



Digital Advertising Creative Processes and Innovation in UK SME Advertising Agencies: An Empirical Investigation of Viral Advertising

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Abstract:

Innovation is arguably the largest theme in advertising literature. However, the emergence of E-Marketing has led to an unprecedented level of change in the industry. In an attempt to explore innovation practices and digital advertising creative processes by UK advertising agency, this paper empirically, investigates the different innovations introduced into the advertising creative design and development process by UK advertising agency managers. The research focuses specifically on the creation of viral adverts. While there have been several studies of the broader advertising industry and change within agencies, there has been less attention to campaign creation activities and exactly “how” and “where” in the design process creative managers have innovated to support virality. The study adopts an interpretivism paradigm employing a qualitative approach. Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews with UK SME advertising agencies’ creative managers to analyse their visions and reactions to viral advertising, as they conceived, considered and reflected on advertising campaigns. The findings indicated that although there are major changes within advertising creative design and development process, some aspects are still the same (e.g., core brand values directing the campaign, the iterative process of research, and discussions). The planning process is fundamentally unchanged, indicating that prior work has over-stated the case for radical change. The findings confirmed not only viral advertising’s unique ability to live in both the “old” and “new” media world but it also shows where innovations in the advertising campaign process have been introduced. The findings challenge some of the prior work, which has been over-enthusiastic about the disruptive nature of the digital environment. This research paper enhances empirical research studies in the field which had been conducted to examine viral advertising campaign design.

Key words: Viral advertising, advertising creative process, creative innovation, UK advertising agencies, digital advertising, SME.

1. Introduction:

This paper aims to explore the innovations introduced into the advertising creative design and development process by UK advertising agency managers in response to digital technology, specifically in relation to the creation of viral adverts. The study locates the specific processes, which are new but also to challenge some myths.

It is acknowledged that not since the invention of the printing press has communication experienced as much change as with digital technologies (Busca & Bertrandias, 2020; Cho, Huh and Faber, 2014; and Alhabash et. al. 2013). In advertising, this is both a threat and an opportunity (Raghubansie, 2013). It has blurred the edges of what advertising means today (Huang et al, 2013; Makrides, Vrontis, & Christofi, 2020; Takemura, 2012). The most intense creative responses are observed particularly among SME agencies, which constitute the largest grouping of interactive specialist, new entrants.

Advertising in general was on the decline; however, new advertising techniques, particularly digital forms have had remarkable growth. Over the period of about a decade, digital expenditure grew from about £200 million (2003), exceeding £15 billion, triple the spend in 2010 (Advertising Association, 2020; Raghubansie, et al 2014). An example of note shows that among advanced economies, the UK became the first major economy where ad expenditure on the web was greater than that on TV (BBC, 2009). The UK digital ad budgets grew at about 12% in 2014, continuing up to 2019 (IAB, 2019). Although, the FMCG category usually dominates advertising, this has not been the case with internet advertising until 2013, when it finally caught up providing clear evidence that digital advertising was becoming normalised.

This is especially illustrated in the phenomenon of viral video ads, which have seen sustained interest and consumer adoption (Raghubansie et al., 2013). Digital video advertising grew by nearly 46% in 2013, likewise over the next 5 years (IAB, 2019). What is discussed here as viral marketing (VM) is the diffusion of marketing communications messages from consumer to consumer (Huang et al, 2019; Yang, et al, 2010; and

Toubia, Stephen and Freud, 2011). Most of these messages tend to be videos; in this regard, VM is almost identical to TV (often it is the same ad) (Southgate, Westoby and Page, 2010). Hence, the focus here is on viral advertising, which is a subset of VM (discussed below). However, it is the digital technology, which allows the spreading of these adverts like a virus - exponential peer-peer sharing which can result in dramatic message spread and awareness within very short time frames on a scale not possible in offline marketing communications (Makrides, Vrontis, & Christofi, 2020; Raghubansie, 2014).

Digital technologies have necessitated a reflection on what advertising does and how agencies produce them (Harms, Bijmolt & Hoekstra, 2017). The DDB model - writer / creative director is already shifting, towards a wider coalition of skills, based on groups. What other changes are taking place? How will creative roles and processes develop? Given that most of these agencies are small or medium-sized, what is the nature of their creative decisions? What novel elements have they introduced in their design processes, the sources of ideas, and the range of skills involved? How does the design of viral ads utilise the technological platform? Are there elements, which have not changed from the typical way of generating advertising? All these questions are not only considered in this paper, but it also contributes to the extant research on new creative processes in digital advertising within SMEs in the UK.

The paper firstly contextualises innovation in the creative design process and concepts, then a brief overview of the way advertising agencies operates to ground the paper. There is then a discussion of viral advertising and how this is different from conventional forms of advertising, followed by an analysis of the extant models of advertising and how, where innovations might be occurring, ending with the research questions to be investigated. The methods section briefly justifies the choice of qualitative interviews and the sampling of digital directors and/or heads of digital within agencies. Then the final part of the manuscript discusses the results, conclusion, recommendations, limitations and propositions for further enquiries.

2. Literature Review:

Innovation is arguably the largest theme in the advertising literature (de Waal Malefyt and Morais, 2010; Bakhshi and McVittie, 2009; and Den Hertog, 2000). However, the emergence of electronic marketing has led to an unprecedented stage of change within the industry (Hamad, et. al., 2018; Zahiri, et. al., 2018; El-Gohary and El-Gohary, 2016; Chu, 2011; Hamad, et al. 2015; El-Gohary and Eid, 2012; Raghudasie, et al., 2014; El-Gohary, 2012; Raghudasie et al., 2013; Eid and El-Gohary, 2014; Makrides, et. Al., 2020; El-Gohary, 2010; etc.). While there have been a number of studies of the broader industry (Duhan and Sandvick, 2009) and change within organisations (Magnusson, Kristensson and Hipp, 2010), there has been generalised attention to the creative campaign creation activities (Brown, Badhury and Pope, 2010; Chu, 2011; and Eckler and Bolls, 2011). A particular gap is the lack of attention to the people who design the campaigns themselves within the agencies. Viral advertising (VA) offers a channel connecting the “old” with “new” worlds. Although it retains the features of both TV as well as the internet, it received very little attention (Raghudasie et al., 2013). Exactly how and where in the design process creative managers have innovated to support virality has not been studied. Such examination is important because the practice of viral advertising has challenged the established models.

Creative teams within advertising agencies are still coming to terms with digital; they are still revisiting and seeking new theories (Makrides, Vrontis, & Christofi, 2020; Green, Miles and Rutter, 2007). New technological platforms are emerging continuously and creatives are struggling to fully react, or to establish approaches, which can support the management of creative campaigns (Bharadwaj et al, 2013). The mobile category consisting of handheld devices has expanded the consumption opportunities spawning new business models (Fard & Marvi, 2019; Yang, Zhou and Liu, 2012; Hackley and Tiwsakul, 2011). Therefore, novelty to the used procedures, newness of the product(s), and practice represent the heart of this revision, in the sense of sustaining innovations developed by Christensen, (2003).

For the last half of the 20th century the dominant creative structure which advertising agencies have employed has been the Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB) art director and writer combination, which at its inception, (the 1960s) was a major departure from how advertising was developed previously (Levenson and Bernback, 1987). It became the new norm (Mallia and Windels, 2011). What has happened with the emergence of digital advertising in the last ten years has implications for the creative process on a similar scale as it was 50 years ago, i.e. disruptive innovation (Christensen, 1997).

2.1 The Advertising Agency(ies), How can we Understand it?

To evaluate the effects of such inventions and novelties, it is essential to comprehend advertising agencies construction. An advertising agency usually has six departments, which are:

- Account services,
- Planning,
- Media buying,
- Finance,
- Production and
- Creative division (Broschak and Niehans, 2006).

Normally, print and TV ads and additional promotion communications are developed within the creative division. The advertising agency sections and division consist of novelists, professional writers, graphics artists to plan and build visuals, designers (often including a web designer), art directors, all of whom report to the creative director (Broschak and Niehans, 2006; Pratt, 2006). These people are referred to as creatives, recruited to use their conceptual and artistic capabilities in the production of advertising (Davies and Prince, 2010). The creative function is usually the centre of the advertising agency (McLeod, O'Donohoe and Townley, 2009).

For the purpose of conducting this study, the authors focus on SME UK advertising agencies creative directors and managers of digital divisions who play a leadership role within the creative function. These creative managers pitch for new business as well as acting as sources of creativity (Mallia and Windels, 2011). They are accountable for creative / digital plans, overseeing advertising development and for signing off concepts and final creative outputs (Sheehan and Morrison, 2009; McLeod, O'Donohoe and Townley, 2011). As a caveat, among small agencies, such divisions may be absent with staff more flexible in their roles, subcontract or utilise networks (Berthon, Ewing and Napoli, 2008). Increasingly there are “boutique” agencies providing tailored solutions for niche requests, including for viral advertising (Grabher, 2002; Horsky, 2006).

2.2 Viral Advertising:

To understand the term viral advertising, it is first essential to clarify the meaning of the word digital, as it is this technological innovation, which has precipitated much change. It is oft overused but strictly denotes a different way (from analog) to package information (Yang et al 2010). This type of storage can hold and electronically transmit much larger volumes of data at faster speeds (Truong, McColl and Kitchen, 2010). As such, the improvement of technology was such that it transformed business and consumer communications - evident in media (web, mobile etc.) and advertising (live screens, mall touchscreens etc.). The critical distinction is the ability for the audience to interact in the advertising process - placement, input, advocacy etc. (Huh et al, 2020).

It is this idea of consumer influence (Kristensson, Matthing and Johansson, 2008) which determines if an advertisement can be classified as viral advertising. There are three main definitions. Porter and Golan, (2006) define viral advertising as: “*unpaid peer-peer communication of provocative content originating from an identified sponsor using the internet to persuade or influence an audience to pass along the content to*

others” (Porter and Golan, 2006, p.29). Kirby (2006) proposes that it is “*creating contagious advertising messages or material that get passed from peer-peer to increase brand awareness (as opposed to amplifying and accelerating word of mouth advocacy such as product recommendations)*” Kirby (2006, p88). The most recent improves on these two, suggesting that “*viral advertising is a widely used form of unpaid communication through persuasive messages created by identifiable sponsors and distributed among peers on interactive, digital platforms*” (Eckler and Rodgers, 2014, p.186). They did not only acknowledge the importance of the distribution platform but also reflect the message characteristics, which are the focus of this paper, and therefore that definition is used here.

Digital media communications such as VA allow consumers to determine the destiny of campaigns, to imitate, interact synchronously, to comment and share (Huh et al, 2020; Eckler and Bolls, 2011). These advertising “partners” provide valued commentary on campaigns in real time (Fard & Marvi, 2019; Nieto and Santamaría, 2010); some of them actively promote or add content which can enhance the positive attitudes to the ad, extending reach and frequency within the market (Griffin, et al., 2009; El-Gohary, 2010). So how do the creators of these viral ads leverage the digital platforms? What creative considerations go into the creative to support viral spread?

Consequently, the following figure (Figure 1) provide an illustration concerning the way by which UK advertising agencies creative teams accomplish such vital process. Figure 1 also illustrate in what way the different phases of communications are processed within the advertising agency.

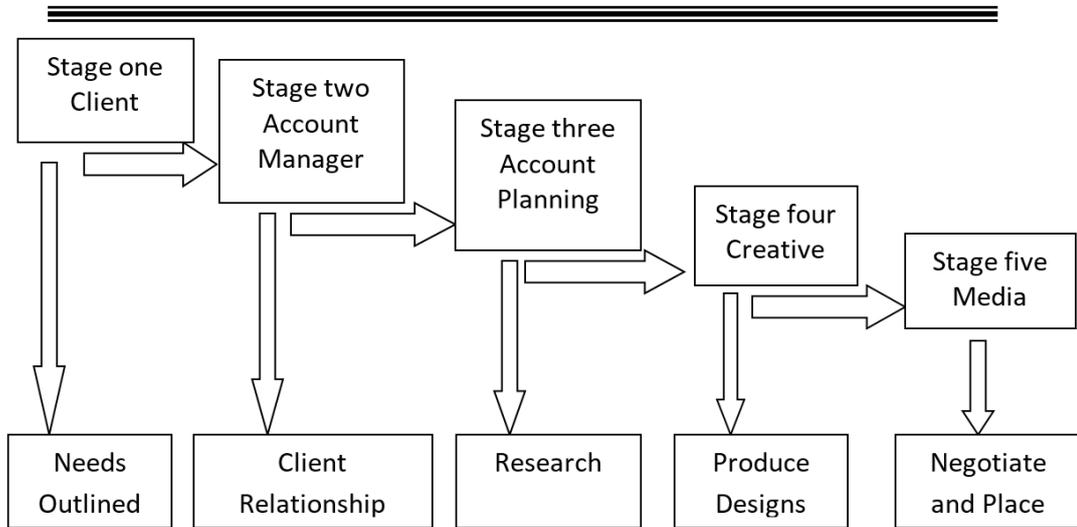


Figure 1: UK Advertising Agency Creative Development Processes and Phases.

Source: Raghubansie (2014)

In stage 1, the brand owner outlines the objectives (Pratt, 2006). At the second, account owners lead the relationships with the client and therefore take a dominant role between those working at stage three, four and five (see Figure 1) (D'Alessandro, et. Al., 2012). Planners have a major role in providing an insight which could underpin the overall campaign, design decisions and the media platforms, conducting market scanning, and research (Davies and Prince, 2010; Baskin and Pickton, 2003). Stage four is led by creative managers to ideate, compare, amend, seek account manager approvals before presenting to the client (El-Murad and West, 2004). The final team, media make choices about how to spend the largest portion of the budget. They determine campaign performance indicators (Cheong, De Gregorio and Kim, 2010).

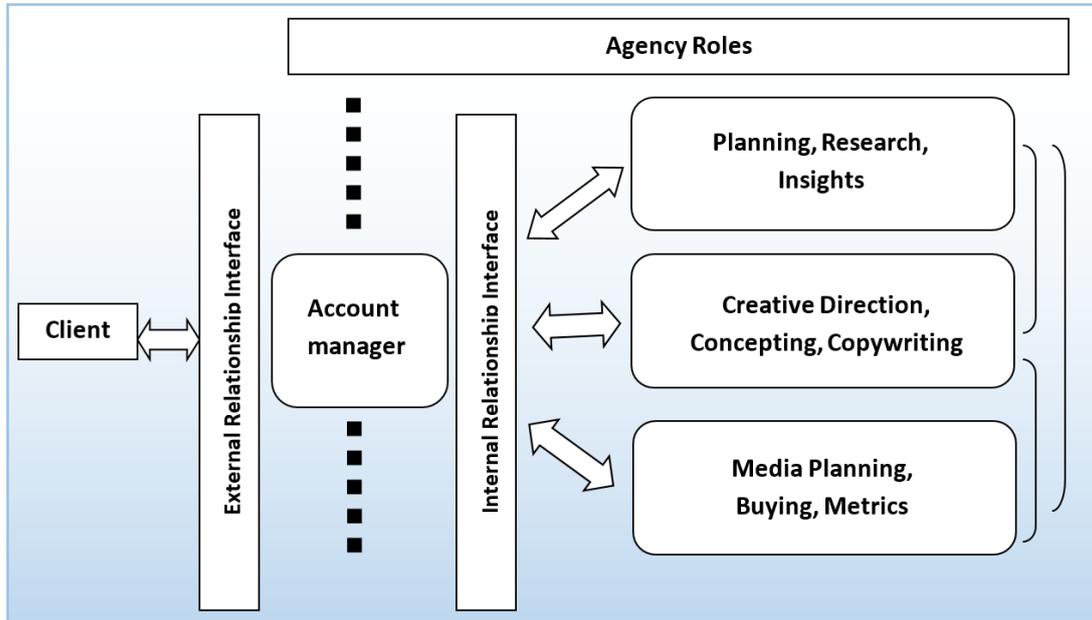


Figure 2: UK Advertising Agency Creative Development Processes Roles, Frontiers and Relations

Source: Raghubansie (2014)

It is noticed that during the evolution of the advertising campaign within the advertising agency, all the illustrated roles will be conducted through continuous interactions and communications. Nevertheless, for the purpose of clearness, all the illustrated phases were streamlined (Crosier, Grant and Gilmore, 2003).

The question now is, in what way did the collaboration transversely such phases transformed in the designing and development of viral advertisements within the advertising agency?

There are questions about changes in the campaign stages - the ways in which units in the communications agency are adapting standard practice to design viral ads. Of crucial relevance are the innovations in media management which have substantial potential implications for clients and creative agencies (Clemons, Barnett, and Appadurai, 2007). In comparison to producing TV adverts, the finished artefact is sent on a

physical device to a channel and they place and run the message (Kirby, 2004). Consumers, receive the ad via their satellite or streaming device. In that case, they can like, dislike, or be indifferent to it. If they do have a response (an attitude), they may recall it and tell another person with either favourable or unfavourable commentary (Huh et al, 2020; Deuker and Albers, 2012). They may search for it online to demonstrate. All of this is conventional Word of Mouth (WOM), decoding, re-encoding and re-transmitting a message.

In viral advertising, the creative organisation can also commission a third party to agency to transmit the message (Kirby and Marsden, 2006). That party can then share the ad with a few chosen, people who act as seeding agents to transmit that viral ad to others (Chiang, Huang and Yeh, 2013). Marketing organisations have traditionally used intermediaries to act on their behalf – often press, spokespeople on their payroll, partner organisations (see Figure 3 classic model) (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013). What is different about viral advertising is the vast volume of consumers that are potentially reachable and therefore, the possibility they could engage in multiple transmissions – seeding, planting messages with people who are opinion leaders is crucial to viral ad dissemination (Fard & Marvi, 2019; Jankowski et al, 2013). In fact, viral ads have been able to provide complex, large social network patterns so that the function of opinion leaders/influencers could be studied (Zhu, Walker & Muchnik, 2020). In fact, the extant research is dominated by studies of the two-step communication model. With such power, how are creative managers being affected by the use of influencers in their campaign design?

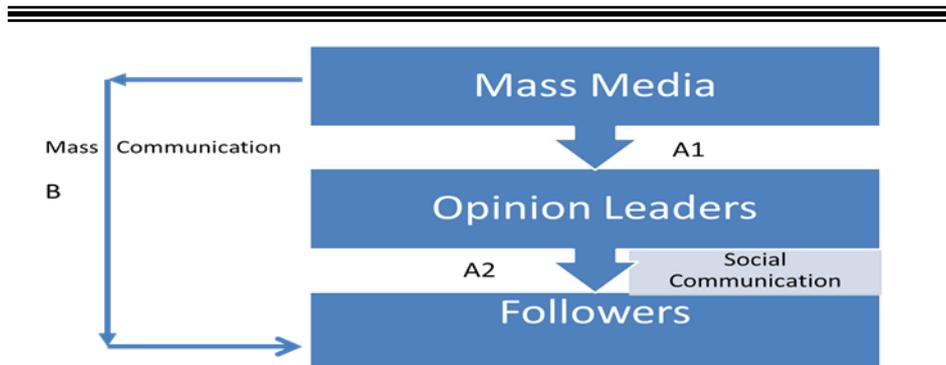


Figure 3: One Step and Two Step Communication.

Source: Katz and Lazarfeld (1955)

The discussions above can be summarised as the interruption model of advertising - based on an organisation delivering communications to the customer (Godin, 2001). It is a linear process with the brand having the principal role and the receiver a passive one. Such a view has dominated advertising from its inception, but as seen above the advent of digital technology has challenged this, for example in Dell's use of customer conversations to improve their products, processes and brand awareness (Mullaney, 2012). In other words, there is greater influence being exercised by consumers than before. Social media offered a space for customers to network, including sharing interests in advertising. The evidence for much of this engagement is in what Horovitz, Petrecca and Howard (2008) refer to as "megabuzz" - the speedy transmission of web-based communications. Viral marketing is the most visible exemplar of such activities. These questions asked of the foremost model suggest that creative managers are engaged in seeking solutions, innovating in their creative processes to meet new challenges and opportunities.

3. Research Questions:

From the literature above, it is clear that there are many gaps within the body of existing work. There are many questions which digital as a whole has brought to the advertising industry.

RQ1: How is the sender and receiver relationship changing in response to viral advertising?

RQ2: What and why are the changes introduced into the processes and stages of advertising campaign development?

RQ3: How are media channels affecting creative decisions?

RQ4: How is the role of influencers in viral advertising affecting the campaign development process?

4. Methodology:

An exploratory approach was employed using eight semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews with creative directors and heads of digital within a range of UK SME advertising agencies to inductively assess the innovations introduced into the creative development process through the phenomenon of viral advertising. When considering questions of personal interpretation, motivations and the nature of interactions within a dynamic situation, qualitative methods are appropriate for data gathering (Yin, 2016). Viral advertising is a new and under-researched subject among a sample population, which is difficult to access (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011). Meanwhile, it is important to notice that digital creative directors are also “outsiders”, many of whom have entered advertising from other fields and face difficulties of adapting, of remaining current with technology, of working with “insiders” and with clients who are suspicious of digital innovations, making their roles complex and even more pressed for time, in an industry, which charges for its time. At the same time, they are effecting fundamental changes in the process of producing advertising.

The South and central London makes up the largest part of the advertising industry in the United Kingdom (Advertising Association, 2020). However, diversification across the rest of the UK and England in particular has continued over the years. This study, therefore, involves agencies from London and across the country. The industry has continued to change with new entrants, change among the large and mid-sized agencies. This fluidity in the sector makes it especially challenging, in

particular with digital agencies, to select the sample. The London concentration of agencies is also less crucial as they continue to network virtually.

The power of the gatekeeper in B2B research and this industry is another key obstacle. Besides, the participants charge for their time, tend to be on the go around the clock, compound obstacles to participation (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Homogenous sampling is an approach to overcome the entry obstacles, the fluid industry environment, unique, new competitors and connected agencies, using jobs, size of the organisation and location (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). The agencies were selected from four counties, four small and four medium sized firms, three women, five male and in leadership functions. They oversee digital and campaign design within the agency. Three are owned by global groups and five independents.

3.1 Data Analysis - Thematic Framework:

Interview data was recorded, transcribed and prepared for thematic analyses – to capture the views of agency creative function heads as the design viral ad campaigns (Bryman & Bell, 2019). An interpretive approach allows an examination of the meaningful content of these data sets (Jones and Alony, 2011). Within this research, thematic analysis is employed to describe the impact viral advertising has had on creative design and developmental processes with the view of making a theoretical contribution following the recommendations of Elo and Kyngäs (2008). In order to arrive at these points however; it is necessary to produce broad themes, which have emerged from the data (as recommended by Walker and Myrick, 2006). Identification of the overarching themes is a consequence of other levels of analysis starting in the coding of the data (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). This is also linked to case research by the authors in agency selection, while recording interviews and reflections after (Jones and Alony, 2011).

The coding framework is developed following three steps of observation, collating and then consideration (Saldana, 2016). Charmaz (2003) suggests the questions below to initiate and complete the coding of qualitative data.

- *"What is going on?"*
- *What are people doing?*
- *What is the person saying?*
- *What do these actions and statements take for granted?*
- *How do structure and context serve to support, maintain, impede or change these actions and statements?"* (Charmaz, 2003, pp: 94-95)

Analysis and coding took place in a reflective pattern, revisiting at each stage (Dey, 1993). The researchers shared preliminary findings with colleagues specialising in qualitative research and the communications industry (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Each data gathering session was audio and video captured, each lasting between 40 – 60 minute, resulting in 30,000 words from participants.

4. Results:

The following table provides a summary view of the broad categories emerging from the data analyses. These are thematically analysed with three sub-themes under each of the five. As part of the coding framework, the theoretical models applicable are also indicated in the final column to aid the subsequent discussion. A short definition of each sub-theme is also included. Given the research questions of this paper, the focus is heavily towards themes 4 - viral characteristics and 5 - advertising planning. However, there are important linkages to the other themes as well.

Table1: Summary of the Coding Framework

<i>Themes</i>			<i>General Theoretic Group</i>
Theme 1: Manipulating Diffusion Innovative Elements			
ST-1	ST-2	ST-3	Contagion moulding
Transmission (different actions related to the process of distributing viral adverts).	Technological Platforms (text messages, the internet, email, Facebook, etc.).	Taxonomy (sub-assemblies fundamental to the process of distributing viral adverts).	
Theme 2: CB			MA Theory
ST-1	ST-2	ST-3	
Behaviour (activities made beforehand receiving the viral advert, throughout and afterward receiving it).	Media Consumption (the patterns of media usage).	Emotive Desires (motivations that support participation with viral adverts).	
Theme 3 OB			Institutionalisation
ST-1	ST-2	ST-3	
Conservatism and Evaluation (client mind-sets in selecting to involve in the assessment	Agency Management Changes (forms of organising agencies for VM).	Industry Rearrangement (indication of the nature and location of changes within	

processes of the advertising campaign effect).		the industry in view of new advertising agencies entering the market, and contestants).	
Theme 4: Viral Features			
ST-1	ST-2	ST-3	
Creative Contemplations (choices concerned with what to comprise in the advertisement and the campaign plan).	Roles of Digital Creatives (comments about jobs, which art directors, artists etc., do).	Commencements of Novel Innovative Concepts (the procedures of generating, selection and evolving thoughts, ideas, and concepts).	Creative Production Processes
Theme 5: Advertising Planning			
ST-1	ST-2	ST-3	
Planning Procedures (means of systematising efforts inside the advertising agency)	Insight (examination of needed elements to gain the required knowledge to lead innovative choices)	Objectives (defining the main aim of the viral advert)	Advertising Effects Framework

MA Theory: Motivation and Attitude Theory, SU: Sub-Theme, CB: Customer Behaviour, OB: Organisational Behaviour

Source: Adopted from Raghubansie (2016).

Before discussing the findings related to each research question, it is worthwhile to point to three key innovations in advertising campaign development which viral advertising has influenced. The first major change is an expansion of creative possibilities (creative ideas); the second to an expanded group of people now involved in the creative process. The two mentioned innovations are associated as the people who cross departments, functions and roles and who are often new to advertising agencies, bring quite different views, skills and ways of operating. In so doing, they do contribute different viewpoints but more broadly, they link to networks, organisations and others, which provide access to emerging concepts, technologies and people. These contribute to creative ideas; affect the roles of staff and influence the actual creative production of viral advertising partly seen in Huang et al, (2013).

The other critical change which is associated with viral advertising is a dedication to ongoing learning, an issue which Takemura, (2012) partly addresses. This is mainly for those with digital elements responsibility within the agency. They have two demands – stay up to date with new digital solutions and educating staff across departments. They also educate clients directly or with other colleagues, about the value, purpose and risks of employing interactive technologies in advertising. This educational role is vital to viral advertising as will become clear in the section addressing the first research question below (Hackley and Tiwsakul, 2011). All three of these are disruptive innovations (Christensen, 1997) bringing deep-rooted changes in the creative process and the interactions among creative teams. Conflicting with McLeod, et. al., (2009) the powerful innovative stage/team have to share campaign creation and allow others to influence their decisions in viral advertising.

4.1 RQ1: How viral advertising is changing the relation between the sender and receiver of the advert message?

This study finds that in the case of viral ads, creatives dedicate considerably more time to the idea, i.e., an idea that has powerful viral qualities. It is a process requiring consideration of; the sender objectives, the receiver likely interpretations, and the channels through which the messages are delivered (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). It is much more iterative, reflective and research driven with viral advertising compared to a typical campaign (sustaining innovations following Christiansen, 2003). Qualities which the sender will use to encode their message include emotions (e.g., humour, risqué content) consistent with most of the prior studies (Porter and Golan, 2006; Brown, et. al., 2010). However, in addition to emotions, the data shows that there is a range of considerations that are equally important. Some of which are summarised below:

- The strength of the idea in developing initial conversations.
- The flexibility (e.g., multiple interpretations/ storylines) of the idea to sustain such “buzz”.
- The suitability of the idea to the platform on which the viral ad will be delivered.
- How amenable is the creative concept to the media channels (e.g., twitter, Instagram, offline press)?
- The capacity of the advertising agency to support the platforms, the idea and the buzz.
- Critically, the power of the idea to create a form of “social currency”, which consumers utilise for their own trading (self-enhancement, maintaining communications, creating relationships etc.).

These are novel insights even while taking into consideration the work of Kirby (2006), a practitioner presenting his views and experience of viral marketing. In other words, there are many very good ideas which are discussed but when set against the channel and receiver behaviour concerning viral advertising they are discarded. Such a dialogic relationship has always existed but it is intensified in viral advertising affecting the timeframes, which the sender sets (Raghubansie et al., 2013).

As an illustration, the core campaign idea encoded might develop initial conversations at a slower rate than another idea but it has greater storylines with which the receiver can engage. Therefore, it starts slowly but then builds rapidly (Huh et al, 2020). An example shared by one participant was an idea, which appeared to lack social currency, commissioned by a leading motor service firm, to start with but was modified to tell the stories associated with particular items, thereby connecting with people's everyday experiences, encouraging them to share their own stories, building routine car journeys into something interesting.

“An interesting piece of content we worked on was like on Valentine's Day what it would be that women leave in their cars ... You have to find a twist [to each story] you know”.

However, it is not just communications, which are important, but also the capacity of the advertising agency. Some participants pointed to campaigns that linked the sender and the receiver very well but failed. An example was a viral campaign (based on a game) which crashed the website because it attracted so many users very quickly, that in the end, it harmed the agency and the brand and the wide-spread awareness created changed from positive to negative at speed. Therefore, the parameters which are used to assess the creative idea, how it is encoded, how the media will facilitate that and how receivers are likely to engage with viral advertising are multi-layered and more complex than in a typical campaign.

It is also clear from the data analysis that senders have a more open attitude to consumer participation in the sharing and interaction with advertising content (Raghubansie, 2013). In other words, brands employing viral advertising must acknowledge that there is a clear shift of power to the consumer. This also comes with an acknowledgement of risks but that consideration will be given individually how such an issue will be addressed or not, in one example given by a creative director.

“We were fine if Hackney Council did not like it [the ad] but when the Big Issue took issue. It is quite a hard organisation to criticise. I have a few friends who work for them. The Sun, you can ignore but not the Big Issue.... That was a bit difficult”.

There is on-going feedback, recoding, and redelivery of original and new messages across the stages of communications (Shannon and Weaver, 1949; who are in line with Porter and Golan, 2006; and Raghubansie, 2016). From this study, all the participants were in agreement that digital advertising in general means that the agencies spend considerable time examining the online browsing patterns of consumers prior to the campaign launch and during (Raghubansie et al., 2013). The availability of “big data” is making this increasingly more sophisticated. Two participants demonstrated how sophisticated managing the communications process has become. They literally watch on screen, live where the viral consumer is online and then move/activate content at that point. For example, if a story about cats is attracting attention at breakfast time in Japan, the viral would be moved into that “natural” context on websites at that point, or seed would be contacted to post, comment, engage with the cat story providing linkage to the viral being launched (similar to Busca and Bertrandias, 2020).

4.2 RQ2: What and why are the changes introduced into the processes and stages of advertising campaign development?

It is clear from the two sub-sections immediately above that process innovations, some sustaining and others disruptive are happening in response (sometimes initiated) to technologies, to consumer behaviour and the unique possibilities of viral advertising. Based on the prior literature (Busca and Bertrandias, 2020; Eckler and Rodgers, 2014; Raghubansie, 2016; Cheong, et al., 2010; Nieto and Santamaría, 2010; etc.) as well as results of the current research, a comparison is made in table 2 below to illustrate where innovations have been introduced across the typical departments tasked with the development of advertising.

Table 2: Comparison of Standard Advertising Plans with that of Viral Advertising

<i>Phases</i>	<i>Regular Advertising Plan</i>	<i>VA Plan</i>
Customer Aims	Succinct and firm	Unblemished nonetheless uncertain if they can be achieved
Account management	Strong handle on the client relationship	Consumers have a media distribution role in sharing viral ads
Planning	Standard models for research	Much digital footprint but inadequate models to evaluate and lead into decision-making.
Creative	Basic model of creative director and art team	Osmotic and re-drawing practice as audiences self-select to a large extent in sharing viral ads
Media	Agreed	Budgets say or may not be agreed but with viral ads, it is the selection and interactive capabilities of the media that matters, not the space purchased.
Channels	Fixed (offline and online)	Mainly online and can be fixed beforehand or unfixed based on how consumers interact and share.
Other Extras:		
Advert Launching (the time)	Teaser, beforehand or afterward	Teaser, beforehand or afterward is similar but the people/websites identified to seed the viral ad requires detailed planning, careful monitoring and ongoing adjustments.
Reach and Frequency	Planned in advance and signed off with client	There are indicators but the potential audience is the whole relevant segment online,
Resources	Usually set based on budget	Creative may be fixed as a viral ad is designed such that it can spawn others, can enter into other areas of social relevance which have not been predicted

From the discussion above about encoding messages, it is clear that there is a much wider source pool from which ideas can be drawn – so a technologist may provide leadership on how a platform would support a particularly creative idea, rather than the conventional writer, art director combination (Raghubansie, 2013). This can lead not only to tensions but also to the adoption of a concept generated by someone outside of the creative function, which is embraced, produced and is successful based on technical insights, which enhance the core concept. In agreement with Baskin and Pickton (2003), account planning remains essential to generating understanding of audience behaviour but viral advertising means a much wider idea of what is the creative team. The major challenge which viral advertising presents for the planner is data analysis methods to manage overwhelming information about consumers, seeding, or about sharing and discussions (Jankowski et al, 2013; Zhu, Walker & Muchnik, 2020). Tracking viral advertisements is also becoming more effective but likewise generating considerable data (Zhu, Walker & Muchnik, 2020). For smaller agencies, this can be a major problem, as illustrated in this quote by the head of digital for the largest independent agency outside London in the South.

“You almost need an individual to manage measurability because there is so much content out there... There is a level below where that data is at the moment still being scrambled around and you cannot get at that...So you have stored data and no real understanding of it, nor the people. But there's so much of data, that it is making sense of it”.

Despite this, such intelligence is powerful addressing the core model – interruption – on which advertising has been built, consistent with Godin (2001), though he argues from a point of customer behaviour rather than data mining. As observed by the same participant above, *“So, it is becoming a lot more targeted. Therefore, interruption becomes less of an interruption. It is something that you genuinely might be interested in”.*

Changes in the jobs done by departments within the agencies have also been evident from the data, whether these are forced, are innovations or simply evolutionary, it is not quite clear but very important in understanding how agencies cope with a digital future and in this case produce viral advertising. The distinctions among the departments/stages within advertising agencies have been made less clear; the functions and roles of staff is more fluid (Cheong, et al., 2010). The role of the digital creative operates across all these departments / functions that has brought both opportunities, and challenges to the functioning of the agencies as a whole (see also Takemura, 2012). This is less of an issue among smaller, particularly independent agencies. Among medium-sized agencies, there is still a perception of an outsider, insider in this regard, despite an overall view that is emerging to suggest that the digital side of the advertising agency drive to be absorbed in core efforts of the advertising agency rather than a special responsibility.

Viral advertising requires considerable innovation in media management to such an extent that it can be classified as disruptive (Christensen, 1997). Most of the work is done at the pre-launch stage and the launch. Critically, media is where more than half of advertising budgets tend to be dedicated but with viral advertising, there is very little. In agreement with Horovitz, Petrecca and Howard (2008), this research demonstrates that “megabuzz” is essential to viral spread. However, it goes further, finding that in viral advertising consumers substitute for media buyers, “placing” the advertisement at no cost (other than time) on a media channel where the target audience can view and discuss. This coincides with other changes in the computerisation of conventional media buying suggesting that the role will become significantly diminished or come close to dissolving all together (Huang et al 2019; Raghubansie, 2016; Huang et al 2013; Raghubansie, 2013).

4.3 RQ3: How are media channels affecting creative decisions?

A basic distinction is that the creative team may also replace a broadcaster, by posting the viral ad online (D'Alessandro, Peltier and Dahl, 2012). The viral messages themselves, the time to spread is short, placement costs are little as consumers take on the transmission role. Viral ads are standardised, therefore saving on local versions and courier around the world (as seen in Porter and Golan, 2006; Kirby, 2006; Eckler and Rodgers, 2014). Time to market, to message landing are advantages in advertising, crucial to mass brand spread and reducing the window in which competition can counter. Award winning campaign director noted:

“They can guarantee five hundred thousand hits on YouTube. They had ways of seeding the campaign, not by using any others. By seeding it to certain chat things in China, metatags into it, descriptors, in a certain way and certain websites. They [can] prove it by making their own videos, fake ads they had made for their creative book”.

The consumer may do all the usual (ignore, like, dislike), but with VM, especially videos, they mostly forward, post the ad without amendments. The consumer will add a sentence and pass along on social media or mobile. Distinct from word of mouth, the movement of the message is observable, from placement to each sharing. That allows brands to oversee the whether comments are positive or not and they can then consider if they need to take action (Deuker and Albers, 2012). Traditional advertising is also able to gather data on viewership and course correct as well. However, this study finds differences in VM:

Speed (of message transmission, insight and data).

- Richness of data (several mobile and online platforms to use, consumer profiles).
- Multiple stakeholders (including intermediaries who place viral ads).
- Scale (global and inexpensive).

All participants recognise this in their practice and they plan for ideas, which are for example, relatively easy to communicate, can cross cultural and language barriers.

4.4 RQ4: Role of influencers in viral advertising and how it is influencing the campaign development processes?

The most powerful distinction between viral marketing and traditional ads is in the way creative managers employ influencers (“seeds”) to place and accelerate the spread of messages (Chiang, et al., 2013). considering the innovation of such campaigns, people with the skills to influence viral campaigns spread (Kirby and Marsden, 2006). To service the need, campaign managers spoke about emergence of support businesses which specialise in seeding VM online. Therefore, the access to influencers is dramatically higher than before (Jankowski et al, 2013). VM generally, has exponentially facilitated social network tracing, study and predictions about the role of influencers (Huang et al, 2019). Participants consistently made the point about the value and richness of the trends that data analysis produces but also how challenging too much data has been. Agency to agency commissioning of viral message distribution is increasing in both independent and large sized agencies.

A well-established, global agency, hired one study participant because of her public relations background since she was able to bring her skills at managing key media stakeholders to the viral ad campaign teams to identify and manage influencers. That was not a usual capability in the agency before. Such skills helped the agency to build strong processes for managing the seeding influencers (consistent with (Zhu, Walker & Muchnik, 2020) and set them apart from other agencies, even services which do not easily lend themselves to virals (insurance, road breakdown cover etc.).

“We have like a content calendar which has events coming up in the industry what subjects’ people are talking about and we plan our content according to them as well. And then we feed in our ideas as well so it is kind of a collaborative you know, team with everyone” - Content Manager

This last quote captures much more than a media channel function for seeding agents. They are also co-creating the campaign with the agency for their own objectives, this is an interesting finding and its trajectory would be valuable in understanding campaign ideas, the levels of influence and the roles of agency creatives in this regard. The linkage to the heritage of PR also opens possibilities for conceptual explorations not only of theory and practice, but also on how this is affecting conceptions of not just viral advertising but advertising in general.

4.5 Much has not changed:

There is evidence of both disruptive innovations, which has changed the nature of the work of the advertising industry, or created new industries in some cases but also of sustaining innovations, which incrementally change creative development processes. However, there was much too that emphasised the value of what might be termed “conventional” advertising management. An example is reflected in the quote below from a creative director in London,

“I just say it is about brand consistency. It is about the brand character. If you found one of your friends behaving in a way you have never seen; ... you would probably trust them less”.

Here is encapsulated the idea that the core brand values direct the campaign regardless of the novelty of the form of advertising. This is an important point as brand managers and agency staff experience a feeling of being overwhelmed by rapid changes in technological platforms, and pressure to join the bandwagon. The head of a rural, independent, small agency observed that you have to understand “*how to spot its greatest strength... If it creates better customer service. The customers need to know the rules of engagement, which are often unclear. Another area is where companies like Walkers Crisps; they normally used it for really, really clever product development*”. Such a view reinforces the decision-making role of the brand rather than some of the proposals, which suggest that brands should be active all over social media for example. It allows managers to decide as to what is appropriate in which situations.

At the core of campaign planning, the iterative process of research, discussions, reflection re-development remains a crucial part of agency life. This is ably captured in the views of two participants in different roles, the first from London and the second from outside, both independent agencies.

“We do considerable amounts of research into behaviour or attitudinal views, so brand research, media behaviours of any consumer group”.

“As long as you have got an understanding of who your audience is; that has to be baked in from the start. No point building something that nobody wants...My view has always been that the technology you build something in, has a complete relationship to the thing you get out at the bottom”.

It could be argued that prior studies have over-stated the case for radical change.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations:

There are four disruptive innovations:

- The focus on a “viral idea” has resulted in a co-production (Kristensson, Matthing and Johansson, 2008) of the advertising concept across the whole of the advertising agency, compared to the narrower focus (in creative teams) in traditional advertising
- The digital creative is critical bringing in new skills, new networks, knowledge (Magnusson, Kristensson and Hipp, 2010) and therefore the quest for viral currency, the novelty has dramatically extended the creative possibilities
- An educational imperative (self, colleagues and clients) which are not only essential to viral advertising but also to digital in general. This is not only a basic question of knowledge but also of creative and managerial judgement of opportunity and risks.
- Viral advertising requires very little media buying, accelerating the decline of this function in e-marketing in general

Based on the different elements investigated within this study, authors can conclude the following:

The sender, receiver relationship has been an undergoing transformation, particularly since the arrival of the internet and social media adoption; however, viral advertising illustrates in detail how this relationship has affected decision-making at all points of the creative production process. Compared to a typical advertisement development, it is much more iterative, focussed on the receiver and driven by a desire to match not just the target audience behaviour but also their activities, often in a live environment.

Introduction of greater flexibility across the whole planning process with built in unpredictability to allow for interactivity, future creative content and broader audience appeal. This is coupled with a desire to utilise available data on campaign progress but resource problems for smaller agencies. These have also resulted in the blurring of boundaries among agency departments. Reference is made above to the media stage already.

Viral advertising changes the media delivery method, shortens the time, responses patterns, reduces costs and produces rich data at speed to understand and amend media decisions. The consumers take on the role of the media buyer.

Previous research casts seeding agents as passive nodes activated when the sender needs to. However, this study points to a more complex role emerging, one of partnership, in the manner of a joint venture, where influencers achieve their objectives and the clients/ agencies the same.

6. Limitations, Implications and Future Research:

6.1 Implications (Managerial and Other):

This paper offers some managerial and strategy implications which add more value to its contribution. The paper clearly articulates the disruptive changes, which managers within agencies and client organisations should focus on. Moreover, it grounds the creative decisions in well-known models of communications showing where and why changes are taking place; therefore, allowing accessible entry points to address not just viral advertising but also e-marketing in general. The paper also reinforces the conventional thinking about brand's values, heritage and characteristics as determining factors in deciding how, where and why to employ viral advertising and e-marketing tools. Additionally, the paper points out that the fundamental planning process is relevant, applied and effective. Meanwhile, considering the research results, the role of seeding agents is changing into one of partnership; as such, managers need to re-consider how they commission them in viral campaigns.

6.2 Limitations:

As in the case of any other research paper, there are some limitations that need to be illustrated, the mentioning of which can be a valuable help to future research studies. Within this regard, it is important to notice that this study is the result of cross-sectional, exploratory data, meaning that the results are limited to this situation. Meanwhile, the research respondents are drawn from Exeter, London, Staffordshire, and Coventry and so does not fully show the picture across the whole of the UK (despite the fact that London dominating the industry within the UK). Additionally, this study presents the results of participants in the creative roles but there are other stages and/or roles that may have different perspectives. Finally, viral advertising, though the most "extreme" (in terms of potential spread and value for money) and most closely related to TV; it is just one example among many other digital creative outputs.

6.3 Future Research Agenda:

The logical progression of this study would be to conduct some similar studies relating to extending the range of participants and regions, which this study covers. Moreover, the scope of this research could be enhanced by the development and implementation of screening models for viral advertising creative ideas that can lead to better and deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Meanwhile, if digital skills are being integrated into agencies, future research studies need to attempt finding answers for the extra enquiries and questions, such as: how is this going to change the roles of staff across the different departments within the advertising agency? Some of other directions for future research agenda include:

- The media management function and its role in informing creative design.
- Revisiting current conceptions of viral marketing and viral advertising in different sectors and industries.
- How are seeding agents collaborating and agents partnering with advertising agencies?
- How are established, larger agencies responding to the viral challenges?

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العمليات الإبداعية للإعلان الرقمي والابتكار في وكالات الاعلانات الصغيرة والمتوسطة الحجم في المملكة المتحدة: دراسة تجريبية للإعلانات ذات الانتشار الفيروسي

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ملخص البحث باللغة العربية:

يمكن القول إن الابتكار هو أكبر موضوع تعرض للبحث والمناقشة في ادبيات البحث العلمي في مجال الإعلان عن المنتجات. ومع ذلك، فقد أدى ظهور التسويق الإلكتروني إلى مستوى غير مسبوق من التغيير في الصناعة. وفي محاولة لاستكشاف ممارسات الابتكار والعمليات الإبداعية للإعلان الرقمي من قبل وكالات الإعلان في المملكة المتحدة، تبحث هذه الورقة البحثية بشكل تجريبي الابتكارات المختلفة التي أدخلها مديرو وكالات الإعلان في المملكة المتحدة في عملية التصميم والتطوير الإبداعي للإعلان. ويركز البحث بشكل خاص على إنشاء الإعلانات ذات الانتشار الفيروسي. ومن الملاحظ أنه وعلى الرغم من وجود العديد من الدراسات حول صناعة الإعلان والتغيير داخل وكالات الإعلان، فقد كان هناك اهتمام أقل بأنشطة إنشاء الحملات و "كيف" و "أين" تحديدا في عملية التصميم قام المديرون الإبداعيون بممارسة الأنشطة الابتكارية لدعم الانتشار الاعلاني. وتتبنى الدراسة منهجا وصفيًا تفسيريًا. وقد تم جمع البيانات الخاصة بالدراسة باستخدام المقابلات المتعمقة شبه المنظمة مع المديرين المبدعين لوكالات الإعلان صغيرة ومتوسطة الحجم في المملكة المتحدة لتحليل رؤاهم وردود أفعالهم تجاه الإعلانات ذات الانتشار الفيروسي، وقد أشارت النتائج إلى أنه على الرغم من وجود تغييرات كبيرة في عملية التصميم والتطوير الإبداعي للإعلان، إلا أن بعض الجوانب الخاصة بتصميم وتطوير الإعلان لا تزال كما هي (مثل قيم العلامة التجارية الأساسية التي توجه الحملة الاعلانية، الخ). ومن الملاحظ ان عملية التخطيط الاعلاني لم تتغير بشكل أساسي، مما يشير إلى أن الابحاث السابق نشرها في ادبيات الإعلان قد بالغت في ذكر ومناقشة قضية التغيير الجذري في مجال التطور الاعلاني.

وقد أكدت النتائج، ليس فقط القدرة الفريدة للإعلان ذو الانتشار الفيروسي على التواجد والاستمرار في كل من عالم الوسائط الإعلامية "القديمة" و "الجديدة"، ولكنها توضح أيضًا، أين يمكن إدخال الابتكارات في عملية تصميم وتطوير الحملة الإعلانية. وتتحدى النتائج الخاصة بالدراسة بعض الأعمال السابق نشرها في ادبيات الإعلان، والتي كانت شديدة الحماس بشأن الطبيعة التخريبية للبيئة الرقمية على الاعلان. وتعزز هذه الورقة البحثية الدراسات البحثية التجريبية في مجال الإعلان والتي أجريت لفحص تصميم الحملات الإعلانية ذات الانتشار الفيروسي.

الكلمات الدالة (المفتاحية):

الإعلانات الفيروسي، العملية الإبداعية للإعلان، الابتكار الإبداعي، وكالات الإعلان في المملكة المتحدة، الإعلانات الرقمية، الشركات الصغيرة والمتوسطة الحجم.