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TEAM CREATIVITY IN AD AGENCIES: AN ORGANISING FRAMEWORK

ABSTRACT

Team creativity is an under researched area in ad agencies. As digital changes the media landscape it would be interesting to investigate not only the type of team emerging but the way in which knowledge or 'insight' is being harnessed via teams for creativity. The aim of this paper is to summarise the antecedents for team creativity in agencies and present an organising framework the input- output-process model (IPO) of team performance (e.g. Ilgen et al 2005) adopted in the innovation literature (West and Anderson 1996) in an attempt to map the existing literature. It provides the basis for identifying research gaps and proposes future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

Creativity is at the core of the advertising industry (Reid, King and De Lorne 1998, Smith and Yang 2004) and advertising development is the output of creative endeavour (Sasser and Ksolow 2008). In this vein generating ideas and creativity are the lifeblood of the advertising industry. However, with the advent of technology and the increasing pressure to be accountable the nature of the advertising industry is changing (Adbrands 2014; Keynote 2012). There are more different types of agency particularly more digital agencies as clients are beginning to favour the smaller boutique type agency as a result of their frustration with larger agencies (Sasser et al 2013). Practitioner views suggests that there are a number of changes occurring within the advertising industry from the way in which creativity is viewed, that the advertising product is changing (Suzanne Bedlake 2014) to rethinking about how data and creativity work together (Zac Pinkham 2014). The impact of these changes may be reflected in the changing structure of agencies as some agencies have introduced Innovation Directors and cross functional teams. So the question arises how are agencies adapting to the new environment? In particular is the nature of teams changing and what is the impact for the way in which creativity is harnessed?

To address some of these issues the author suggests that more research should be carried out in the under researched area of teams in ad agencies to investigate not only the type of team emerging but the way in which knowledge or 'insight' is being harnessed via the teams for creativity. The aim of this paper is to summarise the antecedents for team creativity taking into account the changes that are happening in industry. The paper presents an organising framework the input- output-process model (IPO) of team performance (e.g. Ilgen et al 2005) adopted in the innovation literature (West and Anderson 1996) in an attempt to map the existing literature. The paper finishes by discussing the implications for researchers and agencies and proposes future research directions.

ADVERTISING CREATIVITY RESEARCH

Within the advertising literature creativity has been investigated from a number of perspectives – from advertising creativity described as the process of developing and producing creative advertisements (El Murad and West 2004, Reid et al 1998, Sasser et al 2007) to the creative quality of agency teams in producing innovative advertisements (O'Connor et al 1996, Smith and Yang 2004) and by contextual factors e.g. the product or service being advertised and the target audience (Wang et al 2013). It has been strongly argued that creativity in advertising is different because it is an industry which specializes in

idea generation (Kilgour et al 2013) and therefore warrants particular creativity research (Sasser and Koslow 2008). The sector provides distinctive managerial and organisational challenges (Mumford Scott Gaddis and Strange 2002) and there is also some evidence that creativity frameworks developed in the management arena do not quite “fit” the advertising sector (e.g. Verbeke et al 2008). Since Sasser and Koslow (2008) 3P’s agenda which called for further research in advertising creativity, more studies have emerged in the following areas - advertising awards (e.g. Kilgour et al 2013; West et al 2013) mental models (e.g. Nyilasy et al 2013) creative process (Oliver and Ashley 2012; Sasser and Koslow 2012; Turnbull and Wheeler 2015); leadership (Mallia et al 2013); client agency relationship dynamics (Sasser et al 2013); consumer studies (Ang et al 2012; Rosengren et al 2013) place (Stuhlfaut and Windels 2012) and performance (Wang et al 2013). To date there appear to be few studies which investigate team creativity in the advertising literature.

AN ORGANISING FRAMEWORK FOR TEAM CREATIVITY

In order to bring together the existing strands of team creativity research in a more meaningful way, the input- output-process model (IPO) of team performance (e.g. Ilgen et al 2005) has been utilised as an organising framework (see Figure 1). Insights have been drawn from the team diversity literature, team creativity and innovation literature. What follows is a brief overview to help map the literature and provide direction for future research in team creativity in advertising.

Team creativity

In the main creativity literature creativity has been defined in several nuanced ways depending on the perspective adopted. However, there is general consensus that creativity is novel and useful (e.g. Amabile 1988, 1996; Ford and Gioia 1995; Mayer 1999; Oldham and Cummings 1996; Scott and Bruce 1994). In the advertising literature there is also agreement that creative advertising should be novel or original but that it should also be ‘appropriate’ (Koslow et al 2003) and ‘relevant’ (Smith and Yang 2004).

Interestingly, for many years many of the empirical studies in creativity have adopted an individual focus investigating personal traits and characteristics which has not helped our understanding of creativity in organisations (Styhre and Sundgren, 2005). More recently, team research has received more attention as practitioners, academics and researchers realise the benefits (Anderson et al 2004). This is particularly evident in the innovation literature. Again the definition of team creativity has been subject to debate for example team creativity is accepted generally as the joint novelty and usefulness of a final idea developed by a group of people (Hoever et al 2012) or as the generation of novel and useful ideas when a team of work employees work together (Shin and Zhou 2007). In an advertising context agency creativity has been defined as “creative quality of an agency team that develops the advertising strategy and produces the actual ads” (Li et al 2008 p.110) and it is well known that agencies rely on teams for creative input and output (Ensor et al 2001; 2006). Whilst advertising academics suggest the benefits of team creativity research from a conceptual standpoint (e.g. Smith and Yang 2004), there are few studies available (e.g. Johar, Holbrook and Stern 2001) and certainly none beyond creatives or the creative department and there does not appear to be an accepted definition of team creativity in this context.

Even taking account of the growing interest in team creativity much of what is still known is limited to individual creativity and is linked to brainstorming (Hoever et al 2012). Additionally, empirical evidence has focused on team diversity (e.g. Milliken and Martins

1996 van Knippenberg et al 2004, Williams and O'Reilly 1998) to the detriment of team dynamics and cross level interactions (Cirella, Guerci and Shani 2012). Perhaps it is time to investigate team creativity more deeply and within advertising in particular.

Team inputs for creativity

There are many factors that one could categorise in terms of input from team diversity which has substantial literature covering team composition, functional background and educational background (e.g. Milliken and Martins 1996 van Knippenberg et al 2004, Williams and O'Reilly 1998) to the emerging areas of team trust and emotional intelligence (Barczak et al 2010). Looking firstly at team diversity there are many theories which underlie team diversity but the results are equivocal. For example, the similarity- attraction paradigm (Byrne 1971) advocates that homogeneous teams should perform better because of the mutual attraction of team members with similar attributes which should result in better communication and team processes. Alternatively, social categorization advocates that team members categorise each other into sub groups and favour the delineation within the team. Again the assumption is that on this basis homogeneous teams perform better (Brewer 1979). Using the information decision making perspective it is suggested that diverse groups will have a wider range of task relevant knowledge, skills and abilities and bring different opinions to the surface (van Knippenberg and Schippers 2007) which may be useful for creativity and innovation (van Knippenberg et al 2004). Furthermore, demographic diversity improves team performance because a team which is rich in demographic variables related to a task has more opportunity to draw on knowledge from a greater variety of perspectives (Hulsheger et al 2009). Recently, Somech and Drach-Zahavy (2013) made positive links between team composition (personality and function combined) and team creativity and positive link between functional diversity and team creativity. They suggested looking beyond the main effects and investigating the moderating and mediating variables for greater understanding.

In summary, the results in the team diversity literature represent a “double edged sword” in contemporary organisational theory (Horwitz and Horwitz 2007, Milliken and Martins 1996) as there are differing empirical results in different teams and contexts. However, fundamental areas which are agreed on are that more diverse teams can draw from a larger pool of task relevant information (Hulsheger et al 2009; van Dijk et al 2012) and as a result engage in team information elaboration (van Knippenberg et al 2004) which improves team effectiveness.

Insert Figure 1 here

Beyond the team diversity and effectiveness of teams in the organisational literature, results from the creativity and innovation literature suggests that team diversity, size and tenure are important antecedents to creativity and innovation Anderson and West (1996) and that “diversity of knowledge and skills is a powerful predictor of innovation” (West 2002 pp.355). As in the diversity literature, job relevant and background diversity may influence creativity and innovation (Shalley and Gilson 2004). Team working should facilitate the generation of more novel ideas and creative outcomes due to cross fertilization of ideas (Perry-Smith and Shalley 2003; Tesluk et al 1997). However, there are many more factors which may influence creativity and innovation including task characteristics, group knowledge diversity and skills, external demand and integrating group processes (West 2002). Again, in this literature too there is no agreement. The views range from - team diversity leads to a greater pool of knowledge and associations to draw from in the creative process (Mumford 2000) which encourages creativity – to situations where it is argued that expertise and a wealth of

knowledge may actually hamper creative performance (Ford, 1996; Mumford 2000; Woodman et al., 1993).

In an advertising context creativity has been investigated at the individual level from the perspective of creatives, account planning and strategy. A few studies have looked at the creative department (e.g. El-Murad and West 2004; Johar et al 2001) but many have explored creativity at the individual level. What is missing is a deeper understanding of the team situation beyond aggregating individual results to the team level (which has been highly criticised in the main creativity literature (e.g. Hulsheger et al 2009; Sullivan and Ford 2010). Supportive or creative climate for creativity could be included as a team input and has been investigated by a number of researchers (e.g., Amabile et al 1996; Anderson and West 1994, 1996, 1998; Ekval 1996; Gilson and Shalley 2004; Isaksen et al 2001). There have been a couple of studies related to advertising e.g. Ensor et al (2001; 2006) and Verbeke et al (2008) both of which suggest that the advertising context needs to be viewed differently because advertising is an ideas business and does not entirely fit with other organisations.

Team processes for creativity

Team processes for creativity include support for innovation, vision task orientation and external communication (Hulsheger et al 2009). Another area of interest has been that of information, knowledge and communication in teams and the effect on creativity. Team processes such as information elaboration – the sharing, discussion and integration of ideas (Hoever et al 2012) have been found to enhance team creativity and that team knowledge utilisation is important (Sung and Choi 2012) because information sharing alone is no guarantee that knowledge will be integrated (Hoever et al 2012). This was originally emphasised in the componential model of creativity Amabile (1996).

Managing creativity in advertising and team flexibility is a key theme for ad agencies to deal (Oliver and Ashley 2012). Their study found that openness and collaboration within and across teams was a key requirement of an effective ad creation process. Whilst this is what top leaders in agencies in the US were found to say, there needs to be empirical evidence to demonstrate this sentiment. This is echoed in a more recent view from industry in the UK which suggests that “high performance” teams are emerging (Ben Fennell 2015). There is a marriage of creative specialists and other “different types of creative people with complementary skills” focusing on business problems. Collaboration too is key both within and across agencies and so there may need to be further changes to processes to accommodate the new way of working.

Team creative outputs

The output of team creativity in advertising ranges from satisfied clients to winning awards to earning the reputation as a creative agency. Ads are not viewed as ‘creative’ until they are judged by others as so (MacKenzie et al 2007, Sasser et al 2003, Stuhlfaut and Windels 2012). Therefore, creative output in terms of the ad or campaign is judged by different stakeholders e.g. Creative Director, client, industry. Winning awards are a measure of advertising creativity (Verbeke et al 2008) within the advertising industry (e.g. Clio Award, IPA effectiveness award, EFFIE), may act as a benchmark of success (Kover et al 1995; Tippins and Kunkel 2006) and may be used to win client accounts (El Murad and West 2003). They are not without their criticism (Sasser et al 2013) and there is a view from practitioners that perhaps the advertising industry has suffered from “introspection” where winning awards is less of a focus for clients.

The influence of the client

Beyond the teams in ad agencies an important area to consider is the influence of the client on both the team input variables and the team processes which may influence team creativity. In terms of the client agency relationship, research has demonstrated that the client influences creativity in a number of ways in terms of direction setting, resource allocation, and performance evaluation (Koslow et al 2006). Additionally, the client attitude towards risk affects the creative outcome (El Murad and West 2003, Sasser and Koslow 2008). Clients who are open to new ideas, give agencies access to their research information and avoid high powered evaluation processes, allow agencies to be more creative (Koslow et al 2006). Recent anecdotal evidence suggests that as teams are changing that some agencies “consider the client as part of the team”. The challenge is to get the right balance - having enough information and input from the client to aid creativity or not enough particularly in the digital arena.

DISCUSSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Interest in team creativity has been growing but is still nascent. In the main advertising literature there appear to be very few empirical studies to date. The organising framework presented is not exhaustive in linking all of the variables that may be important in linking teams with creativity and performance but does serve as a starting point to demonstrate the more important ones from the creativity literature and may guide researchers and suggest some possible future research directions.

Previously creative ideas have been the domain of the creative department. However, ideas and creativity may come from “anywhere” in the agency particularly with the changing landscape and so begs the question - is there a new creativity emerging? We have seen that within industry teams are more talked about and the suggestion that teams are changing. There is scope to relook at how teams work within departments and across department. Consumers are more connected than ever before and so collaboration between agencies is critical to overcome the disconnect resulting from the proliferation of media channels and the fragmentation of marketers and agencies (Fennell 2015). Collaboration between agencies and the client supply rich areas for further research.

Creative insight and the process to develop it is an area worthy of more consideration along with knowledge and how this is created used and utilised. As a starting point some interesting areas for future advertising creativity team research are:

- Using the similarity – attraction paradigm (Byrne 1971), researchers could investigate the influence of Creative Directors or Creative Partners on team members creative output further
- What is the influence of the client on team processes? Is the client now considered to be an extension of the team?
- Does the composition of teams affect creativity?
- What is the relationship between team longevity and team creativity?
- How are teams harnessing knowledge and insight for creative campaigns? How do agency teams collaborate?
- How do the underlying processes mediate the relationship between teams and their creative output?

The benefit of the framework for practitioners is that it may provide a useful checklist for assessing and managing creativity in teams within agencies. Team creativity in advertising is an interesting and exciting area for research as the industry changes and grapples with new organisational structures, new philosophies on ways of operating and a shift of focus from

effectiveness to performance (Fennell 2015). Perhaps the time is right for team creativity in advertising.

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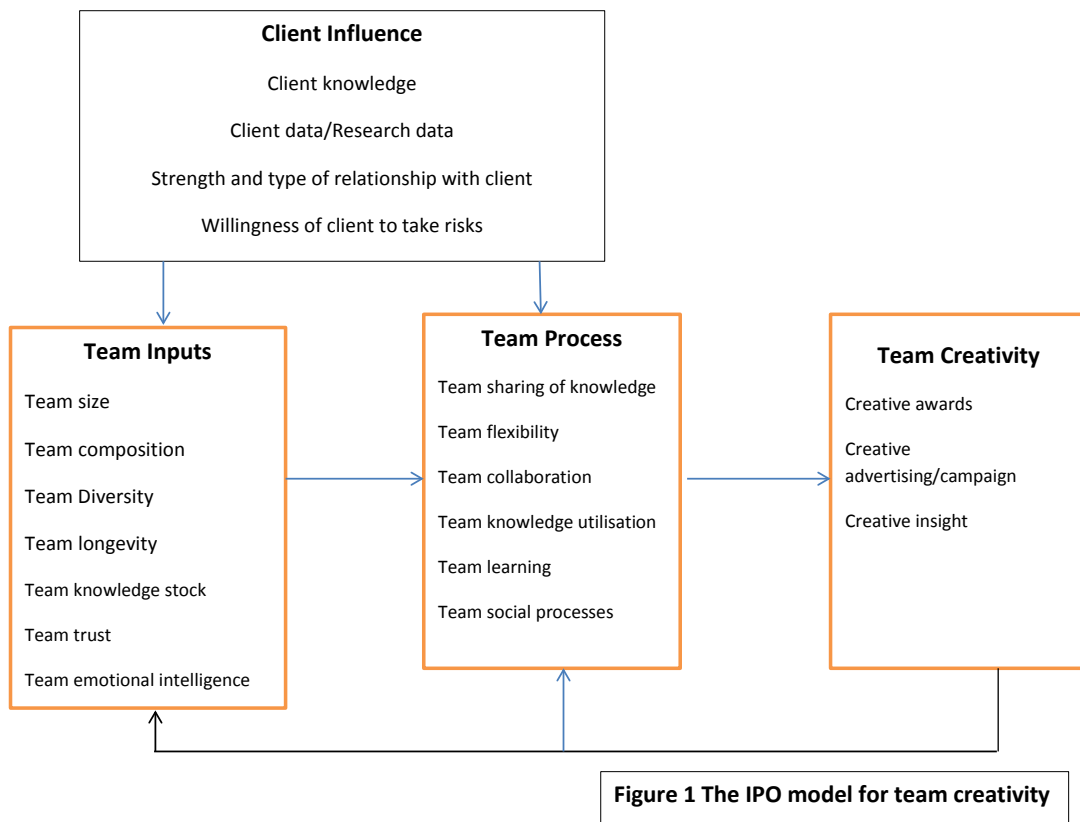


Figure 1