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An exploratory investigation

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This is the accepted author manuscript of a paper presented at the *51st Academy Of Marketing Conference: Marketing the Brave*, Stirling, 2 to 5 July 2018. It will be published in the Academy of Marketing (AM) 2018 Conference Proceedings. More information is available at:

<https://www.academyofmarketing.org/conference/conference-2018/>

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Introduction

Advertising agency creativity is the product of team efforts and yet there is a paucity of team research in an advertising context. There have been a couple of studies exploring teams primarily looking at creative teams and creativity (e.g. Johar, Holbrook and Stern, 2001), creatives and creative identity (Hackley and Kover 2007) which has some reference to creative teams and work groups in relation to creative climate (e.g. Ensor, Cottam and Band, 2001). In a bid to drive further research in advertising creativity Sasser and Koslow (2008) created the 3P's of person, place and process framework to help set the research agenda for the future. As part of this framework Sasser and Koslow (2008) highlighted that more research could be undertaken in the process arena to look at small group creativity. Since that time very few studies have presented themselves. However, the changing nature of the advertising industry and the creative product (Pinkham, 2014) suggests that team diversity in an advertising context is a critical domain to understand (Lynch and West, 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to briefly review the drivers of change in the advertising industry and the implications for team diversity and to establish how better performing agencies are evolving their team approaches to meet the demands of the emerging landscape.

The changing nature of the advertising industry

In the last few years there have been many drivers of change in the advertising industry not least of which has been the technological developments presenting new digital channels and opportunities for communication with customers. The transforming digital landscape coupled with increased pressure from ever more demanding clients and the globalisation of brands and campaigns means that agency models and structures are beginning to emerge.

The industry is certainly in a state of flux with views in the practitioner press commenting on the emergence of new agency models, the age old debate about creativity and data and transforming client/agency partnerships. Much has been written about how old agency models are broken and that the industry is one in crisis (Coffee 2017). However, more recent commentators such as first time CEO's, suggest that the industry needs to be "transformed" (Gonslaves cited in Lee, 2017) and that the landscape is not in crisis but is evolving (Lee 2017). Indeed, a contemporary view of ad agencies is that "our model isn't broken but needs adapting" (Sharpe cited in Lee 2017). Add into the mix that the industry has been infiltrated by management consultants (e.g. Accenture's acquisition of Karmarama in 2016) and it would appear that the advertising industry is evolving as CEOs look at new ways of operating.

Today's business environment is fast paced and dynamic where uncertainty is very prevalent (particularly in the UK at the moment). The idea of a "job for life" is long gone in the business environment. However, ad agencies need to catch up and transform their business models as many are set up for the long term (Rudd cited in Lee 2017). Additionally, it is becoming harder to recruit to the industry as millennials are more discerning about company values and work/life balance (Jackson 2017).

As a result of these changes, different skill sets and different talent is required to fuel a greater diversity of people throughout agencies to achieve an enhanced creative product and a more

agile way of operating. Demographic diversity has been talked about both in the UK and across the pond in the US as a key issue for the industry in relation to gender and ethnicity (Coffee 2016, Joseph 2016). However, beyond this perspective diversity in teams in this article refers to differences with regard to the task-related aspect of functional background.

One such area worthy of further investigation is how teams are changing as a result of the changes outlined above. In particular, a deeper investigation of team diversity is required in relation to the creative process.

Teams and team diversity in agencies

Early team literature has defined “teams” as “a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks who share responsibilities for outcomes” (Cohen and Bailey 1997 p241). However, defining teams in today’s organizations is more complex (Hollenbeck, Beersma and Schouten 2012). As the pressure on organisations to be more efficient and agile increases, teams find themselves operating in dynamic environments (Tannenbaum, Mathieu, Salas and Cohen 2012) which results in teams being more fluid and temporary in nature.

In an advertising context, teams in agencies tend to be formed around the specific elements of a client brief and which are often are cross functional ad hoc or temporary in nature (Lynch and West 2017). Therefore a more fitting definition to suit the advertising context is:

“the responsibility...often overlaps between two or more departments...these teams or task forces allow for lateral contact between multiple departments...tend to be temporary groups that exist for the duration of the designated activity... [these temporary groups] are often used for non-routine tasks... [they] promote rather than inhibit cooperation across functional boundaries” (Pinto, Pinto, and Prescott, 1993, pp. 1283 -1284).

There are a number of different teams in creative ad agencies from creative team to brand team to client team. In media agencies and the more digital agencies there are also activation teams. Focusing on creative ad agencies the ‘creative’ team, which consists of the Art Director and Copy Writer working in pairs has been in existence since the 1970s. Empirical research has suggested that two person teams exists where mutual trust and support is created and effected (Hackley and Kover 2007). This established way of working in pairs is still operating in some agencies for creative execution, but in reality may be far more complex in practice (Lynch and West 2017). Views emanating from the advertising practitioner press indicate that the nature of teams is moving away from the discussion that creativity is just the domain of the creative team to the realisation that cross functional teams may be the order of the day (e.g. Bidlake 2014, Pinkham 2014). There is also a view that creativity and creative ideas do not just emanate from the creative team but also are influenced by planners, brand planners or strategists. Two empirical studies have alluded to the growing notion of the role of the planner as an extended member of the creative team (e.g. Grant, McLeod, and Shaw 2012, Hayley, Taylor and Morrisison 2014). For the purposes of this study, the cross functional team was defined as the client team (sometimes referred to as brand team, campaign team or account team) who were critical to developing agency creativity - the extent to which agency teams develop campaign ideas (and advertising strategy)—which may be radical or incremental—to solve clients' problems as perceived by managers (Lynch and West 2017).

Account teams exist which consist of Account Director and Account executives and are the liaison between the client and the agency and are often said to own the overall relationship with the client. Despite the separate teams where each has their own discipline and approach

they often converge internally both for creative input and output particularly in client facing situations e.g. the client brief or the pitch. In this way teams are both multi disciplinary and multi functional (Ensor, Cottam, and Band, 2001). Functional team diversity was defined using Sethi, Smith and Park's (2001) definition of the construct. Additionally, there is the suggestion that the client/agency relationship is changing. In the IMC literature there are examples of where the client is viewed as partial employee (e.g. Beard 1996, Eagle and Kitchen 2000) and more recently where some clients are part of the team and are now being seen as co-creators in the creative process (e.g. Saren, Díaz-Méndez, and Gummesson 2013).

The need for the research

There are very few empirical studies on teams in an advertising context. It is believed that the formation of teams is still chaotic in this environment due to business dynamics and the nature of the client/agency relationship. Moreover, given the fundamental changes in the advertising industry and the creative product outlined above, it is also suggested that team diversity is also changing to reflect the issues and so team diversity in an advertising context is a critical domain to understand.

Methodology

Given the paucity of team research in an advertising context, and team diversity in particular, an exploratory qualitative approach was utilised to investigate this phenomenon. The research aim was to develop an understanding of how teams are changing in advertising agencies in relation to the creative process in the light of changes in the digital landscape. More specifically, it was an investigation into the different types of teams that are emerging, diversity within the teams and the changing nature of the client agency relationship.

The study adopted a qualitative approach using a key informant strategy. Semi structured interviews were carried out with Creative Directors, CEO's and Heads of planning and Account Directors. The sample included advertising agencies drawn from the top 100 UK agency rankings compiled by Nielsen for Campaign Live, using a combination of snowballing and convenience sampling.

Difficult population and access restrictions

Accessing individuals in this population is difficult and represents "the greatest methodological constraint for models of the creative process" (Sasser and Koslow 2008 p.10). Additionally, like the advertising context in New York, many of these agencies are London based which is considered the heart of the advertising industry in the UK. This represents limited access to a small pool of very geographically concentrated talent (Sasser and Koslow 2008). Finally, practitioners in advertising agencies are answerable to the demands of clients and are therefore busy and often difficult to get hold of.

A total of 13 semi structure interviews were conducted in London creative advertising agencies – 3 CEO's, 5 advertising creatives, 4 planners 1 Account Director (see table 1 below). A discussion guide was used in the semi structured interviews which were digitally recorded and transcribed to aid data analysis. The data was transcribed and coded using Nvivo10 and analysed using themes (Spiggle, 1994).

Table 1 Respondent details

Creative Advertising Agencies	Agency code	Position in agency
Group owned	1	CEO
Independent	2	Creative Director
Group owned	3	Executive Creative Director
Group owned	4	Executive Creative Director
Group owned	5	Executive Strategy Director
Group owned	6	Head of Planning
Group owned	7	Head of Planning
Group owned	8	Senior Planner
Independent	9	Chief Creative Officer
Group owned	10	Account Director
Independent	11	Creative Director
Independent	12	CEO
Independent	13	CEO

Findings

The research contributes by adding to the lack of team research in an advertising context and is a rich example of the changing nature of teams and diversity in advertising agencies. Initial findings suggest that agencies view their businesses differently these days. They have moved beyond an agency with a creative department to becoming a creative business and solution provider.

“I don’t want us to be a business with a creative dept. I want us to be just a creative business.” (Respondent C Executive Creative Director, Group Owned)

What this means for agencies is that the required creative talent for many of the roles required within agencies has changed with a greater emphasis on an ability to collaborate and work in teams.

“You need people with a large interest in things” (Respondent B Creative Director, Independent agency)

“Creative talent needs T shaped people” (Respondent A CEO Group owned agency)

“... when we talk about millennials and Gen Z then they just bring the collaboration and the idea of sharing... So that naturally lends itself to team work and brings a greater diversity to the mix.” (Respondent F Head of Planning Group Owned)

The study highlighted that the model of creative pairs for creative teams which started in the 70s is no longer the norm in agencies. There were examples of creative individuals working alone, extended creative teams and “pods”. What this demonstrates is an increase in team diversity and that different team approaches are emerging.

The study demonstrates that advertising agencies, regardless of size, agree that there is a core team which is supported by specialist functions. This is true of both the creative team and the client or brand teams who are client facing. However, the diversity of these teams has changed fundamentally driven by the changes in the digital landscape. It is likely that a creative team will involve many more specialist functions e.g. UX or social media experts.

“there’s a core team of people ... then a second layer of that whole multi disciplinary skills set that will be brought in as and when.” (Respondent F Head of Planning Group owned agency)

“You need teams of ideas people and then you can add in the support functions. Well I don’t really mean support functions but other specialists in the process....creativity , planning...insight/brand planning” (Respondent B Creative Director, Independent agency)

The way in which the diversity is achieved varied from agency to agency from employing more specialist experts with the right type of skills and expertise to a rise in the number of freelancers working in agencies. This finding confirms the view that agencies need to adapt and accept that careers are no longer for life (Rudd cited in Lee 2017) and modify their team practices as a result.

The study outlined that the nature of the creative challenge is one of the key factors that drives the skill set and diversity of the team. For example, for a simple creative execution the diversity of the team is straightforward. For a more complex problem e.g. a brand relaunch or a global campaign then a greater diversity of team members is required.

“If you are pitching for a piece of global business which is about... re-launching a brand globally and telling a very very complex story you probably want lots and lots of different people in the room which will give you a very different perspectives”. (Respondent D Executive Creative Director Group Owned)

The research confirms that the selection of team members to achieve the right degree of diversity is still chaotic and fluid (Ensor *et al.*, 2001; Johar, *et al.*, 2001) and appears to be done on the basis of who has the right skill set and experience and is available at the time.

“They (the teams) are very fluid” (Respondent G Head of Planning Group Owned)

“although we have I think we’ve made improvements around our processes to stop it from being baton passing to bringing people in throughout that process to make it more efficient and slicker...you still need experts. You still need specialisms. You need an ability to operate as a fluid team to come up with the right solutions and quickly do it and efficiently.” (Respondent E Executive Strategy Director Group Owned)

All the respondents agreed that the front office team which is client facing has remained the same – Creative Director, Strategist (Planner) and Account Director. However, in terms of the

back office team there are fundamental changes as many more experts and specialists are needed for ideation, execution and activation.

Finally, there is the suggestion that there is a new space of clients and agencies as ‘co-creators’ or ‘partners’ of the creative output (e.g. Hughes and Vafeas 2014). This may be seen as a shift away from the old client v supplier situation to a newer strategic partner or collaborator with the client as part of the team. For some agencies the client was seen as an extended member of the team reflecting a new approach to team diversity.

This suggests that the client/agency relationship is being transformed as a result of pressure on advertisers to perform in increasingly volatile and uncertain markets. A pressure which drives them to be ever more demanding of their agencies. It also confirms to some extent earlier research that indicates a new classification of clients in the industry (Saren *et al.*, 2013).

Managerial implications

The research demonstrates that advertising agencies are experimenting and grappling with team diversity to achieve an enhanced creative product. Art Director/copywriter creative teams have been extended to include digital specialists i.e. UX user and customer experience specialists. The diversity of the team will very much depend on the objectives of the client brief, and which media are deemed most appropriate for the campaign.

Client teams have always been multi functional as they embrace creative, strategy and account management (Ensor, *et al.*, 2001). The research confirms that the core team plus specialists is still the norm for client teams but is increasing for creative teams. However, to achieve the diversity required in today's environment many agencies are hiring freelancers who have the required skills and expertise to address the creative challenge. Thus the nature of the creative challenge drives the diversity within the team.

What became clear is that there appears to be no ‘ideal’ way of achieving diversity within teams. Increased pressure from clients for quicker and more responsive solutions, agencies are experimenting with different approaches e.g. “hot house” teams, and teams including the client to make the creative process more agile (Lynch and West 2017) is a growing phenomenon.

Further analysis of whether group owned v independent agencies impacts the findings is required along with agency philosophy and culture. It would also be interesting to review the findings and link them to performance of the agencies. The notion of clients as team member needs further investigation as part of the client/agency relationship.

Limitations

The research design utilised a key informant strategy may be viewed as a limitation. However, key informant strategies are used widely and are necessary in marketing and management research (Homburg, Klarmann, Riemann and Schilke 2012) because they are knowledgeable about the issues under investigation (Kumar, Stern and Anderson 1993). This is pertinent in an advertising context where there is a small population of agencies and ease of access this is extremely difficult.

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