

# What Is Creative to Whom and Why? Perceptions in Advertising Agencies

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The authors apply recent advances in creativity theory to discover perceptual differences in the factors of strategy, originality, and artistry among creatives and noncreatives. It was found that current advertising position influences subjective perceptions of what constitutes creative advertising. Creatives tend to perceive advertisements as more appropriate if they are artistic, but account executives tend to perceive advertisements as more appropriate if they are strategic. The study also indicates that creatives have a distinctive preference for a strong originality component to strategy. To be original within the confines of a tight strategy is perceived as the most creative by advertising creatives. Account executives are so focused on strategy, they will often accept artistic advertisements as a substitute for truly original work. The authors consider future research implications of the study and its limitations.

CONSIDERING THE DISPROPORTIONATE ROLE creativity plays in advertising practice, research has not adequately addressed it (Stewart, 1992). Many call for more research on the advertising creative process (e.g., Zinkhan, 1993) and the opinions of agency creative personnel (Reid, King, and DeLorme, 1998). Although many assume creativity to be highly related to effectiveness—some would even argue they were the same things—creativity is still important in its own right. Therefore agencies spend a great deal of time and energy competing for creative awards (Polonsky and Walter, 1995). Creativity is a mission of the entire advertising industry, its *raison d'être*, but with only a handful of exceptions (e.g., Fletcher, 1990; Goldenberg, Mazursky, and Solomon, 1999; Johar, Holbrook, and Stern, 2001; Kover, 1995; Kover, James, and Sonner, 1997; Reid and Rotfeld, 1976; West, 1993; West and Ford, 2001), researchers know little about it.

Understanding why some advertisements are more creative than others is vital, but a fundamental and frustrating limitation is that perceptions of creativity differ depending on whom one asks.

Hirschman (1989) suggested creative differences depend on one's role within an agency. Creativity awards judges' perceptions of creativity differ from consumers' perceptions (Kover, Goldberg, and James, 1995). White and Smith (2001) noted some aspects of creativity perceptions of students, industry executives, and the general public differed based on their background, but not on their perceptions of originality. Industry executives were the most critical on advertising craftsmanship, and marginally so on advertising logic. Even copywriters and art directors differ in their perceptions of creativity (Young, 2000). To understand why some advertisements are more creative than others, we first need to understand why perceptions of creativity differ from person to person.

This article proposes a measurement framework to explain why perceptions of creativity differ from agency role to agency role. Applying an expanded version of the Runco and Charles' (1993) originality-appropriateness framework for defining creativity, it is shown that creativity *should* be different from person to person, yet at the same

time show *systematic patterns* that anchor the concept. Originality perceptions may not differ among agency roles, but some agency executives perceive appropriateness as strategy and others as artistry. An extended extrapolation of Hirschman's (1989) work on the agency roles within this new model enables a proposition that appropriateness should and does differ among advertising agency disciplines. Two agency disciplines to be examined closely are creatives and account executives. For creatives, finding original solutions within the strategic boundaries placed on their work affects their perceptions of creativity. For account executives, their focus on strategy sometimes leads them to settle for less than truly original advertising.

To explore these ideas, four research steps were followed. First, the established literature defining creativity was reviewed to provide an anchor for this research. Second, use of the academic literature alone did not lend as much insight as hoped, so the authors moved to qualitative methods to achieve a greater understanding of creative dimensions. Third, a questionnaire was developed and quantitative information was secured via a comprehensive empirical survey on 912 campaigns from 323 advertising executives in the largest advertising offices in New York and Detroit. Fourth, factor analysis was conducted to analyze strategy, originality, and artistry perceptions of both creatives and noncreatives for use in predicting subjective perceptions of creativity. Measurement models were developed to demonstrate the systematic differences in perceptions of creativity between creatives and account executives.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The originality-appropriateness framework of creativity

Some consensus in developing a definition of creativity has been achieved re-

cently. First, creativity researchers agree that at least one facet must be originality, novelty, or newness (Sternberg and Lubart, 1996). Second, creativity researchers agree that originality is not enough and that creativity is therefore multifaceted (Mumford and Gustafson, 1988). However, the question of what constitutes the second factor has been widely debated.

One suggestion is that creative products are novel and tenable or useful or satisfying to some group at some time (Stein, 1953), others define creative products as original and having worth or usefulness (Rothenberg and Hausman, 1976), and still others argue that the second facet should be related to problem solving, situational appropriateness, goal accomplishment (MacKinnon, 1965) or even value (Young, 1985). Although these second dimensions appear related, when operationalized, they again become varied. Summarizing these works, Runco and Charles (1993) proposed and tested a measurement model for creative outputs based on two variables: originality and appropriateness. Though other views are still being advanced (e.g., Mellou, 1996), the originality-appropriateness model has become the most widely accepted (Amabile, 1996; Kasof, 1995).

### What is more constant from person to person: Perceptions of originality or appropriateness?

Most researchers assume that what they define as the second factor of creativity is constant across all situations, but a detailed examination of the empirical literature suggests otherwise. A number of studies suggest that agreement for originality judgments are higher than those of appropriateness. The presumption made by these researchers is that the judges were not good, but, alternatively, judges may have been focusing on different situations.

For example, Amabile (1996) reports a series of studies and provides some evidence on the potential of individual and situational differences in defining creativity. This series of studies were designed to test her Consensual Assessment Technique (CAT) of creativity whereby judges view finished creative outputs and independently and subjectively rate the output's creativity. Amabile (1996) avoids the morass of the creativity definition debate by avoiding it entirely. If several judges agree that a creative output is creative, then it is. To validate her technique, she wanted to show that informed judges had high agreement across a variety of situations.

Although Amabile (1996) finds a high degree of agreement across several dozen studies, most are of "everyday" creative tasks like simple art designs, short poems or stories, or basic problem solving in which there is little latitude for differences in viewing some designs, poems, stories, or solutions as more or less appropriate. However, in a few studies, more complex creative tasks or heterogeneous judgment panels were used. In these situations, agreement on originality was still quite high, but other appropriateness related measures declined. In one study, professional artists' portfolios were evaluated and each judge was classified in one of the following categories as: a non-expert, expert professional artist, or an expert art historian. There were similarities in what was viewed as creative within groups, but significant differences were found among the groups. Though Amabile believes that lack of consensus means some perceptions of creativity are more valid than others, there may be another explanation.

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**If creativity is both an original and appropriate solution to a problem, then for high agreement on what is creative, judges have to agree on what is original and appropriate.**

and appropriate. Across a variety of heterogeneous groups, Amabile (1996), Runco and Charles (1993), and White and Smith (2001) have shown that observers with at least some basic knowledge or experience agree on what is original. But, groups of judges agreed less on what was appropriate.

Runco and Charles (1993) found that subjects are much more accurate in judging originality than appropriateness. They report some surprise at this but show that originality perceptions are less subjective than appropriateness. For originality, one only needs to recognize it is different, but for appropriateness, the judgments are what they refer to as more "subjective." That is, they note that for something to be inappropriate, it may violate conventional norms or logic, or develop its own logic or norms. This often holds true in the advertising industry, as agency clients possess specific appropriateness norms within their distinctive cultures.

The implication for advertising is that minimally informed judges can spot the original creative product, but appropriateness is contextual to the frame being used by the judge. That advertising executives can spot unusual advertising should be straightforward, but several authors have suggested that the perceived appropriateness of advertisements may differ from person to person.

**For advertising, do perceptions differ on what is appropriate?**

A number of researchers have explored differences in what is appropriate in ad-

vertising within agencies. Hirschman (1989) provided a detailed review of six different roles played in the creation of television advertisements. These roles include those of the product manager, account executive, copywriter, art director, producer, and commercial director. The first two roles are identified with advertising strategy development. The next two are associated with the creative production of an advertisement. The last two are production roles. However, each role is unique.

For example, Hirschman (1989) reports that account executives are focused on fulfilling the client's communications goals. These may include building brand awareness and creating favorable attitudes. The advertisement is viewed as a vehicle to execute a given marketing strategy to deliver a positive impression about the product to consumers. What an account executive would call an appropriate advertisement is one that is consistent with strategy. The two creative roles, however, shared a different communication goal for the advertisement. Their goals were to demonstrate their own creative talents and express their own aesthetic viewpoints. For the two creative roles, the advertising appropriateness is more associated with the artistic expression of an advertisement.

Other researchers express similar concerns over the lack of consistency in what is considered appropriate. Rothenberg (1994) provides an in-depth chronicle of the development of a single advertising campaign for Subaru of America during a stormy market period. Account execu-

tives viewed advertising strategy issues, such as product positioning, as what is appropriate. Media personnel saw appropriateness in the way media strategy was implemented to maximize impact, given a smaller media budget than competitors. Likewise, researchers tended to see appropriate advertising as that which is based on research and tests well on consumers. There were some commonalities among these three: account, media, and research personnel saw appropriate advertising as that which persuades the target consumer to buy, that is, advertising that is "on strategy." However, Rothenberg (1994) characterized creatives as indulging themselves in their own aesthetic tastes. To them, appropriateness was just as connected to their own artistic expression as it was to the client's needs, and at times, artistic expression won out. Views of what is appropriate advertising are so different that it is difficult to find examples where the characters involved agreed on what is appropriate. Even Rothenberg's (1994) characterization of consumers suggested that what is appropriate to a consumer is entertainment.

Kover and Goldberg (1995) detail other differences between account executives and creatives in what is appropriate advertising. Creatives see emotion as more appropriate than account executives. Because account executives play more of a boundary-spanning role between the client and creatives, they bear much frustration and grief over the advertisement when it is too far from the strategies envisioned by the client. The result is that creatives are stereotyped (often unfairly) by account executives.

Even within the creative services area, Young (2000) shows that art directors and copywriters differ in what they consider appropriate in advertising. Other researchers have pointed out that to consumers, appropriateness can take the form of en-

hancing their personal experience (Kover, Goldberg, and James, 1995) or being meaningful (Haberland and Dacin, 1992), which is often different from creatives' perceptions of what will connect with consumers (Kover, 1995). Additionally, clients and agency personnel also have different views of what is appropriate in advertising (Michell, 1984).

Both originality and appropriateness should both impact perceptions of subjectively defined creativity, yet what is considered appropriate varies from role to role within an agency. For account executives who tend to deal with clients and play the role of strategy gatekeepers in the agency, appropriateness takes the form of being "on strategy" with the advertisement. Likewise, media or research personnel should also perceive appropriateness as being "on strategy" because of their affinity to the client's point of view. However, the artistry of an advertisement should have an effect on the perceived creativity of advertising creatives. Originality should predict creativity for all agency employees, regardless of their role. Use of strategy in advertising should also predict creativity for account, media, and research executives, but artistry in advertising should predict creativity for creative executives.

#### QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Although the literature review has been instructive in the identification of some important themes of creativity theory, the authors wanted to further refine their expectations. Similar to other advertising creativity researchers, the authors employed qualitative research methods. Most marketing research texts (e.g., Malhotra, Hall, Shaw, and Oppenheim, 2002) recommend that if a literature search does not uncover enough material, then qualitative analysis is required. Kover (1995) and others have used qualitative methods in this

manner after exhausting the potential of the established literature. Likewise, Johar, Holbrook, and Stern (2001) did the same to explore other areas within gaps in the literature. Therefore, this research utilized qualitative methods to more closely specify relationships among originality, strategy, artistry, and creativity for different agency roles.

#### Exploratory research method and sample

Exploratory focus groups and interviews were held to probe these areas and to further elaborate on some of the differences discovered in earlier research such as the White and Smith (2001) study. The Amabile creative model was used as an initial guiding framework. Additionally, focus group findings, pretesting, and pilot survey reviews were conducted with practitioners, clients, and MBA students employed in advertising and related fields. This combination of exploratory research methods resulted in a variety of items for survey construction and later statistical analysis.

An exploratory qualitative study was initiated by conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups with creatives, account management, media, strategy, and IMC executives at various levels within advertising agencies. The interviews included four CEOs from the leading worldwide agency systems, (two in New York and two in Detroit), chief creative officers, creative directors, copywriters, art directors, executive vice presidents, managing directors, senior vice presidents, vice president account supervisors, and IMC digital account executives. This form of ethnographic interview method provided insight for the development of research variables. Once these common variables were identified in the first phase of qualitative research, multiple focus groups were structured to probe further into specific constructs with creatives, account manage-

ment, strategists, and media executives. Additionally, one of the authors worked for many years in the advertising industry in New York, Detroit, and internationally, which facilitated interpretation of jargon, scale development, and other subtle research nuances. Some interviews were conveniently conducted off-site to provide a more relaxed and uninterrupted atmosphere in a local restaurant, pub, loft area, or building lobby, as well as to ensure unbiased anonymity in a culturally acceptable location.

Four focus groups were conducted. The first focus group was comprised of participants from diverse agency areas, including creative directors, senior account management, media specialists, and strategic planners who had worked on major accounts typically across several agencies, both large and small. For example, the first group included the founding partner of a specialized creative "boutique" agency who worked closely with a large agency on a major food client on integrated marketing programs, as well as the creative director on a major national retail advertiser and two senior automotive account managers, along with others who had spent their entire careers in advertising agencies. A second focus group included an entire creative department with creatives who had worked and freelanced at several different agency offices, as well as on the client side on major national accounts in automotive, retail, consumer packaged goods, and financial services. Advertising account managers and directors comprised a third group, most of whom had a minimum of 10 years of experience on diverse product categories. Finally, a fourth focus group was held at the offices of a major agency with a creative team consisting of a creative director, senior copy writer, and senior art director who had experience in a wide array of product categories.

Although a variety of questions were asked of the qualitative participants, all interviews and focus groups opened with the question, "What is advertising creativity?" In an effort to not introduce any potential bias, the originality-appropriateness framework developed from the literature was not presented to participants. However, research subjects were probed during follow-up interviews to determine if the constructs applied.

### Exploratory findings

When asked to explain advertising creativity, many respondents frequently offered the three constructs of originality, strategy, and artistry as definitions. Of these constructs, the latter two were classified as different kinds of appropriateness. Participants used a variety of descriptions for each of these, with the highest number of offerings for originality. Words like *edgy*, *breakthrough*, *different*, *daring*, *visionary*, *innovative*, *risky*, *extreme* were commonly used for originality.

The first focus group was mixed with account, media, research, and creative executives, but this inhibited the more open and unreserved discussions that followed in the subsequent groups and interviews. It was quickly determined that in most cases, when in a conference room setting, creatives were more prone to allow the "account guy" to run the meeting, only offering their perceptions when probed. Additional break-out interviews were conducted in the actual creative departments, where participants spoke more openly and did not hold back their frank views about creativity. In fact, most respondents insisted that the most original work "rarely, if ever, made it out of [their] offices." Account executives were proud of this, and creatives were not, but both agreed that creativity was more than originality.

One notable interview quote was "it is not the size of the budget that drives

creativity, it is the willingness of the client to take a risk and believe in our work, if they hold back, we hold back!" Another key comment was that "it is clear that the management at this agency supports pushing extreme creative concepts, while other agencies that I have left talk a good game, but then wimp out when it comes to taking a stand." Perception of agency culture and support for original work became recurrent themes from respondents.

If advertisements exhibit strategy, participants referred to this aspect of creativity as being *on strategy*. They also regularly reinforced the strategic focus of advertising as equated to selling. Other strategic themes included advertising as "problem solving for the client," or as "the substantive benefit element of the advertisement." A CEO with extensive international experience drew a detailed flow chart and notes illustrating:

Some ideas either make it all the way to the top of the client hierarchy, or they get stifled at various brand management levels in the firm. The key notion is for senior management to provide clear strategic direction early on, then allow the creatives to do their job, sink or swim . . . that is when everyone wins, especially the client. Until you have been in the trenches with them [the client], you should not be running a worldwide ad agency and that is how to win agency of the year working as a team with the client!

Several participants used the phrase "doesn't do it for me," and upon further probing the "do" part clearly referred to selling. That is, the viewer saw an advertisement as original, or even artistic, but that the selling connection appeared to be missing. The account and media executives tended to place scrutiny in this area with one quote of "how can we sell some-

thing if we don't ask them to buy it?" Another point shared was that "we know that we have to move the product and if the creative is too far off and misses the mark, we are the first to hear about it!" Some media respondents felt that they could play a far greater role in the creativity of the entire campaign if they were brought in at an earlier date to interact during the process.

Artistry was frequently mentioned as being related to creativity, but routinely in a disparaging manner. Linking artistry and creativity seem to be something "other people" did, but they themselves did not. For example, one participant, an account executive, referred to artistic work with the pun "I-candy": it was pleasing to the eye, but selfishly artistic of the creative (the I) who produced it. Even creatives looked at linking artistry with creativity as a "negative." Frequent diatribes were delivered concerning fellow creative directors "run amok" with artistic content that was neither original nor strategic. Both account and creative executives disliked the "beauty pageant" approach to advertising creativity, but acknowledged that many may hold such views in private. To paraphrase the comments of one creative, "yes, wouldn't we all just love to be hanging in art museums or to be raking in the big bucks in Hollywood; most of us here couldn't survive as artists or writers, so we make ads . . . and some day maybe our ship will come in before we are all dead." At least, "we still get to do some nice locations for commercial shoots, not everything is computer generated yet!" Most creatives took a more optimistic approach commenting on how they actually "get paid to do what they love" and they do not even have to dress up (in an uncomfortable suit) either!

It is suspected that the lack of acceptance of artistry may be the result of creatives posturing in front of account

## **Creatives appeared to have a love-hate relationship with the boundaries imposed by strategic considerations on advertising.**

executives, but even when separated, the same themes prevailed. It may have something to do with their career choices and the need to differentiate themselves from the purely artistic realm, as evidenced by earlier comments and quotes. Many clearly distinguish between commercial creativity and artistic creativity, possibly because they decided to “sell-out to work in the ad business, leaving their artistic side in order to function in the real world.” Creatives routinely did not report accepting artistry as part of creativity. It could be that creatives may not be aware of artistry’s effect on creativity. Although there was a great deal of uniformity on what participants called creative, there were two noticeable differences among agency groups.

### **Creative executive differences**

Creatives appeared to have a love-hate relationship with the boundaries imposed by strategic considerations on advertising. They liked being left alone to do their creative work and did not want interference from other groups. “Everybody wants to be *in* creative, but few *are* creative,” commented one junior creative executive. Creatives appreciated it when clients allowed them room to explore original ideas, but simultaneously felt there was insufficient challenge unless their work was guided by a tight strategy. Several creative executives expressed concern that when clients directed them to merely “be creative” that meant that the client had no idea what problem was to be solved by advertising, thus presenting a quan-

dary creatives usually solved by being highly conservative or uncreative with a basic strategy and unoriginal execution. One agency account executive vice president summed up many participants’ views when he noted:

There is nothing more terrifying to a creative than for an account person or client to simply say “go make me an ad and do anything you want to do!” Although creatives have a love-hate relationship with boundaries, the fact is that a strategy on a brief provides parameters and gives them latitude to define the opportunity, like a canvas for a painting. Great strategy provides a differentiation approach, a key insight, beyond the basic product, a hook to hang their work on that they can feel good about!

Alternatively, an obscure, poor, or absent strategy may signal a negative direction for the creative that could hinder the creativity of their output. A New York creative respondent chuckled that “they know better than to not give me anything [i.e., no strategic brief], when that happens, I go out of my way to do the wildest, most shocking, no-holds-barred stuff and then they get scared . . . a strategy appears the next morning!” His creative partner said to “ignore him because he has ADD, attention or ad deficit disorder and can never finish anything anyway . . . I am the cleanup crew!” As this interaction shows, it often becomes a cat and mouse game when the strategy is an issue.

Some creatives had spent time in client boundary spanning roles, often at smaller advertising agencies. There, they engaged in much more client exposure and appeared to be more sensitive to the client and account environment, as well as the strategy. For example, when creatives were able to interface directly with the client in a meeting, there was greater realization of the roles and actual understanding of the strategy, which may be a learning curve. It may be that many creatives are so buffered from the creative presentation and approval process that miscommunication complicates matters, especially when the creative product faces rejection.

Something in addition to or beyond artistry-originality may be at work with creatives. Within the originality-appropriateness framework, this is interpreted as an interaction between originality and strategy. When advertising is highly strategic and original, the greatest creativity is displayed. This may be more often the case for a new account, new product, or new client initiative, as compared to “business as usual.” However, when advertising is not original, sticking to the strategy often results in the most uncreative advertising.

Therefore, an interaction is proposed. For creatives, when advertising originality and strategy are both high, creativity is perceived to be at its highest, but when advertising originality is low and strategy is high, then creativity is perceived to be at its lowest.

### **Account executive differences**

Although account executives viewed themselves as the advocates for the client and the client’s strategy inside the agency, they also appeared to tolerate artistry the most. One even went so far as to define advertising creativity as a “[strategy] disciplined art form.” Using the euphemism of “craft,” several account executives

suggested that artistry played a role in creativity when originality was lacking. Craft made for an entertaining advertisement that was at least acceptable to audiences who might then be more open to the clients' strategy. Account executives lament that the creatives are too protected and buffered from the client's strategy orientation. In reality, account executives "are the ones who catch hell from the client and then have to walk on broken glass to fix it in some politically correct manner to not offend anyone or rock the boat." Originality was clearly valued and doing something that "hadn't been done before" was most important, but it was acceptable to rehash other ideas, if the clients' story can be told well. This is not to say that account people thought artistry was desirable—they were frequently the most disparaging of it—but they grudgingly accepted it as creativity if it could further the strategy.

Within the originality-appropriateness framework, this suggests that account executives may perceive creativity to be a function of artistry only when originality is already lacking. Thus for account executives, when originality is low, the more artistic the advertisement the more it is perceived as creative, but when originality is high, artistry has no effect.

#### QUANTITATIVE METHOD

In the quantitative phase of the research, a survey instrument was devised using items identified by the qualitative phase participants, the previous literature review, and anchored primarily on the originality-appropriateness scheme and the Amabile model (1996). The 13 items developed for this study were part of a larger questionnaire that also probed other advertising issues. This was then administered to 323 individuals in advertising agencies.

#### Scale development

The authors followed Churchill's (1979) recommendations for scale development. As noted above, the construct domains were derived from the literature while the specific items were developed based on focus group findings. The three scales for originality, strategy, and artistry were evolved and tested based upon the commonly used words and phrases coming out of the qualitative phase. In addition, an initial pilot version of the survey was presented to the last two focus groups to explore and solicit feedback on specific items.

Each of these three scales had four items. All 12 items used an initial stem: "Compared to other advertisement/campaigns with the same media approach, this advertisement/campaign was. . ." Each item differed in the ending for that phrase. The originality item endings were: *original*, *unexpected*, *novel*, and *different*. The strategy item endings were: *"on-strategy," a good fit with the client's strategy, an appropriate strategy for the client and built on good strategy*. The artistry items were: *able to stand on its own as art, could be appreciated as a work of art, emotionally expressive, and artistically sophisticated*. The response scale was a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" (-3) to "Strongly agree" (+3). The midpoint was labeled "Neither" (0).

For the overall measure of creativity, the Amabile (1996) scale was employed. She recommends the use of a single item scale that encourages subjects to use their own subjective definition of creativity. The wording used here was: "Using your own subjective definition of advertising creativity, relative to other ad/campaigns with the same media approach, how creative was this ad/campaign?" The response scale was a 5-point scale ranging from "Far less than average" (1) to "Far above average" (5) with the midpoint labeled "Average creativity" (3).

Following Churchill (1979), a pilot test of the survey was conducted with another 30 advertising creatives and managers. Jargon and specific words were pretested and retested for consistency across different agency areas. Additionally, 53 MBA students, 18 of whom worked at leading agencies, completed pilot questionnaires, as part of an MBA course in advertising management. These subjects were then debriefed to confirm if the questionnaire probed constructs as expected. At this point there was no evidence of the need for additional scale purification. The industry pilot test and MBA responses were not included in the main study.

#### Data collection

The objective was to obtain data from a broad spectrum of accounts from the major full service, traditional agencies that represent "best practice" within the industry. One limitation on the data collection came from the length of the questionnaire that requested information on the subject's last three campaigns and required an average of 25–30 minutes to complete. The length and detail of the questionnaire precluded a mail campaign to a national sample of agency employees. Instead, a personal intercept method was chosen to personally distribute the survey to advertising employees during office hours with full management support, approval, and endorsement. This emphasized the personalized approach taken and implied that both their individual and agency cooperation were critical. Because of the intensive nature of the on-site personalized data collection method used, two significant urban locations with major advertising dollar expenditures, tier one *Fortune 500* client representation, media presence, and client diversity were selected for heavy canvassing.

The most obvious city for the collection of data was New York, the heart of the

advertising industry and by far the United States' leading advertising location in both total billings and creative reputation. As a counterpoint to New York, Detroit was chosen as a survey market. Although Detroit is typically ranked the third or fourth largest U.S. advertising city by total billings, it is often perceived to be not very creative. This may be attributed to an unfair perception that it is dominated by automotive clients, when in reality a diverse base of retail, packaged goods, services, food, and other accounts are serviced by the Detroit offices of several worldwide agencies. As a growth strategy, many Detroit agencies recently consciously decided to diversify their client base beyond automotive. Together, it was expected that the two cities would provide a wide variance in creativity yet have accounts fairly representative of total advertising spending. Other researchers have paired New York and Detroit samples (e.g., Kover, 1995).

For the stratified sampling frame, *Crain's* lists of the top 20 agencies offices in New York and the top 10 agency offices in Detroit were used. The rationale is that the top 20 advertising agency offices in New York account for 77.1 percent of total billings for the New York market and the top 10 offices in Detroit account for 78.5 percent of total billings for the Detroit market, which provides consistency. Thus, this stratified sampling frame should represent the major agencies accounting for the majority of advertising spending originating in these cities.

The 30 agency offices selected were personally contacted through existing relationships with management and invited to participate. Of these agency offices, 19 agreed to participate in the research study, 9 in Detroit and 10 in New York.

Several agency-approved data collection approaches were utilized depending on the timing, situation, and agency office location sampled. Consistency of sam-

pling technique was maintained systematically in that a criterion for participation was that executives from any area who completed a survey must have had direct experience on at least three client campaigns for either the same or different product or brand. In most cases, a management email was distributed and flyers were posted throughout the office notifying potential participants of the creativity study. A specific time was selected such as lunch, and often a free food incentive was provided to enable participants to multitask during a lunch period and fill out the survey without having to leave the building. For some New York agencies, bagels or donuts were offered during breakfast portfolio sessions or on Friday casual days, which were deemed as more convenient for the respondents. Late afternoon data collection sessions were also held for those who could not attend the morning time periods.

In other agencies, the authors were also allowed to go from office to office and floor to floor personally requesting employees to fill out questionnaires either before, after, or during an assigned time frame. Usually a senior agency employee escorted the researchers providing introductions. At times, questionnaires were to be collected and returned by a contact administrator or "champion" who then forwarded them by mail to the authors. In a few cases, the champion was a public relations executive inside the agency at a fairly high level or the key creative administrator.

Given the objective of obtaining a "best practice" advertising agency sample, the on-site personal intercept method generated the best realistically practical representation of such agency employees. In retrospect, this method yielded a much better response rate of the given agency populations than widely used mall intercepts of general consumers. Respondents were only told that the subject of the

survey was "advertising creativity in the real world" prior to filling out the questionnaire, although many wanted to partake in detailed discussions afterward.

### Sample characteristics

Respondent demographics are listed in Table 1. Agency experience appears to be fairly broad and is not concentrated in any single industry with employees reporting experience in three or more campaigns in several product categories.

Of the 912 campaigns, 609 reported the product category. Because of the agency practice of exclusivity, identification of this item was considered a sensitive question for agency employees, due to client disclosure. Several agencies did not allow us to collect this information and in some cases, identification of product categories was marked as "optional." The distribution of product categories in the sample suggests it is closely proportionate of total advertising spending, as compared to *Advertising Age's* (1999) Product Category Total U.S. Ad Spending in 1998, and therefore is fairly representative. The sample has only slightly higher than expected frequencies for package goods such as cosmetics, beverages, and candy, reflecting the New York advertising client market. Slightly lower frequencies were observed on travel, insurance, real estate, retail, and direct mail advertising. These advertisements are often produced in-house using newspapers advertising slicks, and thus total spending may not reflect agency activity for these categories. Overall, the differences between spending and the sample were not statistically large.

## RESULTS

### Confirming scales for originality, strategy, and artistry

To assess measures of strategy, artistry, and originality, these scales were factor



**TABLE 1**  
Sample Demographics

Demographic Variable	Levels	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	173	53.9
	Female	148	46.1
Age	18-24	32	10.0
	25-34	147	45.9
	35-44	83	25.8
	45-54	50	15.6
	55-64	7	2.2
	65+	1	.3
Highest level of education	High school	5	1.6
	Some college	16	5.0
	Associate degree	7	2.2
	Creative design/art program	12	3.7
	Bachelor degree	231	72.0
	Graduate degree	50	15.6
Have you ever worked on the client side?	No	285	89.6
	Yes	33	10.4
Rank	CEO/COO	5	1.5
	Executive vice president	12	3.7
	Managing director	6	1.9
	Senior vice president	28	8.7
	Vice president	33	10.2
	Director	53	16.4
	Manager	71	22.0
	Executive	78	24.1
	Specialist	24	7.4
	Other	13	4.0
Area of current position	Account/strategy	115	35.6
	Creative	127	39.3
	Media/research	40	12.4
	Other	41	12.7
City	Detroit	155	48.4
	New York	165	51.6

(continued)

**TABLE 1 (cont'd)**

Demographic Variable	Levels	Frequency	Percent
Number and percent reporting experience with three or more campaigns in . . .	Consumer package goods	155	48.0
	Automotive/vehicles	147	45.5
	Consumer durables (excluding autos)	55	17.0
	Retail	130	40.2
	Restaurant/food service	70	21.7
	Financial services or banking	105	32.5
	Other services	51	15.8
	Business to business	86	26.6
	Telecommunications/technology	93	28.8
	Other	34	10.5

\*Total sample = 323, frequency differences are attributable to missing item data.

analyzed using an oblique confirmatory rotation, procrustes, available in SAS (see Stewart, 2001 for details of confirmatory mode factor analysis). Prior to rotation, the variance explained by the three factors was 73.0 percent. The rotated loadings shown in Table 2 support the hypothesized structure. Therefore, measures of strategy, artistry, and originality were constructed by summing the items. A summary of these new measures is presented in Table 3.

#### Predicting subjective creativity

Strategy, artistry, and originality measures were then used to predict the single item scale of subjective creativity. The variables used in these analyses were the measures for strategy, artistry, and originality, plus their squared terms and interactions. The final model for each area was selected using Mallows's  $C_p$  statistic. The four final models are presented in Table 4. All models are significant ( $p < .001$ ) and

**TABLE 2**

#### Rotated Factor Pattern for Strategy, Artistry, and Originality

**Compared to other advertisement/campaigns with the same media approach, this advertisement/ campaign was . . .**

	Strategy	Artistry	Originality
"on-strategy"	.804	-.054	.017
a good fit with the client's strategy	.845	-.061	.045
an appropriate strategy for the client	.840	.092	-.073
built on good strategy	.773	.080	.009
able to stand on its own as art	.004	.971	-.124
could be appreciated as a work of art	-.092	.988	-.073
emotionally expressive	.174	.619	.093
artistically sophisticated	-.031	.686	.234
original	.090	.054	.764
unexpected	-.056	-.015	.944
novel	-.023	.095	.802
different	-.013	-.009	.920
Eigenvalues after eliminating other factors	2.30	1.42	1.47
Eigenvalues after ignoring other factors	3.50	4.77	5.01

**TABLE 3**  
Summary of Measures for Strategy, Artistry, and Originality

	Number of Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Cronbach's Alpha
Strategy	4	7.81	3.95	-12	12	.832
Artistry	4	2.61	5.38	-12	12	.870
Originality	4	3.28	5.73	-12	12	.905

fit the data well with  $R^2$ s ranging from 43.7 to 58.4 percent.

For those in creative positions, both artistry and originality had significant

and positive effects ( $p < .001$ ). Using standardized coefficients as a guide, these variables also had the largest effects. This confirms that for creatives artistry

and originality impact perceptions of creativity.

For those in account/strategy, media/research, or other positions, both strategy

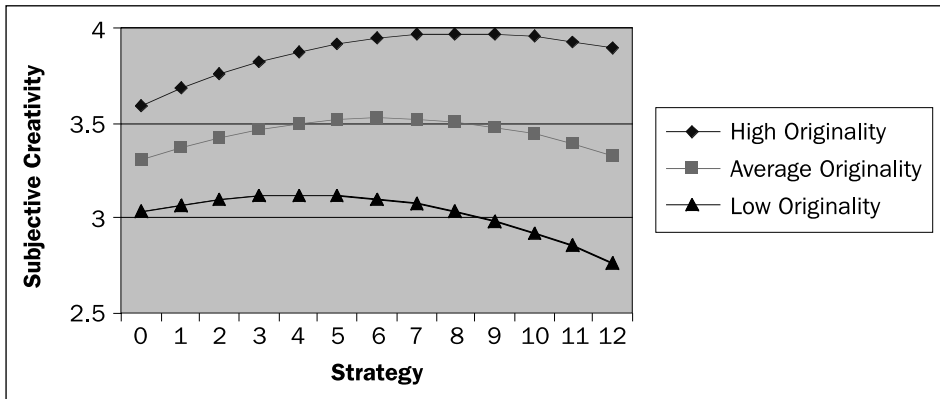
**TABLE 4**  
Effects of Strategy, Artistry, and Originality on Subjective Creativity by Current Position

	Current Creative Position		Current Account or Strategy Position		Current Media or Research Position		Other Current Position	
	Unstandardized	Standardized	Unstandardized	Standardized	Unstandardized	Standardized	Unstandardized	Standardized
Intercept	3.01		2.83		2.92		2.61	
Strategy	.052*	.213	.047***	.205	.057***	.281	.017***	.322
Strategy <sup>2</sup>	-.006**	-.293						
Artistry	.049***	.299	.045***	.279				
Artistry <sup>2</sup>								
Originality	.046***	.291	.047***	.307	.076***	.473	.090***	.465
Originality <sup>2</sup>			.004**	.204				
Strategy × artistry								
Strategy × originality	.005**	.265						
Artistry × originality			-.003*	-.154				
Strategy × artistry × originality								
$R^2$	.584		.457		.437		.450	
Overall $p$	.0001		.0001		.0001		.0001	
Number of campaigns	373		321		106		112	

\*\*\* $p < .001$

\*\* $p < .01$

\* $p < .05$



**Figure 1** Predicted Effect of Strategy on Creativity at Three Levels of Originality

and originality had significant and positive effects ( $p < .001$ ). For the media/research and other positions, these two variables were the only significant effects, and their standardized coefficients are large. In each of these cases, originality had more of an impact than strategy. For account/strategy positions, originality also had the largest effect, but strategy had a more modestly sized effect. This confirms that for noncreatives, originality and strategy impact perceptions of creativity.

However, the models for creative and account/strategy positions both had additional terms significant at  $\alpha = .05$  or lower, so additional analysis was required to understand their full meaning. Because directly interpreting interaction and squared term coefficients is difficult, this research presents graphs of the predicted net effects.

The strategy and originality interaction for creatives is considered first. Figure 1 plots three curves that show the predicted net effect of strategy on subjective creativity at three levels of originality. Thus, the graph incorporates the strategy, strategy<sup>2</sup>, originality, and strategy  $\times$  originality terms. The graph assumes artistry is average and strategy varies one standard deviation plus or minus its average. The curve representing the high level of originality is when

originality is one standard deviation above the mean and the curve representing the low level of originality is one standard deviation below the mean. This figure shows that when advertisements are both highly original and strategic, then they are also considered the most creative. When strategy is high and originality is low, creativity is at its lowest.

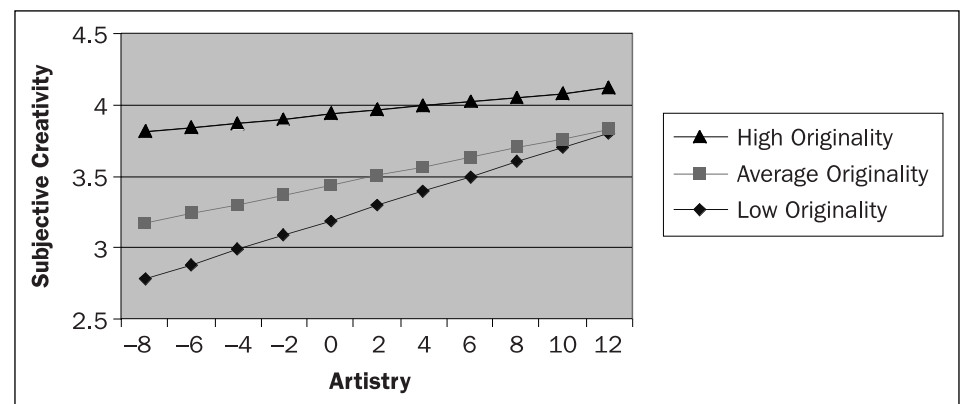
The artistry  $\times$  originality interaction for account/strategy positions is presented in Figure 2, which graphs the predicted net effect of artistry on subjective creativity at three levels of originality. Thus, the graph

incorporates the artistry, originality, originality<sup>2</sup>, and originality  $\times$  artistry terms. Strategy is held constant at an average level, but artistry varies one standard deviation plus or minus its average. The high originality curve assumes originality is one standard deviation above its mean and the low originality curve is one standard deviation below its mean. This figure shows that when originality is modest or low, artistry has a positive effect on creativity, but when originality is high, artistry has little or no effect.

**DISCUSSION**

**Apples, oranges, and creatives**

A frequently heard comment in advertising practice is: *Everyone knows that advertising agency creatives are different.* This study has confirmed that even their perspective of creativity is different, as compared to others in the same agency. It is no surprise that creatives are misunderstood, given the widely dispersed perspectives in creativity research in both the academic and practitioner realms. It could be that creatives are so different because they have been insulated more than other members of the agency. By being buffered from



**Figure 2** Predicted Effect of Artistry on Creativity at Three Levels of Originality

the daily account, budget, and client work, they may be more eager to work on major changes in strategic direction and perhaps less enthusiastic on more mundane creative executions. However, the fact that strategy is very important, along with originality and artistry, demonstrates the notion that creatives require strategy as stimuli in the form of a brief, as much as they need artistry and originality.

Just as Amabile (1996) and Runco and Charles (1993) found that there is typically high agreement on originality judgments, this paper finds that originality predicts subjective creativity consistently across all groups. However, the study also found a distinctive difference in how creatives privilege the originality component of strategy, often elevating it above artistry. Perhaps it is this combination of originality and strategy that provides the spark that Guilford (1963) views as the "aha" flash of insight, in which a new creative idea takes shape. Or, could it be that strategy facilitates the value dimension of creative products that Young (1985) referred to in his work? Kover and Goldberg (1995) discuss the differences in boundary roles that may contribute to the variance between creatives and account executives similar to the findings here in originality and strategy measures. In Sternberg and Lubart's (1999) confluence of components, creativity is hypothesized to involve more than a simple sum. Interactions may also occur between components, such as intelligence and motivation, in which high levels on both could multiplicatively enhance creativity. Likewise, high levels of strategy and originality, combined with artistry, result in breakthroughs in creative potential—an exponential effect that the creatives instinctually recognize.

#### **Account management and strategy**

The focus on strategy by account management positions them as the "client advo-

cate" within the agency and necessitates compromise. Account executives prefer original work but will settle for unoriginal but artistic "craft" in advertising to please the client. Such advertising is hardly breakthrough but protects account executives (much like an insurance policy) from dissatisfied clients.

A possible problem between account executives and creatives may be that each may perceive an artistic but unoriginal and nonstrategic advertisement as creative, but by different mechanisms. In this situation, creatives and account executives may be talking past one another and confusing themselves that they have produced something truly creative. For this reason, artistry may be highly ambiguous and more tied to aesthetics. A beautiful advertisement may be produced, but few, if anyone, outside this dyad would perceive it as creative.

#### **Limitations**

Some of the limitations of this study include the typical issues associated with survey research in terms of time and access. One of these is the retrospective nature of the questionnaire, which may highlight some campaigns more than others. The survey was conducted in person by the researchers on site at the agencies to ensure adequate response rates and efficacy. The length of the questionnaire may have deterred some individuals from participating. There was a time limitation since subjects took the survey during normal lunch periods at most of their respective agencies. Often food was provided in an effort to allow more time for participants to complete the questionnaire.

The sample is essentially an advertising agency convenience sample. However, it was carefully selected and stratified to reflect the top agencies in the designated markets and the relevant category spending profiles. Efforts were made to have

broad representation of agency departments in the study sample. However, uncontrollable factors that may have limited this included creative commercial shoot schedules, client meeting conflicts, vacation absences, and/or other seasonal holiday activities.

#### **Future research implications**

To researchers interested in understanding advertising creativity, it is frustrating to confirm what has been long suspected: perceptions of creative advertising differ depending on whom one asks. If judgments differ from area to area within advertising agencies, this dramatically restricts the ways in which researchers develop measures of advertising creativity that are valid across all possible respondents. Because valid measurement is typically the basis of insightful research, the lack of research progress on advertising creativity should not be surprising.

There are two approaches, however, that interested marketers may take to do future research in advertising creativity. The first is that prospective researchers who use Amabile's (1996) consensual approach to measurement need to use groups of subjects who share similar perspectives of creativity. Indeed, any questionnaire that uses the term "creativity" without being clear about what the researchers define as "appropriate" may be problematic. For example, in studies on small groups of creatives, it may be acceptable to use the consensual approach. Different studies on account executives may independently use the same methods. But, mixing the two groups may leave consensual creativity measures prone to aggregation bias.

A second approach would take creativity and break it down into its specific components. Originality and appropriateness could be measured independently, and a composite used as a measure of creativity. Alternatively, the context of the

advertising problem or a definition of appropriateness could be provided to subjects. This way, all subjects in a given study would be thinking about creativity in the same way and measures would be comparable and reliable.

There are positives and negatives to either approach. The first method allows subjects to use their own rich, complex, and detailed views of creativity but is not easily generalizable. The second is more generalizable but depends on an objective definition of what is appropriate. However, to understand creativity, there must be a starting point.

Twenty years of research finds that the social environment can have a significant effect on a person's level of intrinsic motivation at any point in time, and this certainly may extend to the socio-cultural environment evident in advertising agencies. A means-end work environment, "do this task as a means to the end of getting this reward," appears to have undermined creativity. Not only do advertising creatives regularly have their output evaluated quantitatively and feel very threatened by it (Morgan, 1984/1985; Vaughn, 1982/1983; Wells, 1983), they also face a variety of other dilemmas each day, as the nature of their business. Advertising careers offer little job security and agencies are often rife with politics, both of which would decrease the internal motivation necessary for truly creative work.

Some agencies may have discovered the formula and conditions for synergistically combining certain forms of extrinsic motivation (external reward) with intrinsic motivation, enhancing (or at least not undermining) the positive effects of intrinsic motivation on creativity. Their balancing act of keeping paying clients happy, building brands, increasing sales, and luring talented creative executives becomes incredibly complex. These paradoxes need to be understood more clearly

and additional research is invited and encouraged. **JAR**

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