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ABSTRACT

The development of forms at the blurred boundaries between advertising and editorial content has led to a shift in advertising industry practices. In the process of campaign development, it is not uncommon for media platforms to take on some of creative tasks that were once traditionally delivered by advertising agencies. This study investigates how changes in the media landscape have affected creative processes, and identifies a paradigm shift whereby media platforms have become important (or even key) stakeholders in the creative processes. The study also examines the consequences of the parties' approaches to the situation and particularly to working relationships.

Introduction

Advertisers today are confronted with a world that has become oversaturated with advertising content (Bright and Logan 2018). Brands, and, therefore, creative agencies, that once controlled mass media through the allocation of advertising budgets, as a result of the audience's dispersal and the fact that control over messages received is now exercised by consumers, have been forced to revise their strategies (Turow 2006). It is now evident that "push" approaches no longer work as they did before (Evans, Wojdynski, and Grubbs Hoy 2019), and the burden of advertising communication has gradually shifted toward creating engaging content and encouraging audiences to seek it out, in place of its more traditional imposition (Lotz 2014).

The above-mentioned developments have created a clear path for the evolution of the advertising forms that emerge at the blurred boundaries between content and advertising (Amazeen and Muddiman 2018). Brands became frequent guests in press and online editorials and television programming spaces in a form of branded content and entertainment (Fulgoni, Pettit, and Lipsman 2017). Creation of these formats more often than not requires involvement from the media platform's side in the process of campaign development. This is not without its consequences for creative processes and the complexity of relations between the parties involved (Kover 2016). As much

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as branded content appears to have found its place both in media spaces and in academic and professional literature (Harms, Bijmolt, and Hoekstra 2018), the fact that the media has become the key actors in campaign development has been overlooked in scholarly discussion about creative processes (Kover 2016; Stuhlfaut and Yoo 2013; Turnbull and Wheeler 2014). Moreover, existing studies on client-agency relationships have tended to focus on dysfunctional behaviors (Hotz, Ryans, and Shanklin 1982), client commitment and trust in interfirm exchange relationships (LaBahn and Kohli 1997) or the role of the client in developing creative work, while neglecting investing relationships between stakeholders in the creative process besides client-agency relationships, and media in particular (Kover 2016).

To fill this gap in the literature, this paper investigates the various approaches to the complexity of new campaign development processes and relations between the actors involved. To this end, interviews were conducted with industry experts, from both the advertising and media sides, who are directly involved in these processes. The branded content broadcast on television channels serves as a case for analysis as representing the shift in the industry and as the stakeholders' dependencies are stronger in this context than in that of digital channels, which are characterized by greater creative freedom (Hastings et al. 2010). Therefore, it is assumed that the characteristics and possible tensions of the process will be more exposed (which would not be the case regarding.

The contribution this study offers is threefold: (1) it expands the existing knowledge on advertising processes and validates the stages of campaign development in the evolving market realm; (2) it offers a perspective on the agency-media platform relationship in the creative process; and (3) it offers industry practitioners a more in-depth look at the existing practices.

Literature background

In search of mass audiences: branded content on television

In the television broadcasting market, where, for a long time, the boundaries between "content" and "advertising" were clearly delineated, the merging of these concepts is causing the distinction to become blurred (Kretchmer 2004). The roles of advertisers and producers of culture products, in addition to their standards of co-operation, are also changing (Serazio 2013). Advertisers who, in a way, have control over mass media through the allocation of advertising budgets, push to open up programming schedules for branded communication (Lotz 2014).

At the same time, broadcasters, on the one hand, want to "protect" their programming from content that is overly commercial in character, in a bid to maintain the content's quality and attractiveness to viewers (of course, the question of whether high-quality content or protection of the viewership is the overriding goal of the broadcaster is open to debate), thus avoiding the outflow of recipients to other channels or media platforms (Brennan 2009). On the other hand, however, broadcasters recognize the need to find ways to stem the outflow of advertisers' budgets linked with the development of digital channels. Therefore, they seek ways of keeping their offering attractive and creating new spaces for branded presence. Programming

airtime, which was traditionally reserved for producers and under exclusive control of channels, is now being encroached on by brands and their content (Lotz 2014).

This entails close co-operation not only between advertisers and creatives or media agencies, but also with broadcasters or publishers (Wojdynski and Evans 2015), and affects the process of campaign development and management after the content has been introduced to the original circulation. Advertising agencies, therefore, face the challenge of setting up creative processes and workflows that take into account not only the client's involvement but also that of the potential broadcaster.

Advertising production organisational models

In scholarship on advertising, several approaches to understanding the organizational models and processes that are employed to produce advertisements can be identified. They may be clustered as follows (Stuhlfaut and Windels 2019):

- input-output (I/O): these are the resources required to achieve the desired outcome; the transformative process and the outcomes themselves (Daniel and Kahn 1966);
- flow decision-making models: visualization of the 'flow' of information in the agency setting to achieve the intended aim; and
- sequential or stage models: these constitute a structural approach to how the creative process looks and aim to offer a comprehensive view of the stages in the development process, which is one of the this study's key interests and will be used as a framework and starting point for understanding new practices.

Sequential and stage models of the advertising creative process

The advertising problem delineation communication and response (APDCR) model

The Advertising Problem Delineation Communication and Response (APDCR) framework is a 12-stage process model that presents the creative processes from the client's perspective. In this approach, the advertiser is given a task or a problem to solve by their client and attempt to address it (Hill and Johnson 2004).

The stages of the process are as follows: (1) role definition; (2) problem recognition; (3) product and positioning research; (4) brief development and internal review (advertiser sign-off); (5) tendering; (6) brief presentation; (7) agency translation of brief; (8) brief refinement; (9) presentation of creative ideas; (10) client stakeholder consultation; (11) concept testing research; (12) acceptance/rejection/choice of creative idea(s); (13) if ideas are rejected, the process re-starts from stage (9); and (14) production.

As much as this model offers valuable insights into the steps of the creative process, highlighting several aspects of the agency-client relationship and offering a glimpse of the dynamics between the stakeholders (identifying two relationship patterns, labeled "true partnership" and "master-servant", in which the client is the 'master') (Hill and Johnson 2004), the model does have several limitations. First, the model entirely skips the ideation step, which plays a significant role in the advertising development process, jumping from briefing to creative idea presentation (Stuhlfaut

and Windels 2019). Second, in a review of agency-client relationships, there is no con-clusive indication as to which type of relationship prevails and it is mentioned that the majority may lay in-between the extremes, which might be an indication that there can be other patterns of relationship identified as those presented are not differ-entiating enough.

The seven-step model of the advertising creative process

The model created by Turnbull and Wheeler (2017) is based on the initially identified 24 distinct stages, which have been transformed into seven steps for delivery of the advertisement. The identified steps are (1) task identification, (2) agreement of task and objectives, (3) ideation, (4) response, (5) validation—internal review, (6) valid-ation—external review (client and consumer), and (7) decision.

The research broadens the perspective on the creative process, which was previ-ously commonly presented in advertising literature as Amabile's (1996) five-stage pro-cess, and which placed significant weight on the importance of validation and the identification of the three stakeholders groups (agency, client and consumers) involved in the validation process (in contrast to Amabile's one-level validation [1996]).

Extending the model with the clients as the key validating group constitutes an important addition. Previous research held the view that pre-testing is employed only in unusual circumstances (Hill and Johnson 2004), which has recently been refuted by Turnbull and Wheeler (2017). This seems highly relevant in view of the fact that quali-tative and quantitative pre-testing are now commonly used in marketing and advertis-ing (Turnbull and Wheeler 2017), but also considering the rising popularity of A/B testing (Gallo 2017).

The model can also offers several insights into stakeholder relationships. Most previ-ous studies suggested that client engagement in the process was limited to their involvement in strategy creation and final work approval (Na, Marshall, and Woodside 2009). The shift that can be observed and is described in the research, presents the evolving relationship between agency and client, showing that some agencies allow the client to validate ideas during the earlier stages of the process (Turnbull and Wheeler 2017). However, there is no mention of additional possible stakeholders in the creative process.

The step-and-structural (S&S) model of the creative process

The Stuhlfaut and Windels' model (2019) identifies ten sequential steps in the creative process, as follows: (1) identifying the problem, (2) determining the strategy, (3) pre-senting the initial strategy to the client, (4) briefing the team, (5) creating the core concept or idea, (6) presenting the rough concepts internally, (7) translating ideas into traditional and new media prototypes, (8) presenting prototypes to the client for approval, (9) revising and extending the approved concept to full campaign, (10) pro-ducing creative materials for media placement.

The proposed model takes into account the current, expanded media environment, focusing on redefined roles in the digital media realm and the effects of technology, and presents new dynamics within the agencies that are emerging as the market evolves. The model asserts the importance of technology in terms of its influence not

only on the production and evaluation of campaign materials but also on the generation of ideas and strategic insights (Stuhlfaut and Windels 2019).

The authors acknowledge collaborations with external agencies and outside suppliers, to which media platforms and television producers may be assigned, and consider this to represent a "paradigm shift in the structure of the advertising agency" (Stuhlfaut and Windels 2019, 22); however, they do not examine the effect of such collaborations on the creative processes and relationships between the actors and regard this step simply as the outsourcing of some services without further impact on the process.

All models mentioned above discuss the creative process from the organizational perspective, and are designed to respond to changes that occur in the advertising industry. However, each of them focuses on the traditional agency-client relationship, and the delivery of what may be called "standard advertising campaigns". They neglect or marginalize the involvement of additional stakeholders and their influence on the creative process and its outcomes. In light of the rising importance of "non-standard marketing" solutions, which come across editorial content, it is crucial to investigate the processes that involve other stakeholders, namely, media platforms.

Working relations in the creative process

Relationships between stakeholders in advertising tend to be complex and involve several factors in their efforts to be productive and effective. As the literature seems to neglect investing relationships between stakeholders other than client-agency relationships in the creative process, and media in particular (Kover 2016), for the purpose of creating a theoretical framework, the client-agency relationship will be considered as that which has been most thoroughly explored.

The advertising creative process cannot come into effect without the involvement of at least two parties (the client delivering the brief at the minimum level and the agency providing the service) (Michell, Cataquet, and Hague 1992). Therefore, productive interactions and harmonious relationships must be established and executed (Wackman, Salmon, and Salmon 1986). Productive interaction occurs when client-agency interactions are effective (Wackman, Salmon, and Salmon 1986). It can be affected by communication issues and disagreements in the relationship, which may be called 'conflict' (Michell, Cataquet, and Hague 1992). The conflict can have a dual nature and have a twofold effect on the working relationship: functionally, when the relationship between conflict and productive interaction is positive, or in a dysfunctional way, leading to a decline in productivity (LaBahn and Kohli 1997) or even the termination of the relationship (Michell, Cataquet, and Hague 1992).

Trust between stakeholders serves as a determinant of successful co-operation (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé 1992; Bidaut and Castello, 2009), but also can be earned during the process as a result of productive interactions (LaBahn and Kohli 1997). It has also been proven that the working relationship and agency performance are strongly influenced by service-oriented agency behaviors (LaBahn and Kohli 1997). Moreover, this also influences the client's trust and commitment, which leads to

improved working relationships and creative quality implementation (LaBahn and Kohli 1997).

Methodology

The study is exploratory in nature. A qualitative research approach has been applied, with in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The method, which was proven to be a relevant approach for exploring the participant's construction of meanings based on their everyday experiences (Morrison et al. 2012) and analyzing dynamic organizational, interactive, and socially constructed processes (Lee 1999). It is also highly appropriate for capturing the contextual factors that occur in complex marketing reality (Hewege and Perera 2013), which the advertising creative process reflects.

To ensure informed interviews, qualitative content analysis of selected branded content campaigns (in which the participants had been directly involved) were conducted beforehand; however, their analysis is not the exclusive focus of the study.

Sampling and data collection

The sample comprised 24 experts from the Netherlands, Finland, and Poland. These countries (among others) allow the presence of brands in their television schedules, and branded content campaigns feature in their programming schedules on commercial (and occasionally national) channels.[1]

The interviewed industry experts met the following criteria:

- Group 1: this group consisted of representatives employed in creative agencies with a minimum of five employees. The interviewee had to have a minimum of two years' experience in branded content, at least one branded content campaign which was primarily distributed on television outside the commercial break, and must have held a managerial role in the agency or a lead creative role on the project;
- Group 2: this group consisted of broadcasters' representatives working in agency sales (or related) or programming departments in managerial roles or higher, and who had experience of direct involvement in the creation of at least two branded content campaigns which culminated in being broadcast on the channel that they represented.

The final list of participants can be found in Table 1.

The interviews were conducted in person or via Skype, lasted around 42–66 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure that the results would be comparable, participants from the representing advertising agencies were asked to direct their comments toward branded content campaign development and creation processes in their agencies and the nature of working relations with broadcasters during these processes. Participants representing broadcasters were asked only about the latter. All participants were guaranteed anonymity.

Table 1. Description of participants.

Interviewee	Title	Years of Experience in Branded Content	Based in	Operates
	Creative agencies' representatives			
P1	Campaign Manager	2	Finland	Nationally
P2	Executive Creative Director	4	Finland	Nationally
P3	CEO	4	Finland	Globally
P4	Creative Partnerships Director	3	The Netherlands	Nationally
P5	Creative Director	5	The Netherlands	Nationally
P6	Head of Branded Content & Entertainment	3	The Netherlands, Belgium	Multi-nationally
P7	Co-Owner, Creative Director	7	The Netherlands	Multi-nationally
P8	Creative Director	4	Poland	Nationally
P9	Non-standard Marketing Manager	2	Poland	Nationally
P10	Chief Creative Officer	5	Poland	Multi-nationally
P11	Partnership Director	3	Poland	Nationally
P12	Lead Copywriter	4,5	Poland	Nationally
	Broadcasters' representatives			
P13	Programming Specialist	1,5	Finland	Nationally
P14	Sales Manager	3	Finland	Nationally
P15	Sales & Partnership Director	4	The Netherlands	Nationally
P16	Channel General Manager	3	The Netherlands	Nationally
P17	Senior Sales and New Business Manager	4	The Netherlands	Nationally
P18	Branded Partnerships Director	5	The Netherlands	Multi-nationally
P19	Sales Department Director	5	Poland	Nationally
P20	Special Sales Director	8	Poland	Multi-nationally
P21	Agency Account Director	4,5	Poland	Nationally
P22	Creative Lab Director	5	Poland	Nationally
P23	Value Branded Content Manager	2	Poland	Nationally
P24	Programming Consultant	10	Netherlands	Globally

The interview guide and a synthesis of the results were subject to examination and validation by four advertising practitioners with over ten years' experience in the field and who were not directly involved in the research.

Results

Creating good branded content is more like working in entertainment. So, we [advertising professionals] need to rethink and change several things (…) our approach to consumers, who just want a good story, how we choose media, how we write and produce the content. I think we still have a lot to learn and, yeah, as I said, we could definitely learn from those who produce top entertainment.

The above quotation from P8 illustrates how relatively new forms of advertising, like branded content, differ from other, more traditional ones. As they aim to offer a different value to consumers, they require a distinct approach to its creation and production. Moreover, as is common in the entertainment industry, co-operation from multiple parties is required to make it happen, which was confirmed by the interviewees.

All interviewees reported that, in a case of branded content for television, the creative process differs (at least to some extent and to varying degrees among the agencies) from those of other advertising forms that they develop. In the case of "standard" television spot campaigns, airtime during a commercial break is simply bought and, if the content meets the legal and technical requirements, the spot can
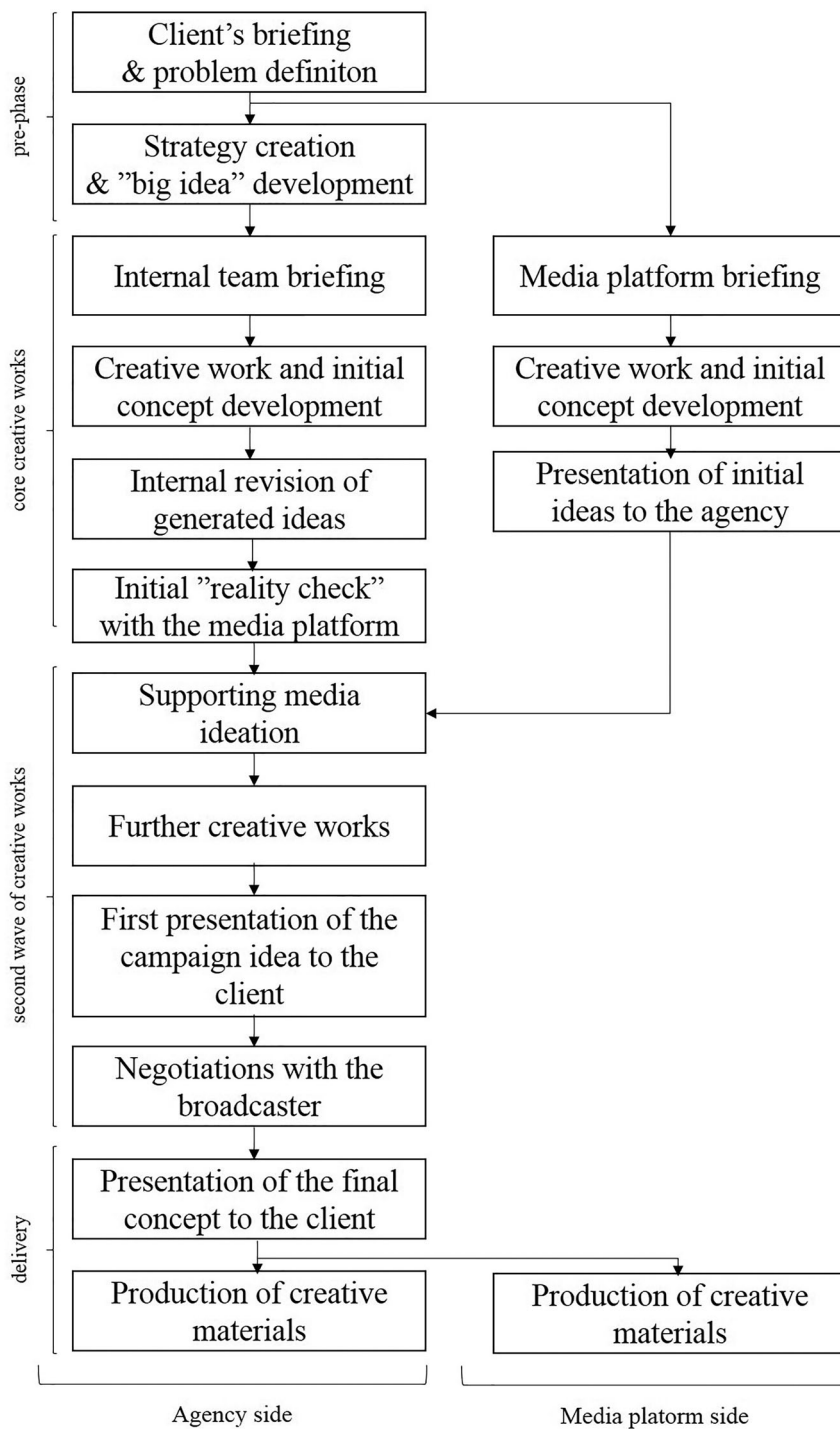
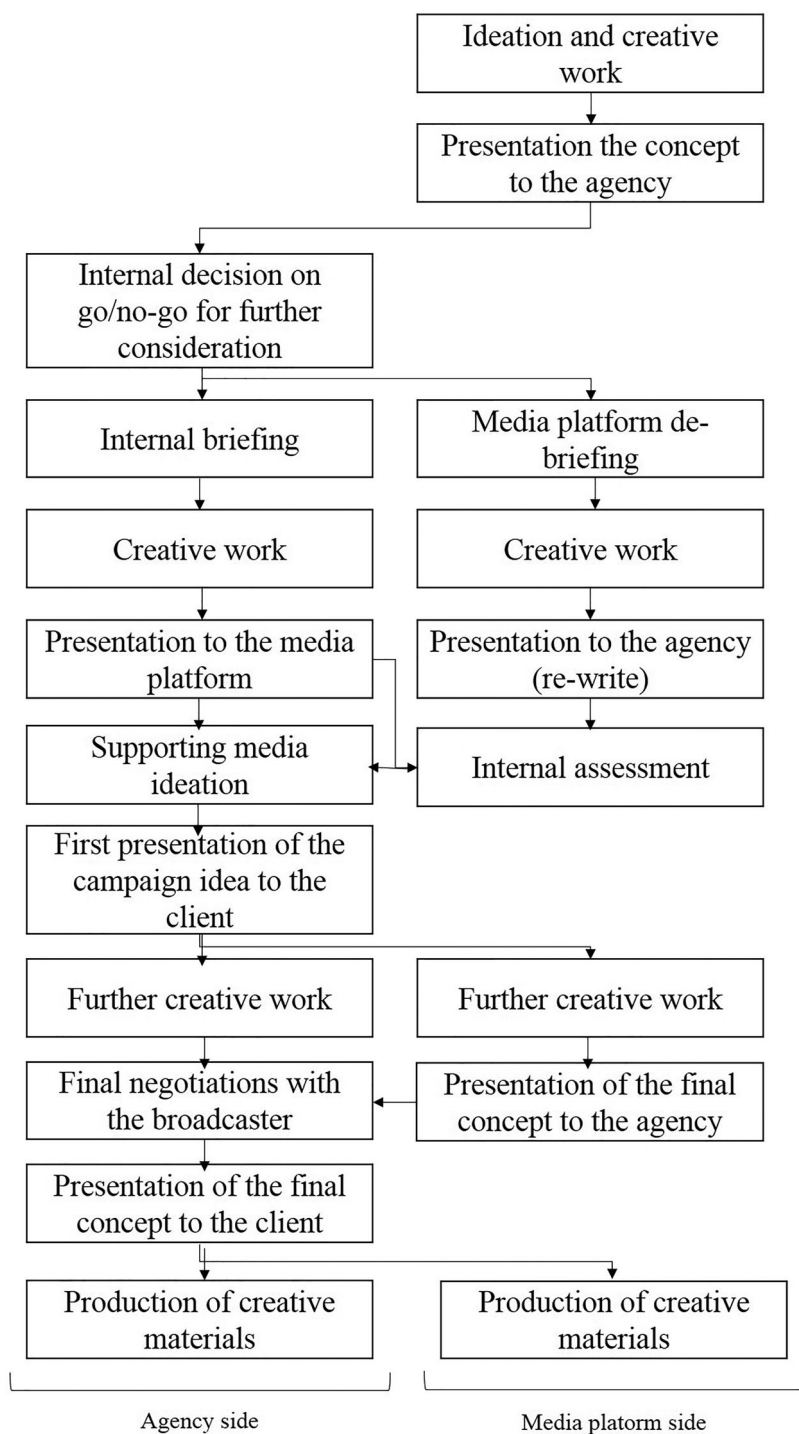**Figure 1.** Agency-initiated creative process (AICP model).

Figure 2. Medium-initiated creative process (MICP model).

be aired. No further involvement from the television station is required. Most inter-viewees (21/24) mentioned that this is not possible in the case of branded content campaigns: airtime is (usually) paid for but the amount is negotiated (most commonly by the media agency) and does not reflect the rate card for the television spot. As P2 explained: "Not a single client would be able to afford to pay for airtime during televi-sion series or reality television. It needs to be a win-win deal", meaning that television stations must see sufficient value in the content itself to want or at least accept it in their schedules. This makes the parties interdependent: the agency wishes to offer the client a branded content campaign and potentially air the content on television to reach a broad audience; the broadcaster does not wish to lose advertiser's budget, so they might seek a common ground. This may lead to tension (as further described in the section *Conflict of interest*).

The process

The branded content creative process for television was described by all interviewees as a complex, multi-stage process requiring the involvement of both client and broad-caster. The compilation and analysis of data facilitated the identification of a new cre-ative process that validates some of the findings from previous research but also extends the existing stage and process models. The model for the *Agency-Initiated Creative Process* (Figure 1) consists of 12 steps, with one alternative path, that reflect the practices commonly implemented by the agency-broadcaster (or the producer/stu-dio acting on their behalf).

Moreover, another model, *Medium-Initiated Creative Process* (Figure 2), emerged from the interviews. Most interviewees (19/24) reported the practice of medium-initiated cam-paigns, which offers a new perspective on how the creative process looks if the third party in the process is not simply a placement platform or validator, but an active player in the creation, initiating conceptual work and leading the process. This differentiation allows to see the different dynamics at play between the stakeholders involved in the process, which were not taken into account in studies of the creative process.

Agency-initiated creative process (AICP model)

In an AICP, the agency works toward addressing some overarching challenge or goal set by a client in a form of briefing (step 1). A branded content campaign can be iden-tified as a response to the client's problem and, therefore, becomes a core element of the strategy and 'big idea' (step 2), but it can be also conceptualized in the lat-ter stages.

After the strategy and, so called 'big idea', which is the main creative lead behind the campaign, have been devised, the internal team is briefed (step 3a), creative work begins and the initial concepts are created (step 4a). The next step is the internal val-idation of the ideas (step 5a), and a broadcaster may become involved to secure possi-bilities of content placement or the co-production may be checked (step 6). At this stage, the broadcaster may verify whether the project aligns with the character of the station, meets legal requirements, and does not have any features that are seen as

disqualifying from their perspective, such as the proposed host being a top star of a major competitor. If the major criteria are met, the broadcaster gives the initial green light and the project is further developed.

However, the broadcaster may become involved much earlier, as P8 explains: "We may even just brief a station for ideas. After all, they know their schedules and their stars best. They are experts in their field, and they know what will have a better chance of being pushed through programming." Therefore, the broadcaster might join the process at the briefing step (3 b) and serve as a 'partner agency', delivering the concept (step 4 b), which is further presented to the agency (step 5 b), evaluated, and revised by agency's team.

After the initial shape of the branded content has been determined, the agency develops supporting media concepts (step 7) that will allow the created content to spread and link with other activities of the client or within the campaign to ensure consistency. Another round of creative work takes place (step 8), which involves creating early visualizations of how the creative materials will look, and the project is presented to the client (step 9). If the client accepts the idea, the campaign is negotiated with the broadcaster (step 10). This happens on the financial, legal and creative levels: as both parties have creative powers in their resources they must agree as to who will be responsible for the storyline and script and how the creative team will be composed. Therefore, this step is also a component of the creative process, as these decisions will affect the shape of the end product. When these are agreed and the final concept has been created, the deciding presentation is delivered to the client (step 11). If the project is granted final acceptance, it goes to production, which, again, may be delivered by either the creative agency (and their partners) (step 12a) or the broadcaster (with their collaborators) (step 12 b).

The process's steps o can be clustered into four phases:

- pre-phase: when the briefing, strategy and 'big idea' setup are often not directly linked with specifically branded content campaign yet,
- core creative works: these may occur on either the agency's or the broadcaster's side,
- second wave of creative works: this usually occurs on the agency's side with some involvement from the broadcaster,
- delivery phase: when the final decisions are made between all stakeholders and agency- or broadcaster-led production takes place.

However, as the models offers an alternative path for the broadcaster's creative involvement, it must be noted that this is not fully reflected in the phase and can be misleading. Therefore, the full 12-step model should be regarded as that which offers the more accurate view.

Medium-initiated creative process (MICP model)

As broadcasters aim to remain proactive in acquiring and controlling advertisers' budgets, it is not uncommon for them to offer non-standard forms of possible brands'

presentation in their airtime. One of the forms offered might be—and increasingly *is*, especially in the case of commercial broadcasters—branded content. This makes the broadcaster the initiator and possibly the leader of the advertising creative process.

In such cases, the broadcaster creates the initial concept (step 1) and pitches it to the agency without having been briefed in advance (step 2). This proposition may be tailored to a particular client of the agency that the station is willing to attract, or it may be more open-ended, targeting clients from particulars sectors (for example, fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) for culinary shows). In both cases, the station is more open and flexible to make changes to the concept (which may lead to creating a new draft of the idea) than in the case of productions that have been planned and fixed by a programming team.

The agency reviews the offer, considering its own portfolio of clients and a possible match between the project and their clients' goals and needs. This leads to an initial go/no-go decision on the agency's part (step 3). If the project receives an early green light, it is recommended for further consideration and the internal creative teams are briefed (step 4a) or the broadcaster is de-briefed (step 4b), and creative works begin (steps 5a and 5b).

If the broadcaster was responsible for project development, the extended concept is presented to the agency (step 6b). If the development was led by the agency, then the agency presents their revised version of the project to the station (step 6a). Then, in both cases, the project is internally assessed in the television station for its potential to meet the programming team's final requirements (step 7b). When these requirements have been met, the agency creates supporting concepts, as in the case of the AICP (step 8).

The idea for the campaign is presented to the client (step 9) and the ensuing creative works take place, either on the part of the agency (step 10a), followed by negotiations with the broadcaster (step 11a), or on the part of the broadcaster side (step 10b) followed by presentation to the agency (step 11b). The final concept is presented to the client (step 12) and, following its approval, goes to production, which, again, may be led by either of the parties (step 13 a and b).

All steps in the process can be grouped into the same clusters as those in the AICP model. However, as the process is more complex and involves more variables, this is not recommended, as it does not yield insight into the nature of the process.

In the case of MICP, the division of labor and responsibilities in the process varies and depends on multiple factors that may be summarized as follows: the broadcaster's reputation and their potential to deliver high-quality content in the eyes of the agency; the agency-broadcaster relationship; and the agency's faith in the client's final approval (the higher, the more engaged they are in the creative process).

Although the process is initiated and led by the broadcaster, it must be said that the agency is still the more empowered party in the relationship. The agency retains control and decides how much creative freedom (if any) they wish to relinquish (after receiving the initial concept) and the amount of effort they are willing to expend in encouraging a client to accept the idea. This is because, in many cases, the agency may serve as a "door opener" for the broadcaster to the client, and might be the only stakeholder that can make a recommendation that will be positively considered. After the client has signed off, the project enters the production stage, which is in this case

usually lead by the broadcaster. However, the agency retains some creative control over the project as the party responsible before the client for the successful delivery of high-quality content.

The processes highlighted in both models require the close co-operation of agencies and broadcasters, which may be complex, are not without their respective challenges and involve various dynamics. Below, the key themes that emerged from the interviews are explored.

Conflict of interests

The need for collaboration with media platforms violates the status quo in which creative agencies almost exclusively hold the power to develop advertising concepts and present them to clients (P4). This change is not always welcomed by agency representatives, who may be reluctant to cede some of their field to new 'players', and may lead to tension and conflict (P12, P18). The interviewees mentioned several factors as reasons, including the limited attractiveness of broadcasters' propositions (P3, P11); the "time consuming process of going back and forth" (P2, P9); the fact that "pushing" product placement solutions is unattractive from brands' perspectives (P2, P3); that it is considered overall "a waste of time" (P9), yielding "no added value" (P5); and the possibility of generating less revenue, as it will need to be shared between the parties (P8, P11). However, these issues are not inevitable and should not be a barrier to collaboration. Six out of twelve interviewees mentioned that they actually prefer to outsource branded content campaigns, as the development is time consuming and resource intensive, while eight out of twelve reported having had positive experiences with collaboration.

The interviewees mentioned that some broadcasters are also unwilling to interrupt their status quo. As P4 expressed, "They just want money for the ads. They don't care about the quality content that we might bring. It is easier for them to sell us airtime, as with a normal campaign. So, sometimes they just don't want to hear about non-standard stuff. It's too much of an effort for them to care. And then, if we are not interested, they might eventually take a look". P11 also mentions that the situation varies depending on the project's leadership: "Now it all depends on whether we are coming to the station because we want to place something [in the programming schedule] or the television is coming to us to say 'look, we have this cool idea for a culinary program and we think it might be fantastic for your client'— then they need us to make the show happen, so we can play cards. But when we want to do something they might even become rude and say, 'oh, we don't want it', which they would never do with a spot campaign".

P3 reported that sometimes they even try to avoid collaborating with broadcasters on complex projects: "Of course, it's easier for us just to place the content on client's channels or some portals, but some clients just say, 'yes, that's fine' but I want television', and we need to understand that some of them are in the television mindset or just believe in television's reach. That's not totally wrong, so we don't kill the idea, but, yeah, that's a tough cookie for us".

When it comes to the actual production, the majority of interviewees prefer their agency to lead the concept development and production, and deliver the project to

the television station for final approval. However, this is not always possible, as television stations are willing to utilize their internal resources and/or don't want to relinquish control over the produced content. Therefore, it may be the case that some key creative roles (such as producer) during the production phase are doubled (P2).

All broadcasters' representatives declared themselves open to collaboration and new ideas. However, they also almost unanimously explained that agencies' expectations are often impossible to meet, citing issues such as their preference for exposing brands to an unacceptable extent, poor-quality concepts for shows from the programming point of view, lack of knowledge and skills to write for traditional television genres, or "irrational budgets".

'Risky business'

Broadcasters' representatives point out that the implementation of branded content projects is not completely indifferent to the schedule, and involves a significant risk, which is not always understood by agencies' representatives. They state that the projects that reach the antenna must be selected with great caution:

The station's risk is associated with lower-than-expected program ratings, affecting neighboring programs and directly adjacent advertising blocks. A drop in viewership for advertising blocks can result in bigger losses than profits across the entire project (P13). Another interviewee notes that, due to the risk and in accordance with policy, their branded content projects are in a sense "doomed to success", as they only implement the projects that, they believe, are likely to yield good viewing results, thus protecting the interests of all parties involved, which does not always garner them sympathy from agencies (P20).

Multiple stations' representatives mentioned that, from their perspective, they prefer to offer product placement in a popular show over a dedicated program. They explain that, in such cases, they are able to guarantee a certain level of viewership without risking the client's dissatisfaction which would limit their channels' future budget.

One of the interviewees (P21), working for a public broadcaster, drew attention to additional threats, indicating that the existing legal regulations regarding the presence of brands on television channels cause the implementation of non-standard projects to be associated with the need to search for potential, not always obvious, solutions that border what is legal. The regulations are ambiguous and are subject to the interpretation of the appropriate broadcasting and television council, which often deviates from the legal departments of broadcasters in its opinions. The interviewee notes that in the case of public broadcasters, both viewers and the councils pay closer attention to possible legal abuses, and that is part of the price:

> As a public broadcaster, we are under greater supervision. We must avoid the risk of having a penalty imposed on us. We cannot implement certain ideas, knowingly assuming that we will be punished. Which does not mean that we do not receive penalties < laughs >. The rules apply equally to all, but they can be interpreted differently. We are certainly trying to look for different solutions that will be accepted in legal terms and at the same time will respond to the client's needs. We do not always succeed— some projects that we have rejected, we can see on the antennas of our competitors. (P21)

Opportunity

Although there are some risks associated with branded content and possible tensions in the process, the form offers multiple opportunities to broadcasters and brands alike: "as a result of the development of on-demand television, streaming platforms, the abandonment of cable television and declining ratings of everything that is live, brands are looking for alternative ways to get their messages to consumers" (P24). Therefore, as all broadcasters' representatives have admitted, branded content is becoming increasingly popular, both in terms of advertisers' interest and the number of productions that ultimately find their place on the given station. This is especially relevant for the difficult situation in which broadcasters find themselves, as advertising budgets shift toward online platforms, and may even be regarded as a remedy for the stations:

> Branded content is good for the industry. The financial television model is completely broken, and branded content is the way to improve television's finances. With so many [advertising] opportunities available on the market and networks' declining ratings, they lose money on programs […]. People are willing to pay to bypass advertising blocks, so the only option to generate a large reach is to transfer brands' presence to the programming sphere. (P24)

According to some broadcasters' representatives, the special projects segment is promising, "provided that it remains an exclusive format. This is its strength, for which the brands are ready to bear a relatively higher financial cost than for standard activities" (P14). Due to this exclusivity and the very limited space for special formats, the costs of placing them on the air are high. P22 admits that the level of revenue that the station receives from the project's implementation is one of the selection criteria (in addition to the potential attractiveness for viewers, and thus the ability to generate adequately high ratings) that determines whether the station will grant its approval.

Interviewees also mentioned that, from the brand's perspective, branded content can also offer multiple opportunities, of which the most important are the possibility of brand exposure outside the advertising block and distinguishing itself from the communication crowd. Branded content is indicated as a form that might have a high number of viewers, with "regular" positions in the schedule. P6, P19, and P20, comparing branded content with traditional advertising blocks, stated that branded content is perceived by viewers as more reliable and viewers' dropout of viewers is considerably lower. P6 also observes, "Special projects are as keenly watched as a standard offer—there is no difference in the issue: if the brand's presence is not intrusive, the viewer is not aware of what is really 'special' and what is standard in our eyes".

P22 and P20 also drew attention to the growing transmediality of today's campaigns and the possibility of content migration between particular communication channels:

Our observations indicate that customers (in this case, agencies and media houses) are becoming more aware of the benefits that such programs can bring to them. Customers frequently place parts of the programs on their websites—thanks to the purchased license, of course—increasing their attractiveness and driving additional traffic (P20).

Agency-medium mutual trust and working relationship

Although advertising agencies are not particularly keen on outsourcing creative tasks to broadcasters, the interviewees admitted that even one positive experience of mutual development of branded content campaign with the station would affect their attitude positively. P3 mentioned that the mistrust that has accumulated between agencies and broadcasters is usually based on the prejudices on the part of the agency's. The interviewee explained that agencies often see themselves "as the only ones who know about creative stuff" (P3) and neglect involvement of others. However, in the process of effective co-operation based on a high level of service from the broadcasters and, as the interviewee called it, "openmindness to creative solutions", trust can be established, which may lead to more long-term relationships and effects, with further projects for some of the agency's other clients.

At the same time, broadcasters' representatives stated that their hesitation in co-operating with the agencies is due to factors such as the tendency toward brand over-exposure in created content, carelessness about legal regulations, and reluctance on the part of the agency to incorporate the station's feedback. Interviewees P12 and P23 explained that this is usually a problem when the first "non-standard" project is executed with the agency and the latter's co-operation proceeds without major issues. P23 explains that this is because "we all learn about one another and the expectations that we have. After we deliver a show with a brand, which turns out to be a success, the agencies happily come back. They already know how we work, what they can and what they cannot expect, so it saves everyone a lot of stress < laughs >. It's kind of expectations management."

Discussion

This study has aimed to investigate new practices in creative processes, in light of the rise of new advertising forms that require the involvement of media platforms, which distinguish the processes from those of "traditional" campaigns. The media became important stakeholders in the process, frequently becoming initiators and leaders of campaign development. As this involvement has been neglected in the existing literature and required a closer investigation (Kover 2016), this study not only offers an expanded model for an agency-driven advertising creative process involving new actors, but also offers a medium-led model. The models that emerged offer a perspective that reflects the evolving advertising media realm.

Agency- and media-initiated creative processes (AICP and MICP)

The study expands our understanding of the advertising creative process, contributing a perspective on practices around close agency-medium collaboration. Previous research either ignored the possible media platform involvement or saw the medium as a partner agency, failing to examine the implications of the paradigm shift (Stuhlfaut and Windels 2019) and neglecting the possibility of media platforms being key stakeholders and occupying positions of power. Hence, this study offers a 12-stage-model, extending existing models of steps that lead to the involvement and

engagement of media platforms (or producers and studios acting on their behalf). The steps are "media platform briefing" and "negotiations" (which are seen here as elements of creative work), but also the alternative path that sees the media deliver some of the creative tasks. It is important to acknowledge that, in this model (AICP), although the agency is still the leader of the process, often the media platform's involvement is significant and not merely that of a party to whom projects are outsourced, therefore, this makes the alternative path an important addition to existing scholarship on the topic.

This study also introduces a new perspective to the discussion of the advertising creative process, offering insights into the process that does not have its origins on the client's or the agency's side. In the search for advertising budgets, media platforms proactively offer agencies non-standard forms of communication for the agencies' clients. This initiative on the part of media platforms changes the dynamics and steps of the process, and, therefore, merits acknowledgment. The MICP model indicates how advertising can be an outcome of a two-sided process, in which mutual co-operation with the media platform is necessary for successful delivery. This requires creative collaboration, whereby responsibilities are shared among the stakeholders, and a search for mutually beneficial solutions, which can make the final projects attractive for both advertisers and publishers.

New paradigm, new dynamics

The MICP model is related to a new paradigm. Traditionally, agencies were the only parties responsible for the creative aspects of advertising, while media were just seen as platforms in which time and space could be bought without the need for more "advanced" collaboration. As media have become important actors in creativity, dynamics and relations between stakeholders have shifted. New models of collaboration come with new dynamics, create new tensions, and may lead to conflict. The agencies began to share creative efforts, but at the same time surpass the media in power, as they remain the gatekeepers to clients' budgets and are the parties responsible for delivery. Media platforms control access to programming and editorial spaces, which is desirable for some campaign goals or requested by clients. However, parties' behaviors have significant influence on the mutual trust and working relationship. The results show that agencies can improve the relationship with greater openness to media platforms' ideas and stronger trust in their creative powers, expertise, and their knowledge of the market and audiences. They should cultivate a fuller understanding of the market situation and legal limitations that may influence the approaches and decisions taken by the platforms. Media platforms should also contribute to quality relationships. They can support the establishment of trust through good availability and by exhibiting a professional attitude. At the same time, they should avoid adopting a judgmental approach to agencies' concepts and offering generic ideas, which can lead to conflict. The ideas presented should prove their understanding of the client's business, goals, and storytelling style, which would make the media more trustworthy partners in the agencies' eyes.

Intent as a constituting feature

Consumers expect that brands will contribute directly to the projects with which they identify themselves, by providing original and tailored cultural materials. Brands, therefore, are becoming carriers of expressive culture, no different in principle from film or television programs (Holt 2002). Therefore, as brands (and, consequently, agencies and media) follow consumers' interests, the *intent* behind the brand's (and their representatives') activities gains importance, which is evident in the *push-pull* transition. If the intent (besides the economic 'end goal') is to entertain the audience, it must influence the content design and development process, and may lead to changes in the creative agencies, as the production of high-quality entertainment content requires different skill sets and expertise than the production of a 30-second television spot (for example, considering screenwriting and character building). In effect, the *intent* to provide audiences with quality content pushes both agencies and broadcasters into new territories and leads to changes in the approaches to the advertising creative process, and becomes a key feature that characterizes branded content as a media form.

Limitations of the study and further research

This study is not without its limitations. First, it is based on qualitative research, which does not allow for systematic generalization. However, to maximize the reliability of the research, the sample consisted of representatives from three different countries, representing a variety of organizations and serving in multiple roles. The outcomes have been discussed with advertising and media industry professionals, who were not involved in the research, to validate the findings against working reality. The research was conducted in Europe, and is mostly representative of this region, which may be seen as a limitation. It would be worth investigating the phenomenon in other regions.

   The research investigated the advertising creative process, in the particular case of branded content development for television. The study clearly illustrates the shift in practices. However, validation of similar practices occurs in the case of collaboration with digital publishers and in the process of other forms of content, which emerges at the blurred boundaries between editorial and advertising content, such as native advertising, and, therefore, would be an interesting area for further investigation.

   Future research should identify potential consumers' involvement in the branded content creation process. As the study illustrates, the media are becoming important actors in the creation of advertising content, which has important implications for the parties' working relationships and interdependencies. Conceptual discussion of idea-sourcing originating from user-generated content and other consumers' involvement would be beneficial.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note

1. Based on author's own prior research.

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