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# Vanishing Acts: Creative Women in Spain and the United States

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# VANISHING ACTS
# CREATIVE WOMEN IN SPAIN AND THE UNITED STATES

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This exploratory cross-cultural study examines the experiences of women in advertising creative departments in Spain and the United States. The study, an exploration of the creative environment and its impact on female creatives, is framed by Hofstede's dimensional model of national culture (Hofstede 2001; de Mooij & Hofstede 2010) and signalling theory (Spence 1974). Interviews with 35 top female creatives suggest that the challenges women face are rooted in the 'fraternity culture' or 'territorio de chicos' of creative departments in both countries. The data further suggest that the gender-bound cultural environment of advertising creative departments may be a global phenomenon, one that may adversely affect the creative process and impact women's upward mobility.

# INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s – the era of *Mad Men* – there were a whole lot more Don Drapers (or, in real life, Bill Bernbachs and David Ogilvys) than there were Peggy Olsons (or Mary Wells Lawrences and Shirley Polykoffs). Today women make up about half the advertising workforce, however they remain a rare commodity in advertising creative departments, accounting for only 20 to 25% of all creatives (Klein 2000; DiSesa 2008; Jordan 2009; Mallia 2009). Yet women make 80 to 85% of all consumption decisions (Jordan 2009; Mallia 2009). In short, 'Advertising is missing its mark with women' (Berman *et al.* 2006, para. 3).

On a global level there appears to be a lack of cultural diversity within advertising agencies, in particular within creative departments (Pritchard & Morgan 2000; Foster 2003; Nixon 2003; Gregory 2009; McLeod *et al.* 2009). Also troubling is the underdevelopment of international advertising research (Moriarty & Duncan 1991; Zinkhan 1993; Taylor 2010). Research addressing cultural convergence is imperative for a comprehensive understanding of our ever-expanding and highly diverse global marketplace (Moriarty & Duncan 1991; Zinkhan 1993; Hofstede 2001; Taylor 2005, 2010; de Mooij 2010; de Mooij & Hofstede 2010; House *et al.* 2010). Finally, maintaining diverse creative teams has the potential of offering clients more distinctive perspectives (Stewart 1992; Pritchard & Morgan 2000; Foster 2003; Nixon & Crew 2006; McLeod *et al.* 2009).

This cross-cultural research explores female creative directors' experiences in creative departments in the United States and Spain. The authors investigate the women's experiences relative to the creative cultural environment and consider the intersection of gender and creativity. The study is framed by Hofstede's dimensional model of national culture (Hofstede 2001; de Mooij & Hofstede 2010) and signalling theory (Spence 1974).

Although there has been some research related to the role of creatives in advertising agencies (Gelade 1997; Hackley 2003; Nixon 2003; Hackley & Kover 2007), little is known about creative women and their interaction in male-dominated creative departments. In the past such topics and discussion of barriers might have been water-cooler gossip. Today's water cooler is social media with posts to Facebook pages and blogs. However, a more structured look can bring to light an important perspective for both academics and those in the industry.

Such gender issues may be systemic. By examining two different cultures – Spain and the United States – we hope to find patterns that might be observed in other cultures as well. In turn, this will help practitioners better understand how women deal with conflicts related to gender and, perhaps, agencies may benefit more from their talent.

This research is framed by three overarching questions. First, what are the similarities and differences experienced by female creative directors within creative departments in Spain and the United States? Second, how do gender and culture inform these similarities and differences? Third, what are the implications of these findings?

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

Considering global cultural perspectives, Hofstede's (2001) dimensional model of national culture offers a productive framework. The model outlines assessment based on five key dimensions: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, gender dimensions, uncertainty avoidance and long- versus short-term orientation.

Power distance refers to 'the extent to which less powerful members of society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally' (de Mooij & Hofstede 2010, p. 88). Individualism versus collectivism refers to how much effort is put into caring for oneself and one's immediate family versus belonging to and caring about in-groups. Gender dimensions are reflected in the dominant values of masculine or feminine society, where traditionally masculine societies have been defined by achievement and success, while feminine societies have been defined by caring and quality of life. Uncertainty avoidance is defined as 'the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertainty and ambiguity and try to avoid these situations' (de Mooij & Hofstede 2010, p. 89). Finally, long- versus short-term orientation relates to a future-orientated pragmatism and investment in the future (long-term), or a focus on personal stability, traditions and personal happiness (short-term). This model (Hofstede 2001; de Mooij & Hofstede 2010) suggests a way to make sense of the impact of the cultural environments such as advertising creative departments where the production of branded messages takes place. Specifically, this model can be used as a way of understanding the collective identity that shapes advertising creative departments and women's experiences within them. In that sense cultural values reflect both mental and social processes within advertising creative departments.

Looking across Europe, there are numerous studies assessing advertising in general. However, research addressing gender issues within agency creative departments is limited and generally takes a unilateral approach. The majority focuses on Britain, with three large-scale studies produced in the United Kingdom. Baxter (1990) and Klein (2000) each produced industry-funded studies. Nixon (2003) produced another, though not industry funded, and remains prolific, with multiple critical studies exploring the gendered culture of advertising creative departments. Also focusing on Britain, Gregory (2009) explores homosociability, while McLeod *et al.* (2009) address the impact of class and gender, and Pritchard and Morgan (2000) look at the male gaze in tourism advertising. Addressing a few related studies beyond Britain, Alvesson (1998) looks at gender identities in Swedish advertising, while Michaels (2007) speaks to sexist stereotypes in Italy.

Spain and the United States might be considered David and Goliath within the culturally western advertising marketplace, with the United States having economic and cultural dominance. From their divergent places on the global spectrum emerges the potential to expose contrasts and insights. The United States spends more on advertising than any other country in the world (Euromonitor International 2010). In an age of global acquisitions with its mammoth advertising spending and its gargantuan media reach, American advertising has 'Americanised' global markets since the 1980s (de Mooij 2010).

Historically American advertising, both in reality and in fictional depictions, has been a man's world. An example of how ingrained this is in American culture is the award-winning television show, *Mad Men* (American Movie Classics 2011). Set in New York City in the 1960s, the show's name is a play on the fact that many top advertising agencies were located on Madison Avenue as well as the fact that men dominated the ad game. As noted on the television series' website, 'The series ... depicts authentically the roles of men and women in this era while exploring the true human nature beneath the guise of 1960s traditional family values.'

Fifty years later, the Shriver Report (2009) documents slowly evolving fundamental changes in American society, most importantly the movement of women out of the home and in to the workforce. This has been the case as women have moved into American advertising agencies. It starts at the college level, where women dominate advertising classes. In a national survey of advertising students, 81.7% were women and 18.3% were men (Fullerton *et al.* 2009). Women have infused many agency departments – in account management (Davidson & Burke 2004), in planning and research (Doward 2000) and especially in media (Mallia 2008).

Yet that trend doesn't extend into the creative department. There men still dominate, especially at the creative director level and above. 'Women are starting creative careers in advertising. But both empirical and anecdotal evidence show many are leaving those jobs ... not making it to creative director rank' (Mallia 2009, online). In 2010, there was only one female Chief Creative Officer among the top 25 American advertising agencies (Grow & Broyles 2011).

Spain, on the other hand, while an extremely small market, might be considered a hub of European creativity, with Barcelona as the crown jewel. Spain's influence is further demonstrated by its annual hosting of the Festival el Sol, the most prestigious global Spanish-language advertising awards festival. The Spanish advertising landscape demonstrates similar trends to the United States, with the advertising workforce being 'increasingly feminised' (Hernandez *et al.* 2009, p. 278). According to the Spanish Association of Advertising Agencies, women make up 56% of the workforce (Pueyo Ayhan 2010). In Spanish upper management, 'men occupy 90% of the managerial positions, while women are concentrated in middle management' (Pueyo Ayhan 2010, p. 245). Similarly, men dominate creative departments. The number of women in creative is about one-fifth of that of men (Martin 2007; Martin *et al.* 2009; Pueyo Ayhan 2010).

Creative departments can become miniature cultural environments within the larger advertising agency. This makes them an interesting microcosm for Hofstede's (2001) dimensional model of national culture. On a macro level, this model is especially appropriate when making comparisons between Spain and the United States. In addition, studies by Klein (2000) and Nixon (2003) suggest that a similar pattern may hold across the industry: women are well represented in the other departments, but not in creative. One cannot help but ask, why are there so few women in creative?

## THE CREATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL CULTURE

As previously noted, the vanishing act of women begins in school. It isn't that there is a lack of female students. In fact, there are many. Women greatly outnumber men in advertising

programmes across the United States (Fullerton *et al.* 2009; Grow & Broyles 2011). The same is true in Spain, where women represent almost 75% of advertising students (Roca & Pueyo Ayhan 2011).

However, the numbers begin to drop as soon as they reach portfolio school. Grow and Broyles (2011) state that there are nearly twice as many female students as men at college level, but on entering portfolio school that number drops to about even. As women begin entering the creative workforce the numbers continue the downward creep, with men having a slight edge (Grow & Broyles 2011). Five years into their careers, the decline is no longer a creep but a precipitous drop. By the time women get to the top they are nearly alone (Dutta 2008; Jordan 2009; Mallia 2009). While there are only a few portfolio schools in Spain, the employment trend appears to be very similar (Martin 2007; Hernandez *et al.* 2009; Martin *et al.* 2009; Pueyo Ayhan 2010).

There may be a number of reasons for this. However, in both countries, all are tinged with gendered overtones. First, portfolio schools are dominated by male faculty – not unlike creative departments. Second, creative women cannot, literally, see themselves in creative departments, especially at the management level. Third, very few female creatives are industry award winners – and 'upward mobility hinges greatly on industry recognition. However, industry recognition for female creatives' work is fleeting' (Grow & Broyles 2011, online). Industry award judging panels in the United States are dominated by men, as are the awards that are bestowed (Jordan 2009; Mallia 2009). The same happens in Spain, where nearly 90% of judges are men (Roca *et al.* 2011). Tied to awards is recognition in the industry press. In the United States, the number of women that *Creativity* magazine calls out as top creatives has been, and remains, less than 10% (Grow & Broyles 2011). In Spain the pattern is similar. When the names of advertising creative's best and brightest appeared in *30 Segundos de Gloria* (*30 Seconds of Glory*) there were no women mentioned (Gonzalez-Andrio 2005).

As young female creatives look out across the creative landscape, no matter the country, they simply do not see themselves in anything but small numbers, if at all. Without role models and a strong support system, women's success in advertising creative is greatly inhibited (Grow & Broyles 2011). While the shake-out of women in creative may begin as they leave college, even though in college they far outnumber men, it appears that the lack of women in creative is an institutionalised industry trend that is environmentally perpetuated.

Signalling theory (Spence 1974) suggests the need to see others like oneself within an organisation in order to signal the ability to be welcomed and subsequently thrive. This provides context for understanding female creatives' experiences within advertising creative departments. Bourne and Ozbilgin (2008) further suggest that organisations that don't transparently address gender bias and/or preferences in the workplace risk not being able to retain female employees. Further, Hirschman (1989) suggests that role-based communication models are essential to effective advertising. Within the context of signaling theory, it appears that 'the social environment can have a significant effect on a person's level of intrinsic motivation' (Koslow & Sasser 2003, p. 110), which in turn affects their ultimate ability to

succeed. For creative women in advertising, the consequences of this environmental challenge can be grim.

Numerous scholars have noted that creative departments are highly masculine environments, embodying the hallmarks of a 'boys' club' (Klein 2000; Pritchard & Morgan 2000; Nixon 2003; DiSesa 2008; Mallia 2009). 'Perception of agency culture and support for original work' are known to be crucial to women's success in creative departments (Koslow & Sasser 2003, p. 110). Stewart suggests that 'creativity is inherently embedded in the context that informs it and nurtures it' (1992, p. 14). However, Gregory (2009) argues that creative departments are defined by 'hegemonic masculinity' framed by sports, humour and clubbing. In essence, they are the men's 'locker room'. Thus, this environmental context signals codes with powerful masculine markers from how one dresses, speaks, plays, eats and drinks, all the way to how one makes another laugh. In short, how one bonds and to whom one bonds can, and often does, define one's creative career (Grow & Broyles 2011). For women it appears that bonding within the 'boys' club' is significantly constrained.

## GENDER AND CREATIVITY

Creativity, in and of itself, 'is not gender specific' (Grow & Broyles 2011, online). However, there is some evidence that women score higher on tests for openness and divergent thinking (Rogers 1959; Helson 1967; Runco 2004). Divergent thinking is helpful for problem solving (Runco 2004), while openness is essential to the creative process and correlates highly with divergent thinking (Helson 1967). Though neither of these attributes causes creativity, both may make creative accomplishments more likely. Thus, it is ironic that 'while women are more inclined toward openness and divergent thinking, they frequently are not accomplished in the advertising creative arena' (Grow & Broyles 2011, online).

In advertising, in particular, creativity is also associated with originality (Koslow & Sasser 2003). Of course both creativity and the authorship of original ideas are influenced by the creative department's cultural environments, which as discussed, are highly masculine (Hirschman 1989). Thus, the sheer existence of one's gender implies greater or lesser originality within a 'gender-space dialectic' (Pritchard & Morgan 2000, p. 116), which privileges a masculine interpretation. This privilege of masculine interpretation of both creativity and originality takes place at all levels – from within creative departments, to awards shows, to industry press forming 'a considerable block to women's capacity to succeed' (Nixon & Crew 2006, p. 246). Further, despite women's inclination to be open, they are less likely to self-report creative accomplishments, which can have 'dire consequences for their career trajectory' (Grow & Broyles 2011, online).

One strategy to level the playing field is gender identification. In environments where 'the disadvantages of femininity and the privileges of masculinity underscore the necessity of … gender identification', women generally have two options: 'active gender resistance and conformity' (Carr 1998, p. 528). At one end is resistance and playing the role of tomboy (Carr 1998; Broyles & Grow 2008) and at the other end is the girly-girl who might use her body as a 'form of cultural capital' (McLeod *et al.* 2009, p. 1026). The tomboy role might offer the ability to be one of the guys. Yet, while being a tomboy mutes one's femininity, it doesn't guarantee admittance to the 'boys' club'. On the other hand, using one's female body as cultural capital

can get you 'into places that a lot of the boy teams can't' (McLeod *et al.* 2009, p. 1026). This too has its limitations. First, when it comes to getting into or understanding female culture, the payoffs are far less valuable as female culture is generally undervalued in advertising. Second, while the female body may have cultural capital, using it also has the potential to acquiesce to the 'male gaze' (Mulvey 1989) or play into 'the politics of desire' (Helstein 2003), both of which leave women more vulnerable.

The idea of leveraging one's understanding of femaleness has another disadvantage. The more women use their femaleness, or their understanding of it, the more likely they are to land in the pink ghetto. The term 'pink ghetto' was first coined in 1983 within a study of American women and children living in poverty. It referred to the limits on women's career advancement within traditional low-wage jobs (Kleiman 2006). In advertising, the pink ghetto means being assigned to work on female products (Koslow & Sasser 2003; Nixon & Crew 2006; Mallia 2009; Roca & Pueyo Ayhan 2011), which rarely win awards or industry praise. Kleiman's (2006) work suggests that women may be relegated to the pink ghetto for two reasons. First, there are preconceived notions that female product accounts reflect women's work and are thus of less value. Second, the women in management roles, within the pink ghetto, are often there because men aren't comfortable working on these brands. Not surprisingly, the pink ghetto is also associated with lower salaries (Kleiman 2006; Martin 2007; Mallia 2009). While salaries in advertising are, in part, linked to billable hours and face time at the agency, they are also contingent on the awards and industry recognition. And so the circular loop that traps women in the pink ghetto comes full circle, keeping them at lower salaries with less recognition.

Further, if you are a woman with children it appears your career trajectory is far less robust than your male counterpart – even if he also has children. Having children for creative men seems a non-issue. However, for creative women having children is often viewed as a lack of career commitment (Mallia 2009; Grow & Broyles 2011). Studies have shown that top creative men generally have stay-at-home partners. Top creative women also have stay-at-home partners or nannies. Yet, because of the double standard, when it comes to how one's commitment to work is viewed, some women simply choose not to have children (Mallia 2009; Grow & Broyles 2011).

Finally, we come to the ultimate output of the creative process – the work. Most industry creatives speak of the work as the key to success (Mallia 2009; Grow & Broyles 2011), yet the literature suggests that advertising creative is shaped and judged within a masculine paradigm (Hirschman 1989; Nixon 2003; Nixon & Crew 2006; Martin 2007; Gregory 2009; Mallia 2009; Pueyo Ayhan 2010). The reality is, advertising is an 'incestuous and … small community' (McLeod *et al.* 2009, p. 1031). Further, some have suggested a tendency for creative directors to hire in their own image (Ibarra 1992; Pritchard & Morgan 2000; Foster 2003; Nixon & Crew 2006; Gregory 2009; McLeod *et al.* 2009), just as signalling theory suggests (Spence 1974). In the context of a system that has institutionalized gender inequity, hiring in one's image is not surprising. For, as Nixon and Crew state, gender is 'written into the creative cultures of advertising' (2006, p. 129).

# METHOD

Organisational research methods are still evolving with respect to gender, using both quantitative and qualitative research based on ongoing criticism to create social change (Calas & Smircich 2009). This investigation helps forge new ground in the global advertising arena by merging parts of two broader long-term studies exploring gender dynamics and creativity within advertising creative departments. The results of this specific study are based on interviews with 15 top creative women in the United States and 20 top creative women in Spain.

## SAMPLE SELECTION

The initial list of American female creatives was derived from women featured in the *Wall Street Journal* Creative Leaders Series and from the *Creative Skirts* website, as well in other articles in trade publications such as *Advertising Age*. The list was then adjusted to reflect geographic diversity by pooling names regionally into three categories: East Coast, Mid-America and West Coast. The original list was derived for a larger study including Canada. For this study, only data from American women were used.

In Spain, the names of senior creative women were initially selected from the Club de Creativos database. From there, women at two types of agency (top award winners and top earners) were selected to create an initial pool. There were only 14 senior women on the Club de Creativos database – which included Barcelona, Madrid and Valencia – and not all those women could be found. Therefore, a snowball technique was used to identify more senior creative women. All of the Spanish women interviewed were based in Barcelona.

## DATA COLLECTION

Each participant was contacted for an initial screening. In the United States the screening was conducted via email. In Spain the screening was done via telephone and email. The screening allowed the investigators to assess if each participant was at the level of Creative Director or above. At the same time, the women were informed about the parameters of the study, including time commitment and possible publication. American participants were told that any quotes attributed directly to them would be cleared in advance or they could choose to remain anonymous. In Spain the women strongly preferred anonymity. Thus all respondents are quoted anonymously.

All in-depth interviews were conducted by one of the three principal investigators. Because all Spanish participants were in Barcelona, interviews were conducted face-to-face. In the United States geographic and financial constraints were a consideration, therefore interviews were conducted by telephone.

Set scripts were used in each country to ensure the in-depth interviews would be consistent. American and Spanish investigators used questions with parallel cultural construction to ensure accurate data analysis. Though there were linguistic variations, the content of each question remained consistent. Follow-up probes were used to encourage elaboration. This structure was designed for more nuanced replies and consequently more substantive data. The interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

## CHARACTERISTICS

As a cohort these women spent 8 to 35 years in the advertising industry. In the United States the time spent in the industry ranged from 15 to 35 years. In Spain the time spent in the industry ranged from 8 to 27 years. Altogether, the women's ages were 29 to 58. In the United States the age range was 29 to 58, while in Spain the age range was 29 to 46.

Titles ranged from Chairman to Creative Director. In the United States the titles included Chairman, Chief Creative Officer, Executive Vice President, Associate Creative Director and Creative Director. In the United States all but three worked for global multinational agencies. Of those three, two operated their own companies (an advertising agency and a consulting firm) and the third worked at a small boutique agency. In Spain the women's titles included Executive Creative Director and Associate Creative Director, with the majority at Creative Director. At the time of the interviews, 17 of the women were employed in advertising agencies. Ten worked for top-earning multinational or domestic agencies, four worked in award-winning creative shops and three ran their own small agencies. The remaining three women freelanced. One year after the interviews were completed, all of the American women were still employed. However, one-third of the Spanish women were let go in the intervening year.

Finally, the women in both countries worked across a wide range of product categories. All worked on classic women's brands such as shampoo and feminine hygiene at one point in their careers. Some worked on these products for extended periods of time. However, only three women – all American – discussed working with the premier 'male brand' categories of beer and automobiles.

## ANALYSIS

Using verbatim comments the co-authors used qualitative thematic analysis. The analysis involved a three-step process. First, Spanish and American investigators analysed data separately determining thematic clusters. Second, investigators compared the American and Spanish clusters looking for cross-cultural patterns and trends. Spanish verbatim quotes were translated into English by the Spanish investigator. Third, the categories were re-analysed allowing similarities and differences to emerge from within thematic clusters.

# RESULTS

Across both cultures three thematic categories emerged: (1) gender and the creative process; (2) gender and project assignment; and (3) factors related to leaving advertising creative departments. Overshadowing all three categories is gender and, more specifically, the masculine cultural environment of creative departments. The voices of these Spanish and American creative women, in the form of key quotes, exemplify the essence of each factor.

## VOICES OF SPANISH CREATIVE WOMEN

In terms of gender and the creative process, five key factors emerged. The selection of creative solutions, or the 'Big Idea', is usually done by men. *'[Executive Creative Director] can always say this idea is not going to be presented or needs a change at the last minute. So I present many things nobody ever sees.'* The bigger the project, the more significant the role

of men becomes. '*[Female creative director] and I had the feeling that they [men] had the best accounts. But our ideas shined … They are good. They are not worse, just different.*'

1. Women favour a democratic process when selecting ideas or creative solutions, but did not always experience that process within the male creative culture. *'It's far from democratic, everything we had done was worthless.*'
2. Women are often marginalised or isolated, especially when it comes to presenting work. *'I was the only woman in the meeting. And, yes, I noticed some discomfort when I had an idea. I am convinced that if presented by a guy everyone would laugh, but as it was presented by a woman they did not laugh … I felt very tense in that environment.*'
3. Many, though not all, creative women tended to avoid overtly expressing discrimination, even when the evidence of promotion and retention made it evident. '*I have not experienced sexist episodes or felt discrimination against [myself] as a women … I think it's your attitude.*'

In terms of gender and project assignments, four key factors emerged.

1. Assignments are often based on one's gender and the perception of the masculine or feminine quality of the brand (men's products versus women's products). *'They gave this very cool account to the boy's team and the principals were pissed off because we said, "Why do they own it and we do not?"*'
2. Spanish women expressed experiencing gender-based cultural codes, which often made them more comfortable with women's products. At the same time, this experience didn't prepare them to work with men's products, closing doors to working on those accounts. '*Look, I like female things because, of course, at the same time I am also the consumer.*'
3. The women long to work on brands that allow them more creativity, which tend to represent the biggest clients with the most creative potential, but feel that they can't say 'no' to any account assignments. '*I will never be able to present a contest (award-winning account) with the agency because the team has its star (a man).*'
4. Most of the women believe that the masculine/feminine division for product assignment should not exist and is detrimental to the client and their own career advancement. *'There are some products addressed to women, but women don't necessarily have to work on them at a creative level. I do not think so … Anyone is trained to do it, to get into the role, right?*'

In terms of why Spanish women leave creative, three key factors emerged.

1. Women choose career paths with less stress, often by opening their own agencies or freelancing. *'For me the big qualitative jump was to become freelance … You own your own time … I just establish my own schedule.*'
2. The women move because they feel there is an overall sexist cultural environment, which leads to less pay than men and a lack of respect. *'The atmosphere seemed to be very good … I had exactly the same position and they raised our salary [her pay and a man in the same position] the same day – and I earn 100 Euros less.*'
3. Women leave the workforce and return to family, though this is sometimes temporary, and is usually driven by having children and the need for a more

flexible schedule. *'Priorities of women [mothers] change. Everybody knows this. She will care less about work.'*

# VOICES OF AMERICAN CREATIVE WOMEN

In terms of gender and the creative process, six key factors emerged.

1. Humour is a highly valued creative attribute, and male humour, which tends to be sophomoric and sexualised, is more valued. *'There's this single-minded pervasiveness about the kind of humor that works. It's for guys who are maybe 19 and 20. I'm really sick of it, my husband is sick of it.'*
2. Many of the women considered empathy essential to creativity. *'Creative people have an incredible power to empathise, the better ones can empathise with a greater range of things.'*
3. Women expressed frustration related to the way time is used and valued, noting that productivity is equated with the amount of time spent in the office, whether it is productive or not. *'Guys play jokes, they play pranks, they spend part of their work time goofing off and most of the women don't have time. We work, work, work so that we can get out of work to be with our families … Then when they [men] stay late to make up time they look like heroes.'*
4. Many of these women did not experience a level playing field at both awards shows and within creative departments, seeing both as part of a fraternity culture that values male creative ideas. *'I think if there were a 40% rule (40% of the creative directors were women and 40% of the judging panels of award shows were women), the business would be more interesting, more diverse, have different voices, not all the same kind of work.'*
5. Intellectual capacity appears to be a significant component of the creative process, with women equally respecting men in this area. *'I've worked with a lot of really smart people, and it makes the work so much better.'*
6. These women felt a strong need to be brave, to stand up and defend themselves and their work. *'Be strong and not be a girly girl … You need to be strong, you need to stand up for yourself.'*

In terms of gender and project assignments, five key factors emerged.

1. Men tend to be assigned the types of accounts that win awards. *'Don't cripple really talented women who could be doing work that is every bit as funny and cool and smart on the marquee accounts – the beer accounts, the car accounts, those kinds of accounts that are stereotypically headed up by men … It's a self-perpetuating problem.'*
2. Male-bonding experiences tend to be part of departmental environmental dynamics and, because creative directors are predominantly male, this impacts the delegation of assignments in ways that benefit junior men. *'A woman can have as much merit as a man, but unfortunately the man will have a better portfolio or he's better plugged in with his boss, who's probably a man. He's been able to fight more.'*
3. Women tend to be less assertive about fighting for project assignments, which results in the award-winning accounts often being assigned to men. *'Sometimes women get held back because they don't know how to talk to men and that might interfere with their advancement.'*

4. Project assignment tends to be influenced by the masculine/feminine qualities of a product, with women being pigeonholed into the pink ghetto. *'As soon as something like Stay-Free maxi pads or some equally undesirable package-good product targeted to women comes up, they say "OK, we have to put a girl on it." As soon as you get pigeonholed like that it can drastically hurt your career … It's a self-perpetuating cycle in which really talented women get put on really crappy products. It's a downward cycle.'*
5. Women tend to trip themselves up by deflecting glory and accepting praise as a team rather than as individuals, which negatively impacts perceptions related to their individual ability to handle work. *'Men are very decisive, they seem to have more courage. They know they'll recover from a mistake … We're (women) so collaborative by nature we can easily forfeit leadership positions … Women need to learn two words: "thank you."'*

In terms of why American women leave creative, three key factors emerged.

1. Women leave because of the 'fraternity club' culture that permeates creative departments. *'I don't see as many women being promoted … Possibly there are a lot of clients that are part of the boys' club too, so it ends up being a harder thing for women to get promoted.'*
2. Women's salaries tend to be lower than their male counterparts, yet they admit that, as a group, women tend to be less assertive about demanding equal pay. *'Men do better at promoting themselves. They go in and ask for raises. They're better at doing the political navigating, of tooting their own horns so they get what they deserve. Women still sit back too much.'*
3. The work/life balance becomes crucial, especially once they have children. *'We lose so many women because their definition of success has balance. I think we could make work really attractive to those creative women that we're losing by finding a way for them to contribute even if it's from home.'*

Overall, there were some differences found between Spanish and American female creative professionals. American creatives tended to stand up and defend themselves and their work while Spanish creatives were more accepting of the roles thrust upon them by their culture. Spanish women also expressed feelings of discrimination indirectly, couched as inequities, while American women were more direct. Spanish women rarely brought up the topic of humour, while American women saw humour as a male attribute. Divergences in project assignment are based on cultural codes in Spain, where some women didn't feel prepared to work on men's products, while in the US gender is considered irrelevant.

There were many commonalities among creative departments in both Spain and the United States. Creative decisions are highly influenced by men, who also dominate presentations teams. Women in both countries tend to see themselves as more democratic when working towards creative solutions. They are more empathetic and collaborate easily. Related to their collaborative nature, women deflect individual glory and prefer shared accolades. Finally, these women feel they are better time managers and multi-task better than men. As one woman stated, 'Once I had kids it made me more efficient when I'm at work. I don't just goof around.'

There were also common factors in reference to assigning accounts whether in Spain or the United States. Cars and beer are considered male accounts, and those assigned to these accounts are more likely to be honoured with prestigious awards, often determined by juries dominated by men. Both Spanish and American female creatives felt disdain when relegated to female accounts in the pink ghetto and wanted to work on more creative accounts that would bring them recognition. Though divided by an ocean, women from both cultures recognised the 'boys' club' mentality that gave the better accounts and more significant work to men. They spoke openly about the 'fraternity culture' and 'cosas de chicos/tios' within creative departments.

# DISCUSSION

For the discussion the authors collapse the first two thematic categories into one – gender, creative process and project assignment – as creative process and project assignment have much overlap both theoretically and in practice. The last thematic category – factors related to leaving advertising creative departments – will be discussed separately. The discussion is framed using the dimensional model of national culture (Hofstede 2001; de Mooij & Hofstede 2010) and signalling theory (Spence 1974). Signalling theory, as previously discussed, suggests the importance of seeing others like oneself within an organisation, while the dimensional model of national culture offers an assessment tool based on five dimensions: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, gender dimensions, uncertainty avoidance, and long- versus short-term orientation.

## GENDER, CREATIVE PROCESS AND PROJECT ASSIGNMENT

### POWER DISTANCE

This is both significant and variable. Both Spanish and American women suggest that the Big Ideas of male creatives are often prioritised. '*Yes, it is true there are always more ideas chosen from men than women. But perhaps it's also because he [the CD] has a man's values,*' said a Spaniard. Another way the power differential is articulated is through silence. Said another Spaniard, '*Something you hear very often is silence because all the power is highly concentrated (with men at the top).*' Additionally, men often get the plum accounts – the accounts within categories that tend to win awards (Nixon 2003; Jordan 2009; Mallia 2009). Just as we have seen in previous studies, there appears to be an unlevel playing field (Hirschman 1989; Nixon 2003; Nixon & Crew 2006; Martin 2007; Hernandez *et al.* 2008; Gregory 2009; Mallia 2009; Pueyo Ayhan 2010). Thus, these women saw the need to be brave and fight for their work. '*This is a really difficult business. It's unforgiving … You have to be able to fight for your ideas constantly. You have to be able to stand up to criticism,*' said an American. Virtually all of the women favoured an open or egalitarian creative process. On the ideation level it often appeared egalitarian, yet at the level of selection, it appears that gender was at times an influence. As one Spaniard put it, '*I think the gender issue is seen in other things but not the ideas … Yet I have the feeling that they treat me differently because I'm a girl.*' Finally, it appears that Spanish women experienced the power distance more acutely and were, ironically, less willing to go on the record about the discrimination that accompanied this. Said one Spanish creative, '*Please don't tell anyone I'm complaining.*' This may be influenced by a more machismo Spanish culture, while Americans tend to internalize the mythology of meritocracy. Whatever the influence, 'many creative departments are like male

fraternities, housed in agencies that have men's names on the door' (Broyles & Grow 2008, p. 4).

## INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS COLLECTIVISM

In the creative realm creative women tend towards collectivism. That is, they desire to be accepted as part of the in-group – the fraternity. However, women's full acceptance into the creative in-group was fleeting across both countries. '*Why should I bang my head against the stupid Plexiglas – it isn't a glass ceiling. Glass you can break through. Plexiglas ceilings are unbudgeable – and why should I do that*?' said an American. Further, in both countries the women felt they were often treated as tokens, especially in presentations. One American woman referred to herself as '*the vagina in the room*'. For women in both countries, there is a sense of marginalisation and not being on a level playing field with men, of being excluded from the in-group. Koslow and Sasser's (2003) work suggests that this marginalisation and lack of acceptance with the in-group impacts both the women's intrinsic motivation and the support they receive to develop original work, which is so crucial to success in advertising creative. As one Spaniard simply stated, '*Equality is a lie.*'

## GENDER DIMENSIONS

In both countries gender dimensions had significant impact in light of the highly masculine advertising creative department environments (Hirschman 1989; Klein 2000; Nixon 2003; Nixon & Crew 2006; Martin 2007; Gregory 2009; Mallia 2009; Pueyo Ayhan 2010). As a Spaniard expressed it, '*The world is male and with that I have told you everything.*' Gregory's (2009) contention of a hegemonic masculine culture would certainly support this. According to the American creatives, male humour tended to be a dominant way of expressing creativity. Male humour is also a way to support and maintain a masculine advertising identity (Nixon 2003). Interestingly, male humour was raised only fleetingly among the Spanish women. American women also viewed intelligence as paramount to the creative process, and they believe men and women are equally intelligent. Additionally, both the Spanish and the American women spoke of the need for empathy to enhance creative process. Speaking of her work, one Spaniard said, '*It takes a woman because you know it [the product] as a consumer and you have empathy.*' Interestingly women, indeed, tend to score higher on tests related to openness and divergent thinking, which leads to empathy (Rogers 1959; Helson 1996; Runco 2004). Yet, in both the United States and Spain, it appears the ability to empathise is not as highly valued as other qualities such as male humour. Still, the American women especially viewed empathy as essential. One went so far as to say, '*The truth is men can't write women's ads … They're just so nervous that they're going to offend that they overcompensate.*' Unfortunately, for the women who can write with resonance to female consumers, the reward is often being relegated to the pink ghetto where one's career is at risk. '*They say it [women's products] is a subject for girls because we have more sensitivity. It is true, but it puts us in a jam,*' said a Spaniard. The advertising industry's institutionalised practice of assigning women to work on women's products, while excluding them from classic male products (such as beer and autos), is a practice that truncates women's careers by sending them to the pink ghetto (Mallia 2009; Grow & Broyles 2011). As one American said, '*The worst thing you can do is get stuck on women's accounts. It will kill your career.*'

## UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

In both countries, these women were, by and large, unable to avoid uncertainty and ambiguity in the creative process. Uncertainty and ambiguity are not a gender-bound variable when it comes to the creative process (Rogers 1959; Runco 2004). However, it is fair to suggest that women's level of uncertainly was higher than that of their male counterparts. As one American women said, '*The higher up you go there is more fall out of women.*' Within the creative environment, with its powerful masculine cultural codes that often are reinforced by the male bonding experience, uncertainty is increased for women who are generally excluded from these bonding moments (Grow & Broyles 2011). The results suggest that the experiences of both the Spanish and American creatives are indeed filled with uncertainty and ambiguity, but for women the uncertainty and ambiguity are more extreme. One Spaniard explained it this way, '*Your credibility costs more, because you are female.*'

## LONG- VERSUS SHORT-TERM ORIENTATION

This dimension is particularly interesting as it varies across time. These top creative women appear pragmatic and future orientated, a long-term orientation. '*Advertising is a business. You have to figure out how to get along so you can do your work. And oh, by the way, I'm a woman,*' said an American. Nearly all spoke of the necessity of investing time in their work to build a future and forget about being female. As one American stated, '*Make your book great so that no one realises you're a woman.*' For creatives, their work makes or breaks their career. As another American put it, '*In advertising, it's still who has the best book.*' However, over time, building the book on an uneven playing field wore down both Spanish and American women. One Spaniard put it this way, '*The idea should be there is no discrimination in creative departments and, in fact, as a creative person I should have no gender. But it's not like that.*' This reality eventually changes the long-term orientation of some women, shifting it towards a short-term orientation. This is particularly striking, as shall be discussed, related to the factors that lead women to leave creative departments.

Across all five of Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede 2001; de Mooij & Hofstede 2010), the significance of signalling theory (Spence 1974) is highly apparent within the gender, creative process and project assignment thematic categories. Spanish and American women alike long to see other creative women at the top, '*but there are so few,*' said both the Spanish and American women. As one American advised, '*Find a mentor right from the beginning … Learn the business.*' Seeing women at the top and having them as mentors appears especially significant when it comes to the creative development of other creative women (Hirschman 1989; Bourne & Ozlilgin 2008; Mallia 2009; Grow & Broyles 2011).

# FACTORS RELATED TO WOMEN LEAVING ADVERTISING CREATIVE DEPARTMENTS

## POWER DISTANCE

The power distance is very clear to these women. They see it in their salaries, which are less then men's (Mallia 2009; Pueyo Ayhan 2010; Grow & Broyles 2011). One American simply aid, '*We're still low paid for what we do.*' Further, they see it in how their time is valued – or not. They see it in the industry awards they rarely receive (Jordan 2009; Mallia 2009; Pueyo 2010; Grow & Broyles 2011). They see it in their everyday experiences. As a Spaniard said, '*You have to swallow many things.*' While an American commented, '*You need to stop looking*

*at yourself as a woman and they'll (men) look at you as a good creative.'* As the literature demonstrates and Nixon and Crew so aptly express, there is 'a considerable block to women's capacity to succeed' (2006, p. 246). That block reflects the unequal distribution of power in advertising creative departments and strongly implies reasons for leaving.

## INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS COLLECTIVISM

When these creative women initially came into the industry, and as they rose through the ranks, they clearly had a sense of collectivism drawing them towards a desire to be part of the creative in-group. However, as women advanced and observed colleagues, female and male, that sense of collectivism begins to shift towards individualism. The shift appears to be driven in part by the sexist experiences some of them had and/or which they observed, which has also been discussed in the literature (Nixon & Crew 2006; Martin 2007; Dutta 2008; Hernandez *et al.* 2008; Gregory 2009; Mallia 2009; Pueyo 2010). It also appears to be driven by their desire for a work/life balance that they often don't see (Mallia 2009; Grow & Broyles 2011). As one American commented, '*If someone is going to leave because they have family obligations, I hope that if an agency really wanted them they would find a way to keep them, male or female.'* While a Spaniard said, '*If you want to be creative and want to be a mother, it's inconsistent.'* The family factor appears to impact creative women more than it impacts creative men (Mallia 2009; Roca & Pueyo 2011), most of whom '*have stay-at-home wives'*, according to most of the women. Despite this, many American women saw the issue as impacting men too, especially the young men. '*If you can make a workplace into a family friendly workplace for women, I think that you will find happier and more productive men as well,'* said an American. It appears that, for Spanish women, the issue of children and family may be more salient than for the American women. Recall the Spanish women's discomfort with sharing feelings of discrimination. Additionally, perspectives on motherhood may be influenced by the more 'machismo' Spanish culture. Yet, over and over the authors heard the women speak of wanting flexi-time, the ability to work from home, and many, especially the Americans, spoke of the desire for onsite daycare. Across the board and over the course of their careers, creative women tend to shift from collectivism to individualism.

## GENDER DIMENSIONS

Gender issues are at the heart of this study. So, too, do they appear to be at the heart of why women leave creative (Nixon 2003; Martin 2007; Dutta 2008; Hernandez *et al.* 2008; Mallia 2009; McLeod *et al.* 2009; Pueyo Ayhan 2010). After many years, these women have seen female colleagues come and go, and many believe that the sexist environment was one of the reasons their colleagues left. As one Spaniard put it, '*It is very clear to me now that I cannot compete.'* Looking at the literature, we are reminded that women, especially those in sexist environments, are confronted with the issue of gender identification (Carr 1998). Do they resist or conform to gender stereotype? For these women, it appears that neither offers a successful outcome (Carr 1998; Broyles & Grow 2008; McLeod *et al.* 2009). Rather, the challenging middle ground appears the most productive. As DiSesa says, 'It's okay to be decisive, courageous, and focused as long as we are also somewhat collaborative, nurturing, and empathetic' (2008, p. 211). Considering the more machismo Spanish culture, Spanish women may bump up against the politics of desire (Helstein 2003) and the male gaze (Mulvey 1989), though sometimes in backhanded ways. A Spanish woman explained it this way, '*There are so many little sexist jokes [bromita]. There's patronage there.'* This is not to say sexist jokes don't exist in the United States. They do. Yet some women thought gender bias was less

prominent than others or that it was mostly a thing of the past. '*I do not think that it is more masculine than feminine. I think that it is a legacy of the masculine past*,' said a Spaniard. While an American expressed it this way, '*I don't think there's blatant discrimination.'* However, for most of these women, gender dimensions loomed large in their experiences, and in the experiences of the women they saw leave creative departments.

## UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

Advertising is not for the faint of heart. These women clearly understood this. Yet, as much as they appeared to push themselves, they often saw other women end up in the pink ghetto – a place where uncertainly and inequity loom large (Kleiman 2006; Mallia 2009; Grow & Broyles 2011). Further, these women's desire for less stress and a work/ life balance appears to mitigate their willingness to perpetually deal with the ambiguity and uncertainty of working in creative (Mallia 2009; Grow & Broyles 2011). The stress that comes with ambiguity and uncertainty, coupled with the excessive travel and long hours, wore on them and their colleagues that left. For some women, meshing the gender dimensions with the daily ambiguity of creative life led to creating exit strategies. '*We like things to always agree. I think that is a weakness of women,'* said a Spaniard. Looking back at the Spanish women, there are some striking demographics to note that suggested deeper gender issues. The oldest Spanish woman was 12 years younger than the oldest American women. Further, one year after this study was completed, one-third of the Spanish women were no longer employed at agencies, while all the Americans remained employed. For Spanish women, it appears that uncertainty and ambiguity are even more pronounced, leaving them preparing exit strategies at much younger ages.

## LONG- VERSUS SHORT-TERM ORIENTATION

While Spanish women may have prepared their exit strategies earlier, it is clear that a short-term orientation is on the radar of most creative women not long after they enter the profession. Recall their desire for a work/life balance, along with the increased uncertainly that they appear to face, causes many women to eventually shift their orientation to personal stability and happiness. Said a Spaniard, '*At a certain age you have to leave to become a mother and that's it.'* For as much as advertising might sell happiness, it's not an industry that promotes happiness within its own ranks.

Spence's (1974) signalling theory helps frame significant implications within this research. As has been discussed, there are few women in creative and those who are there appear to leave in strikingly high numbers (Klein 2000; Nixon 2003; Mallia 2009). At the same time, just as signalling theory suggests (Spence 1974), there is the tendency for creative directors to hire and retain in their own image (Ibarra 1992; Pritchard & Morgan 2000; Foster 2003; Nixon & Crew 2006; Gregory 2009; McLeod *et al.* 2009). This leaves fewer and fewer role models for aspiring young female creatives. Further, as Bourne and Oziligin (2008) suggest, organisations where gender bias is not addressed are at risk of losing female employees. As one American stated, '*It takes 30% of an average salary to hire and retrain a new employee.'* Now consider the fact that one third of the Spanish creative women were no longer employed one year after these interviews were completed. Then consider that the oldest Spanish woman in this study was 12 years younger than the oldest American woman. It seems to be a costly, unending cycle that appears to be institutionalised.

# IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Reflecting on the results of this study in the context of the literature, it appears that there is a global advertising creative department culture – and it's clearly masculine. That said, there are also cultural overtones. The Spanish creative woman apparently experience gender bias more acutely, perhaps influenced by the more machismo Spanish culture. The American creative women, on the other hand, appear to have internalised the American mythology of meritocracy, making them a bit more willing to stick it out and be brave. Nonetheless, the differences between the experiences of the Spanish and American creative women still pale in comparison to the striking similarities. When comparing the experiences of the women in this study to the literature, it appears that there is a global culture of masculinity in advertising creative. While there are individual country-based differences, the masculinity in advertising creative departments is not a unilateral issue. Simply put, gender bias in advertising creative departments appears to be a global issue.

Gender bias in advertising creative departments matters significantly because it impacts more people than simply creative women. The issues that have been outlined in this study have implications for all creatives, men and women alike. In addition, the issues have implications for the people who manage creatives, for advertising agencies as a whole, for marketing managers and the brands they serve. Finally these issues have implications for consumers as well. For, without the voices of women and the taming of the hegemonic masculinity (Gregory 2009) that marks advertising creative, the advertising industry runs the risk of perpetrating stereotypes that have far-reaching and, by and large, negative consequences.

The findings suggest that change may come slowly. However, structural changes such as flexi-time, more opportunities to work from home and onsite childcare could be catalysts for retaining more women in creative. More importantly, these kinds of changes could create an environment that would enhance the workplace for all creatives – men and women, young and old alike. Structural changes can take place only when the issue of gender bias in advertising creative departments is acknowledged at an institutional level and subsequently addressed at the executive level. Candid discussions need to happen within the industry as well as inside agencies, and clients need to demand that more women participate in bringing the voice of their brands to the marketplace. Agency-by-agency commitments need to be made to retain female creatives with equitable pay working in creative environments that offer a level – albeit tough – playing field. Finally, institutionally there needs to be a commitment to seek an end to the apparent, though perhaps unconscious, practice of hiring and promoting in one's image, which often leads to hiring and retaining more men. This could begin with an industry-wide commitment to having gender-balanced judging panels for creative awards.

This study had some limitations. It focuses only on top women, to the exclusion of the perspectives of juniors and top male creatives. In addition, interviewing women from only one city in Spain was a limitation, as was the fact that there were more Spanish women than American women in the study. Ethnographic research could also have enriched this study, adding visual dimensions to help contextualise the words of these women. Finally, Spain and the United States represent only two countries. While they are global leaders in advertising

and culture, more research needs to be done to bring the insights of creative women from across the world to the fore.

Stepping into the future we recommend that there be more studies to inform pedagogical practices and illuminate constructive discourse for both practitioners and scholars, and for exploring the experiences of junior creatives and top men. Comparative studies, across age and gender, could be particularly insightful. We also suggest expanding this study to include more countries on more continents in order to gain a truly global understanding of the phenomenon under exploration. Finally, we believe ethnographic studies of advertising creative departments could provide richness, enhancing our understanding of the dynamics within advertising creative departments.

In the past, the norm was to remain quiet so as to not cause a stir, especially in terms of gender issues. But now this topic screams to be heard. It is our hope that this and other studies will make young professionals entering the advertising creative system more aware of what appears to be global gender biases within advertising creative departments. We also hope that this study, and others like it, will lead to creating an improved work environment, bringing more balanced and successful work for clients. Finally, we hope our work leads to changes that help create more hospitable, equitable and inevitably better creative departments for all creatives.

While it would be nice to think that the days of *Mad Men* are long past, it appears that Don Draper casts a long shadow. It is our hope that the advertising industry soon steps out of this shadow and into the light of equity – for women and men alike.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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