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Creativity in PR consultancies: Perception and management

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ABSTRACT

Business in general, and advertising in particular, recognise creativity as a crucial component of success and competitive advantage, but it has received little research attention in Public Relations (PR). This study seeks to address that neglect in relation to the understanding of how creativity is perceived and managed in PR consultancies. It involves a total of 23 interviews that included international PR creative directors as well as senior managers of PR consultancies operating in Spain. The initial findings suggest that creativity is considered a skill required by PR professionals, is seen as something valuable for clients, and is acknowledged in PR industry awards. Nevertheless, the article argues that some unhelpful myths and prejudices still exist around the area of creativity and that creative processes common elsewhere are not widely used in PR consultancies. It concludes by identifying elements that could encourage creativity within the sector.

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1. Introduction

Over the last 30 years, creativity has been considered a competitive advantage and a crucial element in business (Florida, 2012; Golen, 1983; Mumford, 2000), as well as a central component in the advertising sector (El-Murad & West, 2004). Even so, there has been very little scientific investigation focused on creativity in PR although authors in the PR literature cite it as part of the professional competence of a PR practitioner (see Gregory, 2008; Wilcox & Cameron, 2007). The aim of this study is to contribute to the understanding of how creativity is perceived and managed in PR consultancies, to discover the creative processes and techniques that do operate there, and to examine the role of the creative director. It concludes with proposals for further encouraging creativity within the sector.

2. Research approaches to creativity

Defining the concept of creativity is complex (Runco, 2007). Creativity simultaneously refers to a cognitive process and the result of this process (the product or creative idea), to an attribute of the individual, and also to an environment (Rhodes, 1961). Psychology has been one of the disciplines which has studied creativity in more depth with theories generated as early as the 19th century in the London School of Differential Psychology (1869) and the Experimental School of Leipzig (1879). In the 20th century Guilford, 1950 is commonly named as the catalyst in generating scientific interest in the matter with his definitions of two types of thinking: *convergent thinking* (logical, rational, vertical) and *divergent thinking* (original, free-flowing and flexible). Subsequent notable scientific theories on creativity include the Associative Creativity Theory

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(Mednick, 1962), The Conceptual Spaces Theory (Boden, 1996), The Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 2004), The Investment Theory of Creativity (Sternberg, 2006) and Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009).

The concept of creativity has evolved throughout history (see Tatarkiewicz, 2002). Taylor (1959), for example, considered the process of creativity as consisting of a system that entails shaping or designing a stimulating environment in which problems could be transformed into productive solutions through facilitation. In contrast, Landau (1987) claimed that creativity resided in the capacity to discover connections – between previously unrelated experiences – which can, in turn, transform into new mental schemes generating ideas or novel products. The creative process has similarly been the subject of studies, with Wallas (1926) being one of the first to define its stages (*preparation, incubation, illumination and verification*). Thereafter, authors as Osborn (1953) and Koestler (1964) expanded and deepened that line of study.

Creativity is more important now than ever before, because is a useful and effective response to evolutionary changes (Runco, 2007). Advertising creativity agencies that win awards, attract large clients and reinforce the creative capacity of the agency (Verbeke, Hans, le Blanc, & van Ruiten, 2008). In addition, creative messages increase ad recall (Lehnert, Till, & Carlson, 2013), enhance purchase intention in some situations (Heiser, Sierra, & Torres, 2008), lead to product evaluation if consumers are sufficiently motivated (Dahlén, Rosengren, & Torn, 2008), and impact brand attitudes in some situations (Sheinin, Varki, & Ashley, 2011). Thus PR consultancies should consider it as valuable for their clients.

Compared to advertising, creativity research in PR is much smaller in size and scope and has a shorter history. Although Lesly (1966) claimed that the proliferation of new mediums of communication demanded more creativity in public relations in order to make an impact on a more and more fragmented audience, the literature on the subject remains sparse. Notable exceptions are Moriarty's (1997) chapter, and the two editions of Green's (1999, 2010) book on *Creativity in Public Relations*. Equally sparse are empirical studies on the management of creativity in the PR industry. Nevertheless, the first edition of *Creativity in PR: A Global Study* (The Holmes Report, 2012) provides relevant international data. Based on a survey of 650 professionals from more than 35 countries, this study finds that 50% of the PR organisations have no clear creative objectives and 42% do not reward creativity at all. The second edition of the same study reveals that clients want better creative quality, with only 18% satisfied with their current agency's creativity (The Holmes Report, 2013). Previously, two studies carried out in the UK showed similar results. In the first, Daymon's (2000) qualitative research found that the level of creativity in UK public relations consultancies depended on the encouragement given by management to aspects such as unconventionality, autonomy, and risk among their staff members. The second study, by Parker, Wayne, and Kent Ltd. (2005) carried out a survey amongst 104 professionals belonging to The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR). It discovered that 96% considered creativity plays an extremely important role in the public relations process, but less than 44% were familiar with models of creative thinking. In Spain, some studies not focused on creativity but on the evolution of the PR industry show that creativity is demanded by clients more and more each day (ADECEC, 2008; Grupo Consultores, 2009, 2011, 2013).

3. Methodology

A qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews was used with the objective “to capture tacit knowledge which is gained from the reflexive accounts of relevant interviewees” (Partington, 2000). Due to the absence of formal creative directors in the Spanish market, the research focused on international Creative Directors [CD] from global PR firms, as well as Senior Managers [SM] of PR consultancies operating in Spain. All of them were professionals whose opinions have real implications for how creativity is managed in the PR industry. Two main research questions were developed:

(RQ1) How is creativity perceived in PR consultancies?

(RQ1a) Is creativity differently perceived among PR senior managers and creative directors?

(RQ1b) Is creativity valued as a professional PR skill?

(RQ2) How is creativity managed in PR consultancies?

(RQ2a) Which creative processes and techniques are used?

(RQ2b) Do differences appear between the largest agencies and the most awarded ones?

(RQ2c) What are the elements that limit and encourage creativity?

(RQ3d) What is the role of creative director in PR?

3.1. Sample selection

The investigation was carried out in three complementary phases, each one comprised of non-probabilistic directed samples:

- The first phase sample (Phase A) was composed of international creative directors from world leading PR agencies from the Global Ranking by The Holmes Report (2010). Of the top ten public relations companies, four formed part of this sample (see Appendix 1).
- The second phase sample (Phase B) was composed of senior managers from large PR consultancies operating in Spain with offices in at least Madrid and Barcelona. Due to the lack of a unified database, the initial list was derived from the

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