EXPLORING CULTURE:

AGENTS, STRUCTURES AND DIVERSITY

WITHIN CHICAGO ADVERTISING AGENCIES

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A Project

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri-Columbia

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

JOHN KURPIUS

Prof. Holly Higginbotham, Project Committee Chair

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Holly Higginbotham for her enduring support, wisdom, and availability throughout both my undergraduate and graduate years. When asked (very last-minute, I might add) to be my project committee chair in February 2021, she accepted with no reservations despite already having committed to other engagements, projects, committees, and duties at the Missouri School of Journalism.

Next, I am grateful for Associate Dean Earnest Perry and Professor Jamie Flink for serving as project committee members. These individuals brought immense knowledge and detailed feedback to the table in their own ways, helping me identify areas for improvement as I worked on a study of diversity, inclusivity, and equity in the advertising industry. Without them, this project would have felt incomplete or lackluster, and I have no doubt that the quality of this project would have suffered without their involvement.

All three of these individuals have had a profound impact on my development over the last five and a half years, and I cannot thank them enough for their continued support and mentorship through my undergraduate and graduate years, a pandemic, and the beginning of my career beyond the Missouri School of Journalism.

Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to Breinify, the AI marketing tech startup which served as the professional component for this project and an opportunity to blend the professional experience I had with an opportunity to work in an industry I'm passionate about. Despite operating in a high-energy, fast-paced environment, Breinify understood my obligations as a student and encouraged me to meet them in a timely

manner. While I will miss being a student, I am excited to close one chapter of my life

and lean fully into the next as an integral part of the Breinify team.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

When I graduate, I intend to continue my career at Breinify as a content marketing manager and I fully expect to shift my focus towards the advertising industry when it is time to move on from my current occupation. This is certainly a career that my undergraduate and graduate studies in strategic communication have prepared me for. I have spent the last year specifically focusing my efforts on developing a heightened awareness on topics surrounding diversity, inclusivity, and equity, specifically engaging in coursework and research that would drive that understanding of culture forward.

In an industry that predominantly skews white and male, especially as one ascends the corporate ladder, it's important to understand the importance of diversity, inclusivity, and equity. DEI is not an uncommon topic for advertising agencies to comment on, especially after new light has been cast on racism and inequality during the pandemic, but I don't believe it's enough to simply talk about it – there needs to be more decisive action around promoting diverse, inclusive, and equitable cultures.

My research is based on a foundation of coursework that delves deeper into race and representation. For example, my Mass Media Seminar provided me an opportunity to dive deeper into issues of race and representation in the media, sparking deep and sometimes difficult conversations about how to address issues in newsrooms and agencies across the United States. Alongside that, my time as a student in the Novak Leadership Institute helped me connect those seminar conversations to a deeper understanding of how organizational culture operates, specifically piquing my interest in social structures and assumptions about organizational culture. My professors gave me

ample opportunity to discuss potential research topics with them, and helped guide me along the path to completing my research proposal and professional project.

In the spring, I used courses like Qualitative Research Methods to understand the importance of conducting research correctly, and I developed my research proposal as I made my way through that class. My research proposal was also informed by participating in Media Ethics seminars, which helped lay the foundations of the ethics behind the research I am conducting and the industry in which I hope to work – which, historically, has battled notions of dishonesty and "spin," working to be seen as an ethical, honest industry by the very audiences it hopes to connect with.

Without a doubt, I am well-equipped by the Missouri School of Journalism to not only tackle my coursework and research, but to be among the best in my career field of choice simply because of the level of training and education I have received over the last five and a half years. While the advertising industry is rapidly changing, I hope to be a part of the innovation and creativity that is to come.

II. FIELD NOTES

Week 1: 8/30 – 9/3

It's been about 10 weeks since I started as a Content Marketing Manager at Breinify. I have learned the ropes for the most part, but I'm continuously learning about the tech industry, AI technologies, and how to be most effective as a member of the marketing department. Most of my expertise and education was in the advertising and public relations sphere, and while I have two years of part-time experience in content marketing, I find that the "small team, lots to do" environment has given me an opportunity to try my hand at plenty of different things in a more marketing-centric role.

At this point, I am solely responsible for creating blog content, planning content and campaigns, and managing the relationship with Influence & Co., my former workplace and current content partner. This week, I spent a great deal of time and effort on content creation and content planning. While I feel confident in my ability to execute in my current role, I find that there's a constant need to self-educate to be more effective – I've been exploring SEMrush and Hubspot SEO trainings to better understand how to produce high-quality content that drives awareness for Breinify's brand.

In terms of my graduate project, I have had a slow start. Coming back from summer, moving to a new city, and managing my workload at Breinify has proven to be challenging, though I feel motivated to make a great deal of progress in the coming weeks.

Week 2: 9/6 – 9/10

This week, most of my time was spent on search engine optimization, evaluating proposals from PR agencies, and the launch of our podcast. I created promotional materials for LinkedIn, Twitter, and our website, while managing the relationship between Breinify and our podcast production partner. I regularly meet with my manager, who is the Head of Growth and has 10+ years of marketing experience. While we work closely on things like the podcast, I often find that I'm free to work on the projects that I deem important to our overall content strategy – in recent weeks, that's mostly been dominated by content planning, SEO, and social media strategy.

In a startup environment, things are relatively chaotic – I have learned the importance of planning and scheduling when it comes to executing things effectively on short deadlines. As it stands, I'm about a month ahead on content creation for our blog (I will be writing blog content for November in the coming weeks).

Regarding my research project, I have two promising leads from my network at Edelman and The Marketing Arm, both of which I believe can help me gather a substantial number of interview participants for my research project and connect me with individuals in other agencies. I intend to meet with both of them at their earliest convenience and finalize my screener survey within the next week.

Week 3: 9/13 – 9/17

This past week has been fairly productive at Breinify. We're in the process of hiring a digital marketing manager, who will take some of the workload off of my plate and allow me to shift my focus primarily to content strategy, planning, and creation across all of our channels. In the past week, I've had the opportunity to review pitches from various PR agencies and talk through the pros and cons of each with my manager, as well as participate in conversations with those agencies as we work towards finding the right mix of deliverables for our company in the next quarter.

With Q4 starting up soon, I've started evaluating my progress towards my Q3 goals and figuring out where to go from here. While progress on the content creation side of things has been robust, with more than 10 pieces of content published since the end of July, I'm spending more time looking at the strategy behind each of our channels and figuring out how our content can be mapped to the consumer journey. We're also discussing the possibility of pursuing email campaigns, which I'll be planning and writing copy for if we do decide to go that route.

I have an interview scheduled with an individual from Edelman tomorrow. Other than that, my pursuits of interview subjects have been limited – I will be adopting a new approach, sourcing interview subjects from LinkedIn and reaching out to them to gather more participants for my study. I intend to have my interviews completed by the final week of October, while the analysis portion will start as I wrap up the final few interviews.

Week 4: 9/20 – 9/24

This week, I spent the majority of my time writing articles and blog posts for Breinify's website, reviewing some application materials for our digital marketing manager position, and meeting with our content partner who produces offsite articles and secures placements for us. It's been interesting to be on the client side of things vs the agency side, as behaviors and expected responses are in stark contrast with one another in some situations. For example, a PR firm pitched us a contract with a $466k price tag, while the other firms were more in our range of $10k-$20k – there was a clear disconnect between our expectations, so I was able to get some firsthand experience on handling those sorts of interactions.

Additionally, I am exploring opportunities to create sales enablement pieces with the sales team to help with lead generation and close more deals, and am in the process of finalizing a customer case study that will be published on the website next week. While it's not my main focus, the bigger picture lesson from this week revolves around understanding the goals and approaches of marketing and sales teams, how they're similar, and how they're different. I have been tasked with creating a content library for the sales team and coming up with a social media strategy (particularly for LinkedIn), the caveat being that I'm doing that on behalf of salespeople, not marketers and advertising professionals or brands. The approach is different in some regards, but likely will give me the opportunity to learn quite a bit about that part of my company.

In terms of my graduate project, I have switched my approach to cold messaging on LinkedIn, and I have initially seen better results from that approach. I have two interviews scheduled for tomorrow, and I intend to use those connections to source more interviews within those agencies. I am awaiting responses from individuals at a couple of other agencies but fully expect to get some responses and subsequently, interviews from professionals at that agency. As I have explored my options and responses from potential participants, it seems that I may need to pursue other options in order to secure interview participants for my project.

Week 5: 9/27 – 10/1

This week, I spent most of my time working with the DemandJump platform, an SEO and content optimization tool that we've started using to inform our content decisions and help us rank better in search engines. I spend quite a bit of time in the depths of keyword trends and analyses, and while I'm not an SEO expert by any means, it's been quite an interesting thing to learn about. For my role in content marketing, it's absolutely a necessary skill to have.

I also had the opportunity to review a few resumes, pre-hiring assessments, and meet with one of the candidates who has applied for our marketing manager role. It's an interesting experience, being on the other side of the hiring process. We have something called the "Breinify Challenge," which is essentially a pre-hiring assessment that isn't uniform – it's changed to fit the responsibilities of the role that a candidate is applying for. For example, mine was primarily focused around writing, approaches to content strategy, and

topics around editorial calendars, SEO, and goals for the first few months – nothing crazy. I reviewed some of these challenges this week, helping my manager figure out who might be the best fit for this open position. While I don't believe the near future of my career will include tons of hiring and interviews, it's been nice to get a glimpse of how these decisions are made, especially in thinking about how small the startup is and how each person is crucial to the growth and success moving forward.

Next week, I will be in San Francisco visiting the company office for the week. I expect to learn lots about the culture, and I'm definitely excited to meet people in person.

As for my project, I have adopted a new approach to finding participants for my study. As my network hasn't yielded a diverse pool of connections, I am trying to source participants from LinkedIn. I have subscribed to LinkedIn Premium, which allows me to message a certain number of people that are not my connections, and I have tried connecting with individuals at various agencies and starting conversations via messages. So far, I have not received any responses. I reached out to primarily nonwhite individuals at my target agencies, so I am curious to see if this approach will work out for me. If I don't receive many responses by mid-October, I will rely primarily on my personal network to connect with and engage participants for interviews.

Week 6: 10/4 – 10/8

This week, I traveled to San Francisco to visit the company office and work in-person for the entire week. Aside from the opportunity to meet my coworkers in person and have a

nice change of scenery, I found it especially interesting in terms of exploring and observing the company culture. Oftentimes, I find that the virtual setting completely erases the ability to observe the interactions of others. Outside of the #general and #random channels in our company Slack, I generally have no way of watching other coworkers interact with each other and with their environment. The routines, social norms, and behaviors of my coworkers were very interesting, both in the office and outside of it.

In light of my visit here and the opportunity to spend time getting to know my coworkers outside of the office, it's been a very busy week. I have not made much progress on my project, though I have continued to reach out to participants on LinkedIn and monitor responses, but so far, nothing has come through.

Week 7: 10/11 – 10/15

After returning from San Francisco, I've realized just how used to remote work that I am – and that it's not my favorite thing. I think it has become a given for me, in the sense that I have worked from home for about 18 months at this point, and also completed almost all of the last four semesters online, sitting by myself at the same desk every day. In the office, I found that there's so much more to a job than simply enjoying the work – you have to enjoy the people and the culture. This week, it's been awfully quiet in my office at home.

It was a short week, as Breinify took the day off for Indigenous Peoples' Day. Most of my work this week revolved around sharing knowledge and insights with Influence & Co., our content marketing partner that is based in Columbia, Missouri (and my former company). Right now, they send us topics and question sets related to that topic that follow an outline, then we fill in answers and discuss those with the account team in further detail. Influence & Co. then writes an article draft, I review it, they edit it once more, and then we approve it for publication. We're in the early stages of a new batch of content, and we'll likely have a few external articles go live sometime this month (hopefully). My manager has started to take a sort of hands-off approach to this transfer of knowledge, feeling confident in my ability to make sure these articles have all the necessary information and elements that improve their performance once published. Being on the client side is an interesting change of pace – having intimate knowledge of the internal processes at Influence & Co. but being a client of theirs certainly allows things to move faster and is helpful for clearing up any friction or breakdowns in communication.

For my project, I primarily focused on tapping my network for interview participants. We're nearing the end of the semester, and I still have not found a large group of individuals willing to participate. I scheduled a few more interviews this week, but I am still far from where I'd hoped to be earlier in the semester. It seems like my participant pool is slowly growing, but is far, far less diverse than I wanted it to be.

Week 8: 10/18 – 10/22

This week, our new marketing manager started her role. With that, my manager has been quite busy with onboarding and training sessions, so I've been left to my devices for the most part. We also had a kickoff meeting with a new PR agency that we are working with, so there have been lots of introductions and get-to-know-you conversations happening.

My tasks this week consisted of developing some PR materials for a momentum release, writing a new batch of internal content around contextual marketing, marketing trends for the holiday season, and a podcast episode that's going to be released in a couple of weeks. As we head towards the end of the year, I've been working on some research around what types of content are most popular – at this point, it tends to be a lot of trends, year-in-review articles, product feature updates, holiday-themed posts, and predictions for where industries will be headed in the new year. I fully expect to be writing these types of pieces over the next few weeks in order to publish them throughout the month of December. I've also been tasked with ideating topics through the first part of Q1, as it's important to keep the momentum going for the weeks following the holidays, especially with lots of people planning to take that time off (myself included). I have definitely learned some lessons about forward thinking and how to effectively manage an editorial calendar this week.

At this point, I have scheduled most of my interviews for late October and early November. I will be meeting with Jamie Flink to discuss my interview guide and make sure I am eliciting strong answers from interview participants, but I have had some short,

preliminary conversations with interview subjects in the last few weeks. To be honest, I

have not been as focused on my project as I needed to be over the last few weeks – with a

trip to San Francisco and new team members joining the company, I've been distracted

and quite busy at work, which has made focusing on my project quite difficult. As the

end of the semester is rapidly approaching, I'm hoping the interview process will move

quickly and I'll be able to meet the deadlines for my project submission and defense.

Week 9: 10/25 – 10/29

Perhaps the best week of my experience at Breinify so far, I have completed my 90-day

review with great feedback and secured my biggest win for content marketing since I

began working at Breinify in June. This week, analytics showed that the 19 articles I have

produced for Breinify's blog so far have yielded incredible results for our SEO efforts. In

late September, we were ranking for just 8 keywords (up from only 2 keywords in May,

before I started). This week, I found that Breinify is ranking for 39 keywords, including 3

first-page SERP results, which is a huge indicator that the content I have been planning

and creating is working. I'm hoping to continue riding this wave of momentum, but for

now, it's nice to start seeing results from the work I've been putting in.

I also had my 90-day review (which was a little bit overdue). Here, I was able to share

my experience with my manager and the CEO of the company, and discuss where things

were great and what things needed to be improved. I also received tons of feedback on

my work, most of which was positive, though there are always areas that could be

improved and have room for growth. My next evaluation comes at the 6-month mark, so I

am eager to compare the results from my 45- and 90-day reviews with that 6-month evaluation.

As for my project. I have had a few cancellations and reschedules for upcoming interviews, so I am trying to stay positive and motivated in light of these late-game setbacks. I do not think I will fully meet the number of participants I had hoped to get when I submitted my research proposal (12), but I do think 9 or 10 is a realistic number and I believe that number of responses should be sufficient enough for drawing some conclusions, shedding light on answers to my research questions, and identifying some opportunities for future research. I have also begun laying out my project report and formatting it so I can begin writing shortly.

Week 10: 11/1 – 11/5

October went quickly, and we're already nearly halfway through Q4. Our new marketing manager is fully integrated into the team now and has taken quite a few responsibilities off of my plate (which I appreciate). For example, I am no longer the point of contact for our new PR agency partner, and I no longer am the writer of LinkedIn posts for the sales team. This week, I worked with my manager, Anushka, to redefine the role and responsibilities of the content marketing manager, and I'm excited to have a slightly narrower list of tasks to tackle.

For example, this week, I worked on creating an internal document, a playbook for LinkedIn, complete with templates and brand and writing guidelines, while the new marketing manager contributed the social strategy and metrics for that playbook.

Last week, I worked with Jamie Flink to make sure my discussion guide was air-tight, so I expect that my interviews should produce some really interesting insights. The interviews I have completed and scheduled are among a less diverse group of participants than I had initially planned, but I do think that it's still worth pressing on with the research and seeing what I can find. I also completed the bulk of my interviews this week, having multiple conversations that yielded some interesting results and helped me get a great idea of what findings I'd be able to share.

It seems like participants have fairly similar responses to interview questions, so I fully expect to reach response saturation fairly quickly. Some individuals have given great answers, while others have been a little quieter and less eager to volunteer information – I've certainly had to ask the same questions a few different ways. In terms of findings, I've been particularly interested in how similar participants' experiences are given that all of these professionals are working remotely – I think this will become a major factor in the analysis of these interviews. Additionally, some participants don't appear to be very interested in the conversations about culture and DEI initiatives, but their answers have uncovered some interesting points about structures and agency nonetheless.

Week 11: 11/8 – 11/13

The end of the semester is almost here, but it's certainly weird to still have things moving at such a fast pace. It's a little bit weird to not expect a Thanksgiving break or multiple weeks off around the holidays, in between semesters, but that's part of taking the first

steps into my career, I guess. This week, I focused on editing external content for publication in MarketingTech, Toolbox for Marketing, and AdAge. I also wrote an article for Retail Tech Insider, which was really an exercise in writing clearly and concisely. Most of my articles fall between 750-1,200 words, but this one only allowed 500 words to cover the topic of consumer empowerment and how brands should react to this shift in power, utilizing personalization to improve consumer journeys and drive results for their brands. Pretty interesting stuff, and it sparked a couple of ideas for blog articles that can expand on this topic. I also explored more SEO possibilities, and I started production on a pillar blog post that will unite 6-8 different pieces of blog content in one place, which is great for SEO and SERP rankings, a piece of content that is coming in at about 3000 words. I'm not sure when this will be published, but I hope that it builds on the great results I've seen in the last few weeks.

I completed the last of my interviews this week, constrained a little bit by time and participant availability. I currently have 9 participants and have reached response saturation, but hope that a couple of participants come out of the woodwork before my defense and I can add in some more insights prior to submitting the final report. I started writing my report on Thursday, and hope to finish it by early next week to fall within the defense deadlines. Things appear to be moving quickly, and I think I've got some really interesting insights despite the lack of diversity in my pool of interview participants.

Week 12: 11/15 – 11/19

Mid-Q4 is crazy busy, as I would imagine it is for most businesses. Breinify is gearing up

for another round of funding, which means it's more important than ever to have solid

footing in terms of content marketing, PR, and paid search campaigns. Now that we've

established relationships with our new partner agencies, we're starting to create press

releases and campaigns geared towards generating more media attention for our company

and solution as we head into the funding round, and it's been quite the educational

experience for me. While I have some experience operating in the public relations world,

it's been incredibly interesting to be a part of the in-house operations that contribute to

telling our story and promoting a very technical product in plain language that our

audiences understand and can derive value from.

My role is also shifting, as we have caught up completely on the backlog of content that

needed to be published. I'm starting to look ahead and learn what it's like to really get out

in front of our content creation needs, and I'm hoping to quickly get to a point where

we've got content scheduled 1-2 months in advance. For me, that means ideating and

pitching content campaigns to my supervisor, which all of the strategic communication

classes I've ever taken have prepared me well for. It's a little bit weird to be the only one

ideating these themes and campaigns – normally I've got a sounding board and ideas

come from all around the table. Either way, it's an exciting time to be in the startup

environment and I'm eager to see what happens next.

On the project front, I am wrapping up my report and conducting a couple of last-minute

interviews, compiling my findings and scheduling my project defense. While the project

ended up looking a little bit different than what I had imagined it would when I was

crafting my proposal, it's certainly been an eye-opening (and very, very busy) semester. I

am so excited to wrap things up, share my findings, and move onto the next stage of my

career beyond being a student.

III. EVALUATION:

I am pleased with both the professional and academic components of my semester. While incredibly busy, especially during the last few weeks, I have certainly grown immensely in both a professional and academic sense. My role at Breinify continues to not only be great experience, but it's fun as well – I work with a great team of individuals in a very fast-paced environment, and this semester, I have been able to have a fairly robust impact on the company's marketing efforts. It's a small team and there's lots to do, but I have absolutely enjoyed every week there so far, and can't wait for what comes next.

In terms of my project, the workload was quite heavy, though manageable. It's definitely not easy to keep up with the demands of a rapidly-growing startup while working on a research project, and I do think that my time management skills at the beginning of the semester left quite a bit to be desired. I also faced quite a few difficulties in sourcing participants for interviews, trying to hold myself (and them) to perhaps a higher standard than I needed to, which, in turn, made it difficult to make real, tangible progress in the early parts of the semester. I do think my proposal was a bit ambitious, and I do think I overestimated my ability to garner the participation of a diverse group of interview participants, while also discovering that some fairly obvious obstacles stood in my way – primarily the fact that most people are working virtually and are not eager to participate in after-hours interviews about sensitive topics such as DEI.

Finishing the project feels good, to say the least. In the final days leading up to the deadline to submit my report draft to my committee chair, I was under a great deal of stress. At this point, a mentor told me "if it was easy, everyone would do it." That's true.

It's not easy, and that makes it all the more exciting to approach the finish line and have contributed a great deal of time and effort that's about to pay off.

I do feel as though I wasn't able to fully explore topics of diversity, inclusivity, and equity as much as I had hoped to. While I learned a great deal from my interview participants, the lack of racial and ethnic diversity there left me wondering what exactly I would have learned had my pool of participants been more diverse. I hope to contribute to the literature surrounding DEI, social structures, and individual agency within the advertising industry, and I hope to see future research that builds off of the topics herein. If I had the opportunity to go back and do this project again, I would likely tackle it differently, though I wouldn't change the topic at all. The research is meaningful and important for the advertising industry, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work on this project.

The professional component, my role at Breinify, could not have been a better fit for me. While it didn't contribute to me accessing advertising agencies, it provided me with an opportunity to merge my professional experience with an industry and product I am passionate about. Six months ago, I thought I'd be working in an ad agency, trying to earn my way onto an account team working with tech clients. Now, here I am, armed with more technical information about AI, marketing technology, and predictive personalization than I ever thought I'd have, and an opportunity to spend every day figuring out how best to reach Breinify's target personas in meaningful and relevant ways.

I appreciate Breinify for more than the role. It's a fantastic environment that brings together people of all different backgrounds, locations, ethnicities, and identities

into one team that works as a single unit – I've never experienced anything like it. From day one, the work I did mattered to the company. Whether it was creating an internal company handbook and coming up with values for the company, or crafting external articles to generate top-of-funnel awareness for the brand and drive organic traffic to our website, every day has been an opportunity to learn, grow, develop my skills, and be a part of something larger than myself. While I won't be here for my entire career, this has been an incredible place to take the first steps out of school and into the real world.

In the future, I will work on more proactive management of my editorial calendar, becoming more independent and requiring less oversight and editing from my manager, and continue to hone my storytelling abilities to make an impact on B2B audiences. With my studies and graduate school behind me, I hope to lean into my role as a content marketing manager even more heavily, looking to learn, grow, and challenge myself in the coming months and years.

Work Product:

Breinify

Capabilities ⌄   Company   **Learn** ⌄   Contact / Log In

4 Marketing Trends to Watch This Holiday Season

It's almost that time of the year again - the holiday rollercoaster from Halloween to Thanksgiving to Christmas! For me this usually means a lot of eating, drinking and shopping. For brands and consumers, it means the hustle for holiday shopping.

While a return to pre-pandemic normal feels like it's within reach, consumer behavior won't look like it did in 2019. Consumers this year are engaged and ready to go while maintaining the shopping behaviors that have become second nature to them over the course of the pandemic.

Here are four trends to keep in mind as we go into the 2021 holiday season:

1. D2C channels are building deeper relationships with consumers.

The pandemic brought in-store shopping to a complete standstill, as brick-and-mortar shops were forced to close their doors for months.

In the last year or so, plenty of consumers made the leap to fully digital buying behaviors and started relying on e-commerce channels to get what they needed. They did more research, became more comfortable with shipping times, curb-side pick-up and online returns. Shoppers that used to take pride in their weekly grocery lists and picking fresh produce became more comfortable using offerings like Walmart's grocery pick-up service and food subscriptions.

Traditionally, consumer goods brands have reached their customers through retailers and third-party e-commerce sites, but the pandemic has shown that building relationships, driving trust, and making use of first-party data and owned e-commerce channels is the key to CPG brands' success moving forward. By the numbers, D2C channels are more attractive than ever – comprising more than 14% of total retail e-commerce sales in the US

How to Achieve Real Personalization in Online Retail

Personalization is rapidly becoming a must-have for retail brands hoping to maintain a competitive edge in the ecommerce marketplace. When you can provide your consumers with relevant and personalized online shopping experiences, they're more likely to make purchases and stay loyal to your brand. If not, another brand might seem like a better option.

In an increasingly competitive environment, it's important to stay ahead of the curve to secure the benefits of personalization in ecommerce.

> *Successful personalization that fosters brand loyalty can't happen without a strong foundation and careful planning — and that starts with understanding the three stages of retail personalization."*
>
> *- DIANE KENG*

An Inside Look At The Stages of Ecommerce Personalization

Personalization in online retail is easier to understand when it's broken down into stages:

- First, understand your consumers and what they really care about by investing in data collection and analysis
- Next, take that data and put it to use – your actionable insights about your consumers will provide you with some quick wins when it comes to optimizing the consumer journey
- From there, work towards fully predictive and dynamic digital consumer experiences

Each stage in the journey towards personalizing online shopping experiences has its own challenges and hurdles to overcome, but you can vastly improve your brand's consumer experience by working through these stages with specific business goals in mind.

Pivoting the Marketing Strategy of a 50-Year-Old Fire-Fuels Company

In this episode of Beyond Conventional Marketing, Diane speaks with Daniel Moznett, Director of Marketing at Duraflame. He shares the importance of being a data-driven brand during the pandemic, as well as how to best understand your consumers and improve your approach to engaging them.

Duraflame is a family-owned enterprise brand that's nearly 50 years old, but with the right approach to personalization and marketing, they've managed to engage with their consumers on an entirely new level through content and their website.

During our conversation, Daniel highlights the crucial components of the data journey – brands need to overcome the challenge of getting the right message to the right consumer at exactly the right time. The only way to do that? Use your data effectively.

The journey has three main steps, each of which is explored in-depth during this episode of Beyond Conventional Marketing:

- First, find out who is consuming your content and where they're consuming it
- Second, figure out how to reach these audiences effectively
- Third, determine which partners you'll need in order to do this effectively

The last piece of the puzzle is one idea that should guide every brand on its data journey. You have to follow the golden rule of data: treat your consumers' information and data with the care and respect that you want given to your own data.

Pivoting the Marketing Strategy of
Beyond Conventional Marketing: A Mark

00:00:00   00:23:16
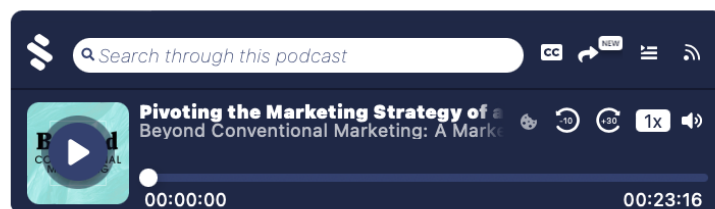
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How Colombia's Largest Telecommunications Provider Improved Checkouts With Personalized Push Notifications

The Problem

Claro Colombia is the largest telecommunications provider in the country of Colombia, with nearly 34 million subscribers – more than 60% of the country's population. This company has a large market of users that subscribe to pre-paid mobile plans, which require users to purchase recharges to "top off" their plans to receive more minutes and cellular data for their devices.

Claro Colombia had two main goals: increase the number of recharge checkouts by 5% through personalized push notifications for individual users and streamline the business process for launching new marketing campaigns.

In addition to their main goals, Claro Colombia also wanted to see:

- Clear split testing between customers who receive Breinify-powered push notifications vs no push notifications
- Health metrics for the campaign, such as push notification sends, opens, and checkouts
- More variations of copy built from consumer behavior and context

Results

Breinify activated a POC for Claro Colombia within 30 days, and throughout our partnership, we helped Claro:

- Increase the recharge checkout rate for prepaid packages by 17.5% by sending push notifications with dynamic content and smart timing
- Increase total sales for recharges by 31.63%

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How AI Helps You Keep Up With Your Consumers

Consumer expectations have been steadily rising, and the pandemic only accelerated that trend. With online shopping paving the way for consumers to find new brands and lose the ones with inadequate digital consumer experiences, marketers need to adapt to a rapidly changing landscape.

To do so, things like AI and predictive personalization are no longer just nice to have – they're all but required to provide consumers with the experiences they're looking for. That means eliminating the guesswork and using data to inform consumer experiences at every touchpoint in real-time.

Consumers aren't looking for tons of content from your company, either. They only care about what's relevant to them and their current situation – if a consumer just bought a puppy, for example, you should recommend content and products around caring for a new pet. If they can't find what they're looking for quickly, they're likely to lose interest and give another brand a try.

What Can an AI Marketing Solution Do For You?

Technology plays an increasingly important role in marketing. In order for brands to produce truly relevant and timely experiences, they need to have the right tools at their disposal.

In the past, marketers could break their audience down into a few different segments, providing different experiences for consumers based on age, gender, or geographic location, for example. Now that consumers expect personalized experiences at almost every touchpoint, marketers need to be able to create tens of thousands of audience segments to meet that need – something that isn't possible with manual segmentation practices.

AI also creates an opportunity for dynamic consumer experiences that change in real-time based on a consumer's changing preferences. For example, if a consumer just looked at a vegetarian recipe and it's almost dinnertime, the AI can recommend quick recipes that don't contain any meat. Adapting instantly to a consumer's preferences isn't possible

4 Keys to Personalizing Digital Consumer Experiences

In the last year and a half, almost every purchase I made was online. And with not much else to do, I did a lot of online shopping, alternating between different websites to find the perfect pair of mom jeans and the right SPF for my skin tone. Shopping online was a different experience than my pre-pandemic habits because my purchases were driven by research and how easy it was to find what I wanted at the right prices. In the past, I probably would've looked no further than a few different brands for a pair of jeans, but this new way of shopping online changed my loyalties.

Research from PwC found that 32% of consumers will leave a brand they love after a single bad experience, and this increases to around half of consumers after several bad experiences. But as consumers shop online more frequently, the landscape is different. Now, a personalized digital experience could be the difference between a loyal consumer or a lost opportunity. Consumers expect these stellar experiences, and delivering them shows that you understand their needs — which drives consumer loyalty and business growth.

Why Customer Experience and Brand Loyalty Go Hand in Hand

The cost of attracting new customers is more than keeping existing ones — about five times more expensive, in fact. This is partly because the conversion rates for existing clients tend to be higher, especially if they're loyal. A mere 5% bump in retention can increase company profits by as much as 95%. This means that creating personalized digital experiences is critical to your bottom line.

Personalization is also critical to building better relationships. Offering relevant experiences creates longer-lasting partnerships because it builds trust with customers. You should know what information they want and need to see. So at the end of the day, if you want a loyal customer, you have to invest in creating that kind of positive relationship via personalization.

5 Ways To Improve E-Commerce Consumer Experiences

Even as pandemic restrictions started to relax, there weren't many signs that online shopping would go back to pre-pandemic levels. Instead, consumers appear to have settled into new routines, regularly using online channels to engage with content, make purchases, and decide which brands their loyalty belongs to.

With higher levels of online shopping, brands have learned one very valuable lesson: today's consumers care about consumer experiences more than ever before, and business is being won and lost in the online marketplace. With consumers quick to swap brands after just a few bad online shopping experiences, the key to keeping consumers happy and loyal is curating truly relevant and personalized digital consumer experiences.

Why Improving Consumer Experiences Matters

It's no secret that a better consumer experience leads to better outcomes for brands.

Personalization goes hand in hand with efforts to improve the consumer experience – it's the backbone of the experience itself. Not only are you creating relevant and meaningful experiences for your consumers, you're setting them up to become loyal to your brand because you're providing value and convenience.

Depending on your business goals, your personalization strategy might change. For example, if you want to increase sales, the approach you take will be different than if you simply want to boost CRM registrations or content engagement. Moving away from static content to dynamic, personalized experiences is a key element of creating an ecommerce experience that drives consumers to action – rather than spending their time parsing through products and content, you're providing them with exactly what they want to see, right when they want to see it.

How to Improve Digital Consumer Experiences

Set clear business objectives.

V. ANALYSIS

Introduction:

The advertising and public relations industry is historically an overwhelmingly white and overwhelmingly male industry, especially when looking at the upper levels of these organizations. In recent years, however, as conversations around diversification, race, and representation have received more mainstream attention, the advertising industry has a long-standing problem to solve: figuring out how advertising agencies can successfully foster diverse, equitable, and inclusive work environments.

To explore this, one must evaluate the social structures that are in place within the advertising industry – culture, values, assumptions, and other facets – as well as how individuals who work in the industry are both influenced by and responsible for the existence of these social structures. Giddens' structuration theory posits that one cannot study the autonomy of an individual without also studying the social structures that influence that individual's behavior, and simultaneously, how individuals' behaviors reproduce and strengthen those social structures.

Stuck in a cycle fueled by gaps between organizational culture and DEI efforts, it is important to shed some light on the social structures that are in place, the advertising professionals within those social structures, and the relationship between the two. Leaning on Giddens' structuration theory, this research study aims to explore the attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of individuals operating in advertising and public relations agencies in Chicago, as they pertain to topics of diversity, inclusivity, equity, culture, and individual autonomy. This analysis will also provide insight into some

barriers to progress, as well as potential strategies that advertising and PR agencies can use to improve their DEI efforts.

As this is a small-scale research study focused solely in the Chicago metropolitan area, there is no intent to generalize these results or extrapolate them to the entire advertising industry within the United States or the world. This report simply aims to explore the attitudes, beliefs, and opinions, and characterizations of nine professionals across three agencies in Chicago, provide some analysis, and identify limitations, challenges, and opportunities for future research.

This study aims to address two main research questions:

RQ1: What social structures are conducive to supporting a diverse and inclusive environment, and which are not? Which elements differ between the two?

RQ2: Do structural barriers exist that hinder the DEI efforts of the advertising agency? What strategies are employed by advertising agencies to combat this beyond the hiring process?

In short, what factors and practices contribute to a diverse advertising agency culture? What strategies are advertising and PR agencies using to create more diverse, inclusive and equitable cultures in advertising and PR agencies? And what gets in the way of that progress? These questions were explored through a series of interviews with professionals at multiple agencies in the Chicago metropolitan area – though it should be noted that most participants were working from home.

Methodology:

Using semi-structured interviews, I spoke with nine advertising and public relations professionals in the Chicago area about their identities, experience in their agencies, the existence and impact of diversity, inclusivity, and equity programs or initiatives, and their own evaluation of the company culture through a DEI lens.

As Roulston states, the role of the interviewer should be viewed as a) a neutral party working to gather objective data about the attitudes and experiences of the interviewee and b) a co-constructor of knowledge working to deepen relationships with interviewees in order to initiate some notion of social transformation (Roulston, 2010). This description helped inform how I structured my discussion guide and completed the interview process. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, it was important to be open and honest with participants about the ways that I would be using their responses, establish a rapport with interview subjects before delving deeper into the research questions I was attempting to answer, and ensure that no personally identifiable information (PII) would be shared outside of our conversation.

While I originally attempted to schedule interviews to be conducted over Zoom, many participants requested to do the interviews via phone call after work hours. After interviewing three participants at each agency, I felt that I had reached saturation and, while there were areas for future research to explore, I had sufficient data to answer my research questions and no reason to expect that other participants would yield vastly different responses. Interviews were transcribed as they were completed, and phrases such as "um" and "you know", as well as speech mistakes and misspellings were corrected or omitted from quotes in this final report.

Participants in this study comprised nine professionals from three separate agencies in Chicago. Before the interview, participants were asked if they were specifically engaged in any DEI initiatives at their organization in a professional capacity – if they were, they did not qualify to participate in this study.

Due to my ability to access participants in a completely virtual manner, I relied on an existing network of connections to get inside each of these agencies. Through mutual connections within my professional network, I was able to source participants that were primarily entry-level, as most of my connections also operate at that level, though a few participants held mid-level roles as well.

Participant titles included: associate account executive, account executive, account manager, media manager, associate strategist, strategist, etc.

Organizations were selected based on similarity and research accessibility. Each organization, herein referred to as Agency A, Agency B and Agency C, had roughly 100 professionals based in their Chicago offices, almost all of whom were still working virtually, but existed as part of a larger organization with multiple office locations in various cities. Agencies were also selected based on similarities in clientele – for example, no agency served only small, local businesses while another only served global clients.

The data from the interviews was analyzed using analytic induction, serving to bring forth the ideas and beliefs of individuals and pair those with concepts and themes that answer the research questions at hand.

Findings:

Analysis of the interviews conducted for this project yielded five overarching categories, defined below:

<u>Social structures</u> – participants speak about the ways that their agency operates, discussing concepts of cultural and behavioral norms, operations, and social interactions.

<u>Identity</u> – participants speak about their individual identity, the characteristics that make them who they are and how they fit into their organizations.

<u>Autonomy</u> – participants talk about how they fit into their organization, their individual roles and behaviors, and what factors dictate their actions on a day-to-day basis.

<u>DEI</u> – participants discuss topics of diversity, inclusivity, and equity, including demographic breakdowns of their organizations, strategies employed to improve DEI, and how to address issues of race and representation at their agency.

<u>Barriers to progress</u> – participants share their personal opinions on what gets in the way of DEI efforts, what hinders progress, and how these might be addressed.

Social Structures and Diversity

The first part of this study aims to explore the social structures that impact cultural norms, behaviors, attitudes, and opinions of advertising practitioners.

Participants were asked to discuss the culture of their agencies, their personal experience there, as well as what elements they thought contributed to diverse, inclusive, and equitable corporate environments.

Virtual Work and its Impact on Culture

One important factor to note is that every single participant in this study was currently working virtually. While some had experienced their organization's culture in person prior to the pandemic, most of their comments came through the lens of the virtual corporate environment. Even for participants who had previously been working in-office, discussions of culture and social interaction were primarily limited to what they were experiencing virtually.

Participants that were hired in March 2020 and beyond, then, had no practical in-office experience. Participants 1, 2, and 9 all completed the hiring and onboarding process virtually, with two of the three having visited their office in person but never working from the office. Participants 7 and 8 had been at their agency since before the pandemic began, but shared that many members of their team had opted to move to new cities under the freedom of remote work, which changed the team dynamic and culture.

Virtual work is an interesting element in this study, as social structures are arguably less visible in remote work. Participants are unable to observe much behavior that they themselves are not involved in, and most of their social interaction is limited to their immediate teams, generally just a few individuals at their agency.

> *"For my account service team, there's just the four of us right now. That being said, there's a wider team, just with the account that I work on, specifically. I think probably 20 or 25 others that also work on the account in different capacities, the experiential marketing events, and we have the creative art directors, finance, and we all make up that collaborative team on the account.*

There's definitely that smaller pocket that I directly talk to more on the day to

day."

– Participant 1, Agency A

In terms of evaluating social structures, culture, and diversification efforts at these three agencies, participants are experiencing and evaluating these elements through their computer screens within the walls of their own homes or the nearest coffee shop. When asked to estimate the level of ethnic and racial diversity in their agency, younger participants with only virtual experience tended to share higher estimates, while individuals with in-office experience or experience on multiple, larger teams shared lower numbers, though both were informed by individual experiences.

Participant 2, for example, began working at Agency A during the pandemic. Working on a small team and not having been exposed to multiple teams and clients yet, her experience and observations of the virtual workspace informed her response:

"From what I have gathered, just from people I've met, I'd say the agency is at

least probably 40% to 50% nonwhite or people of color. I feel like once we're

back in the office, I feel like I would have more information."

Participant 1, a more tenured member of Agency A, has had more exposure to the agency and filled in some of the gaps:

"On my small, immediate team of four, half of us are people of color. In the

larger scope, looking at the whole team for this big client account, there's

probably two more people out of the 15 total people on that team."

Identifying Core Tenets of Agency Culture

Beyond simply identifying the level of diversity within their company, participants struggled when asked about their company cultures, with most referring to social interaction as the main identifier of a healthy or unhealthy culture. Of course, skimming any trade publication will likely yield a few articles about how to build and maintain company culture in a primarily virtual environment, but in practice, discussions of culture tended to include how being back in the office would provide the missing cultural elements.

Other participants mirrored the same sorts of responses – those with relatively short, fully virtual experiences use their immediate surroundings to evaluate their agency's level of diversity, cultural norms, and social behaviors, while those with more experience are able to produce more realistic characterizations of their agency's social structures. Without a doubt, the lack of in-person observation is a major issue when it comes to participants' ability to fully evaluate the social structure that they are operating within. That said, it is likely that they are not able to provide much insight into their own autonomy in that space because behaviors and norms are unconsciously accepted.

To summarize, participants felt that cultures of transparency (often referred to as "openness") and curiosity, with a strong push from top-level leadership, were conducive to promoting diversity and inclusivity at all levels of the agency. Participants also felt that incorporating diversity into company events doesn't require every event to be a hard-hitting panel of diverse voices discussing social justice, trauma, and DEI initiatives – instead, incorporating cultural events that are light, entertaining, and work towards

passive education are potentially more favorable and may result in higher satisfaction and information retention.

While events that foster open and honest conversation are appreciated by employees, participants shared that when agencies only focus on these types of events, they can become fatigued and less interested in participating in company culture events, which may give way to complacency in changing the social and cultural behaviors of their agencies. Of course, culture goes far beyond events, however, in a completely virtual workspace, these are among the most observable and impactful drivers of agency culture, and were the primary focus of participants' responses in terms of culture and DEI initiatives.

Barriers to Diversification and Cultural Change

The second aspect of this study delves into the strategies used by advertising agencies to make progress in terms of diversity, inclusivity, and equity initiatives, and what stands in the way of that progress.

Overall, agencies appeared to have similar approaches to diversity, inclusivity, and equity. Particularly since the beginning of the pandemic and the events of summer 2020 and beyond – heightened awareness and attention around social justice issues, particularly racial justice and the Black Lives Matter movement – advertising agencies have had to take a more public stance on their efforts to improve diversification in their organizations.

Strategies for doing this differ from agency to agency, but based on participants' responses, it appears that the goals remain largely the same: increase visibility and

transparency of DEI programs and initiatives, hire from more diverse talent pools, and bring in third-party experts to educate employees and facilitate training sessions.

More specifically, within the agencies surveyed, DEI work manifests itself as unconscious bias training (though this is not new), recognition of cultural groups by way of facilitating events and resources around Asian/Pacific Islander Month and Black History Month, for example, and company newsletters or aggregated resources sent out via email. Additionally, all three of the agencies in this study had some sort of company-wide listening session or town hall-like event that served as an open forum for discussions of DEI to take place.

> *"We do a lot of panels, and I love it. During API month, they did a panel of a few*
> *different people from our agency, and they talked about experiences, what they*
> *went through, experiences where they felt marginalized. And then they always*
> *provide resources about podcasts you should listen to like, Asian American*
> *podcasters, or like here's some music, or these are restaurants you should go to*
> *and these are places where you can donate, which I think is really great. And they*
> *do that throughout the year. But during those months, obviously, it's a little bit*
> *higher."*
> *– Participant 1, Agency A*

> *"There's always been a culture of learning. We weren't required to go to events*
> *surrounding diversity, inclusivity, and equity when everything happened in 2020,*
> *but our work was excused. During that time, we could go, if we wanted to – that*
> *was also kind of a phenomenal place for people in marginalized communities to*

talk about experiences that they've had, share, and help us understand what they

were going through."

– Participant 4, Agency B

"There's a bunch of employee resource groups, like many agencies have, and they

do a lot of panels and different programming for awareness in like, these

employee resource groups are mainly driven by allies and people that identify

with those communities. We're certainly doing a lot more of that than we used to

be."

– Participant 7, Agency C

Alongside positive comments about these resources, events, and initiatives, some

participants felt a sort of dissonance – torn between the idea that their agencies were

"doing the best they can," the understanding that "change takes time, and these things

don't happen overnight," and the fact that DEI efforts are almost entirely confined to

scheduled, regulated company meetings, events, and trainings.

Differences in Opinions and Approaches

Participant 5 shared a unique insight surrounding large-scale change in social

structures, mentioning that there's often a difference in opinion where there's a difference

in levels of experience. As someone who is well into her career, has spent multiple years

at Agency B and worked on a variety of teams of various sizes, she characterized the

hopeful naivety of some individuals who have just entered the workforce:

"I do think it's different when you've been here for a few years. I see people, mostly the oldest members of Gen Z it seems like, I see them enter this industry and approach issues from how things appear on their face, but they don't seem to grasp how deeply-rooted these systems are, and it goes back to policy and how these organizations were founded and when they were founded, so of course it's going to take more than just talking loudly and sharing things on Twitter to make some change."

– Participant 5, Agency B

Other participants did not bring this specific issue up, but responses showed that other areas suffered from the same lack of universal understanding – specifically the idea of identity.

"Professionally, identity has been an interesting thing to explore. I definitely, as a white man, have understood my privilege. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I've been able to tell where I can and can't completely lean into my identity."

– Participant 5, Agency B

"Well, I'm Asian. And I think that's a big part of my personal identity. And in a big way, probably my personality."

– Participant 1, Agency A

"I would say hard working. Kind and compassionate. I feel like that's a lot. I don't know. How many do you need? This is hard. I would say maybe innovative or eager. So I was eager to learn and try new things."
– Participant 6, Agency B

The idea of identity appears to manifest itself in different ways – differing opinions and approaches on the individual/agent level might impact how social structures are either changed or reproduced. Different understandings of what needs to happen in order to foster a more diverse workplace may actually be a barrier to progress, rather than a wealth of ideas that can be combined to enact some large-scale change.

Time

One large barrier to progress that was shared amongst almost every participant: time. It's no secret that the advertising industry is known for tight deadlines and long weeks with a few late nights. In a world with deadlines growing ever-shorter and the constant increase in work pace, some participants feel that there's not enough time to take on things outside of their job role.

Participants shared that the majority of DEI-focused events and initiatives were not mandatory, outside of company trainings and hiring. In addition to that, several participants shared that they are very likely to participate in company events when their workload is light, but when they're busy, engaging in these types of initiatives and gatherings is not a priority for them. While trainings do exist and agencies do provide time for employees to meet those requirements, it does seem as though there is room for

improvement in terms of improving employee engagement around culture, especially while operating in a fully virtual environment.

Value-Add vs. Job Requirement

Most roles don't include any sort of DEI requirement, and participants' responses showed that DEI knowledge and engagement didn't hinder their ability to be successful in the agency setting.

> *"You can, you know, <u>not</u> have the diversity piece as part of your identity, <u>not</u> be a member of a marginalized community or group, and still do good work, but you would likely struggle on brands that are always trying to challenge themselves to bring DEI principles to the table and do things that are challenging societal norms. I don't think you'd be successful on those brands without any knowledge of DEI that goes beyond the basics. I wholeheartedly believe that you have to have some different interests, curiosities, experiences...I think part of being really good at your job in this industry is bringing lived experiences to the table and telling those stories in meaningful ways."*
>
> *– Participant 5, Agency B*
>
> *"I'm not an expert on race or DEI, and I don't claim to be. We do company trainings, as most agencies do, and we've got some culture events, but I don't think you need that to be successful."*
>
> *– Participant 7, Agency C*

While a lack of engagement with DEI principles and knowledge doesn't necessarily keep one from being successful in an agency setting, it may put a cap on *how*

successful you can be. Especially as brands are becoming more socially-conscious and taking stances on more issues, it's essential for advertising professionals to understand how to craft those narratives and stories in meaningful, compelling, and culturally respectful ways.

It's important to consider how the approach advertising and PR agencies take towards DEI impacts the development of diverse and inclusive environments, and how they contribute to reproducing and strengthening the social structures that are in place. In essence, participants felt that DEI was a value-add, but largely didn't consider it to be a core tenet of company culture. In fact, very few participants mentioned diversity, inclusivity, and equity when asked about culture.

Discussion

Building off of these findings, I would like to propose a few strategies that advertising agencies could employ to improve their diversity, inclusivity, and equity efforts, and ultimately, contribute to improving agency cultures.

First, agency culture is dependent upon the advertising professionals within it. Agencies are investing in diversity, though this tends to happen primarily at the entry level (Bendick and Egan, 2009). By working with programs that are centered around hiring and placement, such as the Multicultural Advertising Internship Program (MAIP), agencies can access a more diverse pool of talent. However, leadership should evaluate post-hiring opportunities as well – while diversity may improve at lower levels, drivers of policy and organizational change tend to be the individuals with decision-making power,

those in the upper levels of the agency. Finding ways to elevate diverse voices and source diverse talent internally may improve agency culture over time.

Secondly, time is a major constraint and possibly the biggest obstacle to improving individual autonomy and ability to impact company culture as an agent. When involvement at an agency doesn't go outside of the job requirements and DEI is seen as an extracurricular activity, it's no surprise that agencies still struggle to improve their organizational makeup. Additionally, agency clients are brands – and brands are increasingly under public scrutiny when it comes to social issues like race and diversity. In order to best counsel agency clients and provide culturally-sensitive creative and strategic work, advertising professionals need to be educated on and engage with DEI topics. This likely will improve open-mindedness among individuals, inject DEI into the cultural fabric of the agency, and improve agency ROI from client work.

Thirdly, social interaction and cultural events outside of the work sphere are the main way that participants identify agency culture – the idea of what the agency is outside of the work alone is important for individuals to assess how they fit into the organization. When it comes to company events, participants felt that events centered around DEI tend to be more conversation and town hall-focused, which caused some participants to share feelings of exhaustion and fatigue. On the other hand, events that used culture as a backdrop, such as a cooking class for National Hispanic Heritage Month, were more positively received and may be a means to addressing topics of culture and inclusivity.

Lastly, and perhaps most obviously, virtual work has taken a toll on agency culture. High-stress, fast-paced work environments do not mesh well with feelings of

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isolation, disconnectedness, and limited exposure to many positive aspects of company culture. There is one clear (albeit not helpful) solution: wait for the pandemic to end and return to the office. For continued work in a virtual environment, however, agencies may consider hosting company events during the workday and ensuring that participation is not mandatory, but also isn't hindered by meetings, client calls, and pressing deadlines.

In short, advertising agencies are facing difficult cultural issues that stand to define the future of their organization and the advertising industry itself. Rather than waiting for other agencies to make moves and see results, agencies should work towards implementing solutions that address the formulation and reproduction of their agency's culture – that means investing in the individual agents who are reproducing it. By improving diversity, inclusivity, and equity at *all* levels of the agency, the social structure itself will improve rather than simply being reproduced. An industry that has long been stuck in its ways, there is a clear opportunity for improvement that needs to be seized.

Limitations:

As a researcher, I am keenly aware of my own involvement in this study, and the impact that my identity may have had in terms of engaging participants for this study, and fully exploring the themes herein. While I am disappointed that this is the case, I do feel that the research still has merit and can open the door for research in the future that continues to expand the existing body of literature around the topic at hand. I also believe that my conducting this research study will help future researchers by providing insight into the challenges, obstacles, and potential setbacks that may occur, and encourage them to expand on the topics and themes that are covered in this study.

As this was a qualitative research study involving semi-structured interviews, I cannot fully remove myself or completely negate my unconscious biases that may have impacted the results of this study. Furthermore, as I utilized a snowball sampling method beginning with my own network and the use of LinkedIn for individuals outside my network, it is clear that my identity and the connections I have played a role in which individuals elected to participate in this study and which did not respond to messages, connection requests, or requests for participation in this research project.

My efforts to contact individuals outside my own network using LinkedIn were largely unsuccessful, save for a couple of participants. Despite reaching out to an equal number of white and nonwhite participants, nearly every single white individual responded to requests for participation, while zero nonwhite individuals outside my network returned my messages. One likely cause of this is the fact that only a small portion of the advertising and public relations industry is nonwhite – statistically speaking, efforts to study and improve DEI efforts in this industry means this small

population of individuals is likely engaged more often by researchers, journalists, and their own agencies. With that increased concentration of requests to speak on the topic of diversity, it is likely that these individuals may feel burned out, exhausted, fatigued, or overburdened by requests for their attitudes, opinions, and beliefs on the subject. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that yet another attempt or request to engage these individuals and garner their participation in a study on DEI was unsuccessful.

Connections within advertising agencies also yielded an overwhelmingly white pool of respondents, which I was initially skeptical of. In the interest of completing the research project and contributing to the literature around race, representation, and social structures within the advertising industry, I elected to move forward with a rather homogenous group of participants in the hopes of garnering research findings that may help to inform future research.

In terms of utilizing one's professional network to source participants: this is a sound approach, and is useful for gaining access to an organization and sourcing participants. However, prior to conducting research or crafting a proposal, it is important to evaluate the strength of your own professional network. For example, you may assume that your professional network is strong, diverse, and open to connecting you with other individuals – this assumption is not a safe one to make. For future researchers taking this approach, it is an *absolute necessity* to spend time conducting a brutally honest evaluation of your network, who is reachable within it, and what you hope to gain from those connections. I did not conduct such an analysis, making the assumption that I had a diverse network of individuals to tap into – not only was I incorrect, but when using a non-diverse network to reach participants, it is unlikely that this will result in an

incredibly diverse pool of participants. This finding should help future researchers avoid the pitfalls and setbacks I encountered, and I would strongly advise them to take this into consideration.

Opportunities for Future Research:

As mentioned above, I am aware that my identity may have played a role in my difficulties sourcing nonwhite participants for this research study. The advertising industry is overwhelmingly populated by white individuals, and while I am wary of weighting my own identity too heavily in this regard, I do believe that nonwhite researchers who are professionals in the advertising industry may make more headway in engaging ethnically diverse participants for a similar study.

I would also like to suggest pathways for future researchers to avoid replicating the obstacles and challenges faced in this study. I would suggest that researchers evaluate the strength of their professional network (and likely get a second opinion). Additionally, map out the network and potential participants, then use a tool like LinkedIn to identify individuals in their organizations that are ideal participants – not only does this benefit the research, it benefits one's professional network for the future.

Furthermore, this study is not meant to generalize. The pool of participants is rather limited both in number and in geographical location. While certain opinions, attitudes or responses may be able to be generalized, future research could explore these themes on a larger scale through physical interaction with agencies and participants, observations, and multiple interviews or focus groups over a longer timeframe with a more diverse group of participants.

Appendix A: Codebook

Code #	Theme	Description
1	Social Structures	Participants speak about the ways that their agency operates, discussing concepts of cultural and behavioral norms, operations, and social interactions.
2	Identity	Participants speak about their individual identity, the characteristics that make them who they are and how they fit into their organizations.
3	Autonomy	Participants talk about how they fit into their organization, their individual roles and behaviors, and what factors dictate their actions on a day-to-day basis.
4	DEI	Participants discuss topics of diversity, inclusivity, and equity, including demographic breakdowns of their organizations, strategies employed to improve DEI, and how to address issues of race and representation at their agency.
5	Barriers to Progress	Participants share their personal opinions on what gets in the way of DEI efforts, what hinders progress, and how these might be addressed.

Appendix B: Discussion Guide

       This discussion guide was used to guide the semi-structured interviews conducted for this project. While each area was covered, some follow-up questions that were asked in interviews are not covered here, and some of the following questions were not asked in every interview due to the discussion taking a different course, time constraints on the participant's end, or participants covering answers to multiple questions within a single response.

Background:

1. How did you become a part of the advertising industry? What things led you to this career field, specifically towards an ad agency?

2. If you had to describe your identity, how would you do it?

    a. What sorts of characteristics are important to your personal identity? Your professional one?

    b. What role does DEI play in your work identity?

    c. What did you expect from your agency in terms of DEI (while being hired, perhaps), and what is actually happening now that you've been hired?

3. When you think of your agency's DEI efforts, what are the first things that come to mind? What characteristics do you think define these efforts in your company/ad agency?

4. Help me get a better idea of the structure of your agency. Who determines your day-to-day, what projects you're working on, and who do you go to for approval?

    a. About what percentage of your agency would you consider to be non-white or racially/ethnically diverse?

  b. Are managers the ones who place importance on DEI initiatives?

RQ1: What social structures are conducive to supporting a diverse and inclusive environment, and which are not? Which elements differ between the two?

5. Tell me about the social structures in your agency – what do you think of the culture? The values? The leadership?

6. What elements do you think are important to creating a diverse and inclusive corporate work environment?

  a. Do you think that's important for an agency to be successful, or does it have less of an impact than most people would assume?

7. Do you find any of these elements in your agency? Which ones are there, and which ones are missing?

  a. How do you think that changes the environment in which you work?

8. Do you think your agency is set up in a way that encourages or inhibits diversity, inclusivity, and equity? Why do you feel this way?

9. Do you think that knowledge of topics surrounding diversity, inclusivity, and equity helps you to be successful in your organization?

  a. Do you think that these areas are key elements of being successful at your agency? Why or why not?

10. How would you improve the culture at your organization to be more diverse and inclusive?

RQ2: Do structural barriers exist that hinder the DEI efforts of the advertising agency? What strategies are employed by advertising agencies to combat this beyond the hiring process?

11. What strategies does your agency use to promote diversity, inclusivity, and equity (i.e., hiring, education, opportunities, etc.)?

    a. Where do you see the most impact from these?

12. Was DEI a part of the hiring process? How did that manifest itself?

13. What do you think gets in the way of DEI initiatives at your agency? Why?

14. How would you fix or improve your agency's approach to these DEI initiatives and strategies?

Appendix C: Textual Analysis Data

Q2. <u>Participant 1, Agency A</u>: "Well, I'm Asian. And I think that's a big part of my personal identity. And in a big way, probably my personality. That's the first thing that comes to mind when I think about identity." – **Code 2, Identity**

Q2. <u>Participant 2, Agency A</u>: "I work in advertising. I'm very close with my family and love to be with friends. And I would say, I definitely have a strong work ethic. I like to stay busy and always keep learning." – **Code 2, Identity**

Q2. <u>Participant 5, Agency B</u>: "Professionally, identity has been an interesting thing to explore. I definitely, as a white man, in recent years, have understood my privilege. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, in my personal life I've definitely surrounded myself with environments and ways that I can be myself, but professionally, I've been able to tell where I can and can't completely lean into my identity." – **Code 2, Identity**

Q2. <u>Participant 6, Agency B</u>: "I would say hard working. Kind and compassionate. I feel like that's a lot. I don't know. How many do you need? This is hard. I would say maybe innovative or eager. So I was eager to learn and try new things." – **Code 2, Identity**

Q2. <u>Participant 7, Agency C</u>: "I'm white and we're talking about DEI, but I guess I don't really think about that being at the top of my mind when I think of identity. I'd probably talk more about my work ethic or things I find interesting or my personality, being outgoing and trying to help connect people to one another." – **Code 2, Identity**

Q3. <u>Participant 9, Agency C</u>: "I've observed that no matter what your position or like title is, everybody's willing to get their hands like dirty to get the thing done, or meet the reporter deadline, or, you know, push the items forward and take things on if somebody else is strapped on another client. I've seen like executive vice presidents be proofreading,

you know, different decks and stuff like that. So I think it's kind of ingrained that you're never better than anybody else. And I really appreciate that, obviously, being a member more on the junior side, too, because I think that's very admirable. And like, that's how you keep people around and build up a culture. And then I definitely think I think there's a value, honestly, not thinking right now. But I think there's one about curiosity. As I do all the values, maybe I need to know these better." – **Code 1, Social Structures; Code 3, Autonomy**

Q4. <u>Participant 9, Agency C:</u> "I would say, everyone's like, I'm an account executive. Right now everyone's like, probably a year or two out from like, college or maybe three. But yeah, there's like a ton, a ton of junior staff that are still in the early years of their careers." – **Code 1, Social Structures**

Q4. <u>Participant 6, Agency B:</u> " I've always had the mindset as a manager, as a leader that, you know, my success is dependent on the success of those that I managed. So if I'm not enabling them, or they're not feeling, you know, successful, or, you know, have the ability to do their job, like, I'm thus not doing my job that well, and she was very, I would say, like hands on and more of, like, tell you what to do, instead of letting you do it kind of thing. Which isn't just, I guess, I didn't find the best with that type of leadership. And I think too, like she was hired, maybe four or five months after me. So I was running the comp by myself for a while and she just kind of took over without like, discussing with me or taking any into account. So it's just like a different type of leadership that didn't vibe well with not only me, but everyone on the team. So that kind of led to some obviously, like pain points." – **Code 3, Autonomy**

Q4a. Participant 1, Agency A: "There's like one Hispanic woman, maybe two. But yeah, I would say, like me, my boss on my team, and then across brand campaigns. Maybe like two more, but recommends and has a little bit more robust. I would say there's like 15 people on that team.

Q4a. Participant 4, Agency B: "It really depends on the team. I have worked on several different teams during my time here, I would say the majority were white, I would say people in leadership positions definitely skew white. Yeah, I would say the majority are white, but I have, I had a coworker who was of Indian descent, I had a data analytics partner, who was in my community. I had a few coworkers that were mixed. So it just it really depends, but I would say that it was definitely a majority white by quite a bit." – **Code 4, DEI**

Q4a. Participant 2, Agency A: "From what I have gathered, just from people I've met, I'd say the agency is at least probably 40% to 50% nonwhite or people of color. I feel like once we're back in the office, I feel like I would have more information." – **Code 4, DEI**

Q4a. Participant 8, Agency C: "I've been here a while, I would say there's a large number of people I've worked with that are white but there's also a lot of very diverse teams here. People in leadership positions certainly are more white, but that's improving. We're still a majority white team, though it's better than it used to be." – **Code 4, DEI**

Q4a. Participant 9, Agency C: "I would say definitely, it's diverse, I would say also, it's kind of hard to tell tubing virtual, because I haven't met anybody and everybody. But like I've mentioned, I've worked with so many different people on different counts that diverse in the way, obviously, of like backgrounds of positions of expertise, apart from physical diversity, but there's definitely still a big emphasis on that." – **Code 4, DEI**

Q4b. <u>Participant 9, Agency C:</u> "Our new CEO is a woman who came in mid-last year. So I didn't previously see a ton the old CEO did, but she's really had a rockstar agenda and like, just operates and leads with transparency and honesty and kind of needs people were that in the agency, too. And I think she's been a big driver of culture, too, in a positive way." – **Code 1, Social Structures**

Q5. <u>Participant 4, Agency B:</u> "There's always been a culture of learning." – **Code 1, Social Structures**

Q5. <u>Participant 1, Agency A:</u> "It's really social, and I feel like a lot of times we end up talking about things outside of work. For example, in most of my meetings the understanding is kind of 'okay, let's keep this status really quick, and then we can talk about celebrity gossip.' So I feel like that describes the culture pretty well in practice, because I feel like a lot of my calls and non-text interactions start with stuff like that. And then, when I have one on one meetings with my boss, I'd say the majority of it is just talking about our personal lives or reading or watching and then probably about two minutes of the whole 'okay, here's what I'm doing today.'" – **Code 1, Social Structures**

Q5. <u>Participant 1, Agency A:</u> "I think culture and DEI definitely overlap. I mean, I don't think that they're completely separate, but they're also not exactly the same thing. For example, we'd have a taco making class for Hispanic Heritage Month, which was awesome and also [not another panel about DEI efforts]. I think there's parts of diversity and inclusion that are not a part of culture, and there's parts of culture that aren't a part of diversity and inclusion, but I think there's parts where it overlaps." – **Code 1, Social Structures**

Q6. <u>Participant 5, Agency B:</u> "I would, say, being able to listen – especially in corporate environments – putting definitive time to listen, I would say, to kind of build on my answer, because I think it's very easy for people to get siloed into feeling like they're on an island, even if they're talking to one person day to day. Maybe that person might not be the person they want to speak to, so they want to say something or express a concern or raise a question about an issue they're having, they might feel really uncomfortable saying it. And if you don't hold the time as a corporation or agency to have an open dialogue, even if it's just like a manager–employee relationship, having those times to just say 'okay, work aside, let's shoot the shit. What's up? How are you feeling?' is just so important." – **Code 1, Social Structures**

Q6. <u>Participant 6, Agency B:</u> "Yeah, to start off the bat is, you know, being appreciative of people, I feel like that's one thing that gets really lost in an agency environment. Like saying thank you, like appreciating what people are doing or what they have on their plate. I just feel like at agencies, it's very, go, go go. So I feel like that sometimes, you don't understand like people have different backgrounds, you don't know if that…maybe it took them four hours to do this task that for you, maybe it took you an hour because you've done it before, just kind of being understanding and appreciative of what people do and bring to the table, I think is awesome. Because I do think there's like some preconceived notions like, 'oh, that person doesn't have a media background. We don't want them on our team,' but just kind of being like understanding, I think, and then appreciative of what people can bring to the table and the work that they do. Just pull, like a more positive work environment. And I think if people, you know, feel happy at work, they usually do better work." – **Code 1, Social Structures**

Q6. <u>Participant 4, Agency B:</u> "The first one is, like I mentioned, we have a really, really great in my opinion, CEO. And something he did is when we brought back the intern, the intern program for the summer, I think I think that was right when I was trying to get you in there, too. But they, what they did was they actually really didn't take anybody they usually take and I truly believe that they did actions that it wasn't like Oprah show we're going to show people are inclusive. So we're just going to like, give people of color opportunity instead of like the typical like, you know, frat boy or whatever." – **Code 1, Social Structures**

Q6. <u>Participant 8, Agency C:</u> "I think, for the most part, it's really just the being open and honest that gets you there. That kind of transparency, you know, in leadership and in practice. Like if you're making these bold claims about, you know, what's going on in the workplace or whatever? Out there? Do you internally? Are you doing this? Are you? You know, for example, I'm like, off top of my mind, are you giving paternity leave? – **Code 1, Social Structures**

Q7a. <u>Participant 3, Agency A:</u> "One thing we just did to just like, try to make everyone feel included, like the, like, encourage everyone to put their pronouns in their email signature. Of course, they did force anyone, like it wasn't which, you know, I think that's good, too. They didn't require it. But they like send out an email being like, Hey, we're doing this, like, if you really nice if other people could do that, too. So people, they make it very clear that you can be whoever you are, however you want. And you can have that identity in the agency." – **Code 1, Social Structures**

Q9. <u>Participant 5, Agency B:</u> "I mean, there's, there's definitely like a difference that, like I can dissect it into in terms of like, if you want to be a great strategist, or if you want to

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just do your job, I think, I think as a strategist and in advertising, like, there's so many different brands that brings so many different things to the table, for example, in my well, we'll get to the example in a minute, but like, I think, I think like, say, for example, you could be a white man, and not have the curiosity, the interest the term I'm looking for, I guess, like humble, humbleness. You can not have all those things and still do good strategy work, you would struggle on brands that always try and challenge them themselves as a brand to bring, you know, DEI principles to the table and do things that are challenging societal norms." – **Code 4, DEI**

Q11. <u>Participant 1, Agency A:</u> "[This topic] doesn't come up in my day-to-day all that much. When I'm working on integration stuff, leadership always wants to find that we're casting people that are more diverse, or we can get talent that's more diverse. Other than that, I would say, we have this one initiative that is like a meeting or a town hall, which is a place where the CEO like talks to us, probably once a month, or it's people in higher up leadership. But they discuss things like how many white people work at the company and what we're working towards, working towards this number to make it a more equitable workplace. So I think that, like our higher-up leadership is pretty open about that, which is great. But obviously, we have like, over half the people on our company are white. But you know, we're working on it, and they at least acknowledge it. And it's slow and steady process." – **Code 4, DEI; Code 5, Barriers to Progress**

Q11. <u>Participant 2, Agency A:</u> "I know that there are a certain amount of mandatory trainings and also ways for everyone to really come together to make sure that we are keeping up with the topic of diversity and inclusion." – **Code 4, DEI**

Q11. <u>Participant 4, Agency B:</u> "We have a really great CEO, who was very responsive when everything happened in summer of 2020 with George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter activism. He was very forthcoming about understanding that he doesn't understand everything, and giving people time off, making sure we have an experience to take advantage of different opportunities, and brought people in to do webinars." – **Code 4, DEI**

Q12. <u>Participant 3, Agency A:</u> "No, I don't think that they did in the hiring, like the initial like the interview process. It definitely came up in like, orientation, and things like that." – **Code 1, Social Structures**

Q12. <u>Participant 9, Agency C:</u> "I've worked with so many different people on different account that are diverse in the way, obviously, of like backgrounds of positions of expertise, apart from physical diversity, but there's definitely still a big emphasis on that Edelman has been pushing for diverse hiring and making sure that's a priority of the agenda. And I forget the exact metric, but they met the goals for 2022 or 2021." – **Code 1, Social Structures; Code 4, DEI**

Q12. <u>Participant 8, Agency C:</u> "I think diversity is definitely a big part of my decision making when it comes to where I work and what I want to do there, how I choose to spend my time outside of my responsibilities. I think the culture, diversity and equity are the big three when I'm looking at jobs, or companies in particular. Just because why aren't like if you're not like, why wouldn't you be invested in like diversity and equity training? Employees programs? Just because that's like the state of our world right now." – **Code 2, Autonomy**

Q12. <u>Participant 4, Agency B:</u> "I think that I think those things are destined to be imbalanced for a very long time. However, I do think the potential is there just because I think that like, you know, the workflows, and when you force your talent, especially like new grad talent, and something else, our agency like why I'm like perpetually white, is because a lot of like, a lot of people hired or referred from other agencies, like they were going to agency to like your friend, you refer them this connection, like, right, they get hired, you know. So it's a little bit like anything else, when we talk about like, racial inequity, or equitable. But I would say that, like, if they spent more time sourcing their talent in the way that, you know, is diverse, I guess you could say, like, based on the colleges they're looking at, or where they post the jobs or what have you. I think that like, incremental progress can definitely be made as best as they can." **– Code 5, Barriers to Progress; Code 1, Social Structures**

Q13. <u>Participant 2, Agency A:</u> "I feel like, the only thing you know, sometimes I feel like with just the agency landscape, with it always being so, you know, kind of busy and go-go-go, I think, if anything, maybe that, you know, sometimes people might be as not as attentive to trying to read those emails, or keep up with it. I think there definitely are employees who may look at it like, 'oh, I don't have time to do this.'" – **Code 5, Barriers to Progress**

Q13. <u>Participant 6, Agency B:</u> "I think a big part of it is like putting together a committee, whether that's like, a group that focuses on that, and like having some like, goals to work towards, you know, like, when I was at other agencies, we add women's groups, and we would be like, hey, like, 43% of our leadership is women, and like, our goal is to get to X percent, you know, just be more aware of what's actually at stake,

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because, you know, maybe you see, you know, everyone I work with, in my day to day as a woman, but I don't see any leadership, but it might just be the vantage point, I have, you know, having some of that education, and also, I think putting those groups out there also enables people to focus on that outside their day to day because I do think at agencies, it gets very, like, we have to get there, you know, everything the client wants, that's first, but there is a value in promoting some of those, like, I guess you'd call them like extracurriculars like, you know, commitments outside of your day to day that can drive, you know, for better growth, and, and just like improvement in that agency, and so having some of those like groups, or committees that dedicate time towards that definitely helps that." – **Code 5, Barriers to Progress**

Q13. <u>Participant 8, Agency C:</u> " I think they do a good job of having a set schedule, when we're going to roll out these kinds of trainings and have these check-ins just to like, make sure that it is a continuous track and it's not getting pushed back all the time. I think that's good that they really set times to have employees take a second, you know, take a break from the work and actually really immerse themselves in these trainings." – **Code 5, Barriers to Progress**

Q13. <u>Participant 6, Agency B:</u> "There isn't much of an in-person social experience these days. You know, the whole 'how are you doing?' It was a lot of getting on a call. You know, 'we need to get this done.' So I definitely felt like, again, I can't speak for other teams, but some of the teams, like the team I was on and they didn't address [events of summer 2020] at all really? You know, it was more like, 'where?' Yeah, so that was kind of surprising. I mean, I think there was, you know, some emails that got sent out saying, 'You need to take time' or that kind of stuff. But I definitely don't feel like on my media

team, as I mentioned, my director didn't really talk about it, or say, 'hey, if people need time…'. Some places where some of us live, there was rioting and, and chaos and things going on, wasn't really addressed much. So definitely think there was room for improvement there, because it wasn't really talked about a lot. Within our team from a leadership standpoint." – **Code 5, Barriers to Progress; Code 4, DEI**

Q13. Participant 9, Agency C: "I think there's nothing worse than, you know, as employee, if you do feel like you can't speak up, or something's bothering you feeling like you have to bottle it up. And I feel like that just like makes the work not enjoyable, if you feel like you're not able to kind of express how you're feeling. So I think having that mutual respect for everyone, and kind of makes the work environment more uplifting and light hearted. I feel like in some corporate settings, it's very 'if you say something, it's going make things get all serious and awkward,' and it can really change the dynamic, but I do feel like with Agency C is working on this." – **Code 5, Barriers to Progress**

Q13. Participant 6, Agency B: " I think for me, it's it's hard to be very genuine or understanding at a really like large level, like our company obviously was pretty vague. So it's hard like I know, they tried they sent out emails and things but I think it really comes from like a smaller group stance so like, like my manager coming to our team and saying, 'Hey, how are people doing? Let's take some time and not talk about work – there's a lot going outside of this,' and taking that time to talk to people more one on one or in smaller groups I think is really helpful because also people are more willing to share, there's a little bit more comfort and also just saying 'hey, I'm here if anyone needs to talk' and acknowledging the situation I think is better than at least from what I've seen Agency B try to do it at a large level. Sending an email obviously isn't as personal but it

kind of allows you to get to know people a little bit more as to like what they're experiencing in what's going on with them." – **Code 5, Barriers to Progress**

Q14. Participant 3, Agency A: "I think, in general, and an agency, you know, things are super fast-paced. And you don't really get a lot of time to really, connect with some of your coworkers. So I do think there's kind of a gap there just especially for younger people coming into the workforce. So everyone's just so focused on getting their work done that they're not really like trying to make friends or be social sometimes." – **Code 1, Social Structures; Code 5, Barriers to Progress**

Q14. Participant 8, Agency C: "Honestly, I think they do a really good job. For example, our Black History Month event was really great. It's hard to beat that one, so we just have to keep like matching that level of event for all the other cultural events. It felt like that one was so superior to the other ones, that the other ones might not have gotten enough attention. I would say just putting equal amount of attention into all the different types of events so that it is really inclusive of everyone." **– Code 4, DEI; Code 5, Barriers to Progress**

Q14. Participant 2, Agency A: "Each week, even, we'll send out emails with news in the agency. And like, I think sometimes I've seen some that really do relate to diversity and include stories in the news that relate to that topic. And so with that, I feel like it kind of becomes a continuous conversation around the topic of DEI." – **Code 5, Barriers to Progress**

Q14. Participant 4, Agency B: "I think something that comes with working in the agency world is, even when it's not heavy stuff like that, like, even when it's just fun company culture events, there's generally not a lot of time. You're already working overtime,

you're already swamped with things to do and when you have free time, you're rushing to meet another deadline or make something better. And I think there's like not a lot of time to do those things during the middle of the day, and nobody really wants to do them after work, either. So I guess there's some fix in there that has to be made, but I don't know that I, you know, have the answer for you." **– Code 5, Barriers to Progress**

Q14. Participant 9, Agency C: "I would say looking more sometimes at the long term, macro-outlook for objectives. For example, taking pause every once in a while to ask yourself 'how is this leveling up?' For bigger objectives or KPIs, like what we're ultimately scoped for or where we're trying to grow the business. Because I think it's really easy, and I blame myself for doing this too, chasing opportunity here, there, everywhere. And then you're saying, 'is this strategic? Is this what we're like trying to grow towards? Or is it just something that is a good media when in are a feather in our cap? Or is it something that's actually strategic?' So I think pressing pause, sometimes it's a little bit of a weakness – but I think that's a very similar issue to many companies and in different programs." – **Code 5, Barriers to Progress**

Q14. Participant 6, Agency B: " I think this fast-paced, time-poor culture can go both ways. Because sometimes it drives to this idea that we're all in this together, like we can get through it kind of mentality and that leads to this 'work hard, play hard' mentality, but I think it's got a little bit of the 'we can get through this together' mentality, but when it comes to virtual it's hard not to think 'well, why am I doing all this where there's no benefit?' And it's hard to like disconnect from work, so I feel like before COVID I would have said like, I think the like go go go attitude kind of brings people together. But I think kind of in this like COVID or post-COVID world, it drives kind of a different experience.

Because I feel like people can get so disconnected. So the go go go it's like, what's the point? And kind of just like deters that drive?" – **Code 5, Barriers to Progress**

APPENDIX D: ORIGINAL PROJECT PROPOSAL

INTRODUCTION

This project aims to address the overwhelming underrepresentation of nonwhite individuals within the advertising industry and to assess the ad agency structures that contribute to diversification of the industry as a whole, as well as the ones that create additional barriers to progress towards this goal. By examining the structural components of different advertising agencies as well as the behaviors and attitudes of diverse actors within these structures, my research will highlight the differences between structures that have engrained diversity into their practices and those that struggle to implement initiatives to expand the demographic makeup of their organizations. Advertising agencies will be referred to as an "ad agency" or "advertising agencies" to avoid confusion between discussing organizations and an individual's autonomy or "agency." Individual agents, then, would be advertising professionals working within advertising agencies, primarily in the account services or creative departments (as opposed to the non-advertising departments like IT). This research project will also focus heavily on the concept of social structures (also referred to as structures), which can be defined as internal norms, assumptions, symbols, and methods of interaction that are present in an organization. These things, among others, enable the social practices of actors that operate within the structure. For this particular research project, the concept of one singular structure can be imagined as a single advertising agency, and individual agents can be thought of as the practitioners who work at this agency.

This research is essential for the advertising industry now more than ever, as some of the largest advertising agencies in the United States (though many of these operate globally) have committed to diversity, inclusivity and equity initiatives, but large-scale change is yet to become readily apparent. For example, a 2020 survey of over 27,000 advertising and marketing professionals showed that the industry struggles with diversity efforts. Ten percent of advertising professionals surveyed identified as Asian, 8% identified as Hispanic or Latino, 6% identified as African American and 2% identified as other – the remaining 74% of the industry identified as white (non-Hispanic) (ANA, 2020). For context, Black and Latino individuals make up 13% and 18%, respectively, of the total population of America. These demographic statistics are representative of the industry as a whole, but only one group – white advertising professionals – increases as you ascend the corporate ladder.

While diversity and inclusivity requires more than a sole focus on race or appearance, race is among the most pressing issues facing the advertising industry – a historically white industry that recognizes its lack of diversity would be well-served by research that highlights how whiteness can impede the progress of diversity and inclusivity initiatives. The advertising industry would also make for an interesting study in terms of diversity of gender, religion or sexual orientation, as diversity in these areas has increased in recent years while improvement in ethnic diversity has stalled (ANA, 2020). For the purpose of maintaining a narrow enough view to produce meaningful and focused results, this project will focus on ethnic diversity efforts alone.

Without proper representation, and without the ability of diverse individuals to have a voice, advertising agencies essentially are hindering their own efforts to reach

target audiences, as there is a significant lack of diverse voices in the decision-making processes that occur at the point of production. Though agents within the advertising agency structure have the ability to make change, they are limited by the social aspects of the structure itself – what is acceptable behavior, what behaviors hold value for the agency and what courses of action the agency is comfortable with. When individuals are socialized into these spaces, their actions are determined in large part by the structure itself.

Structures cannot be changed until 1) the structure itself has been identified and 2) the individuals within the structure are empowered to make change happen. By exploring the experiences of advertising professionals and the organizations in which they work, my research aims to provide a comparison between advertising agencies in order to highlight which elements of these social structures either support or hinder diversity and inclusivity efforts within individual organizations.

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS COMPONENT

A major part of exploring the inner workings of advertising agencies is working inside of one. While I have not secured employment at any particular firm at the moment, I intend to work for a full-service ad agency in Chicago, Kansas City or New York in Fall 2021.

During the fall semester, I hope to be situated in an [associate] account executive or brand strategist role within a full-service advertising agency, working closely with both strategic and creative teams as well as clients – a healthy blend of internal and

external communication that may help color my analysis of these very institutions and the industry they operate within.

I have applied to the following places:

- VMLY&R Kansas City

- FCB Chicago

- Twoxfour Chicago

- Landor New York

- TMA Chicago

If none of the above are available and no other opportunities present themselves, I will retain my current position in the account services department of Influence & Co., a digital marketing agency located in Columbia, MO, assisting teams with content marketing, search engine optimization, analytics and public relations.

ANALYSIS

Topic:

The advertising industry has long been a white-centric institution – in fact, in 2020, just 12% of CMOs or equivalent positions identified as ethnically diverse, a number that grows to 26% when considering senior-level employees (ANA, 2020). In recent years, diversity, inclusivity, and equity initiatives have become more prevalent, raising questions about the efficacy of such programs when social structures developed by white individuals, with an overwhelming population of white professionals, are the ones leading the charge.

In this professional project, I intend to explore the structures and agents within multiple advertising agencies through the lens of structuration theory. I will be conducting semi-structured interviews with advertising professionals to learn more about the organizational structures, barriers, and strategies that are employed when attempting to address the issue of diversity and representation in the advertising industry. In essence, which structures support diversity and inclusivity initiatives, and which ones do not?

Research Questions:

R1: What social structures are conducive to supporting a diverse and inclusive environment, and which are not? Which elements differ between the two?

R2: Do structural barriers exist that hinder the efforts of diversification of the advertising agency? What strategies are employed by advertising agencies to combat this beyond the hiring process?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My research aims to explore the structural components of advertising agencies and the actors operating within them, primarily identifying which structures are conducive to successfully supporting the diversification and representation activities of the individuals within the structure, specifically within the advertising industry. Utilizing Giddens' structuration theory, which posits that individual actors' actions (in this case, the actions of advertising professionals) are limited by the structures in which these actors exist, while simultaneously serving to reinforce and reproduce those very

structures (Giddens, 1984). In layman's terms, an organization impacts the actions of its

employees, the employees serve to reproduce the structure of the organization, and this

does not produce a cycle, it happens simultaneously.

Giddens' main argument lies in the development of three essential principles.

First and foremost, social structures are defined by the individuals within them – on a

basic level, social structures cannot exist without social agents operating within them,

defining the parameters of the structure itself. Following from that, Giddens states that

social structure is reproduced and strengthened by individual human agents who possess

some level of individual autonomy. The third main point of Giddens' structuration theory

is that structure and agency are mutually involved in social practices (Giddens, 1976).

In the field of advertising, this framework can be applied to examine the

relationships between advertising professionals in an agency setting, the environments in

which these professionals operate, and their ability to make decisions and exact change

within this sphere. Essentially, the question surrounds the extent to which advertising

professionals can influence the activity of their organizations and how heavily these

advertising agencies influence the actions of the professionals within them – most

importantly, however, is the exploration of the relationship between these structures, the

actors within them, and diversity, inclusivity, and equity efforts across the industry.

Structuration theory is a sociological concept that relies heavily on the idea of the

"duality of structure," acknowledging the relationship between power, organizational

standards, and meaning-making within organizations (Schauster, 2015). Research

exploring the concepts of structure and individual agency often state that a social

structure determines an individual's actions within that structure. This means that the

socialization of an individual (like a new employee being onboarded) into the social structure of an organization is almost entirely responsible for how that employee behaves (Schauster, 2015).

In exploring the diversification of the advertising industry and the recent attention put on representation within the industry, examining structure and individual agency will likely yield interesting results regarding strategies for diversifying advertising agencies and creating inclusive cultures that, in turn, may improve the quality of the work produced in these settings. The application of Giddens' structuration theory in the field of advertising is uncommon at best, but the application in this case refers more to the organizational aspects of the advertising industry.

Conrad and Haynes expand upon Giddens' theory, noting in their review that structuration theory, as it pertains to agency and action, speaks more to "constraints" on the action of individuals, rather than promoting the determinist view that an individual's actions are solely defined by the social structure that they work within (Conrad and Haynes, 2001). Their review of Giddens' structuration theory goes in a separate direction from most of the other research on the theory, which focuses mostly on structural issues. Conrad and Haynes, however, correctly state that the point of utilizing structuration theory is to explore the connection between structure and agency, and without an understanding that the two are intertwined, analysis will not produce the desired results. Structuration theory requires the researcher to look at the simultaneous relationship of structure and agency, and to make these mutually exclusive would be to render the theory almost useless. Gaps in this research include the lack of knowledge about the balance

between structure and action, and how action within structures can transform the constraints of said structure (Olufuwote, 2003).

BACKGROUND

It's no secret that the advertising industry bears a long and troubled past for most everyone who isn't a white male. Though the rhetoric has changed since the 1960s from blatantly racist imagery and words within advertisements, the industry is still facing a very real problem – those same issues are existing under the surface as structural and systematic problems.

In recent years, some of the world's largest brands have come under fire for racist advertisements. For example, the global skincare brand Nivea has received negative backlash for racist rhetoric in their advertisements twice in the last decade. In 2011, Nivea released advertisements featuring a black male holding an afro attached to a mannequin's head with the tagline "Re-civilize yourself." In 2017, the brand again received widespread backlash following an advertising campaign for a new invisible deodorant product with the copy reading "White is Purity." To almost any audience capable of critically engaging with these advertisements, these two instances ring insensitive at the very least and, by a more reasonable assessment, racist.

A great deal of the research surrounding race and representation in advertising can be described as audience studies, focusing on the advertisements that have been disseminated to public audiences and how those audiences view, respond, and internalize the content of that messaging. Those studies have reviewed advertising blunders from brands like Nivea, Cadbury, who compared supermodel Naomi Campbell to a chocolate

candy bar, and Pepsi, who portrayed its signature carbonated beverage as the solution to racial injustice and police brutality back in 2017.

Perhaps more notably, however, is the prevalence of racist or exclusive language that pervades advertising agencies – it may not be present in the advertisements that are created by a certain agency, but, especially when considering the impact that this kind of rhetoric has on an organization, it contributes to the structure of the agency as a whole. Take, for example, the Richards Group – one of the country's largest independently-owned advertising agencies, which has been embroiled in controversy following racist comments made by founder Stan Richards. The issue, however, is that the comments weren't made in an advertisement – they were made on an internal client call with Motel 6, with Richards stating that the proposed ad was "too Black" and would not be well-received by the motel brand's "significant White supremacist constituents," (Green, 2020). When leaders of advertising agencies are engaging in these sorts of behaviors behind closed doors, questions arise of what enables this sort of behavior to go unaddressed prior to the point of no return, and whether the traditional advertising agency model, as we know it today, is a viable structure for supporting the diversity and inclusivity initiatives that are being introduced by these organizations in a modern environment.

Research that addresses the activities that take place within an advertising agency before advertisements are released, however, is less common. Bendick and Egan address hiring practices and representation within the industry, but focus their efforts primarily on studying the lack of post-hiring opportunities and under-utilization of diverse individuals (Bendick and Egan, 2009). The gap remains in identifying specific structural elements

that hinder the abilities of diverse individuals to operate within these environments, instead proposing strategies for improving post-hiring employment outcomes.

The question is not "why do brands create racist advertisements?" Instead, it is "what is happening inside of advertising agencies that allows this to continue?" In order to change structures, it is first essential to identify the structures that are in place. Given this, the exploration of structure and agency within the advertising industry may help uncover what structural elements are influencing the agents' activities and thus, what elements are conducive to supporting diverse and inclusive cultures and which ones are not.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This literature review will discuss the importance of and barriers to ethnic diversity and representation followed by a discussion of studies that highlight the shortcomings of the point of production for ad messages, the advertising agency itself. I will also highlight the findings of other researchers who have explored diversity in the advertising industry, linking the structures and agents of the industry to one another. The aforementioned research provides a solid foundation for understanding the current literature on the topic of race and representation in advertising and PR agencies and will inform my research on the strategies employed by advertising professionals when crafting messaging for target audiences that are not necessarily represented – or represented well – within the agency.

This analysis of the literature surrounding race and representation and how these manifest themselves inside advertising agencies will cover four main topics: the

diversification of the advertising industry, discussions of individual agents within the advertising agency structure, the decision making processes at the point of production, as well as the possibility of action and transformation within organizational structures. Painting a picture of the structures within the advertising industry isn't exactly the most straightforward task – for all intents and purposes, the "structures" refer to advertising agencies, though for individuals unfamiliar with the advertising industry it may be more effective to think in terms of the "big four" of advertising: WPP, Omnicom, Publicis Groupe, and Interpublic Group of Companies, the parent companies of hundreds of smaller advertising businesses that range from full-service advertising and public relations agencies to boutique creative shops to data companies. While each individual agency operates differently, it is clear that the industry as a whole is dominated by the aforementioned parent companies.

Dissecting the argument of structure and agency, as it pertains to Giddens' structuration theory, will allow for the exploration of both structure and agency on separate terms, with the overarching theoretical framework operating as a model for combining the two in a mutually-dependent relationship, i.e., the social structure impacts agency, and agency (re)produces the social structure.

Diversification of the Advertising Industry

Diversity efforts across the industry are less than stellar, as some of the largest advertising agencies in the world are among the worst offenders when one takes a look at the demographic statistics of their employee base. Furthermore, as you climb the corporate ladder, the presence of nonwhite and nonmale employees almost completely disappears.

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Some parent companies like Interpublic Group (IPG), Omnicom, and WPP have recently pledged to begin publishing diversity figures and statistics for their organizations, largely due to a combination of internal and external pressure to diversify their talent pools. The numbers at IPG, for one, leave nothing but room for improvement. In 2020, only 2.6% of senior leaders at IPG identified as black or African American, while 5.5% identified as Asian and 5.2% as Hispanic. Prior to 2020, the organization has only released diversity numbers as the percentage of the organization that identified as multicultural, which stands at 22% – leaving 78% of the company counted as white or choosing not to identify (Patel, 2020). For comparison, Dentsu Aegis U.S., another holding company for a number of advertising agencies, found that only 1.8% of senior leadership within the organization identify as black or African American, 7% identify as Asian, and 3.6% identify as Hispanic (Patel, 2020). Those numbers improve slightly if you look at organizations as a whole, but diversity efforts need to reach beyond entry-level positions if large-scale change is the goal.

Recent changes in leadership among global agency giants are likely to be a catalyst for change within the industry, as executives from WPP, IPG, and Dentsu, among others, have publicly acknowledged the dire need for more action in terms of diversity, inclusivity, and equity work within the advertising industry and agency structures themselves.

When discussing the diversification of the advertising industry as well as the hegemonic structures that are at work within it, it is necessary to address the concept of "whiteness" as it pertains to being the backdrop or "status quo" within the industry. Conversations about diversity often are cast through the lens of bringing nonwhite

individuals into an organization in order to establish a more societally-acceptable culture within an organization, bringing together different experiences and perspectives in order to expand the boundaries of the organization. What these conversations largely exclude, however, is any discourse surrounding the historical "norm" of whiteness within advertising agencies. According to whiteness theory, which was established as an offshoot of critical race theory, whiteness is essentially the canvas of society against which everything else is evaluated – there is little said about the canvas itself, as the majority tend to focus on what is different or the "other," (Burton, 2009). As whiteness is socially and historically engrained within society, structures of whiteness – such as those that exist in the advertising industry – are essentially white spaces that remain overlooked and therefore, unchallenged.

In taking a deeper look at what this means for the advertising industry, it is important to note that whiteness theory isn't an indictment of white individuals or their identities, but it is an indictment of the social structures and organizational norms that continue to produce obstacles for nonwhite individuals to advance within the field (Nichols, 2010). Many advertising agencies are aware of the issues but, in white-dominated spaces, the path to addressing diversity, inclusivity, and equity is hardly a straightforward one, as employees find it difficult to enter an agency environment and enact large-scale change due to structural barriers. The ability to act of their own free will and subsequent inability to make rapid progress speaks to the complex nature of the duality of structure and agency (Giddens, 1976).

Discussions of Agency Within the Advertising Agency Structure

One core tenet of structuration theory states that individual agents act of their own free will, but their actions are bound by the structure in which they operate. While they have the ability to act differently, should they so please, organizational norms and social pressure often forces conformity, thus reproducing the social structure that the agent is operating within (Giddens, 1976). In regards to the advertising industry and advertising and PR agencies themselves, structure both defines and is defined by the social actions of the advertising professionals operating within these spaces.

Studies have shown that black individuals, particularly in entry-level positions, struggle to access the same amount of post-hiring opportunities as their white counterparts in the advertising industry (Boulton, 2016). One such study details the experiences of 10 black interns participating in the Multicultural Advertising Intern Program, or MAIP, who had been placed at an agency in New York. Looking at their experiences through the lens of stereotype threat and code-switching, Boulton draws conclusions about the additional barriers faced by diverse individuals operating within an overwhelmingly white structure.

The study found that these interns often resorted to code-switching, similar to the audience-pleasing approach of self-presentation theory, which is the act of matching one's outward appearance, speech or mannerisms, and performance to that of the audience rather than to one's own ideal self (Baumeister and Hutton, 1987). Black advertising professionals operating within predominantly white advertising agencies, then, are bearing the burden of additional pressures as they work to avoid engaging in action or behaviors that have the potential to solidify stereotypes about their race within the minds of their coworkers or present their race or identity in an undesirable way. In

some instances, black advertising professionals may be called upon to provide insights about their race or culture as it pertains to underrepresented communities, or offer up their own personal experiences as black individuals because, to their white counterparts, they may be seen as representative of all black people. The interns in the study also shared their concerns about associating with mentors of their own race – a sentiment not shared by white interns – as they did not want to be perceived as "preferring their own race" (Boulton, 2016). The consequences of this psychological burden isn't an immediate one, but rather creates long-term consequences in the form of fewer advancement opportunities and smaller networks through which to acquire new opportunities. Even as more entry-level positions have become more diverse, the correlation between corporate status and diversity continues to be a negative one (Boulton, 2013).

Effectively, in the white-dominated spaces that comprise the vast majority of larger advertising agencies, and the American ad industry as a whole, nonwhite advertising professionals are forced to navigate racial stereotypes at every turn, which only serves to further strengthen the structures that they are operating within despite the fact that those structures do not have their best interests at heart.

Diversifying the Decision-Making and Production Processes

Diversity goes far beyond skin color alone – it encompasses age, gender, religion, geographical location, and socioeconomic status. Seeking out diverse talent can be time-consuming for organizations, but the alternative is to continue recruiting from the same white-dominated talent pools over and over again, which has implications for the production process itself. The issue faced by the advertising industry, however, is that the structures that are in place right now do not necessarily lend themselves to the adoption

of new practices that serve to diversify the point of production, the advertising agency itself (Twohill, 2018).

"In order to tell relatable stories, you also need a deep understanding and empathy for the people that you want to reach. Stereotypes are the fastest way to show your audience that you don't understand them… And it goes beyond casting. We need to consider every element of creative. Authentic characters matter, but so does music, family dynamics, food, wardrobe and how products are portrayed."

Bonilla-Silva posits that contemporary racism exists less as the Jim Crow-era discrimination faced by black individuals and that the "end of racism" in the 1970s allowed for a surface-level understanding of race and racism, without addressing the underlying, structural inequalities that are still prevalent today in America, particularly corporate America (Bonilla-Silva, 2015).

When discussing the decision-making processes that happen within group or team-oriented spaces, it is important to highlight some of the theories that help uncover the pitfalls and shortcomings of organizations. One theory that has been proposed for analyzing organizational missteps in the decision-making process is the theory of groupthink, first coined by Irving Janis, which discusses the prevalence of group-oriented thinking when individuals' logical and reason-based approaches to problems are sabotaged by concurrence-seeking (Janis, 1978). When it comes to the advertising industry, where client deadlines become more pressing with each passing day, the pressure to create something that satisfies the client and achieves the goals of the brand isn't to be taken lightly. Groupthink, then, is a major hinderance to the production

process *especially* when the group in question doesn't represent the target audience of the client.

In essence, much of the research surrounding diversification of the advertising industry, or any industry, for that matter, merely concludes that the hiring process is what needs work. In reality, however, it is the post-hiring outcomes and advancement opportunities inside the advertising agency that possess the true power for structural change. Despite putting all of an agency's efforts into more diverse hiring, it can take years for the agency to see any sort of fundamental change because of the social structures that are in place. A more productive approach, then, would be to invest in diversification of all levels of the agency and create a culture of inclusive decision making, especially within the production process (Bendick and Egan, 2009). Moreover, most large advertising agencies pull from their intern pools to fill entry-level positions within the agency – the industry isn't well-known for a wealth of low-level opportunities for entrance into the field. Oftentimes, internships are unpaid, meaning that these opportunities are only available to individuals with the means to support themselves for months on end with little or no income, all while working in a fast-paced environment where working over 40 hours each week is all but expected (Boulton, 2015).

In fact, decisions made by inclusive teams produced 60% better results than non-diverse teams, and overall, make smarter business decisions nearly 90% of the time (Larson, 2017).

Dissecting Action Within Organizational Structures

Organizations are defined by their values and mission, in a large sense, but a much more pragmatic approach to evaluating organizations is by their actions – the

business model they adopt, the personality of the organization, the products they produce and the actions of their employees.

The dimensions of cultural context, as explored by Schein, highlight the need for establishing the structural models of organizations in order to fully explore the internal workings (Schein, 1985).

"Culture assessment can either be a vast bottomless pit or a focused exercise around specific issues based on the problem we are trying to solve. We sometimes need to assess macro cultures of nations or occupations and to identify cultural DNA because we have specific problems to solve or changes to make."

In further exploring organizations and structures, especially with regard to the culture that manifests itself as a result of these structures, it is essential to include the macro cultures that these organizations–in this case, advertising agencies–are nested in and the more traditional notions that the powerful institutions within the industry still embody and that younger, newer organizations likely are still representative of (Schein, 1985).

Additionally, within organizations, action is largely defined by the social elements that are in place. In most cases, there is a level of socialization that occurs when individuals become employed, as they are expected to adhere to the norms and regulations of the organization for which they work. This socialization process, a sort of indoctrination into the processes and procedures of the agency, can hinder the ability of individuals to act entirely of their own free will. This refers back to the concept of "constraints" mentioned by Olufuwote, rather than an entirely deterministic view. Social roles and identities are not one and the same, according to identity theory. Identities are

defined as internalized role expectations, while social roles are expectations that are tethered to positions within organizations and networks (Schauster, 2017). In the context of structure and agency, then, exploring the identities of advertising professionals operating within advertising agencies is paramount to establishing a robust analysis of the structure's influence on advertising professionals' individual autonomy and agency.

In addition to defining identity and social roles, it is also important to discuss the concept of categorization, or the individual agent's role in assigning themselves to relevant categories, which may or may not come as a result of the structure's categorization of that individual, i.e., holding a certain position or title within the agency (Hogg, 1995). Structure plays a large role in defining where individuals lie organizationally, but it is the agent themselves that relegates their identity to a certain role or position within the social structure of the advertising agency. Thus that individual agent has the ability to either contribute to the reproduction of the structure that is in place or the transformation of that structure.

Due to the complex nature of the duality between structure and agency, this review of literature has attempted to analyze the established literature around the topic at hand, linking Giddens' structuration theory to theories and studies that have been conducted within the advertising industry in order to produce some idea of where gaps remain in the research.

The previously published literature surrounding race within the advertising industry focuses mainly on audience studies and how target audiences receive the messaging included in brand advertisements. The relatively small number of published pieces delving into the inner workings of advertising agencies to better understand the

views of race and representation tend to revolve around the experiences of nonwhite advertising professionals operating within primarily white spaces. My research aims to expand upon the existing literature by examining advertising and PR agencies as social structures and, through the lens of Giddens' structuration theory, developing a more robust documentation of individual agency as it pertains to the diversification of advertising and PR agencies and the targeting of underrepresented communities.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research project is to determine which advertising agency structures are conducive to supporting cultures of diversity and inclusivity, particularly through the eyes of nonwhite advertising professionals within these structures.

Semi-structured interviews best fit the research question at hand because, while there is a structural component to the research, the individual agents hold the knowledge and understanding of not only their own organizations, but their own behaviors and attitudes within those agency structures. In-depth interviews will have a general question outline, but in large part will center around the experiences of the interviewees, allowing them to provide factual information about the structures in place as well as their role in reproducing or challenging those structures. By utilizing a participant feedback approach to interviewing, research subjects will be able to convey the information and ensure that it is received and published as intended. Roulston discusses the role of the interviewer as a) a neutral party working to gather objective data about the attitudes and experiences of the interviewee and b) a co-constructor of knowledge working to deepen relationships with interviewees in order to initiate some notion of social transformation (Roulston, 2010).

Interviews are also a rather flexible form of data collection, as in-person meetings are plausible as well as over the phone or on Zoom (or a comparable web-conferencing platform).

I intend to gather subjects for these semi-structured interviews through my personal network and LinkedIn, utilizing a snowball sampling method and a screener survey to ensure that the interviewees will be able to provide valuable insights about structure and agency. Ideally, interviewing 12 individuals across multiple organizations would provide the ability to compare and contrast structure and agency on a wider scale – for example, this could be broken into three individuals at four organizations or four individuals at three organizations.

Ideally, these candidates would be a mix of entry-level, mid-level, and executive-level employees from a small collection of traditional, full-service advertising agencies. This will allow for the exploration of each organization on a number of levels, likely creating a more robust image of the structural boundaries present at each level as well as the ability to enact change within their agency. As the project is set to explore ethnic diversity in the advertising industry, the goal is to recruit interviewees who are ethnically diverse or are working on diversity, inclusivity and equity initiatives in advertising agencies.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic at hand and the overwhelming lack of diverse voices in the advertising industry, interview participants will be anonymous, so as not to jeopardize their status or reputation within their organizations due to their responses being included, sometimes verbatim, in the resulting analytical paper. In addition, the condition of anonymity may increase trust between the interviewee and

interviewer, allowing for more robust data collection during the course of the research project.

In addition to the use of interviews, I will also collect and analyze physical data about the structures of advertising agencies, such as organization charts and other materials, which will allow for some triangulation of the data and increase the validity of my findings.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did you become a part of the advertising industry? What things led you down this particular career path?

2. If you had to describe your identity, how would you do it? What sorts of characteristics are important to your personal identity? Your professional one?

3. When you think of your organization, what are the first things that come to mind? What characteristics do you think define your company/ad agency?

4. Help me get a better idea of the structure of your company. Who do you work most closely with? Who do you report to? Who reports to you?

5. Is your organization supporting any diversity, inclusivity, and equity programs or initiatives? What do those look like in terms of structure, participation and employee attitudes towards the programs?

6. How effective do you think diversity and inclusivity programs are? If your agency doesn't have any, why do you think that is?

7. In participating in your organization, do you feel that you have to change parts of your identity to be successful in that environment? Why or why not? Do you see others change their own identities in certain situations?

8. Is your organization making enough of an effort to combat racism and a lack of inclusivity within itself? Do you have any views on the advertising industry as a whole working towards this goal?

9. Do you think the advertising agency structure you work within is conducive to fostering a culture of diversity and inclusivity? What do you think makes that possible/keeps it from being possible?

10. Is it realistic to change the structures that are in place, or do you think that new structural models for advertising agencies need to be built with diversity as a cornerstone of the agency rather than an initiative?

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