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## Challenges in the Creative Process within Romanian Advertising Agencies: Obstacles and Solutions

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# Challenges in the Creative Process within Romanian Advertising Agencies: Obstacles and Solutions

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## Abstract

The creative industry daily faces genuine challenges in their work when it comes to advertising and meeting client's demands. Besides, technology and the necessity of updating creativity resources urge on new approaches during campaigns, at least in creative department. Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation stand for essential aspects in challenging new resources of creativity in a field where copywriters and art directors unfold incredible sensitive messages following strong and relevant insights. The present paper aims to point out the difficulties and opportunities of creative work in any advertising agency, by exploring the purpose, the barriers and the chances of this activity in the context of a complex relationship between client-brand management-consumers. One could perhaps say that these employees are just gifted people able to simply follow some instructions given by the planning department. Actually, they have their own psychological and even social barriers or engines, which represent challenges. Therefore, we have investigated these issues by conducting semi-structured interviews based on their creative experiences in both cases, as juniors and seniors, respectively. The data collected via semi-structured interviews are investigated by using content analysis.

**Keywords:** advertising, creativity, challenges, copywriting, success, brands

**JEL classification:** M37

## Introduction

Creativity in advertising relies on a special dynamics of associations between data, information, cultural background, campaign's purpose and, obviously, the personal touch of every person involved in the whole process. Designing the campaign from the strategic viewpoint to the final product can be seen as a creative approach as well, because the connection between client's demands, consumers' needs, brand capital and agency should be very well thought. One of the roles of the creativity in advertising is attaining the campaign effectiveness as scholars like Reid et al. (1998) noticed since last decade. Over the years, scientists have identified two directions of defining creativity in advertising: divergence and meaningfulness. In the first case, the focus is on novelty and aesthetic (Till et al., 2005), whereas in the second relevance and appropriateness, which drew Smith's and Yang's (2004) attention.

Certainly, divergence corresponds to a specific way of thinking that refers to the ability to absorb any source of inspiration arising from day-to-day life. With reference

to this, the concept might be explained as follows: "Divergence is that component of creativity that differs from the expected; it provides the spark of the advertisement that separates it from ordinary communication." (Lehnert et al., 2014: p. 275). Obviously, creative slogans, techniques or messages reveal authentic pleasant surprises to both customers and clients in order to sell, as people had better react to that spark than predictability. Novelty and conveying unexpected solutions to buyers' problem is the success key in advertising.

Meaningfulness refers to the brand capital and its image, because, despite the novelty and the surprising effect, every creative message must be related to the main goal of the campaign, no matter what. This is the driving engine and, therefore, creativity has to be strongly supervised by the planning during the whole campaign design. This term broadly associated with relevance in the consumers' eye could be simply understood by reactivating the relationship between brand personality, brand trust and brand affect as Sung and Kim do in 2010. According to them, common consumer invests a brand with trust as long as this offers the proof of its reliability: "Indeed, the notion of <reliance> is crucial to the definition of brand trust, suggesting that there are two key components and characteristics essential to brand trust: trustworthiness and expertise." (Sung et al., 2010: p. 644). Ignoring this dimension of brands, but producing enjoyable advertisements generate neither awareness of every campaign goal, nor consumer's loyalty or commitment.

Considering that professionals should pay attention to consumers' human nature and brand equity as well, creativity ought to establish its appropriate goal from case to case. Consumers trust utility and rational campaigns, but enjoy approaches that are more emotional. When analyzing the similarity between human personality and brand personality, Aaker (1997) identified five dimensions that should be discussed in terms of creative techniques welcomed by common consumers. These five dimensions are Sincerity, Excitement, Competence Sophistication and Ruggedness. Excitement and Sophistication stir deep emotions, which give freedom to copywriters in terms of looking for that special spark that makes average consumers loyal. At this point, Ang et al. (2006) consider that hedonistic and symbolic products provide pleasure and excitement to consumer, not utility as rational campaigns do. In these circumstances, brands relevance is already well known and always recognized, so that creative minds are allowed to be more divergent as they should be from time to time.

This dynamics of creativity in terms of divergence and meaningfulness stems from intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as well, on the one hand, but also from the ability to be updated in the agency according to the technological challenges. The purpose of this paper is to unfold the creativity barriers in an advertising agency and to be aware of the best opportunities to get over them. There are many studies focusing on the way creativity is perceived and developed, but in advertising, this concept is paid more attention to given both dimensions taken into consideration: the process and the product. In the first case, the process refers to the entire design of thinking appropriately to the campaign type, while in the second one it evaluates the successful advertisement.

### *Stages of creative thinking in an advertising agency*

As Amabile asserts in 1996, the most important steps of the creative process involve the following aspects: (1) identification of the problem/opportunity, (2) gathering of information/resources, (3) generating ideas, and (4) evaluating, modifying, and communicating them. The problem or the opportunity is strongly connected with the creative obstacles, collecting resources corresponds to the research moment,

producing ideas represents the brainstorming process, while assessing messages reflects analyzing their effectiveness in the campaign. This is finally assessed based on several criteria such as efficiency, attractiveness and novelty. Much later, in 2010, Shimp created a model recognized as 'CAN', which is described according to these three issues: connectedness, appropriateness and novelty. The above features can be translated as empathy towards the target, then relevance to the brand, and last but not least, uniqueness.

Certainly, scholars have highlighted many other classifications of creative steps in advertising over the years. Revealing the creative opportunity means understanding the reasons for improving or updating an old-fashioned/inadequate idea that successfully achieves client's goals and consumers' desires. Gathering information is frequently rooted into culture and society and it is related to the everyday context. Besides, the extent to which emotional or rational involvement of professionals can lead to a specific approach of resources is more than relevant. In terms of generating ideas, the process is, as expected, complex and can be associated with mental imagery according to Lubart (2003) and Amabile (1996). Given their statements, creativity is the ability of people who generate new and useful ideas, while mental imagery refers to producing mental images or representations. At this point of our discussion regarding the process of generating new ideas, scientific literature (Torrance, 1976) identified three categories of outputs: fluidity (the number of new ideas), flexibility (the variation or diversity of ideas) and originality (the unusual ideas). The last stage of the creative process highlights the effectiveness criteria of the whole campaign, which are usually not homogeneous, considering that clients' demands are quite subjective, comparing to the agency ones. Baskin (2010) argues that the best solution to fulfill client's requirements consists in including creative criteria directly in the creative brief. This way, professionals will be prepared to support their work in front of the client. Each year, the Grand Prix awards amazing campaigns at the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity based on the following criteria: creative idea (25%), strategy (25%), results, and effectiveness (50%). These issues definitely underline that "Advertising effectiveness is now a significant issue within the advertising industry and creativity is a significant factor in how it is achieved" (Fill et al., 2013: p. 149).

Considering that the design of the creative process demanded by an advertising task supplies a range of variety in terms of techniques and personal approaches, the synthesis of the above discussion praises the personality of every professional able to evaluate him/herself. Obviously, the problem of every creative brief is already established by the strategic thinking, but the key message and the way planning approach taken by storm creative minds, could be still considered a mystery. When it comes to technology and artificial intelligence, for example, generating ideas builds up an algorithm based on data and all the information needed. The last two Amabile's stages of creative process commonly emerge, regardless of the tools used either technologically or mechanically (artificial or human creativity). Nevertheless, the entire dynamics of both managing and being aware of the campaign effectiveness in advertising field brings to light a specific profile of any professional employed in the creative department. Their main features are curiosity, innovative behavior, steady open-mindedness, the ability to pay attention to everything and being detail-oriented overall. Therefore, instead of gathering ideas, we would like to consider that the structure 'digging' for fresh inspiration seems to offer a more appropriate perspective for the same stage of creativity.

### *A theoretical framework regarding the obstacles to creativity in advertising*

What deserves further consideration in this study, due to the research goals, are the creativity barriers that certainly influence the success of every campaign. In order to better organize these hindrances in creative process, we have decided to follow them from personal and subjective clues to external and objective aspects, the latter ones being easily associated with the organizational creative context. In terms of personal barriers of creativity, the present research reveals significant data in order to add something particular to the topic. Still, we should approach the context of these kinds of barriers, which frequently arises from motivation and emotional attachment to ideas. As long as these two categories are not stimulated enough or strongly encouraged, creativity is in great danger because of the routine or common, old fashioned ideas.

Definitely, intrinsic motivation is related to increasing the quality of creative work in an advertising department, whereas external motivation depends on the integration into a team and organization with high standards. Given many research papers conducted on this topic, intrinsic motivation was diversely characterized by features such as openness to experience, self-efficacy, and perseverance (Prabhu et al., 2008), or strong cognitive skills. As for the latter issue, Hon (2012, p.53) marks out the bridge between creativity and cognitive ability by asserting, "Employee creativity requires various cognitive skills that only intrinsically motivated people are likely to achieve". Somehow, cognition emerges from creativity and the other way round as the respective skills generate more brainstorming and mind challenges. In case of not rejecting routine and accepting ideas not processed or researched, creative walls are built up and intrinsic motivation practically no longer exist. As a result, professionals can neither stimulate themselves daily nor accept compromises of their work, which might lead to creative failure because of ignoring the strategic approach.

Another relevant and subjective matter that could represent a barrier to authentic creativity in an advertising department is the emotional attachment to work. This means either internalizing the advertisement as an artistic and aesthetic piece of work, or neglecting the relationship among brand, consumers' insight/needs and client's demands. Given to Thomson et al. (2013, p. 319) "Creative workers do frequently demonstrate affective attachments to their work, but this is different from industry contexts in which the requirement for 'affect' is initiated and imposed by management," fact that might, somehow, influence the strategic approach of their efficient message. Little is known about an advertising campaign success, when people praise so much the advertisements as creative products and not the process, which practically implies unfolding the core of the campaign, i.e. the brand or consumers' insight. Professionals understand their job as long as the master or the priority of their work is the brand and not their sensitivities, because "a creative idea must be consistent with the communication strategy and brand position" (Percy et al., 2016: p. 324). Whenever copywriters and art directors give birth to a creative product that too much bears their own distinctive human (psychological) signature, the creative process crosses the borders of self-representations with difficulty due to their emotional involvement. However, the line between professional creativity and personal approach ought to be conscientiously drawn all the time. Moreover, one of the most important lessons taught by Fallon et al. (2006) regarding the flexibility of creative process in advertising is the ability to start from the scratch if the strategic approach demands it. A deep emotional involvement makes it difficult for copywriters to relate to their work.

Another hindrance takes into consideration the creativity team that should ensure cohesion and top cooperation in order to reach a high level of performance. In case of conflicts and difficulties intervened between copywriter and his/her art director, creative standards are lower because professionals cannot develop or express their skills and abilities properly. Strong feelings of belonging and the attachment to other members of the team make everything work in the best circumstances as Taggar (2002) states. The level of team engagement to achieve common purposes is characterized by interaction, dedication, shared experiences, and work-related motivational attitude (Costa et al., 2014). In reaching this level of motivation and collective cohesion, a creative team ought to get over personal pride and egotistic behavior. The core of creativity in a team consists in its steady interaction, mutual interests, each other's support and shared success. When one of the tasks is separately or individually done and assumed, the team cohesion disappears and other invisible walls are built up within the entire creative department.

The above-mentioned barriers during the creative process can be seen as challenges, but they are just a few of creative obstacles, considering that technology, managerial context, health and psychological matters might be as relevant as the former ones, for example. The following research aims to unfold both problems and solutions to different kind of creative hindrances in advertising.

## Methodology

The qualitative approach enables us to assess different views expressed by professionals in the work environment, which gives them more credibility when discussing creativity issues. According to Davis (1997, p. 196), "qualitative research allows one to draw insights and explanations from respondents themselves, rather than having to predetermine areas of response or importance. Therefore, the research based on direct interaction provides us with the necessary knowledge to reach relevant conclusions, even though they cannot be generalized.

Moreover, we have carried out the current research in two stages: data collecting and data analysis. Firstly, data were collected by applying 14 semi-structured interviews, and secondly, information was assessed by using content analysis to lead us to our outcomes. Payne (1986) is the one considering that the interview is the most accurate method to explore beliefs, personal preferences and idiosyncrasies to reveal nuances and differences, with the means of qualitative analysis. In the present case, we interviewed 14 professionals working in the creative department as teams of copywriters and art directors, some of them being juniors, others seniors. Among them, there were three creative directors, we had the chance to talk to, and whose experience was quite useful from the holistic and critic perspective. All of them work in the best full services agencies from Bucharest, Romania, such as Publicis, McCann Worldwide Group, Friends TBWA, Kubis Interactive and Next Advertising. The juniors and young seniors are aged between 21 and 25 and senior copywriters and creative directors are aged between 26 and 39. For this reason, we equally split the respondents into two categories entitled accordingly: the group of young Millennials at the beginning of their career and the group of those already notorious in their career, sometimes still very young. In terms of the time spam of interviewing the respondents, the data were collected between 1 of May and 10 of July 2018, in Bucharest, being recorded either during face-to-face discussions or via Skype, subsequently, transcribed. All interviews lasted between 40 and 55 minutes.

When it comes to the structure of the interview guide, we have focused on different aspects, including the way creativity is understood in advertising, yet in this

study the main directions are oriented towards challenges in daily job, solutions to possible obstacles of creativity, confirmation of creativity success, respectively. Each category was investigated by asking individual questions, but our results provided by the content analysis have emerged from the above-mentioned directions.

The main hypotheses of this research motivated the creativity analysis in the amazing dynamics of advertising field as follows:

H<sub>1</sub> - Professionals deal with diversity in challenging creativity during their work all the time because they have to meet the consumer and client's needs constantly.

H<sub>2</sub> - The solutions to obstacles found out by professionals during their creative work do not follow a well-known recipe, yet a personal approach (that could be considered creative as well).

H<sub>3</sub> - Confirmation of successful creativity in advertising stems from both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

## Results

In order to organize the outcomes of the qualitative research, our intention is to analyze the interviews based on both age categories: junior employees and seniors in creative department. Moreover, this view provides the study with a comparative perspective towards creativity challenges.

### *Creativity challenges in advertising agencies*

Most of juniors deeply consider that external factors are their main barriers in expressing their creativity. They list various aspects such as short deadlines, bad organization of the daily work, lack of time, lack of clients' marketing education, many projects at the same time. One of them was extremely sincere and declared that the lack of experience could be another issue at national level: 'you see something quite cool abroad and you want to do it as well, but you don't know exactly how to do it, what to start with or you can't find someone to do it for you'. Definitely, his opinion refers to innovative projects that need significant budget, other resources, and the courage to break the ice. Time management seems to be an essential reason for young copywriters' dissatisfaction, corresponding to their need for a better organization of their work. Only one of the respondents believed that personal problems affect the creative behaviour of the team, this being an answer focused on the collective approach of this complex ability.

By comparison, professionals having at least 7 years and maximum 18 years experience in the field, unfold internal factors as challenges and barriers in their work. Most pay attention to the level of communication and empathy in the team, to intrinsic motivation, lack of initiative, and last but not least, the lack of reaction to a negative feedback. Despite their critical viewpoint, seniors appreciate a good timing and consider that short deadlines are not an advantage for successful creative ads. Besides, one of them is quite aware of personal weaknesses (exhaustion, fear of failure, changes, conformism, and lack of courage) that cannot lead to performance. The client's approach was taken into discussion as a disturbing aspect for a qualitative creativity, but just in one case.

### *Solutions to creativity obstacles*

Understandingly, the way professionals discover solutions to their personal or collective obstacles in their creative work was difficult to be analyzed homogeneously. Some of them answered these questions by involving the need of update through various tools. Many of them expect to be helped by technology in

the future, in terms of researching and discovering new sources of knowledge. Among their answers, one emerges highlighting the opportunity to avoid routine and 'to approach less conventional ideas.' Amazingly, only one of them relies on this concept of team creativity, given that the junior who has provided it is deeply convinced that a better partner in the creative team will definitely improve the situation.

As for seniors, half of them strive for client's education in the relationship with the advertising agency and for a good time management to allow more freedom and creativity testing. The others strongly focus on their own progress both at emotional and informative level. They consider new experiences as the best opportunity to fight against routine or other obstacles. Moreover, informal activities in their team or department stand for a relevant reason to face the creative barriers. They are aware of the necessity to stay connected not only with their colleagues, but also with the society the final consumer lives in. Perseverance becomes the solution to any kind of hindrances as one of them explicitly asserted: 'Finally, creativity is an extremely subjective process, and you need strength to keep doing your best even when not everybody applauds your <masterpiece>.'

### *Confirmation of creativity success*

Getting over creativity barriers in their work, professionals achieve their success frequently and they are aware of the necessity to be recognized in order to feel motivated in the future. Definitely, the experience makes the difference between juniors and seniors' perception regarding the success of creativity confirmation. Most young copywriters firstly aim to reach their team validation, the positive feedback and the colleagues' enthusiasm. Actually, they want to feel integrated, to be part of that team in order to be accepted. Just two of them dream of that confirmation given by the visibility of their advertisements, clients' approval and even some creative awards. In their situation, the perspective on creativity confirmation is quite holistic, considering that those young professionals speak more generally about their desired future, not specifically about the present stage of their career. What is relevant for all of them is the fact that they associate creativity success with the team, with the campaign effectiveness and with the personal joy of something well done. When someone was asked about three aspects confirming his success as a copywriter, he named three significant moments, including his personal life as well among them at the end of confession: 'when I'm satisfied, when I receive a positive feedback, when I sleep well at night.' This connection between daily work and brain freedom at night is a sign of creativity confirmation.

Regarding the seniors' category, the majority considers awards as the best way to recognize their creativity performance, because it means not only achieving client's goals, but also being listed at the top of local Romanian professionals. Therefore, they can have a good relationship in their department based on the philosophy mentor-mentee, and in the future, they can have many chances to be promoted. One of the interviewees pointed out that the confirmation of the creativity success in advertising stems from consumers' assessment, because ads' humour, commercials' characters and innovative online ads are integrated into their life. This is, in their opinion, the highest level of personal achievement for a successful copywriter.

## **Discussion**

Table 1 synthesizes the results of the content analysis of the respondents by using keywords for a brief comparison between generations. The external factors are fully justified as the main barriers for young copywriters who face integration into new



teams, new management and high standards. They have to work on their own approach regarding the challenges of creative process in an advertising agency. As for the seniors, they are more aware of the intrinsic motivation that nourishes mental imagery and emotional involvement of the whole team. Actually, this is the essential difference between artificial creativity produced by software and algorithms (artificial intelligence) and the human mind. Furthermore, seniors cooperate with juniors and need to assess their creations based on both empathy and objective landmarks. Time and client issues depend on the agency management in the relationship with the latter (the client).

Table 1  
Creativity Insight in an Advertising Agency

| Units of content analysis                 | Juniors                               | Seniors                                 |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Challenges of creative process</b>     | External pressure                     | Internal factors                        |
|   | Time management and client's attitude |   |
| <b>Solutions to creativity challenges</b> | Absolving knowledge                   | New experiences                         |
|   | Constantly updating technology        | Emotional development<br>Team cohesion  |
|   | Team integration                      | Being part of popular culture           |
| <b>Confirmation of creativity success</b> | Positive assessment                   | Becoming a real mentor<br>Being awarded |

Source: Authors' work

Analysing the second element of the research that displays the fight against creativity obstacles, the above table highlights two certain directions: juniors' creativity usually relies on fresh knowledge and learning techniques from their mentors, whereas seniors look for new experiences and emotional development to rediscover themselves all the time and to turn creativity into originality and uniqueness. Technology is an appropriate solution to save time and better manage routine tasks and creative people are aware of the new tools that could implement their ideas.

Regarding the way, the confirmation of creativity success is perceived by professionals, the analysis has identified heterogeneous outcomes in terms of respondents' experience. Juniors strive for being recognized by the creative team in their position, in order to become functional in terms of cohesive creativity in a department responsible for this part of the campaign. Seniors are in another position, because they wish to become memorable for consumers through the message of the advertisement, not only to achieve marketing objectives and to satisfy the client. They move forward and expect consumers' loyalty and engagement. Awards stand for the international and national recognition and ensure their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

## Conclusion

Coming back to the research questions, which generated the study hypotheses, the first one is partially confirmed, because the interviewees have reveals various obstacles in their creative work, but not always consumer or client is behind the scene. There is no reason to generalize that creativity in an agency could be

hindered by consumers and clients, because this is an internal mechanism, not an external one.

The second hypothesis is entirely confirmed given that every interviewee, especially the juniors, tried to explain what the source of their creativity is and how it can be nourished or improved. The fact that they face internal or external pressure is also associated with the diversity of their work and with their level of experience. Seniors look for unconventional solutions that will be very helpful to maintain not only the emotional intelligence at very high level, but also to develop their emotional creativity. This aspect represents a real advantage when understanding consumers' insight during a campaign and, even more, when managing it creatively.

As for the third hypothesis of this research, it was not validated, because both juniors and seniors strive for team recognition and industry awards. The process of intrinsic motivation is supported by the colleagues, and, frequently, creative teams made up of a copywriter and an art director, inspire each other a lot. Certainly, interviewees do not overlook personal requirements of motivating themselves intrinsically.

The main limitation of this research could consist in interviewing a relatively small number of professionals, which still provided us with an unexpected amount of data. Even so, this aspect might confer some lack of credibility to the paper. From the qualitative viewpoint, information received is very insightful; therefore, we do not exclude extending the study by investigating other professionals as well. A good idea would be to interview professionals working in agencies in-house or for the client, yet responsible for the creative part of the campaign. Nevertheless, a triangulation of the research method might be a smart decision, by organizing a few focus groups on the same topic to analyze how members of the same creative departments interact.

To sum up, advertising creativity faces many challenges because technological update is a steady pressure and nowadays originality relies on innovation, as much as possible. In addition, generating ideas appealing to clients, to consumers and to the creative director at internal level simultaneously, involves taking into account many factors such as: various goals, agency creative performance, but also self-satisfaction. What makes the difference between creativity used in other fields and in advertising comes from its purpose, according to a strategic approach for each campaign, and team cohesion. It might be a paradox that creative professionals want to be awarded and recognized for their work, which is an individual process, while their success is often the result of their contribution to the success of the creative team. Therefore, one definition of being creative as a copywriter or as an art director in a team is a simple equation: individual creative success enriches the cohesion of the creative team, which leads to meaningfulness and efficiency of campaigns.

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