Durden et al., 1997](#); [Vafeas and Hilton, 2002](#)), firing ([Kulkarni et al., 2003](#)) and termination ([Yuksel and Sutton-Brady, 2011](#)), suggests that ACRs are regarded as problematic. Indeed, some of the earliest empirical research on the ACR ([Murray, 1971](#); [Pollay and Swinth, 1969](#)) centres on conflict.

Research on conflict focuses on one or both of the factors that provoke conflict, and the strategies for managing conflict. In most studies, the focus is on the bilateral relationship between the agency and their clients, although Grant *et al.* (2012) explored interagency conflict and its effects in the context of large firms employing multiple advertising agencies. The factors driving conflict, and ultimately switching, are summarised in Table IV, together with some examples of the specific topics covered by articles in these areas. One of the most researched factors was agency performance, including lack of professionalism and creativity. Agency and client policies regarding advertising campaigns were also often the source of conflict, especially when one party or the other makes changes to their policies. The importance of clarity and effective communication underlies a number of the other potential sources of conflict. For example, unclear decisions-making structures and unclear operating procedures, together with ambiguity in agency and client roles were identified as sources of conflict. Personnel changes could also affect communication and relationships.

Other researchers have proposed approaches for managing conflict, constructively. Table V identifies five action areas towards achieving and maintaining a harmonious ACR. The first three groups of actions, identification of conflict, communication and role clarity require input from both actors, whilst the final two groups focus on actions specific to either the agency or the client. Amongst these areas, several researchers suggest that communication is important.

Client account management

Counter-balancing the interest in conflict, there is a significant body of literature on relationship building and management. Much of this literature is informed by relationship management theory and proposes that managing relationships with clients or customers and seeking to optimize their satisfaction enhances customer retention and longevity (Davies and Prince, 2011, Paliwadana and Barnes, 2005). Interest in the features of a mutually beneficial relationship within the context of client account management is well established (Beverland *et al.*, 2007; Waller, 2004). A number of authors seek to offer advice to

Conflict factors	References
Agency performance	Beard (1997), Bourland (1993), Davies and Prince (2011), Devinney and Dowling (1999), Henke (1995), Hozier and Schatzberg (2000), Murphy and Maynard (1996, 1997), Pincus <i>et al.</i> (1991), Yuksel and Sutton-Brady (2011)
Policy changes	Doyle <i>et al.</i> (1980), Pollay and Swinth (1969), Tahtinen and Halinen (2002)
Communication	Ewing <i>et al.</i> (2001), Hotz <i>et al.</i> (1982), So (2005), Triki <i>et al.</i> (2007)
Lack of mutual understanding	Arul (2010), Devinney and Dowling (1999), Hill (2006), Murphy and Maynard (1996, 1997)
Decision-making structures/Approaches	Grant <i>et al.</i> (2012), Johnson and Laczniak (1991), Morais (2007), Murphy and Maynard (1996, 1997)
Personnel changes	Hotz <i>et al.</i> , 1982; West and Paliwoda, 1996
Role definition	Grant <i>et al.</i> (2012), Hill (2006)
Attitudes towards risk	Zolkiewski <i>et al.</i> (2008)
Trust/Distrust	Bourland (1993), Davies and Prince (2005), Pollay and Swinth (1969)
Creativity	Arul (2010), Michell <i>et al.</i> (1992), de Waal Malefyt and Morais (2010)

Table IV.
Conflict and switching
factors

Table V.
Overcoming ACR
conflict

Identification of conflict	Vigilance (Doyle <i>et al.</i> , 1980) Regular review sessions (Hotz <i>et al.</i> , 1982) Tactical adaptation to change (Zolkiewski <i>et al.</i> , 2008)
Communication	Integrated, increased or improved two-way communication (Beard, 1997) Collaboration in campaign planning (Johnson and Laczniak, 1991) Transparency in communication with clients (Heo and Sutherland, 2015)
Role clarity	Performance review and audits (Johnson and Laczniak, 1991) Developing mutual understanding of roles and rules for engagement (Devinney and Dowling, 1999) Accepting conflict as a basis for a productive relationship (Yuksel and Sutton-Brady, 2011)
Agency-specific actions	Value longevity (Hotz <i>et al.</i> , 1982; Murphy and Maynard, 1997) Decentralisation and direct communication (Doyle <i>et al.</i> , 1980; West and Paliwoda, 1996) Clarity and communications of creative capabilities (Davies and Prince, 2011; Henke, 1995; Murray, 1971; Pincus <i>et al.</i> , 1991)
Client-specific actions	Review decision making effectiveness (Hotz <i>et al.</i> , 1982) Provoke competition in agency networks (Grant <i>et al.</i> , 2012)

practitioners (Beltramini and Pitta, 1991; Halinen, 1997; Harvey and Rupert, 1988; LaBahn and Kohli 1997). Recurrent themes include the following:

- relationship lifecycle stages;
- the factors that affect the development and maintenance of the ACR; and
- the types of relationships that support the ACR.

Wackman *et al.* (1986) is a seminal and much cited work. Building on Doyle *et al.* (1980), they propose a four-stage ACR lifecycle: pre-relationship, development, maintenance and termination. More recently, Waller's (2004) review of the ACR literature distils a similar, but distinct, three-stage lifecycle: selection, development/maintenance and review/termination. In a subtle variation, Fam and Waller (2008) offer a four-stage lifecycle: inception, development, maintenance and dissolution. The key account management model proposed by Ojasalo (2001) embeds the following relationship stages, identifying key accounts, analysing key accounts, selecting suitable account-specific relationship strategies and continuous development of operational-level capabilities to enhance relationships.

In addition, other studies identify personal factors that contribute to relationship building, such as quality of personnel, mutual agreement and understanding, reputation for integrity and interpersonal compatibility (Wackman *et al.*, 1986; Zolkiewski *et al.*, 2008). More specifically, Wackman *et al.* (1986) empirically tested 18 "predictors" for dissatisfaction and found that the five most highly rated factors were the following: agency leadership, relationships with creative, efficient meetings, responsibility assignment and approval mechanisms. LaBahn and Kohli (1997) propose a conceptual model of the ACR, with three key components:

- (1) agency and client behaviours (including agency accessibility, agency assertiveness, client accessibility and client indecisiveness);
- (2) agency performance (including productive interaction conflict and creative quality implementation); and
- (3) client disposition (including client trust and client commitment).

Lichtenthal and Shani (2000) use organisational buying behaviour theory to suggest that the factors that affect the development and maintenance of an ACR can be clustered into four groups: psychological, organisational goals, personnel and environmental.

A key aspect of relationship management relates to the development and maintenance of trust (Davies and Prince, 2005; Fam and Waller, 2008; Wackman *et al.*, 1986). Various aspects of trust in relationship management have been explored, such as how to earn trust (Sekeley and Blakney, 1996), outcomes of a lack of trust (Michell and Sanders, 1995) and trustworthiness as a construct (Haytko, 2004). Pollay and Swinth (1969) highlight the negative effect of dishonesty on client trust, whilst Davies and Prince (2005) discuss the various forms of trustworthiness, such as value-based and cognition-based).

Other studies have discussed the types of relationships that support the ACR. For example, Haytko (2004) proposed a categorisation of key relationships into firm-to-firm (vendor, partner and surrogate) and interpersonal (strictly business, business friends and personal), whilst Lian and Laing (2007) focus on the role of the personal relationships on agency selection and in relationship development and maintenance.

At the core of concern about relationships is the aspiration to achieve longevity of the ACR. Michell and Sanders (1995) proposed a model of inter-organisational loyalty, with the following seven factors:

- (1) a stable business environment;
- (2) large organisational structures;
- (3) well-defined general policies towards suppliers;
- (4) positive attitudes towards suppliers;
- (5) effective processes involving suppliers;
- (6) compatible interpersonal characteristics; and
- (7) account performance.

Palihawadana and Barnes (2005), taking the agency perspective, suggest that the level of attention to the client from the advertising agency was vital in ensuring the longevity in the ACR. Further, Davies and Palihawadana (2006) argue for the role of service quality and client care in cultivating the longevity of ACR.

The knowledge base also includes contributions on a diverse collection of other aspects of the ACR. For example, Beltramini and Pitta (1991) focus on the role of communications strategies between agencies and their clients, whilst Na *et al.* (2009) focus on the agency–client decision-making process. Sekeley and Blakney (1996) studied ACRs involving small to medium-sized enterprises (SME) clients and provided evidence to substantiate Michell (1988) assertion that SME relationships are more volatile than those with larger clients, partly because of the agency's lack of understanding of the client's business.

Finally, several articles comment on the importance of co-operation and thus form a precursor to more recent discussions of co-creation. Michell (1988) comments on the value of a co-operative decision-making process in the development of creative campaigns, and Halinen (1997) discusses the co-production of creative ideas. Beard (1996a) suggests that the

adoption of integrated marketing communications (IMC) expands the demands on the ACR such that the client needs to engage more fully with agency' working procedures. Brennan (2001) explores knowledge transfer within an interactive ACR. Lastly, in Zolkiewski *et al.*'s (2008) study of the power balance between clients and their agencies, participants suggested that power was an overtly negative concept and they preferred the notion of co-operation.

Contracts and agency theory

Agency theory is influential in early considerations of the ACR (Bergen *et al.*, 1992; Gould *et al.*, 1999). Rooted in economics (Wilson, 1968), it has expanded into many other disciplines, including advertising and marketing (Waller, 2004). According to Eisenhardt (1989), negotiation of mutual responsibilities between the two parties is essential to a fruitful co-creative relationship. Bergen *et al.* (1992) suggest that agency theory is a suitable lens for examining a range of facets in contractual agency relationships, namely, goal formation, risk, conflict and performance evaluation. Following this lead, Ellis and Johnson (1993) used agency theory to examine the decision-making process and the associated contractual risks for the ACR, whilst Gould *et al.* (1999) used agency theory to examine the degree of integration between agency and client within an IMC scenario. Agency theory has also been used as a basis for consideration of compensation, more specifically, campaign performance-based compensation (Spake *et al.*, 1999), the contractual dynamics of agency compensation (Davies and Prince, 2005; Zhao, 2005) and agency compensation, client evaluation and switching costs (Davies and Prince, 2011).

In addition to studies that specifically use agency theory, there is also a body of work on other contractual aspects of the ACR, including selecting and contracting agencies, control and evaluation and contract dissolution. An early contribution is Harvey and Rupert's (1988) advisory piece on the selection of agencies; their agency selection process model incorporates the following five stages: pre-planning, agency visitation, corporate visitation, agency project presentation, selection decision and control process. Wackman *et al.* (1986) identified the following as central to client decision-making: work product, patterns and organisational factors; these are re-iterated in more recent works (Waller, 2002; Yuksel and Sutton-Brady, 2011). More recently, Faisal and Khan's (2008) work examines the decision-making process associated with agency selection and proposes and empirically tests a framework of the selection process; the top four components in this framework are the agency's campaign planning, creative strategy, media planning and advertising effectiveness.

Other studies examine other aspects of the ACR process. Bennett (1996) and Arul (2010) investigate relationship dissolution, whilst Farrelly *et al.* (2003), in a case study, revisit the principle/agent dyad to propose a model for risk analysis in the sponsorship in a large sporting brand. Finally, Karantinou and Hogg (2009) consider maintaining relationships, proposing two categories of clients, relationship seekers and relationship switchers, each of which requires a different approach.

Cultural and international perspectives

Early ACR literature was nation-specific and typically restricted to the USA and the UK (Michell, 1987). With stronger globalisation of markets, ACR research from 1989 onwards takes on a more international perspective with a range of studies located in different countries (Delener, 2008). On the one hand, given the cultural dimensions of business relationships, it is reasonable to expect that the nature and management of the ACR may vary between countries, although globalisation of advertising and the presence of large international agencies has the potential to erode cultural differences. Various authors have suggested that there is a need for more research in this area (Fam and Waller, 2008; Moon and Franke, 2000). Articles in this category offer some insights into this tension, broadly grouped

into those studying the relationship in a single country and comparative studies that extend to more than one country.

Single country studies can be grouped into those in Europe and those in Asia. Verbeke (1989) is an early study of the ACR in The Netherlands. Extending Wackman *et al.* (1986), they found that US agencies regarded personal relationships as much more important than did Dutch agencies. Yet, Kaynak *et al.* (1994), in their study on Turkish advertising agencies, argue for the centrality of personal relationships to the ACR. Cardoso (2007) investigated the campaign planning process in Portugal, distilling it into five themes: client research pre-brief, client brief, agency research, consultation and the creative brief. Finally, Zolkiewski *et al.* (2008) examined the inter-personal and inter-organisational power balances between agencies and their clients within the context of the Greek advertising industry and discovered various endemic reasons for conflict.

There has been some interest in the ACR in China and Korea. Prendergast and Shi (1999) examined the role of the client in the ACR within 200 Chinese agencies. They highlight the impact of a rapidly expanding economy and the relative immaturity of ACRs in China's post-communist era. In their 1999 study, they found Chinese clients to be heavily involved in creative decisions, suggesting co-creative campaign planning, but their later studies also revealed expectations that creative decisions should be made by experts (Prendergast and Shi, 2001; Prendergast *et al.*, 2001) and noted fundamental similarities between the advertising industries in China and the USA. Oh and Kim (2002) examined the balance of power between clients and agencies in the South Korean advertising industry and found a relationship between agency size and the level of commitment and communication in the ACR.

Fam and Waller's (1999) study looked at the selection policies of advertising agencies in New Zealand with large global brands. In a later study, Fam and Waller (2008), reveal changes in the factors that determine the success of the ACR have changed since their earlier study, with trust, honesty and commitment becoming more important for account managers in securing client accounts, echoing the earlier work on trust; they propose the utilisation of these in the promotion of an agency. They also suggest that agencies need to determine early on in the ACR, the factors which clients regard as most important in a partnership.

All of the comparative studies involve the USA as a benchmark. Davies and Prince (1999) examined the difference in longevity of agency accounts between the USA and UK, whilst also suggesting that agency size and age have a significant positive impact on longevity of the ACR. They also identify the tactics used in retaining clients and their differences between the UK and USA. Moon and Franke (2000) compare Korean and the US executives' approaches to ethical decision-making, such as taking a gift to curry favour with clients. In addition, the Korean advertising industry displays a high degree of collectivism, in contrast to the centrality of personal favours for clients in the US advertising industry. Waller *et al.*'s (2010) comparison of practices regarding client involvement showed that in both countries, the main areas in which clients offered input were copywriting, creativity and design services; they did not engage in the analysis of target markets.

Co-creation

Early contributions highlighted the importance of co-operation and co-production in planning marketing campaigns for an effective ACR (Beard, 1996a; Brennan, 2001; Halinen, 1997; Michell, 1988). Typically, such contributions were founded on an acknowledgement of the benefits of co-operation between the agency as a professional service, which needed to understand their client to be able to deliver good service and thereby to maintain the business relationship (Durkin and Lawlor, 2001). In particular, creativity is highly prized by clients

both in the early and later stages of the ACR (Sasser *et al.*, 2011, 2012). As the working relationship develops, successful creative work is further enhanced facilitated through cooperation between agencies and their clients (Duhan and Sandvik, 2009).

More recently, fuelled by the confluence of service dominant logic theory, with its pivotal notion of the co-creation of value (Vargo and Lusch, 2008), there has been increasing interest in the notion of co-creation through the ACR. Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004, p. 8) initial description of co-creation is the "joint creation of value by the company and the customer; allowing the customer to co-construct the service experience to suit their context". The growing body of work into co-creation of value within a business-to-business (B2B) relational context (Komulainen, 2014, Nenonen and Storbacka, 2010, Novani, 2012, Piller *et al.*, 2012, Vargo and Lusch, 2011) identifies a novel theoretical perspective for research into the ACR.

A few studies offer insights into the nature of a co-creative ACR. Grant *et al.* (2003) suggest that collaboration in advertising planning involves early involvement with creative input, regular updates and review of copy and imagery and market research by client representatives. Sutherland *et al.* (2004), in focusing on organisational information exchange to support the development of creative advertising campaigns, suggest that the account manager should act as gatekeeper in transferring key information to the creative team.

Various studies have examined the dynamic between conflict and co-creation. Kelly *et al.* (2005) ethnographic study of advertising creatives revealed embedded conflict between creatives and clients, particularly in an online marketing context, which could undermine co-creation. De Waal Malefyt and Morais (2010) also examine confrontation and resolution in advertising agencies, but advocate co-creation because it can support advertising creativity, innovation and advancement of the brands advertising message. Sasser and Koslow (2008) acknowledge that clients can have both negative and positive impacts on advertising creativity and accordingly propose a co-creation interaction model to support co-creation in marketing planning. In more recent studies, Sasser *et al.* (2011, 2012) conclude that impact of clients' innovativeness and willingness to explore risky concepts is pivotal to a co-creative ACR, and Gambetti *et al.* (2016) have proposed a triadic value network comprising of brands, their marketing agencies and consumers.

Agenda for future research

The ACR is pivotal to marketing practice, and therefore, studies in this area have the potential to contribute to marketing-as-practice knowledge and theory. However, the extant knowledge base on the ACR is fragmented, using a range of different theoretical perspectives and investigating a range of different themes. This review has sought to address this fragmentation by drawing together a diverse range of research contribution on the ACR. This analysis suggests three key strands for a future research agenda.

Theoretical foundations

This review has identified a diverse range of theories within the ACR knowledge base. Agency theory (Ellis and Johnson, 1993) and relationship management theory (Buttle and Michell, 1996), together with trust theories (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), are most widely used. Also in evidence are organisational buying behaviour theory (Lichtenthal and Shani, 2000), social exchange theory (Heo and Sutherland, 2015; Yuksel and Sutton-Brady, 2011), practice theory (Ardley and Quinn, 2014) and performance theory (Davies and Prince, 2005), and Game Theory (Pincus *et al.*, 1991). All of these theories can contribute to further development of the knowledge base on the ACR, but further research would benefit from greater focus on theories that privilege the social aspects of the ACR, such as marketing-as-practice (Vallaster

and Lindgreen, 2011), social exchange theory (Cook *et al.*, 2013) and co-creation (Laamanen and Skalen, 2014).

Social exchange theory (Cook *et al.*, 2013) considers social change and stability, as a process of negotiated exchanges between parties, and therefore offers an additional standpoint from which to develop understanding of the ACR. In addition, the theoretical perspective associated with co-creation has potential for interrogating ACRs. For example, Laamanen and Skalen (2014) suggest a conceptual framework for co-creation that involves various actors, practices and outcomes and considers both collective and conflictual elements in social relations in value co-creation, whilst Echeverri and Skalen (2011) introduce the idea of interactive value construction at a provider–customer interface and suggest that it involves both co-creation and co-destruction. On the other hand, Corvellec and Hultman (2014) provide a reminder that value is not absolute but depends on the understandings of what matters and what does not, as explored in their notion of regimes of value.

The marketing-as-practice school of thought also focuses on marketing actors, which, in turn, leads to the development of an account of marketing as a social practice, using the lens of practice social theory (Ardley and Quinn, 2014; Tadjewski, 2010; Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2011). The marketing-as-practice approach is distinct from the marketing management approach in that it focusses on the *processes* that lead to marketing outcomes, whereas the focus of marketing management is on strategy and outcomes. The ACR is, therefore, an ideal context in which to undertake theory development and testing regarding aspects of the social practice of marketing, as any research or theories relating to the ACR inevitably embrace two groups of actors, marketers working for organisations and for agencies. Equally importantly, the use of a marketing-as-practice theoretical stance to underpin further research into the ACR has the potential to subsume and integrate the earlier theoretical perspectives that have been evident in this field, specifically agency theory and relationship management theory. In general, a marketing-as-practice perspective can potentially be interwoven with the conceptualisation of the ACR as a co-creative relationship.

Finally, whilst prior research on B2B relationships is beyond the scope of this review, it may be beneficial to explore the relevance of some of the theories and models in this literature for their potential for understanding the ACR.

Research strategies and methods

Future research should focus on theory development rather than theory testing. Thus, we argue the case for a greater number of qualitative studies, which examine a range of specific aspects of ACR processes and their impacts not only on relationship continuation or on individual campaign outcomes, but on the creative outcomes associated with the relationship over the long-term. We suggest that case studies and ethnographies, which adopt a thematic or discourse-analytical approach towards interpreting findings, would be particularly valuable, and have potential to generate further insights into relationship lifecycles.

Research themes and topics

This literature review has grouped prior research on the basis of five thematic categories. Table I identifies the overarching research question associated with each of these themes. Conflict and associated issues such as switching and termination have and continue to receive much attention. In addition, many of the existing studies on switching tend to focus on what went wrong, rather than how to put things right. Accordingly, we propose that future research should seek to embrace a wider range of relationship lifecycle stages, with a view to generating good practice knowledge around ACR establishment and maintenance. This research is likely to embrace further consideration of the disposition of the client, trust and collaborative learning processes and knowledge exchanges (Masiello *et al.*, 2013), as well

as the role of constructive conflict in driving creativity. Also, as ACR research has tended to focus on large agencies and large clients (Fam and Waller, 2004), more research is needed on the impact of the size of both organisations on the ACR.

Acknowledging marketing as a social practice implies that marketing communications and their creation in different country cultures may differ – and this has consequences for the ACR. A further literature review that embraced articles in a range of languages might offer a useful discussion of the nuances of ACRs, beyond the Western economies. There is also scope for much more research that considers all aspects of the ACR in different countries and international clients.

Future research also needs to reflect the changing nature of marketing communications, particularly with the advent of digital, social media and mobile marketing (Komulainen *et al.*, 2016). Owing to the plethora of small specialist digital agencies which operate on modern campaigns, brands increasingly need to manage a network of actors to coordinate the delivery of their marketing messages through different channels (Kitchen *et al.*, 2007). Hence, multi-agency relationships are becoming more important (Komulainen *et al.*, 2016); in such contexts, trust is particularly challenging to establish and maintain and, hence, is a fruitful area for further research, as lack of trust often contributes to dissolution (Davies and Prince, 2010).

In addition, social media marketing with consumers and departments other than the marketing department all involved in the co-creation and co-production of marketing/brand messages (Sasser and Koslow, 2008; de Waal Malefyt and Morais, 2010), potentially poses a number of challenges. Also, illegal activities such as counterfeit product websites and the proliferation of advertising fraud through botnets are putting increasing pressure on agencies for accountability in their actions (Haddadi, 2010).

Research into the ACR in such contexts, therefore, invites the application of theoretical perspectives associated with co-creation of value, in a B2B relational setting (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2015). Finally, the notion of constructive conflict (Echeverri and Skalen, 2011) and its impact on creativity and the ACR could be further explored.

Conclusion

Whilst the importance of the ACR has been recognised and discussed for decades, overall, considering its importance to effective marketing strategies, campaigns and communication, it could benefit from more attention. Marketing theory tends to discuss marketing communications, branding and, more recently, digital and social media strategies adopted by large and small firms, whilst managing to remain eerily silent on the role of marketing agencies in these endeavours. Thus, in general, there is a need for further research into the ACR and the impact of both good and bad relationships on marketing outcomes and campaigns.

By presenting a systematic literature review of the extant knowledge base concerning the ACR, this paper has clustered articles on this topic under five main themes: conflict, client account management, cultural and international perspectives, contracts and agency theory and co-creation. An agenda for further research has been proposed, including the adoption of social exchange theory, co-creation and marketing-as-practice as theoretical stances, accompanied by a greater emphasis on qualitative studies to promote understanding of ACR processes. In terms of themes, research should continue on relationship establishment and maintenance, with a particular focus on relationship lifecycles and their stages, multi-agency networks that have become more prevalent with the advent of digital marketing, and cultural and international perspectives. In

addition, it is important to explore the extent to which the ACR and its associated processes vary by agency and client, type and size.

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Appendix

Table A1.
ACR dataset –
research strategies,
theory, method and
population

Themes	Articles	Theory	Strategy	Methods	Population
Conflict (CON)	Pollay and Swinith (1969)		Survey	Behavioural simulation	Agency (9)
	Murray (1971)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (164)
	Doyle <i>et al.</i> (1980)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (210)
	Hotz <i>et al.</i> (1982)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (68)
	Michell (1987)		Survey	Questionnaire	Client (100)
	Pincus <i>et al.</i> (1991)	GT	Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Michell <i>et al.</i> (1992)		Survey	Questionnaire	Client (200)
	Johnson and Laczniak (1991)		Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Dowling (1994)		Survey	Questionnaire	Client (157)
	Murphy (1994)		Interviews	Interviews	Agency (10)
	Bourland (1983)		Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Henke (1995)		Interviews	Interviews	Agency (151)
	Beard (1996b)		Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Murphy and Maynard (1996)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (57) Client (63)
	Michell <i>et al.</i> (1996)		Survey	Questionnaire	Client (1,145)
	West and Palwoda (1996)	OBB	Survey	Questionnaire	Client (145)
	Mathur and Mathur (1996)		Survey	N/A	N/A
	Murphy and Maynard (1997)		Conceptual	Questionnaire	Agency (57) Client (63)
	Durden <i>et al.</i> (1997)		Survey	N/A	N/A
	Devinney and Dowling (1999)		Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Ghosh and Taylor (1999)		Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Hozier and Schatzberg (2000)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (66)
	Ewing <i>et al.</i> (2001)		Survey	Event study	Agency (30)
	Waller (2002)		Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Bruning and Ledingham (2002)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (101) Client (46)
	Tahinen and Halton (2002)	RM	Case Study	Interviews	Agency (25)
	Vafeas and Hilton (2002)	RM	Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Kulkarni <i>et al.</i> (2003)		Interviews	Interviews	Client (11)
	Devinney <i>et al.</i> (2005)		Conceptual	Event Study	N/A
	So (2005)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (157)
	Hill (2006)		Mixed Methods	Interviews, Questionnaire	Agency (84)
	Triki <i>et al.</i> (2007)		Interviews	Interviews	Agency (18) Client (204)
Morais (2007)		Conceptual	Ethnographic	Agency (12) Client (12)	
Zolkiewski <i>et al.</i> (2008)		Interviews	Interviews	N/A	

(continued)

Themes	Articles	Theory	Strategy	Methods	Population
Client account management (CAM)	Murphy and Maynard (2009)		Case Study	Interviews	Agency (22) Client (22)
	Beard (1997)		Survey	Questionnaire	Client (300)
	Davies and Prince (2011)	AT, PT	Survey	Questionnaire	Client (108)
	Arul (2010)	SET, NT	Case Study	Interviews	Agency (25) Client (50)
	Yuksel and Sutton-Brady (2011)		Mixed Methods	Questionnaire, Interview	Agency (49) Client (12)
	Prince and Everett (2012)		Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Grant <i>et al.</i> (2012)	AT, NT	Interviews	Interviews	Agency (22)
	Broschak and Block (2014)		Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Heo and Sutherland (2015)	SET	Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (88)
	Capon and Scammon (1979)		Case Study	Interviews	Agency (1) Client (1)
	Calantone and Drury (1979)		Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Wackman <i>et al.</i> (1986)		Survey	Questionnaire	Client (182)
	Michell (1986)		Interviews	Interviews	Client (128)
	Harvey and Rupert (1988)		Interviews	Interviews	Agency (15)
	Beltrami and Pitta (1991)	RM	Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Morgan and Hunt (1994)	TT	Survey	N/A	N/A
	Michell and Sanders (1995)		Survey	Questionnaire	Client (204)
	Sekeley and Blakney (1996)		Survey	Questionnaire	Client (29)
	Beard (1996a)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (197)
	LaBahn and Kohli (1997)		Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Hallinen (1997)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (194)
	Lichtenthal and Shani (2000)		Case Study	Interviews	Agency (1) Client (1)
	Brennan (2001)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (38)
	Ojasalo (2001)		Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Franke <i>et al.</i> (2003)		Survey	N/A	N/A
	Morrison and Haley (2003)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (41)
Waller (2004)	AT, OBB	Conceptual	Survey	Agency (345)	
Haytko (2004)		Case Study	Conceptual	N/A	
Paliharadana and Barnes (2005)		Mixed Methods	Interviews	Agency (20)	
Koch and Liechty (2005)		Survey	Questionnaire, Interviews	Agency (4) Client (52)	
Beverland <i>et al.</i> (2007)		Case Study	Questionnaire	Agency (77)	
Lian and Laing (2007)		Case Study	Interviews	Agency (10)	
Faisal and Khan (2008)		Conceptual	Interviews	Client (16)	
				N/A	

(continued)

Table AI.

Themes	Articles	Theory	Strategy	Methods	Population
Cultural and international (CUL)	Fam and Waller (2008)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (82)
	Na <i>et al.</i> (2009)		Case Study	Interviews	Agency (2)
	Karantinou and Hogg (2009)	RM	Case Study	Interviews	Agency (3) Client (6)
	Rogan (2014)		Conceptual	N/A	N/A
	Turnbull and Wheeler (2016)		Interviews	Interviews	Agency (7)
	Verbeke (1989)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (121)
	Kaynak <i>et al.</i> (1994)		Survey	Questionnaire	Client (101)
	Prendergast and Shi (1999)		Survey	Questionnaire	Client (200)
	Davies and Prince (1998)	PT	Survey	Questionnaire	Client (558)
	Moon and Franke (2000)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (214)
	Prendergast and Shi (2001)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (200)
	Prendergast <i>et al.</i> (2001)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (200)
	Gray and Fam (2002)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (147)
	Oh and Kim (2002)		Survey	Factor analysis	N/A
	Beverland <i>et al.</i> (2004)		Case Study	Interviews	Agency (17)
Cardoso (2007)		Interviews	Interviews	Agency (25)	
Fam and Waller (2008)		Survey	Questionnaire	Agency (102)	
Delener (2008)		Conceptual	N/A	N/A	
Waller <i>et al.</i> (2010)		Survey	Survey	Agency (147)	
Wilson (1968)		Conceptual	Conceptual	N/A	
Ellis and Johnson (1993)		Conceptual	Conceptual	N/A	
Bergen <i>et al.</i> (1992)	AT	Conceptual	Conceptual	N/A	
Armstrong (1996)		Case Study	Case Study	Agency (1) Client (1)	
Bennett (1996)		Survey	Survey	Client (344)	
Chakrabarty <i>et al.</i> (1997)		Survey	Survey	Agency (117)	
Gould <i>et al.</i> (1999)	AT	Conceptual	Conceptual	N/A	
Spake <i>et al.</i> (1999)	AT	Survey	Survey	Client (349)	
Farrelly <i>et al.</i> (2003)	AT	Survey	Survey	Client (96)	
Zhao (2005)	AT	Survey	Survey	N/A	
Davies and Prince (2005)	PT	Conceptual	Conceptual	N/A	
Arul (2010)		Case Study	Case Study	Agency (25) Client (50)	
Davies and Prince (2010)	AT	Survey	Survey	Agency (179) Client (108)	

(continued)

Themes	Articles	Theory	Strategy	Methods	Population
Co-creation (CCR)	<p>Michell (1988)</p> <p>Durkin and Lawlor (2001)</p> <p>Grant <i>et al.</i> (2003)</p> <p>Sutherland <i>et al.</i> (2004)</p> <p>Lace (2004)</p> <p>Kelly <i>et al.</i> (2005)</p> <p>Sasser and Koslow (2008)</p> <p>Duhan and Sandvik (2009)</p> <p>de Waal, Malefyt and Morais (2010)</p> <p>Sasser <i>et al.</i> (2011)</p> <p>Sasser <i>et al.</i> (2012)</p> <p>Masiello <i>et al.</i> (2013)</p> <p>Gambetti <i>et al.</i> (2016)</p> <p>Komulainen <i>et al.</i> (2016)</p>		<p>Survey</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Case Study</p> <p>Survey</p> <p>Survey</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Conceptual</p> <p>Survey</p> <p>Conceptual</p> <p>Conceptual</p> <p>Conceptual</p> <p>Conceptual</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Interviews</p>	<p>Behavioural testing</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Questionnaire</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>Model testing</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Interviews</p>	<p>Agency (26)</p> <p>Agency (12)</p> <p>Agency (31) Client (19)</p> <p>Agency (583)</p> <p>Agency (86)</p> <p>Agency (1)</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>Agency (12) Client (9)</p> <p>Agency (8)</p>

Notes: AT = agency theory; GT = game theory; NT = network theory; OB = organisational buying behaviour; PT = performance theory; PST = practice social theory; RM = relationship management theory; SET = social exchange theory; TT = trust theory

Table AI.