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## **Control, Knowledge and Persuasive Power in Advertising Creativity-**

### **An Ethnographic Practice Theory Approach**

This paper reports findings from an extended multi-method ethnographic study into the social practices of advertising creativity. The study was conducted in a major Iranian creative advertising agency that has many international clients and earns annual billings equivalent to more than \$US100 million. Findings focus on three sets of overlapping aggregated social practices labelled Control Power, Knowledge Power and Persuasive Power that serve to work around tensions over creative output in order to accomplish the dual goals of creating good, effective work and persuading the client to buy in to the creative strategy. We conclude with implications for future practice and research.

Don Draper of TV drama *Mad Men* represents the stereotype of the lone advertising genius who combines stand-out creativity with a charismatic ability to sell his ideas to colleagues and clients. However, many studies of advertising creativity have shown that, in fact, creative output is typically the result of a complex negotiation that is shaped by the predispositions and priorities of internal and external stakeholders (Ang, Lee and Leong 2007; Moeran 1996; 2011; Simonton 2000). Creatives in advertising agencies produce work by engaging with, and operating within, competing motives and interests (Kover and Goldberg 1995) that include the marketing objectives of the client side versus the concerns for creativity on the creative agency side (Pratt 2006; Koslow, Sasser and Riordan 2003; Hirschman 1989), creatives' and clients' different perspectives on risk (Sasser, Koslow, and Kilgour 2013; West, Kover and Caruana 2008) and unequal power dynamics both within the agency and between agency and client (Hughes, Vafeas and Hilton 2018; Koslow, Sasser and Riordan 2006). Much of the process of pitching, negotiating, and ultimately winning buy-in or 'selling' creative work in advertising agencies is tacit (Nonaka 1994; Kover 1995; Hackley 2000) and therefore not easily revealed through self-reported data sets. There is a need for more ethnographic studies of advertising agencies that reveal the detail of how creativity emerges through the interactions of agency and client staff. Great creative ideas do not simply speak for themselves, so it must be the case that agencies with big creative reputations are not just good at creativity: they must also be good at selling their creativity to clients. As a consequence, the research question 'how do advertising agencies produce creative work?' becomes 'what factors determine what counts as creativity in advertising'? To put this more specifically, we frame our research question as 'how do creative ideas percolate through the power dynamics and persuasive strategies of agency teams and client-side teams'?

To attempt to answer this broad research question in a way that embraces the full complexity of agency organizational life, this study adapts a practice theory approach (Schatzki, 1996: 2012). Practice theory is a broad category of mixed method qualitative and ethnographic inquiry that attempts to capture the ways in which actors produce social life through everyday interaction, including ritualistic, linguistic, material and symbolic behaviors. Practice theory assumes that the social world is produced through individual agency acting within and through social structures. Hence, creative output cannot be understood simply as the result of brilliant creative ideas produced by talented individuals, nor simply as the outcome of structural power, but as the result of both in dynamic interaction.

Below, we offer a brief outline of the relevant literature trajectory in advertising creativity and client-agency relations into which we position this study before introducing our practice theory perspective. We then describe the interpretive method before presenting findings. We conclude with recommendations for future research and advertising practice.

## **LITERATURE**

Studies of tension and conflict in the creative advertising development process tend to focus broadly on ideation (e.g. Kover 1995; Reid and Rotfeld, 1976; Stuhlfaut, 2011; Stuhlfaut and Windells, 2014) or persuasion (e.g. Beverland, Farrelly and Woodhatch 2007; Kover and Goldberg 1995; Na, Marshall, and Woodside, 2009; West, Kover and Caruana 2008), within the agency, and in the agency-client interface. These research themes have resulted in many managerial suggestions for the resolution or amelioration of conflict and tension around, for example, the perceived dichotomy of creativity versus effectiveness (e.g. Mallia, Windels and Broyles 2013; Sasser, Koslow, and Kilgour 2013; Na, Marshall and Woodside 2009; Pratt 2006; Koslow, Sasser and Riordan 2006; Koslow, Sasser and Riordan 2003; Hackley 2000). However, there is limited research that examines specifically how tensions in creative

advertising development and their potential solutions actually play out in day-to-day agency practice. Previous studies have taken ethnographic approaches to studying advertising agency work (Alvesson 1998: Kelly, Lawlor and O' Donohoe 2005a, b); Moeran, 1996: Svensson, 2007) but without the specific focus taken in the present study on the role of the social practices of power, knowledge and persuasion in the production of creative output.

Within marketing communications, Ots and Nyilasy (2017) have adapted practice theory to generate insights into the social practices of IMC, and they highlight five key elements of practices around the creation of IMC campaigns:

1) Routines, the recurring activities of practitioners that are tacitly assumed to be appropriate in particular situations. 2) Material set-ups, the physical environment and technological aids (such as PowerPoint presentations or storyboards) used in given situations, such as pitching. 3) Rules and procedural knowledge, the agency prescriptions for behavior in given situations, such as a copywriting style guide. 4) Cultural templates: the often tacit knowledge of how things are done and spoken of in the agency, building on an implicit understanding of the agency's positioning and history. 5) Teleoaffective structures (following Schatzki 2002) referring to personal emotional engagement driving motives and goals. We draw selectively on these constructs in the analysis of the social practices of creativity in this agency.

## **METHODS**

The first author conducted a nine-month extended case ethnography in an international advertising agency located in Iran. The agency is anonymized in this study as 'Dalton'. 14 campaigns were observed in total, from client brief to sign-off, with the aim being to explain a phenomenon in its socially situated context (Burawoy 1991). The ethnographic study comprised semi-participant observation, unstructured interviews and semi-structured interviews (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994) supported by the selective use of projective

techniques (Belk, Fischer and Kozinets 2013). In addition, two supplemental interviews were undertaken in late 2018 in order to ground particular facts.

The data sets gathered over the course of nine months intensive ethnography included 250 pages of detailed field notes from participant and non-participant observation, 536 pages of transcribed interviews with 18 employees aged between 26 and 45, 3 male and 15 female and working for Dalton for between 1 and 12 years, from three departments: creative, accounts, and media. Each interview took between 20 minutes to two hours and was audio recorded and fully transcribed. The informants were asked to talk about their definition of creativity in advertising and to explain what they did after receiving a brief up until the client's acceptance (NB full data sets are available on request).

The first step of data analysis comprised open coding to identify general themes. Subsequently, we conducted selective/axial coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) and developed the three overlapping yet also distinct, aggregated practices.

## **Research Site**

Dalton is located in Tehran, the capital city of Iran. The agency employs more than 100 people and earns annual billings of circa 600 Billion Iranian Rail (roughly US\$100 million). This agency is an international full-service agency having strong informal ties with one of the leading global creative agency groups. The staff have an international outlook, the current CEO and a number of other employees have been educated abroad (mostly in the USA), in graphic design and other art related fields, and some of its employees have worked overseas. Dalton has a diverse portfolio of regional, local and international clients in consumer goods, financial services, government (for a road safety campaign) and retail, and some clients have been working with the agency for nearly 20 years. Dalton was selected for this study because (1) it is ranked among the top ten Creative advertising agencies in Iran over the last two decades, (2)

it follows the structure of large international ad agencies, (3) it is recognized for creative excellence and this is reflected in winning national creative awards such as the Silver Cedar festival awards (partnered with the International Council of Communication Design).

## FINDINGS

The three aggregated social practices of advertising creativity that we label Control Power, Knowledge Power and Persuasive Power are outlined in brief in Table 1 and subsequently elaborated with supporting data extracts below.

--PLACE TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE--

### Control Power

Agency staff are acutely aware that the client has the power to veto creative ideas under the threat of withdrawing their business. Advertising professionals are reconciled to this, especially given the context of economic downturn in Iran which means that few agencies are in a position to wave goodbye to clients on matters of creative principle. One quote, from 'Iain', an account director, illustrates this:

*"In Iran most of the time the ad agency asks us to listen to clients' requirements and to do what is preferred and what is not preferred by the client, this is not similar to my experience outside Iran where they would give us more room to do whatever we like..."*

Iain laments the lack of power that agency staff have to push back against clients. For example, in one local campaign for a coffee brand the client insisted on a focus on product functionality, when the creatives felt that an emotional branding appeal was required. At times, the agency will find a compromise (in the case of the coffee brand, by trying to combine an emotional with a functional appeal) but at other times the creatives simply capitulate but decline to put the work in their portfolio. In one example, work for an international campaign for a tobacco brand had to be changed radically because the client changed the campaign

slogan. When the senior art director told the creative director, the creative director's response was anger and frustration: *"do whatever they want...we cannot commit suicide for them!"* The attitude was, we have done our best for the client, if they insist on making the wrong choice, let them.

Agency staff have various strategies through which they try to wrest some control power back from the client (see Hirschman 1989) by relying on certain material objects to signal their creative authority. *Melissa*, a copywriter, refers to the persuasive material elements of social practices when she states: *"I always say it's our Apple computers which sell it, not us"*. The choice of Apple relates to the scarcity of this brand in the local Iranian agency scene. Clients may be swayed by the impressive presentation of creative ideas through this technology. Animations, line drawings, storyboards and other creative forms of representation are instrumental in this effort. As *Bob*, one creative director stated,

*"We try to perform the clients' behavior via the ads....however sometimes we cannot convince them regarding what they have to do, thus we try based on our power in creativity.... What it means is that, if I just tell them [the client] the required and desirable solution, they are not going to listen but if I tell them this in a creative way or show them something new and creative, they are not going to object and will accept it ...."*

An example of a creative solution to a power struggle with a client was seen in a financial services brand campaign timed for Persian New Year, called 'Nowruz' on March 21<sup>st</sup>, where agency members decided to differentiate their client brand by focusing on relationship marketing and the importance of individual customers for the business. Initially, the client did not like the idea and wanted to have a common New Year greeting for their campaign. However, the creative director talked about a scene where 'happy New Year' could become 'happy YOUR New Year' by just adding a dot in the Persian slogan (shown on a visual



display). The client accepted this visualization and thus accepted the creative strategy of focusing on the individual consumer-brand relationship.

Power imbalances can also be addressed by disciplining the client through the agreed paper trail of creative and strategy documents. In one case a client in the construction sector wished to change the developed visuals after production was complete. The agency pointed to the fact that the client had signed off the agreed creative strategy and visualization, and the client had to concede, saving enormous waste of time and effort.

### **Knowledge Power**

Creative ideas have to have a market rationale in order to be justified to the client. This justification can sometimes come from the proprietorial knowledge of agency conducted research. For example, in one campaign, in contrast to the client's sales driven goal, the creative director with the use of market research found that the underlying issue for the client was a lack of brand awareness. The agency had to try to represent their interpretation of market data as authoritative. As *Bob*, the creative director put the problem, *"We not only have to consider our client but their audience as well....sometimes the client wants to set his/her own preferred social demographics without paying attention to the real consumers and information presented in the market research data"*.

In one case the agency felt that the client had mis-defined their own primary target market segment as socio-economic group B, when the agency's research indicated that sales increases could be achieved by targeting socio-economic groups C1 and C2. The agency team managed to convince the client to accept their reasoning by showing them evidence from focus groups and interviews with consumers. Similarly, the agency was able to persuade an international brand client in the construction sector to re-frame their target audience in the Iranian context. The agency's local cultural understanding was authoritative for this client, who had

misunderstood not only the potential target audience given the Iranian supply chain, but also misunderstood that the pronunciation of the brand name in Persian had implications for the brand's communication strategy. The agency's cultural understanding was a source of authority, giving it power in discussions of creative output.

Clients, particularly global clients, often stipulate mandatory inclusions for their campaigns that they feel are essential to preserve their brand identity, but which may not be right for the local market. For example, an international mobile phone brand was insisting that a creative execution that had been successful in Dubai could also work well with minor adaptations in Iran. The agency creative director reminded the client that in recent history there had been an Arab invasion of Iran, and that using Iranian characters in the creative work, rather than Arabic characters, would be far more agreeable to Iranian consumers. In another example, a personal hygiene brand wanted the slogan 'dirt is good' in the creative work (meant ironically since the brand protects against dirt) but the agency team convinced the client that what might be effective in the brand's home culture would probably not translate to the Iranian socio-cultural context, and the slogan was changed to focus on the virtues of cleanliness. More generally, the agency found that their insights about local culture were particularly important for global brand clients, as *Melissa*, one copywriter put it: *"Iranian people associate local products to have low quality and to be appropriate for middle to lower class. For people to gain prestige and portray a semi upper class image, they prefer foreign brands"*. This is true of many developing countries' consumer markets but needs to be pointed out in some cases to global clients.

Agency staff have to self-censor where they feel that the client will not accept their authority in the interpretation of market research, so they have to be careful in choosing their battles. '*Melissa*', a copywriter noted:

*"Censorship and especially self-censorship, that is based on the perceived rules and organizational ethos and power relationships and the personal tastes of those in power and*

*also the client's preferences, is a way that we present the ideas that we think are having higher chance of acceptance by the team. We have developed a sense about what is appropriate to present and what is not, therefore we will cross out some ideas even before sharing them with the team, as we know that they are not going to get good feedback".*

Melissa's indication of creative code went beyond the agency and its culture and incorporated clients' preferences. For example, referring to a local celebrity endorsement campaign for a petro-chemical brand, Melissa stated: "...this client prefers two word slogans... we also know the kind of visuals they like and would get their acceptance". Melissa worked within these known parameters to produce work they the client was predisposed to accept.

### **Persuasive Power**

The third set of social practices we identified revolved around the practices the agency used to close the sale and persuade clients to accept the creative strategy, even if the client was insecure about signing it off. As a copywriter, 'Ann' put the issue of 'selling' the work, that is, gaining client approval and sign-off:

*"We need to speak in the client's way for them to understand and for us to be able to sell.."*

A creative director elaborated on a client's reaction to the creative strategy for a personal care cosmetics brands thus: *'For example, in the campaign when I showed the path [Greek mythology and its reflection on peoples' behavior] that led us to the insights, they [the client] didn't care. On the other hand, most of the time, statistics are important for them as they are marketing based and their mind-set is like that. [Thus for this campaign]...we had conducted questionnaires and found that 90% of people know the brand. This fact helped us in selling our insights...'*

In this case, the agency had learned that the persuasive rhetoric of statistical data was useful for persuading this client to accept creative ideas, even where it did not necessarily reflect the path to the insight that grounded the creative output. Interviews showed that other clients were

known to find slickly produced visuals and storyboards persuasive, while another client was impressed with focus group videos. The agency staff were passionate about producing good work that would benefit the client, and if doing that entailed engaging in rhetorical strategies of persuasion, then they saw that as part of their job as a professional service provider.

To this end, the ad agency staff observe client behavior and study the client's brand to understand better the client's mind-set. For example, the MD and marketing manager of a cosmetics brand had been educated abroad and the agency team used English words and phrases in their discussions around the campaign in establishing a rapport with the client. By contrast, in meetings with Arab client representatives, the agency staff used the tone and vocabulary they felt was expected, including sometimes using Arabic expressions which reflected and respected the religious ties between conservative Arab and Persian cultures. By adapting the manner, tone and vocabulary appropriate to clients, agency staff were able to be more persuasive in winning the clients' confidence.

An alternative strategy of emotional persuasion was to impress the client with the sheer amount of work that the agency team had put into developing creative ideas. 'Elizabeth', a graphic designer was candid in the way she deployed this technique:

*"One way to get the clients' agreement is to make them tired..."*

Creatives would sometimes present so much work that the clients felt emotional pressure not to upset the creatives by rejecting their ideas. For example, in the campaign for the local petrochemicals brand mentioned above, the agency creative director made a slight change in the visuals to show multiple variations on the theme. The client became overwhelmed by the volume of presented work and expressed concern about missing deadlines, so the proposed creative output was accepted with the proviso that ad agency 'hurry up' so the ad could be broadcast within two weeks' time. The agency account director had invested much time negotiating with a minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting ministry to overturn a

2008 ban on celebrity endorsement for this campaign. Having convinced the minister that featuring Iranian athletes in advertising would benefit Iranian culture and society, the agency was especially keen for this creative strategy to be signed off by the client.

Another persuasive strategy deployed by the agency was to offer three alternative creative routes- a safe option based on the agency's sense of the client's predispositions, the creatives' desired route, and an in-between option to present to the client. Thus, client hesitancy could be addressed without having to go back to the beginning of the process. As *Ann*, the senior art director, stated: "*We might think all three paths are going to work*" (perhaps with differing degrees of potential effectiveness) and all three are shown to the client. This approach was a typical agency strategy seen in all 14 of the briefs that were observed throughout the ethnography. This according to the creative director was *'to increase the chance of approval by the client through incorporating different taste and preferences in the execution of ideas, as there might be different preferences among the client team responsible for approving the ad'*.

Finally, a persistent element of the agency's persuasive strategy was to present a unified team approach whereby client indecision or objection might be countered by agency staff from different disciplines (such as account management and creative) backing up each other's reasoning. This is sometimes pre-planned when the account executive and the project manager go through the creative director's presentation in order to be able to accurately and supportively articulate the creative ideas. 'Becky', an account executive, was able to back the creative director in one client meeting by pointing out that emotional advertising had been more effective than informational advertising in other cases in that sector, and gave some examples. Her efforts in supporting the creative director in convincing the client about the desired route was so successful that the client's communication manager told her: "*you really like that route, so I think we need to select that route, even if we don't want to.*" A clearly collaborative and

unified argument from the agency account team helped to give the client the confidence to accept the proposed creative strategy.

With this comment we conclude our elaboration on the three key sets of overlapping social practices of advertising creativity and turn to our discussion.

## **DISCUSSION**

Our study responds to calls for more exploratory research in advertising (Belk 2017; Goulding 2017; Faber 2015), contributes a new, deep ethnographic perspective to the practice-turn in advertising (Ots and Nyilasy 2017) and contributes to the practice-turn in management studies more broadly (Schatzki 1996, 2002, 2012; Skålén and Hackley 2011). Following Schatzki (2002) and Ots and Nyilasy (2017) the study found that each of the three sets of social practices deployed routines, material set-ups, rules and procedural knowledge, cultural templates and teleoaffective structures in different ways. The five elements of practices that Ots and Nyilasy (2017) found around the IMC process were broadly supported in the study, although the specific manifestations were different. For example, routines were evident where experienced practitioners referred to the Persuasive Power they had learned to wield, for example where the agency presented three creative pathways to clients, where they ‘made clients tired’ by presenting huge volumes of finished work, by the selectively presented use of statistical research data, and where ‘Becky’ deployed the team support approach. Material set-ups were evident with the use of Apple technology to impress clients or invoking the paper trail of the creative the brief as ways to wrest Control Power control back from the client, while rules and procedural knowledge were evident in elements of Knowledge Power as the agency deployed its skills of market research to persuade clients of its authoritative insights into the relevant markets or consumers. Furthermore, again referring to Ots and Nyilasy (2017), ‘cultural templates’ could be inferred by the way the agency staff seemed to instinctively support each other as a source of Persuasive Power, and teleoaffective structures were evident

in the high degree of personal emotional engagement of agency staff with the goal of getting the client to agree to the creative strategy the agency staff sincerely believed in.

There may be elements of cultural specificity to the prevalence of some practices. For example, the glamour of Apple technology would be far less likely to dazzle clients in San Francisco than in Tehran. In another example, Western research studies often give differential attitudes to creative risk as a source of client-agency tension (Pratt 2006; Koslow, Sasser and Riordan 2003; Mallia, Windels and Broyles 2013) but the discourse of creative risk as a continuum was not as prominent in Dalton. Rather, tensions were framed as client insecurity or lack of sufficiently deep local market insight. The practice theory approach showed that such dichotomies as creativity versus risk were dissolved through the deployment of persuasive practices which, in turn, were framed as techniques that helped to elicit client buy-in by helping clients to understand better the reasoning behind creative strategy.

There is some overlap between the present study and the boundary negotiation discussed in West, Kover and Caruana's (2008) study. However, the emphasis in the present study is not solely on making clients' objectives achievable but on the ways in which the very idea of creativity becomes manifest through the interactions of the parties. For example, the agency creative code (Stuhlfaut, 2011) is embedded within and contextualized by the agency social practices such as its sensitivity to clients' attitudes and preferences. In an ontological sense the creative ideas themselves are not independent things but are part and parcel of the ways in which clients and agency teams talk about them. As with most organizational human processes, the social practices of advertising creativity include elements that are tactical (rhetorical forms of argumentative persuasion such as tailoring speech to the speech norms of the client, described as Knowledge Power), ritualized (the use of objects such as creative briefs, research

presentations, statistics and information technology for creative representation, broadly grouped under Persuasive Power) and hierarchical (the client power of veto and the agency paper trail of signed-off agreements, referred to under Control Power above). It is in highlighting the nuanced ways in which power plays out in this process that the study makes a distinctive new contribution.

The notion of creative practices shifts the emphasis from the reification of metaphors around creativity (Hackley and Kover 2007) and the supposed mutual antagonism of creativity and advertising effectiveness (e.g. Smith et al. 2007) to the everyday work of producing and negotiating creative ideas within a given social situation. There will inevitably be variability in how practices and relationships of advertising creativity play out in different contexts (cf. Tsoukas and Chia 2002; cf. Farjoun 2010) and it is this very variability and its embeddedness in agency routines, practices and discourse that is captured by the ethnographic practice perspective, helping to move us on beyond the individualistic and conflictual perspectives of the *Mad Men* era to reflect the more collaborative, integrated (Ots and Nyilasy 2017) and cross-disciplinary character of contemporary creative advertising practice.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The study focuses on one, Iranian advertising agency, and we acknowledge the scientific limitations of the one case sample. However, the study has generated substantive insights that will resonate with advertising researchers and practitioners of any culture. The research question of how creative ideas percolate through the power dynamics and persuasive strategies of agency teams and client-side teams, has, through the ethnographic practice approach, generated a series of social practices we group around three major categories of Control Power, Knowledge Power and Persuasive Power. We explicate examples of how each practice is conducted in the context of this agency. We suggest that the revised ontology of advertising



creativity offered by the practice theory perspective promotes a broadened conceptualization of how creativity can be understood, as a set of social practices, that could offer fertile directions for future research.

For example, future studies could assess whether the ways in which Control Power, Knowledge Power and Persuasive Power deployed in different contexts correlate with stronger agency-client relationships or with greater success measured by industry awards for creativity or effectiveness. In addition, future studies could explore how agencies can support and foster creative practices, and the barriers to adopting these practices. For example, what are the key personnel and training characteristics that contribute to sustained success in deploying power strategies to retain clients and win creativity and/or effectiveness awards? More fundamentally, the practice based approach developed in IMC and adapted in the present study could be extended to different sites, cultures and sectors to build a comparative sense of the variability of Control, Knowledge and Persuasive Power practices in differing contexts.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Creative Advertising Practices**

Aggregated Practices	Definition	Example	Tension	Outcome
<b>Control Power</b>	The agency-client relationship is one of a service provider, so the client has the power of veto over any creative output. Agency staff are positioned as subordinate to the client in spite of their expertise	<i>“Most of the time the agency asks us to listen to clients’ requirements and to do what is preferred by the client”.</i>  Iain (art-director)	Control over the creative output	The client may use its contractual power of veto, whilst the agency pushes back through material objects and paper trails
<b>Knowledge Power</b>	Agency staff have experience and expertise in creative communication and use this knowledge to push back against the client’s creative ideas	In one of the campaigns, the client insisted on having their whole range of products in the advertisement, contrary to the developed copy. This was countered by the agency CEO: <i>“In advertising the task is to reach to the bone and get rid of the meat. We have to have a clear message...”</i>	Different views among client and creatives regarding creative content	Calibrating clients’ views with the agency expertise to create effective advertising
<b>Persuasive Power</b>	Using persuasive techniques (such as the persuasive rhetoric of hard data) to encourage the client to adopt the creative idea	<i>“Since we don’t have concrete reasons, we can’t convince the client .... This might be because our reasons are not tangible enough to the client and he / she wants statistics ... if we have the data from a questionnaire, then the chance of getting the client’s approval is higher...”</i>  Melissa(copywriter)	Client insecurity and need for reassurance around their own decision making	Selling the creative ad to the client to the point of sign-off