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# Creativity and the future of advertising

*Practitioner views from Hong Kong*

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# Abstract

*This study examines the future of advertising through depth interviews with eighteen senior advertising and media professionals in Hong Kong. It questions the definition, role and value of creativity in the context of digitization, exposing tensions – as well as a greater need for collaboration - between various advertising industry players.*



# Introduction

- Hong Kong advertising industry started in 1930s
- By 1980s and early 90s, Hong Kong was known as Asia's creative hub (Chan 2017)
- Following Hong Kong's 1997 handover to China, global ad agencies and clients began to relocate to the mainland. Hong Kong ad industry's global role started to diminish (Kyme & Cheng, 2014; Wong, 2017)
- Digitization and the Internet have had major impact on the ad industry, in Hong Kong as everywhere (Chan, 2018; Kyme & Cheng, 2014; Leung & Hui, 2014)

# Method

- Depth interviews with 18 senior media and advertising practitioners in Hong Kong
- Conducted between October 2019 and May 2020
- Most respondents have 10+ years experience in the industry
- Interviews were recorded and transcribed
- Coding and analysis led to development of conceptual framework and identification of several key themes

(Canhoto, Clark, & Fennemore, 2013)

# Key Findings

1. What's happened to the 'Big Idea'
2. Who owns creativity anyway?
3. Creativity redefined: same but different
4. Creativity and the consumer journey
5. The future of advertising



# 1. What's happened to the 'Big Idea'?

- The 'Big Idea': popularized by George Lois in 1990s (Lois 1991)
- Considered the starting point for any genuinely creative ad campaign; 'holy grail' for creatives
- Fragmentation of media
- Fast turnaround times & need to react quickly
- Now: taking time to develop a 'big idea' is a luxury few can afford
- Consistency of brand message still important, but core concept needs to be adapted to suit multiple media channels

*One concept for all media is outdated. We have to... develop different, multiple creative for all [media] (M7)*

*So to me, this is also creativity, right? It's just not 'big idea' creativity... Now we're talking about creating like ten, a hundred, different pieces of content because of the fragmentation of media (A5)*

*The conventional way of doing creative work is that you come up with a 'big idea'.... But right now, the world is different. Things can be very ad hoc because we have to react in real time (A6)*



## 2. Who owns creativity, anyway?

- Democratization of creativity
- Templates: publishers
- Changing roles of art director/copywriter
- Tensions between media and creative teams
- More than concepts: creativity impacts all facets of business





*Everybody owns creativity these days. If you just rely on creatives to create an idea without [other input] to fully support and help them... I don't think it will create a huge impact (A5)*

*I think we're seeing an explosion of the democratization of creativity in terms of ideation... Creativity is no longer the domain of the professional creative person (A4)*

*You can buy all these templates with a lot of the different platforms... But this is killing it because you don't appreciate the craftsmanship of copy. You don't even care about the layout. It looks so ugly (A6)*

# 3. Creativity redefined: Same but different

- Originality + relevance
- Necessary to attract and engage audiences
- Generally appreciated by clients
- Consumers tend not to notice its presence, but they *do* notice its absence

*Maybe the key element of digitization is relevance, because you can receive a message that's relevant to you... Relevant messages to specific people... Relevance is the most important factor (M6)*

*Creativity needs to be relevant to time and context (A1)*

*People don't dislike ads. They dislike like bad ads. When people are entertained, when people are touched, when people are rewarded for their time, then who doesn't like that? (A7)*

# 4. Creativity and the consumer journey

- Short attention spans
- Overwhelmed by information
- The consumer funnel: multiple touchpoints
- Data-driven insights help advertisers reach audiences more effectively
- Privacy paradox: trade-offs



*Creativity is really designed to attract attention, to be successful. We're living in a very, very crowded world of messages. Our lives are being inundated with too many messages... And so creativity is an essential tool to win attention in the highly distracted world (A4)*

*It's all about placing the right kind of content along the buyer's funnel, when the consumer is searching for a solution to something (M4)*

*Advertising... has to push the consumer along the curve of the sales journey (M5)*



# 5. The future of advertising in Hong Kong

- The future of the 4As
- Changing organizational structures: agile, flexible, responsive, specialized
- More collaboration and partnerships required
- Need to reunite creative and media
- More local, less globalized
- Look to China and the rest of the world



*There is a view that the importance of the 4As is diminishing...  
Because the clout of the 4As is no longer relevant (M4)*

*I see a lot of fragmentation... a lot of smaller agencies...  
there's a lot of specialization (A2)*

*[Media and creative] have to work together hand in hand...  
rather than thinking of each other as competitors (A7)*

*There is still a gap for Hong Kong agencies. They can be the  
bridge between Western clients going into China, or Chinese  
clients going abroad (A5)*

# Discussion and implications

1. Implications for industry
2. Implications for educators
3. Implications for academia



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