The Advertising Creative Process: A study of UK agencies

Advertising agencies are hired to develop creative advertising for their clients. This paper explores the advertising creative process used by agencies when developing new creative work. Using in-depth interviews with 21 agency practitioners in the United Kingdom (UK) this study examines the stages that take place within the advertising creative process. Findings suggest the process is made up of a series of sequentially linked stages and illustrate how agencies validate advertising creative during development. The study provides insight into how agencies customise the process and identifies that agencies have different approaches to the level of client involvement. Implications for practitioners are discussed and areas for future research identified.

Keywords: Advertising, creativity, advertising creative process, advertising agency, pre-testing

Introduction

Creativity is seen to be the key to successful advertising. Industry experts recognise creativity can increase the effectiveness and efficiency by up to ten times (Priest 2014) and that after market share, it has the second largest impact on advertising profitability and long-term brand value (Dyson and Weaver 2006). The literature provides evidence of the influence creativity has on the effectiveness of advertising (Ang, Lee, and Leong 2007; Baack, Wilson, and Till 2008; Dahlén, Rosengren, and Törn 2008) and its impact on sales and profitability (Bernardin and Kemp-Robertson 2008; El-Murad and West 2004). While there is widespread recognition of the value of creativity in advertising, we have less knowledge about how creativity is operationalised (Stuhlfaut and Yoo 2013). Considering the importance of creativity, a better understanding of how creative is developed and the stages of the advertising creative process would be beneficial. This would contribute to the current literature and provide practitioners with greater insight into how agencies manage the advertising creative process.

This study makes three key contributions. First we expand our current knowledge of the advertising creative process and identify the stages that occur when creative work is developed in an agency. We extend our understanding of the individual stages that take place as well as identify the validation stages which occur. This is important as the practitioner literature suggests clients find it difficult to understand advertising processes (Feldwork 2012). Furthermore, studies identify this lack of client knowledge (Zolkiewski, Burton, and Stratoudaki 2008) and role ambiguity (Beard 1996) causes conflict with the agency which is seen to have a negative impact on the creative work (Johnson and Laczniak 1991; LaBahn and Kohli 1997). Hence a better understanding of the advertising creative process may be beneficial. Second, the

study illustrates how the advertising creative process is customised to meet clients' time constraints, major changes in clients' communication strategy and when the agency is pitching for new business. This extends our knowledge of the customisation that occurs and provides insight into why such variation exists. Third, we illustrate the different approaches agencies have towards client involvement in the earlier stages of the advertising creative process. This extends our knowledge of client involvement in the process and has a number of implications for practitioners.

The paper begins with a discussion of the nature of advertising creativity and a brief overview of creative process theories. We then review the existing advertising creativity process literature. Next we explain the methodology used and the research approach, including the sample strategy, data collection and the analysis technique used in the study. Findings are presented and results examined. The remainder of the paper discusses implications for both our knowledge of the advertising creativity process and advertising management. Future research topics are also discussed.

Background and review

What is advertising creativity?

There appears to be no universally agreed definition of advertising creativity (White and Smith 2001; Haberland and Dacin 1992; Helgesen 1994). The lack of consensus in the advertising literature is not surprising given the divergent definitions amongst creativity researchers in other disciplines (Amabile 1996). Indeed Amabile argues that despite the vast number of empirical

studies undertaken to explore the creative phenomenon, "we do not know enough to specify a precise, universally applicable definition of the term" (1996, p.3).

One of the main obstacles to developing a clear operational definition of creativity in any discipline appears to be its subjective nature (Amabile 1996). The notion that something is creative, to the extent that relevant observers judge it to be creative, is an important one. Similar to other disciplines, there is widespread recognition in the advertising literature that advertising creativity is a subjective phenomenon (Devinney, Dowling, and Collins 2005; Koslow, Sasser, and Riordan 2003; Kover, James, and Sonner 1997; West, Kover, and Caruana 2008).

While defining advertising creativity is problematic, several authors agree that advertising creativity should be seen differently from creativity in the 'pure' arts (Bell 1992; El-Murad and West 2004; Hirschman 1989) and have identified the need for advertising creativity to meet marketing objectives set by the client (Hackley 1998). The literature distinguishes advertising creativity from other forms of creativity by highlighting the need for it to be 'appropriate' (Haberland and Dacin 1992; Koslow, Sasser, and Riordan 2003), though previous studies have not considered what influence 'appropriateness' has on the process, or by whom 'appropriateness' is judged. Such an understanding would be valuable for both our knowledge of the advertising creativity process as well as advertising creativity itself.

Stage-based models of the creative process

The creative process has been defined as, "the sequence of thoughts and actions that leads to a novel, adaptive production" (Lubart 2001, p.295) and has been a focus of creativity research for over a century. Many authors have offered stage-based models of the creative process and much

of the seminal work in this area has provided four-stage process models (for a review of models of the creative process, see Lubart 2001).

Amabile (1996) argues the creative process should be seen as a five-stage process and suggests a fifth stage in the creative process called the *outcome.* This is the decision- making stage that is carried out following validation in stage four. She suggests the following five stages:

(1) *Problem or Task Presentation* (the problem can come from internal or external stimulus);

(2) *Preparation* (collection or reactivation of relevant information);

(3) *Response Generation* (searching memory and immediate environment to respond to problem);

(4) *Response Validation* (testing the possible response against knowledge and assessment criteria);

(5) *Outcome* (Decision to progress or terminate process). This fifth stage is a decision- making phase. This stage recognises that if the solution to the problem passes the validation stage the process is terminated. If the solution is not fully met, previous stages of the process may be revisited.

This additional stage of the creative process is an important one to consider when examining the advertising creative process as it suggests that a decision on the outcome will be made.

What do we know about the advertising creative process?

Creative process research in the advertising literature has focused on three main topics:

- idea-generation (Griffin 2008; Johar, Holbrook, and Stern 2001; Kover 1995; Stewart, Cheng, and Wan 2008; Stuhlfaut and Vanden Bergh 2012);

- agency decision-making systems (Mondroski, Reid, and Russell 1983; Na, Marshall, and Woodside 2009), and

- the sequence of stages that take place between the client and agency (Hill and Johnson 2004).

To date, however, there has been no exploration of how advertising agencies manage the creative process, and little is understood about the nature of the advertising creative process within an advertising agency.

The idea-generation literature has explored how advertising ideas are developed. Stewart, Cheng, and Wan (2008) describe a five-step creative process:

- problem identification;

- deliberate thinking;

- illumination;

- evaluation / verification, and

- implementation.

They argue that applying such a disciplined process to creative development helps channel creative ideas and is more productive than spontaneous approaches.

Griffin (2008) identified four dimensions to the creative development process used by students, and suggests that orientation for the work, approach to the problem, mind-scribing and heuristics are all used to construct creative ideas.

Another study, by Stuhlfaut and Vanden Bergh (2012), using advertising students' approaches to creative development identified a metaphoric structure to explain the creative

thought process. Their findings suggest that the creative process can be described through a metaphoric framework that includes: perception, movement and object manipulation.

Johar, Holbrook, and Stern (2001) explored the idea-generation process with agency creative teams, and identified that myths and symbolic meanings influence the creative process and creative ideas. Furthermore, research has identified that copywriters hold implicit theories about communications and these are drawn upon during the idea generation process (Kover 1995). These theories provide us with a better understanding of how creative teams work and the techniques they employ to develop new ideas, but offer little explanation of the stages that take place within an advertising agency when developing creative.

One stage in the advertising creative process that is seen by industry experts to be key is the client brief (Baskin 2010). Industry guidelines provide recommendations for best practice when developing briefs and argue the quality of the client brief determines the creative work delivered by the agency (Briefing an Agency 2011). In addition, guidelines suggest a good brief will speed up the development process and reduce costs. Recommendations include providing clear objectives, being concise and providing inspiration to the agency. The literature suggests that despite their importance, client briefs are often inadequate (Helgesen 1992; Koslow, Sasser, and Riordan 2006). In particular studies have identified a lack of clear definition of the target audience (Helgesen 1992; Sutherland, Duke, and Abernethy 2004). Furthermore, precise objectives and the campaign budget are often lacking (Helgesen 1992). These studies help us understand the importance of the briefing stage and illustrate the information required for successful advertising creative. Insight into what occurs at this stage would be beneficial and contribute to our understanding of the overall creative process.

Additionally, research has explored agency decision making systems (Mondroski, Reid, and Russell 1983; Na, Marshall, and Woodside 2009) which help explain the decisions taken by agencies when producing new advertising campaigns. Whilst studies have been undertaken within an agency context, and provide a valuable insight into the decisions that agencies make during creative development, they do not explain the stages that take place within the creative process. For example, they identify that clients assist in making decisions on strategy and creative ideas, but offer less explanation of the nature of client involvement at other stages of the process. Moreover, studies suggest that pre-testing is used by agencies to decide which creative route to present to the client, yet provide little explanation of other reasons for pre-testing (Na, Marshall, and Woodside 2009).

The advertising creative process has also been explored from the clients' perspective. Hill and Johnson (2004) identify a sequence of 12 stages, through which the advertising creative task is communicated by the client and responded to by the advertising agency. The study suggests that the process is a fairly standardised one and that most advertising is developed in a similar pattern of stages. Their Advertising Problem Delineation, Communication and Response (APDCR) model offers limited explanation of the pre-testing that occurs within the development process and suggests that pre-testing only occurs under very unusual circumstances and usually only to resolve conflict between stakeholders.

Prior studies also provide insight into the different levels of client involvement in the development of advertising (Haytko 2004; Hill and Johnson 2004). Haytko (2004) identified that while some clients were very keen to engage their agency in all aspects of their business, others sought to be less involved. Similarly, Hill and Johnson (2004) suggest clients have different patterns of engagement with the agency and those adopting a master-servant approach

had reduced levels of involvement. While industry experts advocate that better client agency relationships result in better creativity (A is for Alliances 2014), the literature identifies that not all clients wish to get involved in agency processes (Durkin and Lawlor 2001; Prendergast and Shi 2001). Furthermore, while studies identify that greater levels of creativity can result from access to top managers that are open to new ideas, involvement by top managers who are not open is seen to be harmful to creativity (Koslow, Sasser, and Riordan 2006). Similarly, other studies have found certain types of client involvement can be detrimental to creative outcomes (Haytko 2004; Sasser and Koslow 2008). For example excessive client involvement is seen to affect creative output (LaBahn and Kohli 1997).

Therefore, whilst current advertising creative process research has provided some useful explanations of how ideas are generated, what decision-making systems exist, the communication stages between agency and client, and the levels of client involvement in the process, our understanding of the nature of the creative process within advertising agencies is limited. There is scant evidence regarding how agencies manage the development of creative and, in particular, the stages that occur internally. We have less understanding about the richness and complexity of the process that takes place and the customisation that occurs in the development of creative work. To extend our knowledge of the advertising creative process there is a need to explore how creative is operationalized within agencies. This study aims to redress this gap by examining the stages of the creative process; from the point at which the need for advertising is identified, to the stage when the creative is approved to proceed to production. Undertaken within an advertising agency and using exploratory research methods, the study provides new insights on the nature of the advertising creative process.

Methodology

Research approach

An exploratory approach was chosen to investigate this topic. The study adopts a qualitative

methodology and uses semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the advertising creative

process.

Sample

The sample was drawn from United Kingdom (UK) based advertising agencies, using a non-

probability expert sampling strategy. The UK was selected because it has the largest advertising

spend in Europe (The Advertising Statistics Yearbook 2009) and because it is recognised as a

centre of best practice (Creative Industries Mapping Document 2001 2001). The target

population was account management within London advertising agencies. This group is

responsible for both liaison with the client and for co-ordinating the agency's creative process

(Hackley 1998; Sorrell 2014).   Their role within the agency therefore places them in a unique

position to comment both on the stages that take place within the agency during advertising

creative development and the nature of client involvement. While other members of the agency

team, such as those in the traffic department may be involved in the logistics of creative

development, they have limited exposure to the client and hence less understanding of client

involvement. Equally, advertising managers on the client side have limited exposure to the

internal processes of the agency (Hill and Johnson 2004).

  An industry census identifies the gender breakdown for account management in UK advertising

agencies to be 62% female, and 38% male (IPA Census 2012). While the IPA Census does not

provide age profiles for each department, their statistics identify that, for Full Service Agencies, 80% of employees are aged between 26 and 50, and the average age is 34 (IPA Census 2012).

The sample for this study was drawn from six different London advertising agencies. The size of the agencies ranged from 90 employees to 400, and all interviewees were from the account management discipline. A snowball sampling technique was used to access this hard to reach sample population (Brewerton and Millward 2001) and twenty one Account Managers/Directors participated in the study, with the sample size determined once a level of redundancy had been reached (Corbin and Strauss 2008). The sample was made up of 10 male and 11 females, with an average age of 34 years. Although there were more women than men in the sample this does not reflect the industry statistics for gender breakdown in account management and this is a limitation of the study that needs to be considered. The interviewees had an average of 10 years agency experience and, with the exception of one, all were educated to Bachelor's degree level or higher. Their clients included travel, Home/DIY, publishing, banking, service, Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG), financial, pharmaceutical, auto, retail and transport categories. Table 1 provides the sample profile of the participants.

Table 1: Profile of Sample

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Years working in current agency	Role	Client sector
AD1	Male	35	4	Senior Account Director	Travel
AD2	Male	38	2	Group Account Director	Home/DIY
AD3	Female	27	4	Campaign Manager	Publishing
AD4	Female	35	3	Account Director	Banking
AD5	Female	28	2	Senior Campaign Manager	Service
AD6	Female	26	2	Account Director	FMCG
AD7	Male	43	5	Group Account Director	FMCG
AD8	Female	30	1	Senior Campaign Manager	Service
AD9	Male	32	6	Global Account Director	FMCG
AD10	Female	26	5	Account Director	FMCG
AD11	Male	38	2	Managing Partner	Financial
AD12	Female	39	10	Client Director	Service
AD13	Male	36	3	Managing Director	FMCG
AD14	Female	36	3	Managing Partner	FMCG
AD15	Female	34	6	Account Director	Services
AD16	Male	36	3	Managing Partner	FMCG
AD17	Male	31	2	Account Director	Pharmaceutical
AD18	Male	33	1	Business Director	Auto
AD19	Male	29	4	Account Director	Retail
AD20	Female	35	7	Client Services Director	Transport
AD21	Female	37	1	Senior Account Director	Travel

Interview procedure

All the interviews took place in the agency offices in London and lasted between 51 and 136 minutes. A 'native categories' interview technique was adopted (Buckley and Chapman 1997; Harris 2000; Harris and Wheeler 2005) to avoid cuing the participants, and allowing for the creative development process to be explored in an open manner. The 'native categories' technique allowed for interviewees to explain the process using their own terminology rather than using categories gained from *a priori* knowledge (Harris 2000), hence affording new insights about the phenomenon to be gained. Interviewees were each asked the question, "In your own words, starting from the time that this advertisement was first mentioned, up to the time that the creative ideas went into production, can you tell me about how you developed this advertisement for the client?" Following Harris (2000), the process stage described by the interviewees was recorded using their own category name, forming a 'native category'. Each 'native category' was explored further with supplementary questions.

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts were sent to all interviewees for member checking to verify the accuracy of the data (Corbin and Strauss 2008). The data was analysed using NVivo8 software. A start list of codes was developed prior to analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994), which was added to when new themes emerged from the data. The analysis revealed that 24 'native categories' exist within the creative development process. The coding was reviewed by an independent researcher to ensure that the categories being used were logical and to ensure reliability. In line with Neuendorf (2002), the researcher validated the coding by measuring the level of agreement using a percentage agreement method.

An intercoder agreement was carried out on 10% of the data to validate the coding scheme and the percentage overlap between coders was 94%. The remaining 6% of data was discussed between coders and agreement was reached.

Findings

Interviewees described the advertising creative process as a series of distinct stages, as identified and recorded, for each interviewee, in Table 2. This highlights the stages that were most and least common. A total of 24 stages were identified, although not all of the stages were used by each interviewee (see Table 2). We outline each of these stages below.

| | **Account Management (AM) Interviewee** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
Advertising Creative Process Stage	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19**	**20**	**21**
1. Brand review-Need identification		1	1	1	1									1		1				1	
2. Develop Advertising Brief		1	1	1	1	1				1			1	1		1	1			1	
3. Client Brief to Agency	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
4. Agency internal de-brief: review of Client Brief	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
5. Strategy Presentation to Client							1			1											
6. Chemistry Meeting								1			1										
7. Write Creative Brief	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1		1		1	1	1	1	1	1
8. Creative Brief sent for Client approval	1	1	1		1			1	1					1		1	1			1	1
9. Creative Surgery	1		1						1								1		1		
10. Brief Creative Teams	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1		1	1	1	1	1	
11. Set up War Room				1								1									
12. Develop Creative Ideas	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
13. Creatives present Ideas to Creative Director	1		1	1	1		1	1		1									1	1	
14. WIP			1		1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1				1		1	1	
15. Qual ad pre-tests (Agency)												1	1								
16. Tissue Session	1			1	1	1	1					1		1		1		1			
17. Agency continues to develop creative	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1		1	1	1	1				1	1	1	
18. Agency presents creative to client	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
19. Client internal consultation with stakeholders	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
20. Creative route approved by Client	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
21. Qual ad pre-testing	1	1		1		1	1		1	1	1			1		1			1		
22. Client & Agency discuss revisions after pre-testing	1	1		1		1	1		1	1	1		1			1					
23. Quant ad pre-testing				1		1			1	1	1			1							
24. Proceed to production	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1				1	1	1		1	1	1	

Stage 1: Brand Review/Need Identification. In seven of the 21 cases, the advertising creative

process began with a brand review or the identification of a need for advertising (see Table 2).

Stage 2: Develop Advertising Brief. Eleven of the interviewees described how they had assisted

with the development of an advertising brief (see Table 2). While writing the advertising brief

was seen to be the task of the client, some interviewees described how they often assisted clients,

"*we're not meant to, but you always end up helping clients write their client briefs*" [AM14].

Stage 3: Client Brief to Agency. All 21 interviewees discussed being given a brief from the

client (see Table 2). While most discussed being given the brief at a meeting or via email, one

interviewee described how the client had provided an interactive brief and employed actors to act

the part of the target consumer; and another occasion, when the client had taken the agency team

on a speed boat.

Stage 4: Agency Internal De-brief/Review of Client Brief. With the exception of two

interviewees, all discussed a stage where the client brief was reviewed internally by the agency,

"*we went out and we talked to some consumers, we did a bit of desk research*" [AM16] (see

Table 2).

Stage 5: Strategy Presentation to Client. Two of the interviewees described where they had

presented the campaign strategy to the client before showing the client any creative work (see

Table 2). One interviewee explained that this was the standard agency process. For another

interviewee, however, this was unusual, "*it's not the way we normally work, but because it was such a mind-set shift from where the client's heads were at, we sort of thought if we show them the creative work immediately, it's going to kill the work*" [AM10].

Stage 6: Chemistry Meeting. In two cases, where the creative was being developed for a new business pitch, agencies described how they had organised a Chemistry Meeting with the potential new client (see Table 2). These meetings were seen as an important part of the advertising creative process since they allowed for both clarification on the client brief and an opportunity to develop the ad agency/client relationship: "*I mean fundamentally you won't get past first base if there's no chemistry. And pitches now that are handled by, you know, the big intermediaries in the UK, and the kind of global advertising industry, often will start - before you even get to pitch - you have to go and do a Chemistry Meeting*" [AM11].

Stage 7: Write Creative Brief. With the exception of three interviewees, all interviewees described how the agency had written a creative brief (see Table 2). In many cases this was described as a single page document and many agencies used a template format.

Stage 8: Creative Brief to Client for Approval. Agencies appeared to have different approaches to this stage of the process (see Table 2). Eleven of the interviewees described how they sent the creative brief to the client for approval, whereas others saw the creative brief as an internal document, "*the creative brief is normally for agency eyes only*" (AM10).

Stage 9: Creative Surgery. Five of the interviewees described how they held a Creative Surgery (see Table 2). This was a meeting with the agency's Creative Director to discuss the creative brief before it was briefed into the creative team to work on, "*we sit and have a surgery with our Creative Director, and he will go through the brief in quite a lot of detail. He'll concentrate a lot on the proposition and … he might pick bits out of it and say, you know, change this*" [AM19].

Stage 10: Brief Creative Team(s). With the exception of three interviewees, all described how the creative team had been briefed (see Table 2). There was a strong contrast in the way clients were involved in briefing agencies' creative teams. In some cases, only the agency briefed the creative team and clients were not encouraged to participate in what was seen as an internal meeting. For other agencies, clients were invited to attend and participate in the creative briefing session, "*we then do what we call an 'open briefing'. Now this is very unusual for most ad agencies. Most ad agencies will take a client brief, turn it into an agency brief, and then brief their creative teams, and come back to the client after a series of weeks with some work. Here, we like to work as openly and collaboratively with our clients as possible, because we've come to realise that obviously the whole sort of 'disappear-off-for-three-or-four-weeks-and-come-back-with-one-solution' is bound to not produce the most optimum results*" [AM14].

There were differences in the number of agency creative teams briefed. While the majority of interviewees discussed three or less teams, in one case, 20 teams were briefed. Interviewees revealed differences in the number of teams from different countries, "*we pulled in creative teams from around the world*" [AM11]. One interviewee explained how they adapt the briefing process when development time is very limited; for example, using a *Drive-By* brief

displayed in the agency for all creative teams to think about. Differences also existed in the style of briefing creative teams. Interviewees described using a range of creative techniques to engage the creative teams; one interviewee discussed how the agency had taken the creative team out for afternoon tea as part of the briefing [AM19].

Stage 11: Set up War Room. In two cases, a 'War Room' was set up in the agency for a new business pitch (see Table 2). These displayed creative work and were a reference point for the agency team working on the pitch. Interviewees explained how creative work was grouped into different creative territories "*what that meant is that anybody in the team; so, myself, who was leading the pitch; the Planner; the sort of the junior people in the team who may be costing things up; and the creatives and Creative Directors, could wander in and see the work*" [AM12].

Stage 12: Develop Creative Ideas. All interviewees described a stage where the creative team or teams, once briefed, then proceeded to develop creative ideas (see Table 2). No interviewees discussed any client involvement at this stage and none of the interviewees inferred that they themselves were engaged in generating ideas with the creative team either, "*yup, they (the creative team) go down the pub or wherever they may want to go, it's a mystery to me*" (AM7).

Stage 13: Present Ideas to Creative Director. Nine of the interviewees (see Table 2) discussed a meeting where creative teams presented their creative ideas to the Creative Director, "*initially the creative team will do an internal review with the Creative Directors within the agency, and they'll make any amends that they discuss, or changes they feel are appropriate*" (AM5). One

interviewee suggested that there may be several rounds of this stage, where creative ideas were discussed with the Creative Director, and revisions agreed and re-presented.

Stage 14: WIP Meeting. Twelve of the interviewees (see Table 2) described holding a 'WIP' or Work In Progress meeting, "*The WIP is the meeting that the whole team gets back together and collectively reviews where we're at. If, as in this case, we're on track, then everybody goes away and works again on their own, and we'll get back together*" (AM7). The creative work reviewed at this stage, was described as 'initial creative routes', with the creative work worked up in very rough format. Interviewees described the WIP as an opportunity for the agency team to agree which creative route or routes should be developed further.

Stage 15: Qual Pre-Testing (Agency). Three interviewees (see Table 2) described how qual pre-testing had been undertaken by the agency, before creative work was presented to the client, "*we did these focus groups, and we basically took some of our own sort of initial thoughts on which ways we might go; some were very risqué, some were quite safe, and some were very clichéd, and some were very sort of, a bit sort of naughty*" [AM13]. The purpose of pre-testing at this stage was to help identify which creative routes resonated with the target audience and which routes to take forward. Interviewees also explained that pre-testing provided external validation when the creative route was presented to the client.

Stage 16: Tissue Session. Nine interviewees discussed holding a tissue session with the client (see Table 2). The agency presented initial creative ideas and discussed possible creative routes and territories, "*a tissue session is where it's not formally presented, it's where you show work in*

progress, and you encourage discussion, and you encourage feedback, and it's not about

approval, it's about understanding where the agency is going and what sort of things you think

resonate" [AM04].

One interviewee described how tissue sessions were a recent addition to the agency's

creative process, "*the old fashioned process was the agency would disappear off for about three*

weeks, come back to the client with a highly polished solution, and it would usually be one,

maybe two, and they would sell the heck out of it to try and persuade the client that was the right

thing to do. What we've done now is change that way of working. We're not the first agency to

do it, but we went back to the client after about, I think, barely a week, like five working days of

creatives having a think on this. And we put up a load of solutions on the wall of their meeting

room, down in their offices, and we took the creatives with us and we took our Creative Director,

and we very loosely talked through ... 'your brief is making us think about these kinds of areas'"

[AM14].

Stage 17: Agency Continues to Develop/Revise Creative Ideas. Sixteen interviewees discussed

how the agency continued to develop the creative work after the client had provided feedback on

the work they had been shown (see Table 2). For some, this involved making minor revisions

based on client feedback, whilst other interviewees discussed how the agency had needed to look

at completely new creative routes.

Stage 18: Agency Presents Proposed/Revised Creative Route(s) to Client. All interviewees

described how the agency presented the creative route to the client (see Table 2), in some cases

presenting more than one route. The creative work was either approved, or the agency was asked to revise the work. In some cases, the agency had to re-brief the creative teams.

Stage 19: Client's Internal Consultation with Senior Management/Stakeholders to Agree Route/Revisions. All interviewees discussed how their client had consulted internal stakeholders to gain approval to proceed with the creative route (see Table 2). A number of different stakeholders were discussed, including senior management, regional offices, global-business line-managers, legal and external parties.

Stage 20: Creative Route Approved by Client. In all but one case, interviewees discussed the approval of the creative work (see Table 2). At this stage, pre-testing was carried out, if it had not previously been completed.
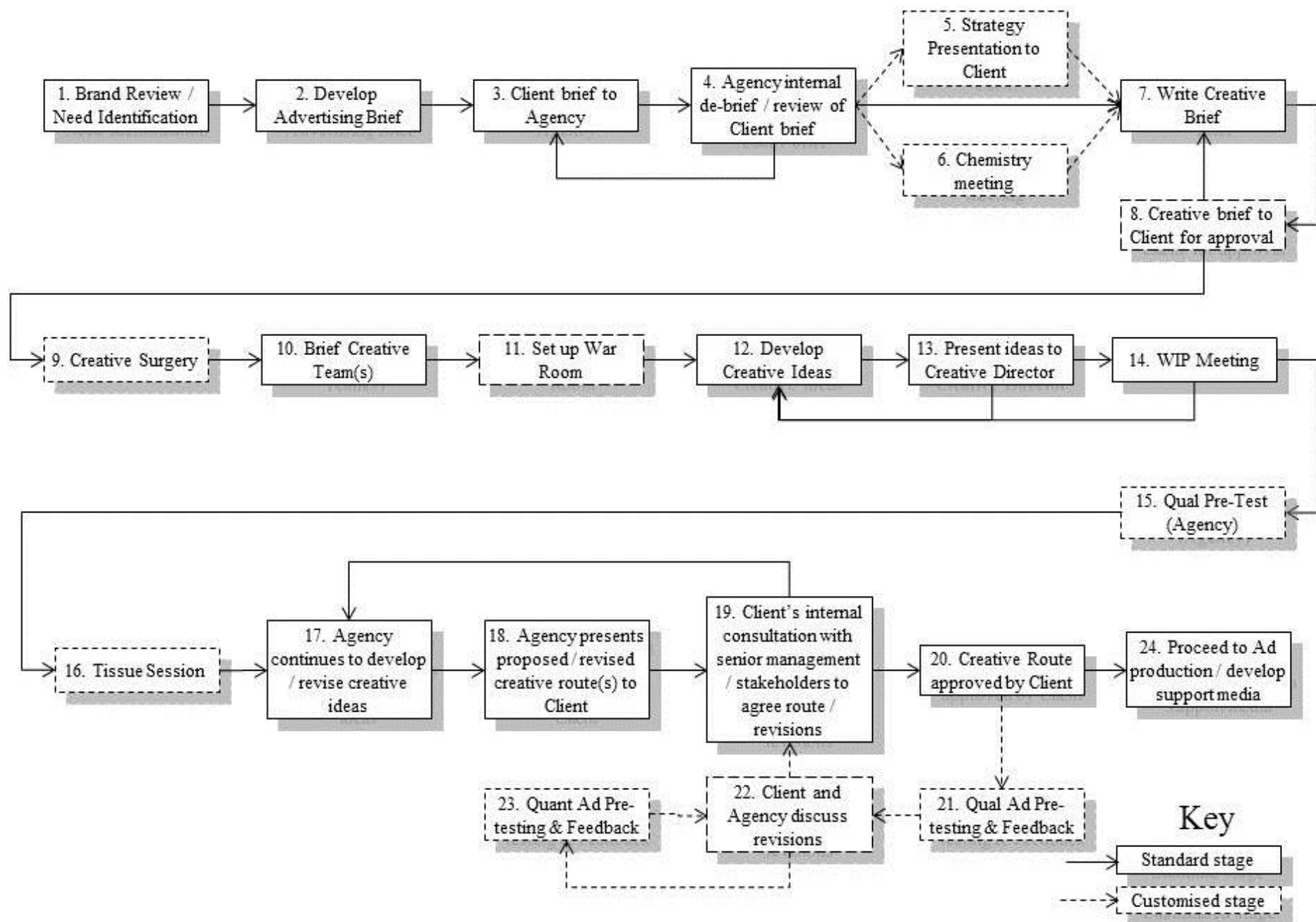
Stage 21: Qual Ad Pre-Testing and Feedback. Twelve interviewees described how creative work was put into qual pre-testing (see Table 2). Without exception, all work for FMCG clients went to qual pre-testing and all, apart from one, were for pan-European or global campaigns. Interviewees discussed putting more than one creative route, or several different versions of a script, into qual pre-testing using between three and eight focus groups. One interviewee described how 10 different creative routes went into pre-testing. Most interviewees saw pre-testing as a means of checking how consumers responded to the creative work, although some discussed using it to resolve creative differences with clients, "*right Mr Client you think one thing, we think the other, let's put them both into research and see how they do*" [AM14].

Stage 22: Client and Agency Discuss Revisions. Ten interviewees explained how the research

company briefed them on their findings (see Table 2). Interviewees commented on the

refinements made to the creative routes following the qual research feedback, and discussed the

elimination of creative routes that had not tested well.

Stage 23: Quant Ad Pre-testing and Feedback. Six interviewees discussed using quant pre-

testing on 'stealomatics' [a compilation of existing video material] or animated storyboards (see

Table 2). With one exception, all of these cases were for global or pan-European campaigns;

four of which were FMCG clients. Interviewees described quant ad pre-testing as offering

clients a predictive score of advertising performance, with results being judged against the

client's benchmarks. One interviewee described how the creative work had gone into pre-testing

three times, with changes made following each quant test, until the results had reached the

client's pre-set thresholds for awareness and brand recognition.

Stage 24: Proceed to Ad-Production/Develop Support Media. Fifteen interviewees discussed

the progression of creative work to production (see Table 2).

The findings identified 24 distinct stages within the advertising creative process. These are

shown in Figure 1.

Flowchart stages:

1. Brand Review / Need Identification
2. Develop Advertising Brief
3. Client brief to Agency
4. Agency internal de-brief / review of Client brief
5. Strategy Presentation to Client
6. Chemistry meeting
7. Write Creative Brief
8. Creative brief to Client for approval
9. Creative Surgery
10. Brief Creative Team(s)
11. Set up War Room
12. Develop Creative Ideas
13. Present ideas to Creative Director
14. WIP Meeting
15. Qual Pre-Test (Agency)
16. Tissue Session
17. Agency continues to develop / revise creative ideas
18. Agency presents proposed / revised creative route(s) to Client
19. Client's internal consultation with senior management / stakeholders to agree route / revisions
20. Creative Route approved by Client
21. Qual Ad Pre-testing & Feedback
22. Client and Agency discuss revisions
23. Quant Ad Pre-testing & Feedback
24. Proceed to Ad production / develop support media

Key

Standard stage
Customised stage

The 24 stages have been further analysed to provide a seven-step model of the advertising creative process:

- **Task Identification (stages 1-2)**

- **Agreement of task objectives (stages 3-10)**

- **Ideation (stages 11-12)**

- **Response (stage 13)**

- **Validation – Internal review (stages 14-15)**

- **Validation – External review; client and consumer (stages 16–19 and 21-23)**

- **Decision (stages 20 and 24)**

Discussion

This study seeks to extend our knowledge of the advertising creative process, and the findings identify a number of distinct stages used by agencies when developing the advertising creative. We offer a seven-step model of the creative process for discussion and further validation. The study provides evidence of the customised nature of the advertising creative process and suggests that agencies have different approaches towards client involvement in the process. An overarching finding of the study is the importance given to the validation of creative ideas. These findings contribute to the current literature in three ways.

First, the study expands our understanding of the advertising creative process. While previous studies of advertising creative development have focussed on idea-generation (Stuhlfaut and Vanden Bergh 2012) and decision-making systems (Na, Marshall, and Woodside 2009), few

have explored the advertising creative process itself (Hill and Johnson 2004). To date there has been no examination of the process within an agency setting and with account managers and hence this study provides a rich insight into what stages occur during the development of advertising creative inside an agency. Our findings suggest that, similar to creative processes in other organisational settings (Amabile 1996), the advertising creative process moves through a series of sequentially linked, identifiable stages: We suggest that these stages correspond with Amabile's five-stage model of the creative process (1996) as follows:

- Stages 1-2 correspond to*: Problem or task presentation.*

- Stages 3-10 correspond to: *Preparation.*

- Stages 11-12 and 17 correspond to: *Response Generation.*

- Stages 13-16, 18-19 and 21-23 correspond to: *Response Validation.*

- Stages 20 and 24 correspond to: *Outcome*.

While the study has identified some similarities with existing models of the creative process, identification of extended validation stages is a major new finding and suggests the advertising creative process differs from other creative processes. In addition to the increased validation findings suggest there is more emphasis on the briefing stages at the beginning of the process which reflect the importance of agreeing objectives for the creative (Hackley 1998). While the importance of the briefing stage has previously been highlighted (Helgesen 1992; Koslow, Sasser, and Riordan 2006) the current study provides evidence of stages that take place to ensure the task is clearly defined and objectives agreed. Hence we offer a new seven-step model of the advertising creative process for further examination and discussion:

- Task Identification

- Agreement of task objectives

- Ideation

- Response

- Validation – Internal review

- Validation – External review

- Decision

The study provides an insight into the sub-processes that occur within the advertising creative process and in particular illustrates the extensive *Response Validation* that takes place. The evidence suggests advertising creative is many cases validated with three groups:

- the agency (including with the Creative Director and at *WIP Meetings*);

- the client (including meetings such as *Tissue Sessions*), and

- the consumer (using qual and quant pre-testing).

Identifying these three groups is important as it suggests these are the key judges of advertising creative appropriateness. The need for advertising creative to be appropriate has previously been identified as important (Haberland and Dacin 1992; Koslow, Sasser, and Riordan 2003), and this study provides evidence of who the relevant judges of advertising creative appropriateness are.

The study highlights the use of pre-testing, which previously had been found to take place only in unusual circumstances (Hill and Johnson 2004). Our findings suggest that validation of ideas through qual and quant pre-testing are now a routine stage within the advertising creative process. In particular, the findings suggest that pre-testing is more prevalent among FMCG and global/pan-European campaigns than other categories. This extends our current knowledge of how ideas are validated with consumers.

Identifying the nature of the advertising creative sub-processes, and the extensive validation that occurs, provides clients with a better understanding of the advertising creative process. Addressing the client's lack of knowledge, and providing them with a better understanding of their role (Beard 1996; Zolkiewski, Burton, and Stratoudaki 2008), could help to reduce client-agency conflict, and reduce the negative impact on the creative work (Johnson and Laczniak 1991; LaBahn and Kohli 1997).

Second, the findings suggest that the advertising creative process is customised to meet clients' time constraints, major changes in clients' communication strategy and when pitching for new business. This extends previous studies which suggest that the advertising creative process is a standardised one, with limited variation (Hill and Johnson 2004). The current study provides evidence of the customisation that that takes place, and some insight into why such variations occur. Some of the main variations identified and discussed are:

- *Drive-By briefs* were used by one agency when there were time constraints and the lead-time given to generate creative ideas was limited. This was seen to allow the entire Creative Department an opportunity to think about the problem and respond, rather than briefing the work to selected creative teams. The notion being that more creative ideas could be generated in a shorter period of time.

- A *Strategy Presentation* to the client was included before any presentation of creative work, to ensure the client was comfortable with the strategic direction of the campaign before they saw the creative work. This was seen to be necessary when a major change in strategic direction was being recommended, and the agency was concerned the client would not agree to the new creative route without prior agreement on the change in direction.

• When the creative route was being developed for a new business pitch, agencies held a *Chemistry Meeting* with the client and set up a *War Room* in the agency. The *Chemistry Meeting* was seen to provide the agency with an opportunity to clarify the brief received from the prospective client. Ensuring the brief is understood is important if agencies are to respond with appropriate creative. The *War Rooms* which allowed creative ideas to be seen by all the agency team supports the notion that internal validation is an important part of the advertising process.

Third, the findings suggest agencies have different approaches towards client involvement in the advertising creative process. Some agencies operate a traditional 'closed' approach, which keeps the client out of the process until the stage at which the creative work was presented. Alternatively, some agencies operate a more 'open' approach and involve clients more extensively in the earlier stages of advertising creative process. The study identified that some agencies invited their clients in to the agency to brief the creative teams. Additionally, *Tissue Sessions* were used to discuss initial creative ideas with clients. While previous research in this area has identified differing levels of client involvement with the agency (Haytko 2004; Hill and Johnson 2004; Sasser and Koslow 2008), we have less understanding about what stages within the creative process clients are involved in. While prior studies suggest clients are involved with strategy and creative work approval (Mondroski, Reid, and Russell 1983; Na, Marshall, and Woodside 2009) the findings identify some agencies include stages within the advertising creative process which permit earlier validation of creative ideas by the client.

While the study contributes to our understanding of the advertising creative process, the findings need to be considered within the limitations of the research design. Firstly, whilst account managers provide an appropriate sample because of their involvement throughout the

creative process within the agency, they do not necessarily represent the views of other agency personnel or clients. Additionally, the relatively small sample size limits the generalizability of the study. Despite these limitations however, the study extends our current knowledge of the advertising creative process and has several implications for agency and client management. Additionally, the study suggests several new avenues for further research.

Implications and future research

The study has a number of implications for practitioners and suggests a number of areas for further research.

Validation and Testing. The identification of the extensive validation which occurs within the advertising creative process provides valuable insights for agency management. Agencies who do not invite clients in to earlier stages of the process such as *Tissue Sessions* may risk wasting time and money developing ideas that are not seen to be appropriate by the client; hence, adopting a more 'open' approach may be beneficial. Future research in this area is warranted, and, in particular, an examination of the impact of such early-stage client validation on the creative output. Furthermore, while the study identified that extensive pre-testing is more likely to be used by FMCG and global/pan-European campaigns to validate creative ideas with consumers, why pre-testing is used more for these categories was not explored in depth. Hence, further research could explore this topic to identify why these categories make more use of pre-testing than others.

Customising the Creative Process. The study illustrates how agencies customise the advertising creative process, particularly when either lead-times are short, significant change is being recommended in strategic direction, or when pitching for new business. Since London is

widely highly regarded as a centre for agency best-practice, this study provides examples of good practice for agencies operating in other countries. *Drive-By briefs,* for example, would be a simple adaptation for agencies to incorporate into their creative process, and may help them meet short turnaround times. Including a *Strategy Presentation,* prior to presenting creative ideas, may provide opportunities to discuss new directions for strategy with clients before committing resources to new creative ideas. Similarly, including *Chemistry Meetings,* and setting up *War Rooms* in pitch situations, may provide more opportunities for clarification and validation, which may be beneficial for securing new business. While identification of these customised stages contributes to our existing knowledge of the advertising creative process, and provides valuable insight of best practice for agency management, we have little knowledge of how these stages affect creative outputs. In particular, it would be beneficial to understand more about the influence of *Drive-by Briefs* and *War Rooms* on the number of creative ideas developed.

Approaches to Client Involvement. The study identifies that agencies have different approaches to client involvement in the process, with some agencies operating an 'open' approach and others a more 'closed' style. This has important implications for agency management and clients. For the agency, it is important to consider the opportunity to validate creative ideas with clients early on in the process. For clients, they may need to decide on which process style they prefer to work with, and ensure this is clearly communicated to the agency. This may mean the client setting out its expectations for the style of working with the agency early on in their relationship, and even consider this when appointing a new agency. Knowledge of these different approaches to client involvement contributes to the current literature and suggests a new avenue for future research. Of particular interest would be the influence of

'open' and 'closed' approaches on the creative output. In addition, it would be of valuable to examine client perspectives on their involvement in the advertising creative process.

Future studies of the advertising creative process using a different sample such as advertising managers on the client side would be of particular interest.   Furthermore, additional examination and validation of the seven-step advertising creative model would enable greater generalisation and be a worthy area of investigation.

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Table 1: Profile of Sample

Table 2: Advertising Creative Process Stages by Interviewee matrix

Figure 1: The Advertising Creative Process

Word Count: 8,263