

REEXAMINING ADVERTISING CREATIVITY:  
A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF COPYWRITERS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
CREATIVITY IN ADVERTISING

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined  
the thesis entitled

REEXAMINING ADVERTISING  
CREATIVITY:

A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF COPYWRITERS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
CREATIVITY IN ADVERTISING

presented by Benjamin Owens,

a candidate for the degree of Master of the Arts

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## DEDICATION

Thanks to my fiancée, Caroline, for putting up with my “philosophizing” and occasionally esoteric behavior, and for supporting me while I followed my professional and educational passions.

Thanks to my mom and dad, who have pushed me since I was in elementary school rewriting spelling words more than anyone else, who have helped fund and inspire my education, and to whom I’ve always kind of sort of told the whole truth regarding my thesis progress.

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ABSTRACT

Creativity is an intangible concept that is in a perceived constant state of change, a state that necessitates the occasional reexamination of previous findings in an effort to further understand the roles and perceptions held by advertising practitioners. This qualitative study offers insights and expands on previous quantitative studies of agency creatives' views on advertising creativity (Reid, King, & DeLorme, 1998). Through ten semi-structured interviews of senior agency copywriters, the author compared past and present perceptions of creativity in advertising. The study's findings help to clarify what factors into such perceptions and what impact technological advancements have had upon said perceived levels of creativity. The study found that copywriters do not unanimously agree that creativity has increased, though a majority believes it has remained constant or slightly increased. Copywriters do perceive creativity to have changed since they entered the profession, and they assert that changes in approach, business models, and technological advancements are the primary factors contributing to change. This study provides practical and theoretical value by contributing to role-based models of advertising and by informing current copywriters of the opinions of their peers.

## EPIGRAPH

“You’re in the desert, the desert is advertising. And you have a little plot of land and a cow walks and dies in it...A few people could live off that cow and you could develop the cow and you could build a brand or whatever...[now they] throw a small bone in front of those dogs, just a piece of meat, and they go nuts, they’ll kill each other for that little bit. And that’s what you kind of see, agencies willing to do more and more to keep a client...which means more and more stress just put on the creatives making them less and less creative.”

— Interview #9

## Introduction

Advertising practitioners have never unanimously agreed upon the most important aspect of their industry, but the significant amount of research into advertisers' creative processes suggests that creativity is, at the very least, one of the most important facets of advertising as a whole (Sasser & Koslow, 2008; Sasser & Koslow, 2012). This is further clarified in the oft-cited saying of Jef Richards, "Creative without strategy is called 'art.' Creative with strategy is called 'advertising'" (MSU Advertising Association, n.d.). A well-rounded understanding of creativity in advertising can prove useful in accomplishing agency objectives. It is also important to note the range of perceptions of creativity's roles within an agency (Hirschman, 1989).

In examining perceptions of creativity in advertising, it has been proposed that a more focused, qualitative take on existing data from top-level agency creatives would help to further explain changing trends in industry-based perceptions of advertising creativity (Reid, King & Delorme, 1998). As suggested by these researchers, advertising research can be broken down into five categories: creative decision process studies (Hirschman, 1989; Kover, 1995; Johar, Holbrook, & Stern, 2001), studies of practitioners' individual characteristics (Auer, 1976; Reid & Rotfeld, 1976; West, 1993; Young, 2000; Hackley & Kover, 2007), studies on organizational influences (Kover & Goldberg, 1995; Kilgour & Koslow, 2009; Reid & Karambayya, 2009; Oliver & Ashley, 2012; Sasser & Koslow, 2012), advertising education studies (McGann, 1986), and studies on trends in the industry (Reid, King, & DeLorme, 1998; White & Smith, 2001; Koslow, Sasser, & Riordan, 2003; Sasser & Koslow, 2008; Sasser & Koslow, 2012).



These categories are reinforced by the 3P Model of Creativity (Sasser & Koslow, 2008), which designates person, place, and process as appropriate research categories.

The present study is situated in the fifth category proposed by the researchers as its focus is on trends in perceptions of creativity by those in creative jobs. The goal of this study was to examine the question of whether agency creatives believe creativity in advertising is increasing, unchanged, or decreasing (Reid, King & DeLorme, 1998). This study is significant because it not only provides further evidence of the importance of role-based perceptions, but also informs copywriters as a whole that commonly held beliefs surrounding the advertising industry in the past are not as unanimous as they once were. This study's qualitative examination digs deeper into the suggestions of previous quantitative results, allowing for a better understanding of the factors and reasons that are perceived to have affected such trends in creativity.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Framework

The foundation for this review is rooted in the theoretical frameworks of Sasser & Koslow's 3P Model of Creativity (Sasser & Koslow, 2008; Sasser & Koslow, 2012).

Using this model to organize existing research on creativity in advertising facilitates discussion and understanding of what has been found by categorizing research according to its primary investigation (Sasser & Koslow, 2008).

The literature included in this review will be organized into sections derived from Reid, King, and DeLorme's (1998) categories: creative decision process studies, individual characteristics, organizational influences, advertising education, and industry trends. There is considerable overlap of the first three categories with those of the 3P Model, process, person, and place (Sasser & Koslow, 2008). Combining these two organizational systems results in a total of four categories as follows: Person, Place, Process and Trends. Using these categories, each aspect of advertising creativity research can be understood within the context of relevant literature. The author has eliminated the category of advertising education from this review, as it is not in line with this study's primary focus on advertising practitioners.

For the present study, creativity is defined based on research by Reid, King, & DeLorme, (1998, p. 3): "original and imaginative thought designed to produce goal-directed and problem-solving advertisements and commercials." The original study put this definition through exhaustive screening and pre-test processes before the researchers felt comfortable using it. This definition will serve as the present study's basis for

comparison (Reid, King, & DeLorme, 1998). Creative Professionals, referred to hereafter as *creatives* unless otherwise indicated, can be defined as professionals with various titles including Copywriter, Art Director, Graphic Designer and/or Creative Director. Account-Side Professionals, also referred to as *account executives*, include those in “management, media [and] strategy” positions (Sasser & Koslow, 2003).

### **Creativity in advertising**

As mentioned above, advertising creativity research may be effectively categorized using person, process and/or place (Sasser & Koslow, 2012). In addition, Reid, King & DeLorme’s trend-monitoring category separates industry trend research from the former three categories. While some studies could be included within more than one category, I have narrowed the focus of the review to highlight the most prominent of the categories within each of the articles reviewed. While the proposed research does not take into account all of the existing information on creativity in advertising, it is imperative to approach a study of perception with a solid foundation and understanding of what has already been researched. This literature is the basis for RQ 1 and RQ 2: *Do copywriters perceive an increase in creativity in advertising and what factors contribute to this perceived change?*

### **Person Studies**

Person Studies is the first of the four categories and includes practitioners in account- and creative-side roles (Sasser & Koslow, 2008). Researchers have spent a considerable amount of time studying this element of the creative process (Auer, 1976; West, 1993; Young, 2000; Koslow, Sasser, Riordan, 2003; Hackley & Kover, 2007; Sasser & Koslow, 2012).

One of the first studies cited by Sasser and Koslow (2012) and Reid, King and DeLorme (1998) is that of Auer (1976) who examined how creative students differ from their peers with regard to empathy. Interpersonal empathy and generalized empathy were the main focus in this pilot study. This experiment was then replicated using practitioners as the subjects. The study consisted of 515 student participants from three universities. Each group of creative students was found to be more empathetic than agency counterparts with regard to generalized others, but less empathetic to interpersonal situations (Auer, 1976).

In the category of individual characteristic research, Hirschman's (1989) role-based exploration is an important study. Hirschman investigated six implicit role-based models submitted by participants. She examined how the creative process is seen from different perspectives within an agency, having participants lay out models of the process whose collective conclusions offer up justification for research into the social and personal aspects of the creation process within the realm of advertising. The article assumes that an examination of the collaboration that occurs during the creative process, and the social process that results in a creative execution, are not a given, generalized phenomena. Under this assumption, Hirschman conducts her study from the production of culture perspective. From such a perspective, Hirschman was able to look into the subjectivity of final product ownership. She also examined the extent to which personal conflicts during the process are conveyed in the final product. The study used in-depth interviews with six agency professionals who each play different roles in the process. The authors found overarching personal and professional goals beyond the stated goal of satisfying the client (Hirschman, 1989).

The notion of understanding how qualities such as empathy factor into personal creative processes is also valuable, especially in the context of broader, cross-cultural consideration. West (1993) explored the personalities, processes and philosophies of advertising agencies in three countries, the United States of America, England and Canada, and sought to examine such differences based on nationality. The study gave preference to generalizability over depth. A survey of 900 creatives at 300 agencies found that personalities across country borders were very similar, ranking intelligence and originality as desirable skills. Philosophies among agencies were found to be quite similar as well. The main difference observed was that of the creatives' involvement with the creation and implementation of a campaign. While North American creatives tend to believe that they have less autonomy and control over the final production process than their U.K. counterparts, results indicated that the former were more closely involved and had more strategic relationships with clients than U.K. creatives (West, 1993). This belief was found to be relatively consistent among all creatives, regardless of nationality, indicating a broad application of creative theory.

Young (2000) outlined the differences between copywriters' and art directors' opinions of television advertising. Conducting 100 phone interviews and drawing from a randomly selected pool of creatives from advertising agencies at a maximum of two per agency, Young sought to understand how copywriters and art directors work in teams, using their respective differences collaboratively to generate creative breakthroughs. It was found that the majority of creatives agreed that interactive, clear-cut and original messages in ads were indicators of good advertising. Two-thirds also agreed that differences exist between copywriters and art directors (Young, 2000). This disconnect

among advertising professionals is reiterated in Hackley and Kover (2007) regarding professional identity and creatives. It was found that the advertising workplace is a constant source of conflict and feelings of insecurity for creatives, but they also see it as a worthwhile battle. Creatives seek a more defined identity and find potential fulfillment in surviving day-to-day conflicts. These conflicts stem from ideological differences on the purposes of a campaign. Account executives tend to prefer a more pragmatic approach, one deemed appropriate to satisfy client needs and nothing more. Creatives' need for frequent identity assurance presents itself as an additional motive beyond client goals. Creatives want the work to be original and artistic in nature, a display of creative skill and achievement, not just a fulfilled contract.

Creatives find conflict and insecurity on a personal and professional level within agency settings, yet perceive these same settings as opportunities for personal satisfaction and growth. Hackley & Kover (2007) focus on the person and process through which the creative finds his or her identity within a certain physical place. The researchers found that creatives believe that workplace and professional conflicts actually benefit the creative (Hackley & Kover, 2007). This serves as a strong foundation for existing work on the topic of agency practitioners, and as an acknowledgement of strains within agency dynamics based on differences in personal perception.

### **Process Studies**

This element of the 3P creative model involves the study of “the process [practitioners] follow in developing creative ideas” (Sasser & Koslow, 2008, p. 6). Studies included the role of myth in advertising creation (Johar, Holbrook & Stern, 2001), how originality and appropriateness are valued as measures of creativity by

practitioners in different roles (Kilgour & Koslow, 2009) and have even investigated theories held by creatives, despite lack of acknowledgement that such theories exist (Kover, 1995).

The processes that advertising professionals follow in the creation of campaigns and ads are well studied (Reid & Rotfield, 1976; Kover, 1995; Johar, Holbrook & Stern, 2001; Kilgour & Koslow, 2009; Oliver & Ashley, 2012). Understanding how creativity occurs and functions is an important area of research, a claim that continues to be supported in the ever-growing list of research within the 3P Model (Sasser & Koslow, 2012).

Kover (1995) found that copywriters have a set of internal theories that they hold to be true and that they act on them (Kover, 1995). The study found that copywriters pay little heed to academic and formal theories, but operate on what they refer to as “common sense.” The study used a sample of 20 copywriters from six agencies, five located in New York City and one located in Detroit (Kover, 1995).

While these “commonsense” theories operate without the individuals’ acknowledging them, research into such theories’ alignment with other disciplines has been approached, such as in Johar et al. (2001), where researchers explored how myths could be identified in advertising. The researchers designed an experiment that directed art director-copywriter pairs to work in a convergent or divergent manner, depending on the activity. At different intervals, pairs would be instructed to either work alone (divergent) on an assigned task or come together with an art director and work together (convergent) on a solution. The goal was to examine the roles that four specific myths, comedy, romance, tragedy and irony, play in the creative process. Individuals identified

as expert judges consisting of a creative person, an advertising research person, and an account planner, then rated an ad containing a combined, multi-myth focus as the most creative (Johar et al., 2001).

Though not ultimately studied in Johar et. Al (2001), the convergent-divergent experiment structure that was used presents an opportunity for further research that some have already begun to explore. One of the authors of the 3P model co-wrote a study that examined how convergent and divergent models differ in their effect upon the creative process depending on the individual (Kilgour & Koslow, 2009). The study addresses two main ways of enhancing creativity, through creative learning or through enhancing social aspects. The researchers found that divergent-thinking techniques are not universally applicable, and, more specifically, those with a larger understanding of the domain at hand would respond better to such techniques (Kilgour & Koslow, 2009). While account side practitioners were able to work well in a convergent manner, looking for the most appropriate method of solving a problem, creatives preferred to work alone, valuing originality as the best measure of whether a campaign was creative (Koslow, Sasser, Riordan, 2003; Kilgour & Koslow, 2009).

In an effort to understand how to improve and enhance the creative process, Oliver and Ashley (2012) focus on improving the system through which creativity is managed within an agency. Instead of conducting the qualitative interviews on-site, researchers analyzed the Wall Street Journal's Creative Leader series over a 30-year period using a grounded theory approach to account for contextual information not obtained in the interviews. This qualitative analysis sought to answer how to create a truly effective management system to oversee the creative process. They found that



political games and efforts to control the situation end up harming the advertising process. They also found that creatives thought that the work structure, or hierarchy, should not be complicated and should be open to natural talent (Oliver & Ashley, 2012). The study's focus on modifying and improving the process of creativity through changes in management and workplaces reveals how context, including perception of creativity in advertising, perception of management, can affect creativity.

### **Place Studies**

The role that the environment and creative setting play in advertising creativity is the subject of the place category. This element has been investigated in agency settings, seeking to understand phenomena such as control games that advertising professionals play with one another in an attempt to retain a sense of control over the work setting (Kover, 1995). Kover, following Hirschman's role-based perspectivism, explored how the dynamic involving copywriters and account executives plays out in an agency setting, examining the aspects of control within this context. The author found that many games are results of unwanted confrontation between two opposing parties, account executives and creatives. The authors used twenty semi-structured interviews, ranging in length from 45-180+ minutes in length, on subjects from New York and Detroit and did not include smaller agencies (Kover, 1995). Understanding what occurs in an agency setting from a variety of roles helps to clarify the importance of perception in advertising.

Within agency settings, the leadership process has a distinct impact upon creativity (Kover, 1995; Reid & Karambayya, 2009). Reid and Karambayya (2009) investigated various elements of the creative process. They questioned the conflict resolution that occurs in a dual-leader environment and how that affects those within that

environment to realize their creative potential. A research initiative examined eight case studies in Canada with established dual-leadership settings where conflict was known to be present and found that would overshadow a workplace and interfere with creative organizations (Reid & Karambayya, 2009). The study of the creative leadership process is a fertile ground for research and is one that has not been fully explored. Insights into areas of further research may be found through the proposed study by utilizing potential participant responses regarding perceptions of what factors into creativity.

### **Trend-Monitoring Studies**

Studies with a focus on examining trends and variances within the advertising industry are the subject of this section. Reid, King, and DeLorme (1998) investigated the belief that creativity in advertising is in decline, a belief that was championed by researchers and historians such as Stephen Fox, John Philip Jones, and William Weilbacher in the 1990s (Reid, King, & DeLorme, 1998). The authors developed three central research questions that asked whether top-level creatives believe there is more or less creativity, whether the factors for judging creativity have changed, and how differing perceptions of these factors has evolved since each creative had entered the field. They developed a questionnaire directed at top-level agency creatives that focused on originality, imagination, goal-direction, and problem solving. These were mailed to 195 respondents, and 83 were returned. The findings suggested that there was an almost unanimously perceived upswing in creativity, with only one dissenting case. This was seen despite differences in age, practicing years, etc. These creatives felt that factors that affected creativity had evolved somewhat from what they originally were. This article was used as the basis for comparison for the present study and its conclusion regarding an

upswing in creativity was comparatively analyzed.

White and Smith (2001) looked into whether demographic variables affected individual and collective perceptions of creativity in advertising. Researchers compared the views of those within the advertising industry with those of students and the general public. A sample was comprised of participants from South Dakota and Georgia. Participants evaluated fifteen print advertisements using the Creative Product Semantic Scale. The findings suggest that students' perceptions of creativity were more favorable than publicly held standards. Conversely, advertisers' views tended to be more cynical than those of the general public (White & Smith, 2001).

Research into perceptions of creativity has shown a rift between creatives and account executives. Underlying assumptions as to whether artistic and original motivations weigh heavier than appropriateness of method have been specifically taken into consideration (Koslow, Sasser, & Riordan, 2003). The study looks at differences in perception of creativity. The article seeks to provide a model to explain why differences in perception occur between agency roles. Their findings provide valuable insight into why perceptions of creativity differ based on the role of the advertiser. It was found that creatives within an agency are more prone to use originality as a primary measure of creativity, whereas their account executive counterparts favored client-appropriate, potentially less original options (Koslow, Sasser, & Riordan, 2003).

Lastly, Sasser and Koslow analyzed existing advertising research, looking to clarify and expand upon the monitoring and research processes involved in the advertising creative process. (Sasser & Koslow, 2008; Sasser & Koslow, 2012). The researchers aggregated and examined more than thirty years of research regarding the

creative process. (Sasser & Koslow, 2008) The article is primarily a literature review but suggests future areas of study. The researchers selected samples beginning in 1972 and extensively searched the EBSCO and *Journal of Advertising* resources to ensure current literature was included. The authors explicate areas that have been well studied, and identify where gaps exist. The authors also bring up that studies of Process tend to use student subjects instead of working practitioners, a limitation that has not evolved to allow generalizability of finding to the profession. The authors challenge researchers to fill these gaps, when appropriate, instead of merely extending the research of others. This source is used as a guide for this literature review and explains the 3P framework. Four years later, the researchers reevaluated the model's effectiveness as a tool for advertising creativity research and found that it still had a plethora of valuable applications (Sasser & Koslow, 2008; Sasser & Koslow, 2012).

The foregoing provides a basis for the following exploration into the perceptions of creativity, past and present, in advertising among copywriters within agencies and the potential factors involved in any noticeable changes. Working with the aforementioned studies as assumptions of existing knowledge, the author of this study has sought to contribute to the academic discussion and further the research of Reid, King and DeLorme (1998).

## Questions

The foregoing literature suggests both significance of furthering creative research as well as the importance of going beyond quantitative responses by using interviews to better explain why such responses arise. This study sought to ask similarly tailored questions to the original Reid, King and DeLorme (1998) study while expanding upon the depth of perceived changes in creativity by investigating why individuals believed these changes were occurring. As such, the first research question is in accordance with the original study while the second, third and fourth delve into the reasoning behind perceived changes in the level of creativity in advertising. The present study attempts to contribute further to the discussion by asking the following research questions:

RQ1: Do copywriters perceive a(n) decrease/increase/no change in advertising creativity?

RQ2: What factors are perceived as reasons for such a change?

RQ3: How have advances in technology perceived to have impacted advertising creativity?

RQ4: How do changes in the advertising business model affect creativity?

## Methods

Given the nature of advertising and its constantly evolving characteristics (Reid, King, DeLorme, 1998), exploration into perceptions and personal interpretations of the creativity suggest a qualitative approach to the situation. Trend-monitoring studies provide insight, allowing researchers to look at variances over time. Given the nature of this study and its limitations, I elected to use an intrapersonal method of inquiry in line with the original study's rationale as follows (Reid, King, & DeLorme, 1998):

We took the intrapersonal approach because it is the only one by which we could study questions of advertising creativity then and now—we could not interview the same individuals in different time periods nor could we find longitudinal perceptual data collected from the same individuals or cross-sectional cohorts (p2).

I believe the intrapersonal approach was useful because it allows for investigation of intraindividual perceptual differences at different points in the subjects' lives. Reid, King and DeLorme (1998) also speak directly to the need for qualitative, focused interviews with a smaller subset of the creative departments, mentioning copywriters, art directors, etc. as potential samples. The present study extended previous research in a more targeted population. My goal was to provide an analysis that would not only benefit our understanding of the creative process from a theoretical standpoint, but also provide insights for copywriters and advertisers who may question the state of creativity in advertising. Thus, I conducted semi-structured interviews as suggested by Berger, who stated "Interviews are one of the most widely used and most fundamental research

techniques... They enable researchers to obtain information that they cannot gain by observation alone” (Berger, 2007, p. 111). Unless there is a long period of time for observation, it is hard to understand the existing context (Berger, 2007, p. 112), as well as understand the unobservable, such as creatives’ thought processes at different points in time. As interviewing deals with past and present attitudes and motivations (Berger, 2007, p. 113), this method proved to be ideal for understanding copywriters’ perceptions over multiple periods of time. This method has been used by many advertising researchers, including Hirschman (1989) and Kover (1995).

I wanted to ensure that my sample was capable of representing specific individuals’ perceptions. Random samples draw on large amounts participation for data collection, while this study’s research was limited to the investigation of ten interviews, hardly representative of a general population (Marshall, 1996). This research area could also benefit further by using large random samples in future studies.

Respondents were senior level copywriters at top agencies in the United States (see Appendix C). Interviewees were from different regions across the country. Reid, King and DeLorme (1998) outlined their original parameters in the previous study. These participants were found using similar sampling methods. Due to the nature of qualitative interviews and time limitations, a smaller sample was used than was used in the previous quantitative study. The Advertising Age annual agency report was used to identify the top 200 agencies, and this list was then cross referenced with company websites, personal portfolios and online profiles to get in contact with the interviewees. The study began in May 2014 and concluded in December 2014.

The researcher conducted ten interviews, citing studies such as Hackley and

Kover (2007) and Kover (1995) as examples of effective samples, ranging in size from 6-20 participants, respectively. Participants were then emailed to introduce the study and recruit for interviews. This email included rights and responsibilities as a participant, methods of the study and any potential harms or risks that the participant might encounter, such as personal comfort levels or reactions of agency peers. An incentive was also offered in the form of a copy of the results of the study for all participants. The author does not believe that the participants will encounter significant risks of any kind.

Ideally, the interviews would have taken place on-site, funding and time permitting. Accounting for the impracticality of on-site interviews with individuals scattered across the country, for reasons such as agency policy, time or travel constraints, interviews were conducted by phone. The interviews took place between the months of July-September, 2014, with sampling taking place from late May throughout late September, and data analysis taking place in late September and October. Each interview took between 17-51 minutes, with an average time of about 29 minutes. This allowed for schedule constraints of interview subjects. During the interview, the author used a short list of questions as a guide, but the goal was to use the semi-structured format to elicit responses that could not be obtained through direct questioning or observation.

### **Reliability and Validity Measures**

The researcher used multiple methods for ensuring qualitative reliability and validity of the study. Firstly, interview questions were pilot tested prior to implementation, using graduate peers, retired practitioners and current practitioners that fell outside of the desired final sample. This allowed the researcher to fine tune questions that read awkwardly or were inaccurate or irrelevant, and also allowed for the addition of



previously-absent questions developed as a result of such feedback.

As previously discussed, purposive sampling was used to ensure a relevant sample is selected. Among this sample were expected to be some “deviant cases,” cases in which practitioners may feel differently than the majority of the respondents. These cases allowed for analysis of outliers and help to establish a correlation, or lack thereof, among a variety of opinions in agency settings. This examination provided a variety of perspectives on such a dynamic, an important facet of any creative process study (Hirschman, 1989).

Funding allowing, interviews were transcribed using a third-party service to control for researcher bias and preemptive interpretation of raw data. After all of the interviews were transcribed, this data was then analyzed as individual narratives, actively constructed by participants as representations of their experiences. This is important to note because I did not treat responses as direct experiences that are being relayed but rather as perceptions of such events (Riessman, 2008; Gubrium and Holstein, 2009; as cited in Silverman, 2010). Information was then corroborated using data from all such narratives as a method of validating and reiterating thoughts on the presence of creativity in advertising.

**Limitations.** While this study seeks to provide insight into the trends of perception concerning creativity in advertising, it is important to note the limitations of the study. First, the qualitative nature of the study means that the results are not generalizable. Second, respondents were limited to the United States, in a time when advertising and marketing communication is increasingly globalized. Thirdly, the aspects of respondents’ careers, including time with company, age of respondents, and level of

historic knowledge, were beyond the scope of the study to investigate but could have an effect upon reported perceptions.

## **Analysis**

“Creativity is always changing and evolving” is the best summation of copywriters’ perception of creativity in advertising. While two dissenting interviews believed that the industry was in a state of decline regarding creativity, the majority argued that creativity had remained constant, if not grown, since having entered the profession. Five interviewees expressed a belief in no change, while three expressed a perceived increase in the level of creativity. All interviewees discussed that, aside from the level of creativity, the approach towards creating was constantly cycling through change.

The lack of unity found in the seemingly similar perceptions of creativity illustrates both the value of interview-based research in gathering qualitative answers and also the value of updating previous studies to observe changes occurring over time. Despite disagreements over the current perceived level of creativity in advertising, all ten interviewees identified technology, business-related pressures and industry approach as factors that have affected a change in the process of creativity. As indicated by the inclusion of a technology-specific research question, it was expected and discovered that technology was a large factor in all of these apparent causes for changes in creativity. The ideas of “ease” and “collaboration” and even the discussion of ideas were all brought up alongside concerns for decreases in “quality” and increases in “disposability” of advertising creativity.

This study is an analysis and investigation into the realm of advertising creativity, as it affects and is affected by the persons, places and processes that compose

the advertising industry, with specific focus on senior level copywriters. All research included has been organized based on Sasser and Koslow's 3P Model of Creativity and its proven efficacy in organizing and analyzing creative research (2008). This study categorizes and includes findings according to this framework, with Person, Place and Process treated as previously defined.

### **Personal Factors**

The focus of responses in this category is on those creators as individuals and what senior level copywriters perceived to be areas of change. These areas trended towards two overarching motifs of evolution in creative background and visible changes in personal ownership felt by creatives.

**Mixed backgrounds.** Most copywriters reported that one of the main changes that they witnessed within the creative side of advertising was the type of people that were attracted to it. In one interview, a copywriter expressed the belief that the advertising industry, and specifically the creative roles, were now exposed to a larger number of people who may not have known or been introduced to the industry previously (Interview #5). The individual went on to describe how previously, there was a common route towards being a creative, whereas now, creatives evolve out of, and are expected to draw from, a variety of backgrounds. "You used to go to school and you were like, you're a copywriter or you're an art director...you can't just get by with slogans and taglines anymore" (Interview #7). Another respondent attempted to illustrate this increased variety in backgrounds through the composition of the industry; no longer are they solely ad men and women, but rather they have come from startups or other professions that have begun to feed into advertising (Interview #1). Interviewees

discussed how the creatives no longer hold a sole role, but have transitioned to a less absolute silo and a more multifaceted working environment. “You’re not just a copywriter and art director anymore...people...[are] blurring the boundaries between print and digital. I find that everyone I work with has a mixed background in some way (Interview #7).

While this can be seen as beneficial, everyone did not view this trend favorably. One interviewee remarked that the current creative’s ability to sell isn’t as good as it could be, continuing on to say that “the best creatives know how to sell it better than anybody” (Interview #3). Another copywriter enunciated his belief that people that were entering the field weren’t experienced enough to successfully approach advertising. The interviewee went on to posit that one such reason was for the youthful age of entry into the profession. The interviewees argued that these young copywriters couldn’t have experienced the same amount of necessary world experiences, and, what they had experienced was vicarious, due to a rise in technology. “Instead of going out and experiencing things, in a way, they’re kind of absorbing them through a window” (Interview #9).

With a few exceptions, most interviewees agreed that the type of person attracted to this field has not changed, though their backgrounds and their experiences prior to advertising may have evolved. “The type of person who is getting into the industry who is anxious to make some sort of fun or interesting work...are probably interested in doing it for pay instead of having to do the artistic route” (interview 6). It takes a greater understanding of the tools at hand to be successful as a creative, and the same type of people remain willing to adapt to convey that same message (Interview #4;

Interview #6; Interview #8).

“The type of person who is getting into the industry who is anxious to make some sort of fun or interesting work that people will see and are probably interested in doing it for pay instead of having to do the artistic route”

(Interview #6).

And while some of the dissenting views of the interviewees might have indicated that this youthful change is much different than the industry’s older counterparts, others championed the similarity, with one interviewee remarking that “The young people I work with are really from the same mold as the older designers I work with” (Interview #4). That being said, these copywriters of all ages still held a respect for the art of the practice.

“I think a lot of people forget that there is...an art and a craft to it and it’s something to be proud of...if you do it right...it’s going to be additive to culture and to society and not a vampire guest” (Interview #3).

Even among the dissenters, this reverence for the pure enjoyment of the craft was made clear. “We just want to make work for you. We want to make cool things with people, that’s what we want to do” (Interview #9).

**Ownership.** Six of the interviewees brought up the topic of ownership and personal standards within the interview process. Specifically, the personal standards of the creative and his or her discontent with the amount of perceived control, knowledge and pride were brought up frequently (Interview #1; Interview #2; Interview #3; Interview #4; Interview #5; Interview #9). One interviewee believed that the process of satisfaction, of being able to produce work that is exciting, has been expedited in certain

settings. This copywriter discussed moving from a bigger agency to a smaller, boutique agency and how he was able to achieve “aha” moments easier, and quicker, now than when he entered the profession (Interview #5).

The personal standards to which creatives hold themselves and their desire to improve the work of the industry as a whole through said standards is perceived to have remained constant (Interview #3; Interview #5; Interview #6). “I’m personally of the philosophy that I’m not going to come forward with any work that I don’t want to make... If we all bring better work to the table, the work will get better” (Interview #6). Another copywriter expressed his belief that ownership within the industry does not fade if the creative cares about his or her work. “If you want to do good work, you will take ownership of it and it will be all your fault regardless of what the circumstances are attached to it... Execution is just as important as concept” (Interview #3).

Conversely, dissenters argued that the process consistently takes the control of an idea away from creatives in a disappointingly expected manner. “It’s never going to come out how you want...even from the beginning there’s always a disappointment; it’s just part of the business” (Interview #9). Another copywriter discussed ownership as a finite, if not temporary, quality, going so far as to say, “Ownership is a fickle thing in advertising. I own something until the moment I don’t” (Interview #6).

Three interviewees discussed their growing lack of pride for their professional work. One copywriter discussed her past excitement over the self-proclaimed “novelty” of reaching massive audiences and how that sense had since “lost it’s luster” (Interview #4). Another copywriter illustrated this lack of pride for the work he was doing professionally by stating that he had only put one project in his portfolio in

the past two years. That same sense of pride for older work was not apparent anymore (Interview #2). What these responses had in common was an increased effect of the pressure put on creatives to churn out work (Interview #1). In contrast, the same people expressed a sense of personal satisfaction “that’s never ebbed away” regarding work done outside of the industry, going so far as to posit that “writers in the industry still feel pride for personally invested projects” (Interview #4).

Another outlying theme of discontent was the lack of knowledge both expected of and acquired by creatives. One copywriter discussed a decline in talent that he attributed to inexperienced individuals entering the profession too early, and to experienced individuals not keeping up with the pace of the industry.

“It used to be that the guys at the top were experienced to understand how to get the job done and the guys at the bottom went to them for the skills to do things...Now, the guy at the top has all of the know-how but no idea about the current toolset and way of going about it, and the guys at the bottom understand the skillset but they don’t have the experience” (Interview #9).

This individual remarked that he, and many like him, don’t look to advertising for inspiration because “it’s so awful and boring” (Interview #9). His personal views of dissatisfaction extended beyond hypotheticals to the immediate future as well. “It’s my biggest fear: I’m afraid that I have become out of touch and redundant” (Interview #9). These feelings were not specifically mentioned in other interviews, though they were occasionally implied.

With regard to ownership, many interviewees discussed high personal standards that led to a sense of ownership. These copywriters discussed that individual



pride and quality goals were largely responsible for the sense of ownership that might be felt over creative work. These copywriters cautioned that ownership was a “fickle” subject, and showed discontent over how a lack of knowledge displayed by a superior or peer might contribute to a lesser quality deliverable. These copywriters continued to demonstrate their discontent in expressions of lusterless creativity and a decreasing sense of control over the work. These interviewees reiterated that the only way to bring better work to the table was to hold oneself to a higher standard, something that many creatives still claimed to hold.

### **Process Factors**

Factors affecting and changing within the process of creativity can be grouped into three categories: ability to create, technological affect on technique and client impact. As process-related factors, these categories evolved out of common observations surrounding how copywriters approach their jobs.

**Ability to create.** The ability of the creative to create was a subject of discussion for four of the interviewees explicitly. Quite often, interviewees explicitly pointed out that a large amount of perceived change was focused on the process of creativity. Among these changes, interviewees saw a positive acceleration in creatives’ power to accomplish and produce work.

One interviewer went on to say that the “ease of creating is greater than it ever has been before” (Interview #10). This point was reiterated by another interviewee that discussed how everything moving faster makes execution easier, even stating that these improvements allow creatives to be “more innovative, more quickly” (Interview #1).

In addition to the ease of completion and production of creative work, the process has changed, moving from a more “linear” model to become “more extensive”, requiring a greater understanding of all of the expedited ways of communicating the message (Interview #3; Interview #8). “Human creativity has not changed all that much, the way in which creativity is expressed has changed; while mediums are changing, creativity isn’t growing or decreasing, nor will it” (Interview #3). Another interviewee discussed the expansion of the process as compared to previously,

“I have noticed change in creativity but it’s not on the level of more creative versus less creative; It’s just the way that people are thinking...the process and obviously the mediums... You can’t just think of some cool TV ad, you have to think more holistically and take a 360 degree approach. I think that takes a level of creativity that’s probably a little greater than we used to be” (Interview #8).

This belief that the level of inherent advertising creativity has not changed, but the process has, is a common motif found in all interviewees’ responses. Specifically, technological advances are seen as a large factor in these shifts.

**Technological effect on technique.** Interviewees pointed out that the technological advancements that had been seen during their time in the profession had pushed a more design-centric trend that was not perceived by all as beneficial or having an impact on the writing (Interview #2; Interview #4; Interview #5; Interview #9; Interview #10). “The way we communicate on a cell phone doesn’t really change what we communicate about. It just changes the way we do it” (Interview #9). The

biggest changes in creativity were consistently found to be related to how messages are communicated, as opposed to how communication changed. Two interviewees discussed an increased desire for shorter communications, discussing how, in the past, a creative might have a 30-second or 60-second television spot to work with, whereas now, especially on digital platforms, creatives are being asked to convey campaigns and messages in small snippets, a product of 15-second Instagram and 6-second Vine videos (Interview #10). Yet, this was not seen as a hindrance, “people are increasingly looking for content that entertains them in short periods of time...that is what the Internet has given us. The advertisers are using an opportunity to create quality creative content” (Interview #6).

In fact, this evolution of media was spoken of as an advantage for creatives, with one interviewee remarking that creatives “always have more tools to use, more avenues for creativity” (Interview #10). Another interviewee discussed the freedom that this evolution has brought, especially relating to digital extensions, due to traditionally perceived constraints on campaigns.

“There’s a pretty wide range of work you can do online...the creative product can be whatever you want it to be. Whereas before, you were kind of limited to ‘Well, 30 seconds is all we got.’ Or maybe 15 seconds or even 60, but now we can create an online campaign where...it doesn’t matter how short or long my spot is” (Interview #6).

Regarding the limitations of campaigns, or lack thereof when it comes to digital, the impact of Social Media as a medium became apparent as well, with seven of the interviewees commenting on it in some form or another (Interview #2; Interview #4;

Interview #5; Interview #7; Interview #8; Interview #9; Interview #10). The rise of digital and social media has necessitated a digital component in client briefs, whereas previously “digital was kind of an afterthought” (Interview #8).

“Social media changed everything both in a positive and negative way” (Interview #5). Interviewees consistently discussed reach and consumer conversation as driving factors in these changes (Interview #4; Interview #5; Interview #6). One copywriter believed that such a rise in the medium was effectively “making everyone a copywriter” and that having even 140 characters to create a message was sometimes more freedom than copywriters’ previously had with headlines, affectionately describing it as having both dinner and dessert; copywriters have always had such a limited amount of space to say what they want, that 140 characters seemed like an extra bit of welcome freedom (Interview #4). But this “everyone’s a copywriter” trend has also impacted the strategy and creative process for professional copywriters as well, now having to accommodate previously unachievable consumer input into early phases of advertising. “You used to only have to please your boss, your client and that was kind of it” whereas now, what your consumers say and how they respond is a large factor in approvals (Interview #5).

“We’ve put advertising in the hands of the consumer a little bit more...for me that’s been a revolutionary change.” This increase has been seen in client demand for consumer ideas as well as a desire for more “two-way conversations” between advertisers and their audiences (Interview #5). This transition was not seen as coming without its downsides though, as client demands for user-generated ideas and executions could make creatives feel less like artists and more like production workers.

“Unfortunately what happens on a creative level is that sometimes the job gets done for us...we’re just kind of providing the sell” (Interview #5).

This belief may have contributed to another interviewee’s observations of the decrease in quality of digital executions, citing great digital campaigns as a rarity (Interview #9). Other copywriters held the belief that, while technology and social may have increased the amount of campaigns and writing that is available overall, there is still a consistent amount of “good writing” that just may be increasingly lost in that greater sea of content (Interview #4). The belief that a medium dictated quality was contested, with one interviewee offering up a commonly referenced topic of ownership and that the pressure was still on the agency and creative to put forth their best work, regardless of the platform (Interview #7).

The interviewees tended to believe that the impact that digital trends have had on inspiring and changing future mediums has been a positive change (Interview #2; Interview #4; Interview #5; Interview #6; Interview #9). “There are mediums that we create for that didn’t even exist before” (Interview #5). Interviewees discussed how innovations, such as the iPhone, were “catalysts” that spurred advertising platforms such as Twitter and mobile content creation, reiterated by the belief that advertising will not only “find a way to not only survive [in these new mediums] but take over” (Interview #4; Interview #9). Interviewee #4 went on to discuss how email as a technology is not commonly used to communicate, with the majority of one’s inbox being filled with solicitations, forcing consumers to other mediums, such as texting, for day-to-day communications (Interview #4).

One interviewee asserted that while the constant state of innovation in the

technological and digital realms improves the design and visual aesthetic of much of the work produced, the level of skill seen in advertising writing has remained constant (Interview #4). Another copywriter mentioned that, while brands like Chanel are still creating interactive and expansive storied campaigns, others, such as Dior, have become increasingly reliant upon visual direction, with less attention paid to good writing. “[The Dior Campaign] was wonderful and it was beautiful and it was cool. But...there’s no writing involved in this. This is just pure art direction. And, it doesn’t tell a story. It’s a high end fashion spot” (Interview #2).

The interviewee went on to say that this trend in visually reaching out to audiences has had a negative effect on approach, a point reiterated in other discussions about the process of creating ads, as directed by advertisers and clients alike. “Brands want to have a ‘hey look at us’” campaign...[it’s] Like a child that’s jumping up and down and waving their arms and saying ‘look at me, look at me, look at me!’” The interviewee went on to discuss the trend of car advertisements declining from the famous VW Darth Vader campaign to a more “\$200 down” approach (Interview #2). Other copywriters commented on that same phenomena, remarking that it was strange to see people “thinking about execution first, medium first, that should be idea first always” (Interview #5). Additionally, interviewees discussed how their role as idea generator had changed, a change that has led to increased feelings of being replaceable. Interviewee #2 spoke about how the process used to begin with the copywriter and then was handed off to an illustrator or art director to visualize; the idea and content for campaigns previously came from and started with copywriters, saying that this design-centric belief “has set advertising back from where it used to be” and positing that

“copy is more under-utilized than ever before” (Interview #2). This point was not universally held, with many copywriters actually championing a rise in desire for storied campaigns (Interview #2; Interview #3; Interview #5; Interview #10).

With the rise in technology, some copywriters believe there is a more of an opportunity for storytelling and conversation:

“I would say there’s actually more of a desire for [long form content]. I think that the brands are going to try more and more to create a connection with the consumer... It used to be that you wouldn’t have much of a need for them to have a piece of video because you weren’t going to put that on TV...but now you can create that and put that on YouTube for free...it’s just one other part of the story that you can tell the brand” (Interview #10).

This point was reiterated with other interviewees claiming that storytelling is “just as important now as ever” and proclaiming that the “art of storytelling has not diminished” (Interview #2; Interview #3). Dissenters argued that there was no escalation of storytelling anymore, a decline seen in the desire to build a series of advertisements under one campaign, a trend that was described (Interview #2). Others believe the demand for stories is never-ending, if not approaching a time with greater opportunities (Interview #5; Interview #10). “Regardless of all technology and all the internet, what will always endure is the art director and copywriter position and our job is to tell stories about people and that should never get old” (Interview #5).

Technology came up frequently as a major factor in the changes impacting creativity and the creative process. Interviewees discussed how interactions with audiences were not only two-way conversations now, but those conversations also

occurred before, during and after the creative process as opposed to previously occurring only after the fact. This increased consumer involvement was largely seen as a result of an increase in social media and similar platforms that were spurred on by the digital evolution that technology has contributed to. Interviewees were quick to caution that it had not impacted the writing itself, but more so affected the process of writing, and the final product of the process. This was perceived as evident in variances in quality and storytelling, and the proliferation of long-form content online due to a lack of limitations.

**Client impact.** Second to technology, clients and their business-focused approach to advertising have been perceived as a large factor in the creative process' evolution, coming up in nine interviews (Interview #1; Interview #2; Interview #3; Interview #4; Interview #5; Interview #6; Interview #8; Interview #9; Interview #10). While creativity can be perceived to have remained constant, the approach has evolved from a competitive system to a more collaborative system (Interview #1; Interview #9). Not everyone viewed this as positive, with one subject countering that such changes have increased the cutthroat nature of the profession: whereas previously, a client would have an agency on retainer to work with, "now, there's a bunch of agencies on retainer...[and] you would think that that would increase productivity, or the creativity, [but rather] I think it's created a lot of apathy towards the system" (Interview #9).

In the past, agencies placed a greater emphasis on branding work, while the current trend was seen to be more "executional in nature." As discussed earlier, this can be seen in car ads having declined from the famed Darth Vader VW campaign towards more "\$200 down payment", short-term sales-focused advertisements (Interview #9).



The executional approach used to be perceived more as a characteristic of digital rather than traditional agencies, but has since become more universal. Digital agencies were described as having previously been “handed off” an idea from traditional agencies to “just execute on it”; “[The offline agencies were] starting from nothing and building something out of it” whereas the perception has since changed to that of “worrying about the details” regarding the functionality of the campaign (Interview #2; Interview #9). Change is increasingly viewed as risky, and as a result, there have been noticeable shifts in the control of the overall process.

These control shifts have led to a perceived increased involvement from the client (Interview #3; Interview #5; Interview #8, Interview #9). Interviewee #9 reported that, while the agency was the one who used to be in control of the brand, that control is shifting back towards the client as general marketing knowledge has increased. This had led to a perceived change wherein the client believes he or she has a greater understanding of advertising due to a background in marketing. “The terms have become interchangeable, but they aren’t. Marketing is sort of the science of knowing who to get to, but advertising is the art” (Interview #9). Clients are now going so far as to dictate arbitrary creative elements, such as colors, and these details can quickly add up to drastic changes in the final product, changes that make some wonder whether “you’re creatively problem solving or just needed as the production person” (Interview #3). Some alleged that this increased involvement was a result of more immediate backlash due to social media that was described as happening “quicker than [clients] can control” (Interview #5). “There’s never been a medium where you could have a conversation with the audience like that. With that good comes the potentially bad”

(Interview #8).

Others saw this evolution of media and variability of executions to have led to more creative freedom, at least initially (Interview #3; Interview #5; Interview #6). “Creatives have been given a little bit longer of a leash on what we can and can’t do,” going on to say that “people are coming to the table with better ideas...and part of that is because clients see how exciting it is to be known as somebody who approved that great work” (Interview #6). But another perceived part of this is that the final products that are coming out post-approvals are much more watered down, so creatives are having to start the process at a much more “outlandish” level (Interview #3; Interview #6). This idea begged the question of whether creatives are essentially negotiating the final product by initially coming to the table with ideas that are expected to be too far outside of the realm of possibility. This way, when the final trims have been made, the end result is closer to a creative compromise (Interview #3). This reflects a common belief that client attachment to advertising ideas isn’t as great as the attachment of those creating the ad.

“However strongly you feel about an idea, they don’t necessarily have to give a shit...from that point to when [we] sold it to the client, the work changed so drastically that it was just barely recognizable; a hot steaming pile of garbage” (Interview #6).

As a result of this outlandish pitching, creative perceive themselves as slightly spoiled with the industry’s level of creativity; they must come up with more and more creative ideas to stand out, despite budgeting constrictions. “[It has gotten] to a point where we now have to come up with ideas that our clients, given their budgets,

can't really approve" (Interview #5). The frustration with this is seen to have a ripple effect, as agencies that truly love these ideas, despite budget constrictions, will use them for case studies to win Cannes or other awards. A lot of great ideas "don't see the light of day but they see the light of the industry" (Interview #5). These award-winning concepts frustrate other creatives who have a desire to create equally impressive creative ideas, but know that their clients would not allow for it (Interview #5).

Copywriters do not appear to be confused as to why these changes are occurring on the client side. An increased desire for reach and virality are pushing for campaigns that can be seen by as many people as possible (Interview #6). As a result, there has been a perceived increase in disposability of creative work. If a video doesn't get the views or a blog post has a typo, it falls victim to a "highly disposable digital environment". Such an environment is seen as being more accepting of mediocrity. (Interview #4). This not only has an effect upon digital mediums, but has pulled quality away from traditional advertising as well. One interviewee discussed the belief that quality has shifted from traditional mediums, such as television and print, towards their respective digital counterparts, with digital video drawing the creative quality that used to be expected in other mediums (Interview #2).

The courage of clients to run creative campaigns was also seen as a reason for such changes (Interview #1; Interview #2). Clients are perceived as more conservative and sage, especially with regard to existing brands that are more restrictive regarding the work than newer brands with no brand equity to lose (Interview #1).

"It takes a smart brand manager to understand how to market your product and there's not many of them out there...like what Old Spice did...it takes a

brave brand manager to say “yes” and wreak havoc on my brand. And then it takes a smart shop to pull it off” (Interview #2).

These brand managers are also recognizing that advertising business models are bottlenecking the process in increasing amounts, so much so that clients are attempting to attract creatives away from the agencies they work with.

“[Companies] are going, ‘you know what, we just want your fuckin’ creatives. That’s all. We want your creatives. I don’t want to pay \$300 for your account person or your project manager because I have them and I could pay \$100 an hour here, so why don’t we just bring them in house?” (Interview #9).

Creatives perceive the “business people” as getting in the way of the process by trying to extract as much money out of a client as possible, while clients are trying to get as much work as possible for as cheap as possible. “The creatives are suffering” (Interview #9). Deadlines have sped up, concepting time has shortened, but creatives are expected to churn out the same or more work in less time. “You actually end up doing more work in a shorter amount of time that’s not as good” (Interview #2).

The copywriters interviewed consistently discussed the large impact that clients have had on creativity in advertising. Interviewees noted a transition from branding to executional campaigns and a “billable” mentality that may be getting in the way of creatives ability to bring more outlandish ideas to the table. Some interviewees discussed a sense of greater freedom in this regard, with clients being more willing to think beyond traditional executions. Others discussed having to negotiate for their ideas by pitching concepts that were far from what the intended end-product was. Reach and

a desire for virility were seen as dominant driving factors of such changes, with clients shying away from riskier campaigns in an attempt to safely succeed, if even at a smaller level. The increased focus on “business first” within the advertising industry, from publicly traded umbrella agencies to billing-centric agency processes, has led to a perceived outpouring of senior creatives from the agency side to the client side of the industry. The business model that is positioning younger advertisers to pitch to older brand managers is a contributing factor to these flaws, and a byproduct of these companies’ recruitment of older creatives (Interview #5; Interview #9). This trend in clientele changes foreshadows the multiple perceived changes in the creative place.

### **Place Factors**

The place in which creativity takes place, both on an individual workplace level and on a current state of the industry level, was also a frequent subject of discussion among interviewees. Within the individual workplace, responses can be categorized as trending towards teamwork, focus on business, and pressure-related changes. Regarding the industry as a whole, the concepts of greatest period of creativity, how it has changed from what it used to be and the value of originality were reported.

**Trending towards teamwork.** Five interviewees discussed a mentionable trend towards a more team-oriented workflow within the advertising profession (Interview #1; Interview #2; Interview #3; Interview #4; Interview #7). Explicitly, interviewees discussed that there were more people involved in the execution and reiterating that the creative process is no longer “just a copywriter and art director in their siloed office, brainstorming things,” but rather a ratio of closer to four or five

designers to one copywriter (Interview #1; Interview #2; Interview #3; Interview #7). They also stated that the people working with copywriters and art directors had knowledge of different niches as well, people “like a UX (User Experience) person and a developer” (Interview #7). One interviewee perceived this increase in ratio and teamwork as paradoxically a transition away from a true “team effort.” Conceptually, the idea that he was now paired with more people lent itself to a less intimate, “team” feeling was implied (Interview #4). It was also mentioned that the growth in people involved did not seem to occur on the client side, which may have actually decreased in actual numbers (Interview #4).

**Focus on business.** Of the ten copywriters interviewed, six interviewees explicitly discussed changes in culture that negatively affected the creative process. This was one of the areas where the general motif was a negative feeling towards the changes (Interview #1; Interview #5; Interview #6; Interview #7; Interview #9, Interview #10). Two interviewees pushed forward the belief that there was a commodification going on in the industry caused by a shift towards more agencies becoming a part of publicly traded groupings. “The culture is not created by the creatives. It’s now created by the business, this dictates a kind of commoditized creativity...when you commoditize creativity it doesn’t really work” (Interview #9; Interview #10). “Agencies are publicly traded more than they ever have been and so you’re answering to a bottom line...I think that that changes the culture a little bit” (Interview #10). This paralleled the transition observed by other interviewees describing a heavy reliance on billed hours and an influx of young creatives replacing the gap left by an outpouring of seasoned creatives from agencies to client-side roles (Interview #2; Interview #9).

The observed continual shift in culture has led to a faux sense of the meaning of teams and groups that is revealed in the heavy trend toward reliance on freelance culture (Interview #6; Interview #7; Interview #9). Agencies are embracing open floor plans in hopes of positively embracing collaboration and group brainstorming, but are ironically creating hostile environments for creatives. “It’s so quiet, if you play music or whatever to talk, people will look over at you...It’s sort of stifled our ability to be creative...it’s like you build your business around the accountants and not the product” (Interview #9).

Another interviewee noted an explicit transition where “more agencies are relying on freelance culture, on having a tight knit group of full-timers and [then] staffing out a lot of the grunt work to freelancers.” Because of this, there is perceived to be an increase in turnover, and a sense of disassociation that is felt by freelance creatives. “[When you freelance], you certainly don’t really feel at home at work, which can certainly happen, which certainly did happen to me” (Interview #6). While agencies have become more reliant on freelancers, the in-house roles have seen an expansion as well that was a positive outlier in the observed culture shift (Interview #5). The internet is seen as the reason for the creation of roles that did not previously exist. An example offered was that the creative department now has its own CTO (Chief Technology Officer) just to answer if an idea was technologically possible. “[The internet] kind of inspired everybody to be like, ‘alright, how can I use the internet differently?’” (Interview #5).

**Pressure-related changes.** Six of interviewees agreed that there has been an increase in pressures that the creatives feel while working in their agencies

(Interview #1; Interview #4; Interview #5; Interview #7; Interview #8; Interview #10). Individuals perceived the main reason for this to be an increase in what was expected of them. Specifically, they noted an increasingly deadline-oriented environment with tighter timelines, the required ability to quickly change focus, and a constant pressure to “bring it” as the primary characteristics of those changed expectations (Interview #1; Interview #4; Interview #7). Additionally, creatives are expected to constantly have their “finger on the pulse of everything going on in the industry” (Interview #1). “Copywriters have to be more on their toes [about trends]” (Interview #4).

Clients expect creatives to know the newest ways of communicating with their audiences, and they are less confident in the uniqueness and effectiveness of campaigns. “There has been more second guessing by clients...I think the pressure is on agencies to create something unique” (Interview #10) Sometimes this even led to a frustrating lack of direction. “Now you get open-ended briefs, “Hey think of anything”...What the fuck does that mean? It’s like think of *anything*...think of something I never thought of before” (Interview #5). One such dissenter thought that such thinking resulted in “a lot of wasted work for nothing” (Interview #9).

Another interviewer made clear that the pressure on the copywriter hasn’t increased as a result of the creative level of the work, but rather “because the model in which creativity comes about is changing” (Interview #6). Creatives continue to believe that the advertising profession is simply an attempt at “finding the happy medium between having creatively meaningful work and wanting to be financially successful” but, in accordance with the Person Factors described previously, this characterization has remained constant throughout time (Interview #3; Interview #5; Interview #6).



**Golden age of creativity.** Four interviewees believed that the greatest period of advertising creativity had passed, but had occurred sometime since the original study was conducted (Interview #2; Interview #5; Interview #9, Interview #10). Four interviewees believed that right now was the greatest such time period (Interview #1; Interview #3; Interview #6; Interview #8). Three interviewees suggested that there are “epochs” of advertising creativity that come in waves and tend to correlate with an increase in economic prosperity, and one of those times was right now (Interview #3; Interview #6; Interview #7).

Those who believed we had already experienced such a time period tended to agree with the idea that “the golden age of advertising was probably before digital” with others specifically mentioning the time period in which the internet and technology was just beginning as the time of most creativity (Interview #2). “We didn’t know how to use [the Internet] and [it made us] kind of figure it out. But now everybody kind of figured it out. And unless something comes along as revolutionary as the Internet, I don’t think...we’re going to be as impressed...Now we’re spoiled in a sense” (interview 5). Other spoke nostalgically of Nike’s “Just Do It” campaign and the ability of advertisers 10-15 years ago to tie in “strong human insights” such as “our tendency to put things off...that was one of the most brilliant taglines ever” (Interview #5; Interview #9). One interviewee did concede that the challenges that creativity faces may be greater now because “you have to be creative in different ways than in the past, but I don’t know if the best work is happening right now” (Interview #10).

In contrast, those who believed we were currently in a state of heightened creativity seemed more optimistic about continued future creative growth. “I think right

now we're heading towards actually a creative renaissance," one that increases brand story rather than attempts to use SEO (Search Engine Optimization) to "fool people to click this" (Interview #3). Many that said currently compared themselves to early generations of "mad men" but dismissed such claims that creativity was declining.

"The creative that was coming out then was pretty much just drama and product description, and occasionally you'd have a really nice piece of long copy in a print ad. That was the standard of excellence.... it's hard not to say right now because I think the work we do now has to be so dynamic and original because there has to be so many things grabbing peoples attention" (Interview #6).

But beyond simply the level of creativity in a certain era, the ways in which creativity has changed from the way it was previously was often a subject of discussion (Interview #2; Interview #4; Interview #6; Interview #7).

**How the industry changes.** While there was agreement that overall creativity has changed, there was disagreement over whether copywriting had seen a change. No one expressed a negative change, though one interviewee did argue that copywriting creativity had positively increased (Interview #2; Interview #4). One interviewer continued to point out that the ways of communicating change, but good writing will always remain constant because "people will always need something to read" (Interview #4). Changes observed typically regarded this method of communicating, with an observed evolution from traditional advertising to an era that is more receptive to cited "outlandish" campaign such as those of Old Spice (Interview #6; Interview #7).

Most notably observed was a change in the value placed on originality and what that meant to creatives. Branding was most often attributed to the idea of originality (Interview #2; Interview #3; Interview #7). “Brands aren’t doing anything original on TV anymore” argued one interviewee, to which another responded that it was hard not to argue “that all works from the beginning of time are derivatives” (Interview #2; Interview #3). This has led to the idea of a “Remix Culture” based on a rising “Copycat Creativity” movement (Interview #3; Interview #7). Another remarked work “becomes creatively repeating ideas that have been done...revamping things done years ago but with the new trend of technology” (Interview #7). Working under these assumptions, it was expressed that work that drew upon previously composed parts and but created something that added value to those source works, could be considered creative. “If it’s additive, then it’s creative; if it’s not, then it’s not creative” (Interview #3).

## **Conclusion**

As the advertising industry continues to evolve and adapt to the changing economic and technologic landscape, so do the perceptions of those who work within the industry. These changes offer valuable insight when examined in comparison to the previous findings of older studies and provide room for suggesting future research focused on the advertising copywriter and creatives in general. This study found that, while those interviewed disagreed on the level of creativity within advertising, consensus was found among the factors perceived to be the reason for such disagreement. As a result, this study provided a richer understanding of the perceptions of copywriters in a currently changing media landscape.

### **Primary Findings**

Through semi-structured interviews with ten senior level copywriters at the top agencies in the United States, this study found an unexpected disconnect in beliefs surrounding creatives' perceptions of creativity while finding a unanimous agreement that advertising creativity was changing in one area or another. This study specifically attempted to examine whether the perceived level of creativity within advertising had changed since 1998, when the original study was conducted (Reid, King & DeLorme, 1998).

Based on the results of the 1998 study, creativity was expected to have perceived to have remained constant, if not increased (Reid, King & DeLorme, 1998). This study found eight of the interviewees to hold such a belief, but that it was not unanimous, with two dissenters believing creativity was actually declining within the

industry. This held especially true when referencing traditional mediums, specifically Print and Television Advertising (Interview #2; Interview #9). While these interviewees explicitly stated that they believed we were more creative than previously, it is worth mentioning that four interviewees expressed the height of creativity so far as having already occurred, a concept that implies greater discord over whether creativity is truly increasing (Interview #2; Interview #5; Interview #9; Interview #10). This can also be seen in the common sentiment concerning creativity's overall increase, but copywriting's consistent nature (Interview #1; Interview #3; Interview #4).

Creativity in advertising was unanimously perceived to be in a state of change, with the primary factors of such changes being an increased focus on business, technological evolutions, and trends in creative process approaches. Interviewees discussed notable effects of all three factors on the person, place, and process of advertising creativity. The trend in more client involvement, control shifts over the creative work, as well as increased reliance on billing processes as measures of success were all contributing concepts to a general undertone of dissatisfaction with how business-centric the advertising industry has become.

Technology and the rise of digital mediums, especially social media, were perceived as having a considerable effect on the process from start to finish. Interviewees also discussed the approach to that process and how it has changed both as a result of the aforementioned, but also as a factor in such change. Clients have an increased desire for digital executions and a decreased reliance on solely television or traditional campaigns. Clients understand and desire the increase in reach for a fraction of the cost. Surprisingly, creatives have not altogether abandoned quality television

executions, nor their enthusiasm for the medium, but rather have discussed this love as a love for video that has carried over into digital and online executions, granting them more freedom to play with the stories and engage their audiences. The client, and occasional agency, desires for certain approaches that were “execution first” or deliberately “outlandish” as a means of negotiating for a final result that wasn’t as “watered down” were clear indicators in motivational changes and executional evolutions (Interview #3; Interview #9).

Alongside the technological changes, the business model was, indeed, a contributing factor to perceived changes, especially regarding client control and involvement. A heavy reliance on billing and “commoditized” creativity has led to a secession of older creatives and an influx of younger talent. This has led to a perceivably flawed model in which young advertisers must pitch unfamiliar ideas to older executives who are removed from the mediums that they are being pitched to campaign with. While clients’ approvals are perceived to become faster, with client presentations being seen as a “dying art,” agency models have been seen as the main sources of much needed efficiency reviews (Interview #1; Interview #4; Interview #8).

These findings considered, the importance of updating research is reaffirmed and the results of such an update to an existing study have yielded more intricate, yet conflicting, results. A qualitative examination of a smaller niche within the creative side of advertising has yielded a more intimate sense of understanding regarding advertising copywriters beliefs, a significant contribution to role-based theoretical research while providing additive information to fill a gap within creative research as seen through 3P model categorization (Hirschman, 1989; Sasser & Koslow, 2008).

## **Future**

Like studies before have shown, opinions and investigations that are updated provide valuable insights into perceived changes as seen by advertising practitioners. When done qualitatively, these reexaminations offer moments to read between the lines of purely quantitative data. This presents opportunities for future research that occur beyond the framework of the study being conducted. As suggested by the original researchers, the author of this study suggests continued qualitative niche examination within the creative side of advertising (Reid, King & DeLorme, 1998). Art directors, UX Developers, and other agency positions that may not have existed previously provide an expansive realm for future investigation as to how universal these perceptions of advertising creativity truly are, while also allowing a more comprehensive examination of such perceptions.

Three other topics of future research came up during the interviews of this study, specifically regarding originality, agency culture and risk-taking behavior. One interviewee specifically suggested a future study that could be done on how social media and today's media landscape have affected risk-taking behaviors of creatives and clients (Interview #8). In many responses, risk-taking was referenced or implied as a part of the creative process, but investigation as to the effects upon advertisers' risk-taking propensity were beyond the scope of this study.

The present study briefly touched on the changes in originality, but a more comprehensive investigation that included clients and other practitioners could provide valuable insight into external forces involved in the observed changes. Similarly, perceptions of copywriters that were examined in this study pertained solely to agency-

side creatives. An examination of client-side copywriters could provide a further elaboration of the industry's perception changes in creativity. Lastly, the value and nature of originality has been studied previously, but presents itself as a new area for reexamination with the discussion of additive qualities and their perception as indicators of creativity (Interview #3).

Technology, business models, and approaches to creativity have all been shown to have considerable impact on the creative process, and copywriters' perceptions of creativity within their profession. These thoughts, feelings and observations have changed, and continue to change, as a result of many factors. The responses of these senior-level copywriters help to elaborate and further evidence of the understanding and importance of role-based theory as introduced by Hirschman (1989). Not only do these findings have theoretical implications, but they also serve as a valuable insight for professional copywriters who often may not know what others in the industry feel, and how it relates to them and their work. Understanding how your peers think and work can help increase understanding, and hopefully inspire creatively additive behavior.



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## Appendix A: Recruitment and Informational Consent Script

Hello, my name is Benjamin Owens. I'm a graduate student at the University of Missouri. I'm working on my thesis, a research study entitled, "Reexamining advertising creativity: A qualitative examination of copywriters' perceptions of creativity in advertising," that will focus on copywriters and creativity in advertising.

To help me in my research, I'm requesting your participation in a brief, 15-20 minute interview. This interview will take place at an arranged time that is convenient for you, and can take place in person, via video conferencing (Skype, etc.) or over the phone. As a part of this interview, you will be asked about your views currently and at different past points in your career. As a part of this process, it is important that you feel confident in your ability to speak to both past and present advertising environments.

These interviews will be audio recorded. The researcher understands that in open-ended conversations, it is important that the interviewee feel secure in the confidential nature of what is said. All recordings will be sent to a third-party transcribing service that has signed a non-disclosure agreement.

Following the transcription, pseudonyms will replace identifiable information such as your name, your employers' names, workplace names, etc. This is to insure that the data will be analyzed and used in a manner that does not pose unintended financial, employment or reputation risks for you.

I would really appreciate your help in this process, and will provide the results of my study to you in return for your time and assistance. As a fellow copywriter and advertiser, I hope you will review the findings and take them into consideration in your views on the current state of our industry.

If you are willing to participate, understanding that the process is voluntary, please answer the following question in a reply to begin the process of arranging your interview.

Do you feel qualified to voice opinions about the past and present states of creativity in advertising?

Yes  No (If no, please send a simple reply to inform the researcher.)

*By answering and responding to this letter, I understand that I have been informed about the study that I will participate and give my consent to participate as an interview subject. I understand that the researcher will keep any identifiable information in a confidential manner as to protect my person.*

Should any further questions regarding this study arise, please contact the researcher, Benjamin Owens, at [blotz4@mail.missouri.edu](mailto:blotz4@mail.missouri.edu) or (704) 519-8874, or his advisor, Dr. Margaret Duffy, at [duffym@missouri.edu](mailto:duffym@missouri.edu) or (573) 884-9746.

## Appendix B: IRB Approval



**Campus Institutional Review Board**  
University of Missouri-Columbia

485 McReynolds Hall  
Columbia, MO 65211-1150  
PHONE: (573) 882-9585  
FAX: (573) 884-0663

May 14, 2014

Principal Investigator: Owens, Benjamin Lee  
Department: Journalism

Your Application to project entitled *Reexamining advertising creativity: A qualitative examination of copywriters' perceptions of creativity in advertising* was reviewed and approved by the MU Campus Institutional Review Board according to terms and conditions described below:

IRB Project Number	1211798
Initial Application Approval Date	May 14, 2014
IRB Expiration Date	May 14, 2015
Level of Review	Exempt
Project Status	Active - Open to Enrollment
Regulation	45 CFR 46.101b(2)
Risk Level	Minimal Risk

The principal investigator (PI) is responsible for all aspects and conduct of this study. The PI must comply with the following conditions of the approval:

1. No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date.
2. All unanticipated problems, serious adverse events, and deviations must be reported to the IRB within 5 days.
3. All modifications must be IRB approved by submitting the Exempt Amendment prior to implementation unless they are intended to reduce risk.
4. All recruitment materials and methods must be approved by the IRB prior to being used.
5. The Annual Exempt Form must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval at least 30 days prior to the project expiration date.
6. Maintain all research records for a period of seven years from the project completion date.
7. Utilize the IRB stamped document informing subjects of the research and other approved research documents located within the document storage section of eIRB.

If you have any questions, please contact the Campus IRB at 573-882-9585 or [umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu](mailto:umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu).

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Charles Borduin".

Charles Borduin, PhD  
Campus IRB Chair

### Appendix C: Anonymized Interview Monikers

General background is provided to help readers contextualize the data presented.

	<b>Interview Date</b>	<b>Anonymized Moniker</b>	<b>General Background</b>
<b>THEORISTS (6)</b>	July 13, 2014	Interview #1	38 year old New York Copywriter with 15 years of professional experience
	July 18, 2014	Interview #2	43 year old New York Copywriter with 15 years of professional experience
	July 28, 2014	Interview #3	35 year old Washington Copywriter with eight years of professional experience
	July 31, 2014	Interview #4	40 year old New York Copywriter with 18 years of professional experience
	August 25, 2014	Interview #5	Late 20s Florida Copywriter with seven years of professional experience
	August 26, 2014	Interview #6	27 year old New York Copywriter with six years of professional experience
	August 27, 2014	Interview #7	Early 30s New York Copywriter with eight years of professional experience
	September 17, 2014	Interview #8	Early 30s Missouri Copywriter with 10 years of professional experience
	September 17, 2014	Interview #9	40 year old California Copywriter with 15 years of professional experience
	September 19, 2014	Interview #10	Late 20s Colorado Copywriter with nine years of professional experience

## Appendix D: Interview Question Bank

### General Info Questions:

1. Do you feel qualified to voice opinions about the past and present states of creativity in advertising?
2. How old are you?
3. How long have you been in the advertising profession?
4. What was the last level of school you completed?

RQ1 *Do copywriters perceive a(n) decrease/increase/no change in advertising creativity?*

1. Since you first entered the advertising business, how would you describe the changes in creativity in advertising?
2. Can you describe what you consider to be the time period with the greatest amount of creativity in advertising?

RQ2 *What factors are perceived as reasons for such a change?*

1. How has the creative product changed?
2. What kind of people are attracted to the creative side of the business? Then, now?
3. How has originality in creative work changed? How have the responsibilities of the creative changed?
4. How has client involvement changed with regard to the creative product?
5. What responsibility do creatives have for their work?
6. How have your individual feelings of satisfaction/reward changed when finding that creative insight?

RQ3 *How have advances in technology perceived to have impacted advertising creativity?*

1. What mediums are most effective for conveying creative strategy?
  - a. Producing enthusiasm among clients
  - b. Quality reproduction/expansion and presentation
  - c. Producing enthusiasm among agency creatives regarding their work
  - d. Deliver ads with stopping power
2. How have available technologies affected the creative process?

RQ4: *How do changes in the advertising business model affect creativity?*

1. How have pressures on agency creatives changed?
2. How has the approval process for creative work in agencies changed?
3. How has creatives' involvement in strategy changed?
4. How would you describe the seriousness of the agency setting now and then?
5. How has the agency hierarchy evolved?

6. How has the number of people involved in the creative process changed?