Bounded Creativity: Understanding the Restrictions on Creative Work in Advertising Agencies

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Abstract

The theme of creativity has gained prominence among practitioners and academics, and the emergence of creative industries, which combine creativity and commercial logic, has rendered the topic even more relevant. Creativity is frequently associated with the existence of flexible organizational structures and organizational cultures that favor autonomy and freedom of action. However, organizations commonly impose limits on the actions of creative professionals because of the timescales, budgets, and business and customer demands inherent to the organizational context. Knowledge of creativity in academia has advanced considerably in recent decades. However, empirical studies investigating the restrictions imposed on creative work in organizations are lacking. This study addresses this gap in the literature. Our objective was to investigate creativity within advertising agencies, a creative industry sector. The results reveal that creativity in such environments is marked by collective work, conditioned by time pressures for performing tasks, and influenced by the tension that originates from the interaction between two dimensions: the search for originality and the need for acceptance. On the basis of this research, we propose the concept of bounded creativity, which reflects the weakening of the creative experience in organizations.

Key words: creativity; social psychology of creativity; creative industries; advertising agencies.

Introduction

The literature on creativity and creative work in context has been developed on the basis of empirical research and accounts of artists and scientists regarding their experiences with creation. These studies gave rise to a general theory called the social psychology of creativity, which outlined the elements that constitute creative performance and its relationship with context (Amabile, 1996; Amabile & Pillemer, 2012).

Based on the social psychology of creativity, a number of studies subsequently aimed to expand the understanding of creativity and its dynamics in organizations. These studies covered several topics, such as the influence of organizational climate on creativity (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Heron, 1996), the role of psychological safety in creativity (Edmondson & Mogelof, 2006), the relationship between group work diversity and creativity (Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002), and leader behavior and its relationship with creative performance (Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer, 2004). These studies accordingly reflected the increased interest in creativity as a means of generating sustainable value for stakeholders in an increasingly dynamic world (George, 2007).

The theme of creativity gained even more relevance with the emergence of creative industries. The concept of creative industries first emerged in Australia in the early 1990s and gained force in England because of its link to the country's political and economic agenda, which focused on fostering creative sectors (see Bendassolli, Wood, Kirschbaum, & Cunha, 2009). Creative industries unite the field of the arts with mass production within the context of new technologies and the new knowledge economy (Hartley, 2005). According to the British government, creative industries include advertising, architecture, the arts and antiquities market, crafts, design, designer fashion, cinema, software, computer games, music, performing arts, publishing, radio, TV, museums, galleries, and cultural activities (Department for Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS], 2012).

The context of creative industries imposes a commercial logic on the creation of culture artifacts (Bendassolli *et al.*, 2009). For example, a fashion designer working for a luxury brand must consider the economic viability of her resulting fashion line, which entails generating income for her creations while considering aspects such as innovation and quality; conversely, a filmmaker hired by an international producer must manage his recording schedule and budget to ensure the financial result of his film while focusing on the artistic aspects of the work. Therefore, the context of creative industries constitutes a notable *locus* for observing the limits and restrictions imposed on creative work in the business and organizational context.

Despite the existence of a burgeoning literature and the growing relevance of creative industries, empirical studies investigating the limits imposed on creative work by the organizational context remain lacking in the literature. Through our theoretical contribution, we seek to elucidate how creativity is manifested in an organizational context in which creativity is the main asset and in which commercial logic imposes limits on creativity. This theoretical contribution in turn provides a practical contribution by highlighting factors that limit creative activity in a context that combines creation with commercial logic. Awareness of these factors can improve management processes and practices to mitigate the effect of restrictions on creativity.

Advertising agencies, a sector within the creative industries, constitute a *locus* in which creativity is strongly combined with commercial logic. This study specifically aims to investigate the phenomenon of creativity by attempting to identify and understand the limits and restrictions imposed on creative work in advertising agencies. To achieve this objective, we conducted in-depth interviews with 18 professionals who work at advertising agencies. The interviews were complemented by *in loco* observations of the work performed at selected agencies.

This article[1] is organized into six sections, including this introduction. In the second section, we discuss the theoretical background of this study. The third section presents the methods. In the fourth section, we present the results of the field research, and in the fifth section, we discuss the research

outcomes. Finally, in the sixth section, we explain the paper's contribution to the field of creativity in context and its implications for managerial practice. We also discuss the limitations of this study and offer suggestions for future research.

Theory

Creativity has been studied from various perspectives, such as the neurological, affective-cognitive, and individual perspectives, and at several levels, including the personality, group, social environment, culture and society, and systemic levels (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010). This study examines creative work and its relationship with the organizational context by adopting the perspective of the social psychology of creativity and focusing on the environmental factors that relate to individuals' creative performance.

We adopt the perspective of the social psychology of creativity for the following reasons: first, this perspective constitutes an especially appropriate theoretical lens for analyzing the role of intrinsic motivation and guidance for creative professionals in the development of their work and career; second, this approach may be useful for analyzing extrinsic factors in the organizational environment that influence creative activity; and third, within this perspective, the focus is the individual, which is a key feature of creative industries.

Within the social psychology of creativity, the object of the analysis of creative behavior is the product of creative activity. A process is considered creative when it produces something that is new and useful in a heuristic way. The heuristic path is not clear or easy to define and can be contrasted with the algorithmic pattern, which is well established and reflects the application of a clear and previously defined formula. Regarding the assessment of the product of creative activity, observers who are familiar with the field consensually reflect on a product's qualities to determine whether the particular product or process is creative (Amabile, 1996).

Three components are necessary for creative performance. The first component is task motivation (Amabile, 1996; Amabile & Pillemer, 2012), which may be either intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation originates within the subject him/herself, whose creation arises from an inner wish to create, a necessity to express him/herself, or the pure pleasure of free expression (Bendassolli & Wood, 2012). Intrinsically motivated individuals perceive themselves to be the *locus* of the causality of action (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and therefore tend to better develop their work (Amabile, 1996; Hennessey, 2003). Extrinsic motivation, however, originates from the external environment. With this type of motivation, the creative professional is moved to achieve an outside objective, such as fame, money, team recognition, or social status. External motivations often undermine creative potential and, eventually, the professional's career (Amabile, 1996) because they tend to generate the perception of external control over actions (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The second component necessary for creative performance is domain-relevant skills. An individual may be creative in a certain field if s/he has some knowledge of the field. Merely being motivated to perform the work is insufficient (Sternberg, 2006). The extent of domain-relevant skills depends on an individual's cognitive, perceptive, and innate motor skills, as well as formal and informal education in the field in which the individual operates (Amabile, 1996). This knowledge has various origins. Formal and informal knowledge originates from the cultural domain that society has constructed over time. Social institutions are responsible for selecting, preserving, and transmitting culture and knowledge to people (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Florida (2000) emphasized the importance of informally acquired knowledge, observing that creative individuals feed their creativity with personal experiences guided by the ideal of **living the life**. Leisure experiences and city-life experiences are ways of simultaneously using both free time and resources for creativity.

The third component necessary for creative performance is creativity-relevant skills. Creativity-relevant skills are resources that are used to surpass existing knowledge in a particular field and to generate something new. Such skills are associated with two factors: cognitive style and personality traits. Cognitive style refers to a professional's natural and preferred orientation toward developing a creative response to a problem. Within an individual's cognitive style, Kirton (1994) distinguished between an innovative style, in which the individual attempts to integrate different pieces of information, redefine the problem, and present a solution that deviates from the norm, and an adaptive style, in which the individual attempts to use information from an already known field, follow established patterns, and generate a response that does not deviate greatly from expectations.

Having defined the elements of creative performance, we attempt to elucidate how creativity manifests in context. Through observations, researchers have concluded that the creative process occurs in stages and have thus created models for the creative process (Montag, Maertz, & Baer, 2012). Such models capture the sequence in which creative responses are generated in order to describe how individuals combines their motivation, skills, and knowledge to find an answer, determine a solution, or create a product. For the purposes of this study, Amabile's (1996) model appears to be the most suitable among the existing models. This model comprises five stages, which are summarized below.

During the first stage, a task or problem is presented. During this initial stage, an individual's motivation is relevant to the way in which the process develops. When the individual's motivation is intrinsic, engagement and (frequently) satisfaction with the completion of the process are present. By contrast, when the individual's motivation is extrinsic, consonance may exist between the request and the individual's internal motivation, but the interests may not be aligned, which may have a negative effect on the individual's performance. The second stage is preparation, which is mediated by a professional's skills and his/her knowledge of the field to which s/he is addressing his/her response. During the third stage, the response itself is generated. During this stage, the professional follows a cognitive path and displays his/her personality traits. The novelty level of the product is defined at this point. The fourth stage, which comprises response validation, includes the assessment of whether the generated product is new, useful, and appropriate and whether the perceived value of the product is adequate. During the fifth stage, based on the assessment obtained, a decision regarding success or failure of the product and the need to return to a previous stage is made.

The creation process is permeated by contextual influences, especially with respect to an organizational environment. Various researchers have investigated the contextual and work organization factors that favor or inhibit creativity, which can be categorized into four main dimensions: organizational structure (Amabile *et al.*, 1996; Kanter, 1988), organizational culture (Amabile, 1993, 1996; Edmondson & Mogelof, 2006; Lee, Edmondson, Thomke, & Worline, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000), leadership (Amabile *et al.*, 2004; Baer & Oldham, 2006; George & Zhou, 2001; Madjar & Ortiz-Walters, 2009; Tierney & Farmer, 2004; Zhou, 2008), and teamwork-related aspects (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Polzer *et al.*, 2002; Taylor & Greve, 2006; Zhou & George, 2001).

Flexible structures that are able to connect people in multiple ways enable individuals to act with a view of accomplishing common objectives, which fosters creativity (Kanter, 1988). Conversely, an organizational structure may impede creativity if its configuration and functioning are rigid. In such conditions, individuals feel controlled, and their mobility is limited. The sensation of external control reduces the capacity for exchange, leading to a reduction in creativity (Amabile, 1996; Amabile *et al.*, 1996).

Organizational culture is directly related to the values and assumptions that guide professionals' behavior with regard to suitable ways of thinking and acting (Schein, 2009). Creative organizations are permeated by values such as openness to new ideas, appreciation of experimentation, and tolerance of errors. Innovative ideas challenge the status quo; thus, the environment must be perceived as a safe place in which to propose such ideas (Edmondson & Mogelof, 2006). An individual's perception of the environment as a safe place for proposing ideas without negative judgment, even if the ideas have no face value, is known as psychological safety. An organization must also have clear and uniformly

defined boundaries and rules; inconsistencies may produce uncertainty regarding appropriate behavior, which ultimately undermines psychological safety and restricts creativity (Lee *et al.*, 2004).

Certain leadership characteristics have a direct influence on creativity. First, pressure associated with the timescale for delivering results may affect creativity. Indeed, Baer and Oldham (2006) found an inverted U-shaped relationship between creativity and pressure exercised by leaders. Consequently, professionals must be challenged without being overburdened by very short deadlines. Second, support and control influence creativity. A manager who expects creative results from his/her subordinates and who offers them the support that they need to deliver these results will foster positive creative performance from his/her subordinates (Tierney & Farmer, 2004); conversely, the perception of control negatively influences creativity (George & Zhou, 2001). Third, constructive feedback fosters creative production. Moreover, the feedback must be directed toward the task rather than toward the person, aiming to promote the development of the professional's skills (Zhou, 2008).

Aspects related to working groups also affect creativity. Taylor and Greve (2006) found that work performed in a group tends to generate more creative results than work performed individually, although group work is less efficient. The essential element favoring creativity is mutual peer support. Feedback given by a colleague to a professional who is dissatisfied with his/her own work positively affects creativity (Zhou & George, 2001), as does openness to new ideas between members (Amabile *et al.*, 1996).

Based on previous research defining the elements that are necessary for creative performance and the organizational factors that foster or inhibit creativity, this study aims to answer the following question: how can we characterize the work of creative professionals who work in advertising agencies?

Methods

To achieve our research objective, we adopted a qualitative-interpretative approach. We conducted semi-structured interviews that were complemented by observations *in loco*, enabling us to obtain extremely nuanced and detailed information (Gray, 2004).
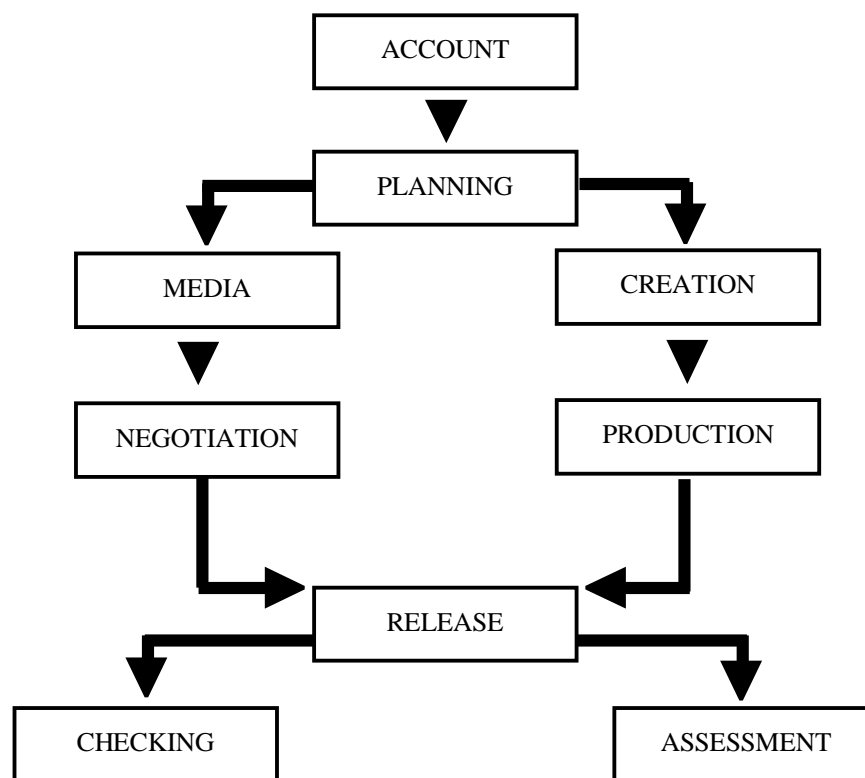
Context and participants

Five advertising agencies were chosen for the interviews and observations. We selected large and medium-sized agencies because of their economic relevance and degree of complexity. Companies with large revenues usually have larger teams, greater responsibilities assigned to individuals and groups, and greater complexity in terms of their work organization. All of the selected agencies are located in the city of São Paulo, Brazil's main commercial center, where most of the country's publicity activity is concentrated.

Advertising agencies primarily aim to differentiate or reposition a brand or product facing competition (Moeran, 2009) or to launch a product in order to induce the receivers of the message to engage in a specific action (Santos, 2005). Advertising agencies employ creative professionals who play a central role in the generation and development of ideas to achieve clients' objectives. Thus, creativity is a core element in the development of advertising services.

Advertising agencies are organized into five main areas, all of which are involved in the campaign production process: account, marketing, media, creation, and checking (Santos, 2005) (see Figure 1). The account sector manages client communications by collecting information on aspects such as the client's business strategy, products, markets, competitors, and advertising needs. This information is summarized in a document known as a brief, which is sent to the marketing sector. The marketing sector then researches the product, the target audience, and market trends to determine the best communication strategy to adopt and sends the results of their work to the media and creation sectors. The media sector

is responsible for programming, negotiating and adjusting the disclosure of advertisements to fit various communication vehicles, such as TV, radio, websites, newspapers, and magazines. The creation sector develops something new using the outcomes obtained from the marketing and media sectors. Work in the creation sector is frequently performed by pairs of copywriters and art directors, who are often called creatives. Copywriters are responsible for written text, and art directors are responsible for images. These professionals prepare text and images based on a central idea that they have created and developed. This work is coordinated by a creative director, who may manage the work of one or more pairs of creatives. Within the creation sector, production may involve the following elements: photography, sound track, image and text design, and video production and editing, among others. After an ad campaign has been developed, an assessment is performed. The checking sector determines whether the advertising material has been properly published and evaluates the results.

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Figure 1. Flowchart of the Production of an Ad Campaign
Source: Adapted from Santos, G. (2005). *Princípios da publicidade* (p. 84). Belo Horizonte, MG: Editora UFMG.

Interviews were conducted with 18 professionals, all of whom had experience developing projects for major clients. Given Throsby's (2008) observation that not all professionals in creative industries are considered **creatives** and given the focus of this study on creative work, the object of this study is professionals who create advertisements. The characteristics of the respondents in terms of their age, professional experience, and functions are described in Table 1 below. To maintain anonymity, the interviewees are identified by their function and by a sequential number (I-1 to I-18).

Table 1

Characteristics of the Respondents

Identification	Age (years)	Years in job	Function
1I	29	5	Copywriter
2I	26	4	Copywriter
3I	32	8	Copywriter
4I	47	22	Copywriter
5I	29	14	Copywriter
6I	35	3,5	Copywriter
7I	37	14	Copywriter
8I	40	13	Art Director
9I	42	13	Art Director
10I	36	13	Art Director
11I	25	3	Art Director
12I	38	18	Art Director
13I	22	4	Art Director
14I	35	14	Art Director
15I	33	10	Art Director
16I	57	22	Creative Director
17I	38	18	Creative Director
18I	34	10	Creative Director

Procedures

Data collection occurred simultaneously with the data analysis and followed the principle of **theoretical saturation** (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The initial interviews allowed us to identify themes and terms for use in subsequent interviews. Moreover, the content analysis allowed us to identify emerging themes. This cycle was repeated until we determined that additional interviews would not reveal new themes or new interpretations of the identified themes (Corley & Gioia, 2004).

The interview script comprised the following topics: the interviewees' professional history; their motivation for doing creative work; a detailed description of their work and some of their projects; facilitators and barriers affecting their creative work; and their relationships with their teams, peers, and superiors. The interviews, which lasted 90 minutes on average, were recorded and transcribed, resulting in a 558-page double-spaced Word file. The content analysis method was then applied (Bardin, 1979).

The data from the interviews were analyzed based on the theoretical references and the creative process model presented in the previous section. The main theoretical constructs concerning creativity were fixed as broad categories: the creative process (task presentation, preparation, creative response generation, validation, and outcome), components of creative performance (motivation, domain-relevant skills, and creativity-relevant skills), and organizational factors (organizational structure, organizational culture, leadership, resources, and group factors). The content of the interviews was then extensively assessed and compared with the theoretical constructs. Thus, the content was allocated to each of the above categories in corresponding order, providing a grouping of data themes. Finally, all the subjects were organized in logical order according to the creative process, as discussed in the next section.

In addition to obtaining information from the interviews, we observed the development of a campaign from its early stages until its conclusion as well as other campaigns in various stages of progress. These activities enabled us to obtain a systemic view of the creative process, which contributed to our analysis of the results and confirmed the interview data.

Results

In this section, we present the results of the field research. As a reference, we used the creative process model proposed by Amabile (1996), which includes the categories task presentation, preparation, creative response generation, validation, and outcome. The themes arising within each category are illustrated in tables with quotations from the respondents. We also provide the percentage of the respondents who mentioned each theme to indicate the incidence of each theme.

Task presentation

For the creatives at the advertising agencies that we surveyed, work demands always originate from an external source through a client request transmitted via a brief. The analysis of the interviews revealed that an essential factor in the initiation of activity is intrinsic motivation, which is linked to three elements. The first element is novelty. The interviewees reported that problems and clients often vary, which makes their work non-standard and interesting. This characteristic of the work eliminates repetition and boredom and makes the job more exciting. When a creative individual's work always concerns the same type of project or the same client, he or she is likely to feel discouraged. The second element is variety of paths for undertaking tasks. The interviewees stated that they like their work because there are no formulae or pre-established paths to completion; thus, opportunities arise for **playing around in their work**. The third element is the challenge to perform better and differently as a source of motivation. In this sense, creatives are constantly stimulated by their clients' demands. The final element, which is complementary to the previous elements, relates to the financial rewards of the work and their careers. Several of the interviewees noted that the recognition and financial rewards for their work are also important sources of extrinsic motivation. Table 2 presents quotations to illustrate the identified themes.

Table 2

Representative Quotations for Task Presentation

Theme	Quotations
Motivation	
Novelty (28%)	"It is a dynamic world. It is a world where you rarely have a routine that can become overwhelming, boring or uninspiring." (Creative Director - 15I).
	"Every day is different. The problems can be the same, you know? But the solutions will be different. The search for a different solution is what motivates me." (Art Director - 9I).

Continues

Table 2 (continued)

Theme	Quotations
Variety of paths (33%)	"I enjoy more flexibility." (Art Director - 10I).
	"The pleasure of the creative is that the creative is a two-year-old child." (Copywriter - 4I).
Challenge (67%)	"[My motivation is] to overcome the last job I did. My intrinsic [motivation] ... is to do it better every time." (Copywriter - 5I).
	"Competition is also a motivating factor. Looking at the work being done and try to do something better." (Copywriter - 3I).
Financial reward (39%)	"Everyone wishes to have a place ... that gives comfort, to have a future, which generates revenues, that generates opportunities for you ... to marry, have a family and children and to accumulate assets." (Creative Director - 15I).
	"One motivation is money. Advertising still pays well." (Art Director - 15I).

Preparation

According to the interviewees, preparation occurs through immersion in and acquisition of knowledge. Immersion involves entering the world of a problem to experience it in its context and thus to facilitate communication with the target audience. Several interviewees noted that the most important knowledge required for the development of creative solutions is acquired informally. Formal education in the field of advertising is considered to be trivial and technical and to lead to a repetition of patterns. The interviewees also emphasized the importance of a lifestyle that is **switched on** to cultural life and new technologies. The interviewees indicated that they appreciate spontaneity and that they are interested in breaking established patterns. Some of the interviewees reported that the richest knowledge is gained from **immersion**, for instance, by traveling or engaging in an artistic activity. Conversely, some of the interviewees complained that their long working hours hindered their ability to have new experiences. Table 3 presents quotations to illustrate the identified themes.

Table 3

Representative Quotations for Presentation

Theme	Quotations
Problem immersion (50%)	"The first step is to move into that world. Then, you will search; you have to ask, do research, get on Google, see what the blogs say about that subject, to understand the problems of that product." (Creative Director - 16I).
	"You do what we call immersion. Often, it is not your world. ... When you enter a business, it is a different universe." (Art Director - 10I).
Knowledge acquisition	
Informal acquisition (67%)	"You need to search all the time, have to read, have to go to the movies, must see TV and cable, have to see Faustão [a popular TV show], must see cult movies, have to read …, have to search the internet; you have to tweak it all, have to get much, much information." (Art Director - 8I).
	"Everything you see feeds your creativity, you can use it in some way.... Everything: cinema.... I feed my creativity watching silly nonsense. I like to see—I love seeing—silly nonsense." (Copywriter - 4I).

Continues

Table 3 (continued)

Theme	Quotations
Experiential 'immersion' (44%)	"My main strategy is traveling.... From the moment you travel, you come out of the commonplace ... You go to a different country, speak another language. The sidewalk is different. To cross the street, you have to do something different. You eat different food. Everything is different; everything is going to feed you." (Art Director - 9I).
	"People do not know that [acting in a play] has a strong relationship with advertising. Because acting is nothing more than using your body as a tool for another character in another life, in another story. This ... requires study, to create a character's syntax. You have to create that whole story." (Copywriter - 1I).
Long work hours (28%)	"This is one of the great conflicts of creation. Ideally, everyone works until 6 PM to enjoy leisure time in favor of continued growth. Hence, this is one of the great anxieties of working hard, staying at night, and sometimes there is not time for you to develop yourself." (Creative Director - 15I).
	"A while ago, you practically lived at the agency. You could not leave at 7 PM to go to a theater, to go home and read a book or whatever. Advertising feeds advertising ... So, advertising is autophagic; it eats its own tail." (Art Director - 11I).

Generating a creative response

The core phase of the generation of new advertising campaigns is the generation of a creative response. Analysis of the interviews allowed us to identify three groups of factors related to the generation of a creative response that should be examined individually: creation practice, timescales, and teamwork.

According to the interviewees, in their agencies, creative skill is more associated with continuous creation than with talent. The interviewees revealed that a significant portion of their work capacity is associated with training, which they call **putting on muscle**. The exercise of creativity is linked to the acquisition of greater speed and accuracy in solving problems, and for this purpose, the main technique that is used is individual or group brainstorming

The generation of a creative response is also influenced by timescales, an essential dimension of the work in agencies. The interviewees perceive time to be scarce and to influence the quality of the idea that is produced. With more time for creating, they can develop their ideas to a greater extent. Nevertheless, excessive time is also detrimental because the work can become stagnant or the idea can lose its appeal and worth. Finally, the interviewees mentioned task overlap, as they are constantly required to undertake small, new work tasks while completing larger projects. Thus, they can rarely exclusively focus on a larger project for an extensive period of time. Task overlap is considered to be detrimental to creatives' work because of they have to constantly change their focus.

Finally, teamwork conditions influence the generation of a creative response. We identified three themes in the interviews that are related to this factor. The first theme is the degree of harmony in a group. According to the interviewees, the team must operate with synergy to ensure that the task flows well and that the project is developed in a climate of collaboration. Otherwise, completing the work would be difficult. The second theme is friendship and rivalry. The agency work climate is generally described as friendly and positive. However, the interviewees described specific situations of strong rivalry in which professionals conceal their ideas to ensure that their colleagues do not steal them. Such rivalry primarily arises in large agencies in which large teams that are developing projects for different customers share the same physical space. Often, creative ideas can be used in more than one campaign. Therefore, teams that generate ideas seek to protect them from other teams. Under these circumstances, strong tension may arise between coworkers. The third theme is the sharing of experiences, views, and

opinions. According to the interviewees, the act of sharing tends to contribute significantly to the generation of new ideas and constitutes an important source of satisfaction. When a creative or team receives a task, they usually begin a process of exchanging ideas and opinions. This informal, unstructured process involves joking and discussing subjects that are distantly related to the task to facilitate a climate of collaboration. For this climate of open sharing to occur, rival teams may not share the same work space, because rivalry greatly reduces the climate of collaboration and sharing. Table 4 presents quotations to illustrate the identified themes.

Table 4

Representative Quotations for Generating a Creative Response

Theme	Quotations
Creation practice (33%)	"[Developing] creative potential is a great workout. It's like walking into a gym and … pulling the weights and walking, running and training and training and training and training. And the more you train,... the more you develop your creative potential." (Art Director - 8I).
	"I think there are many people who are creative and are not in a creative function; ... then, the creativity muscle contracts ... A person who never tried to exercise creativity, s/he comes here and starts exercising and exercising and can get a nice level …. I think creativity is largely the result of exercising." (Creative Director - 16I).
Timescale	
Time is scarce (39%)	"The main resource is time, which is very rare. It's an endangered resource." (Copywriter - 3I).
	"The advertiser wants to think, but today, s/he doesn't have time anymore." (Art Director - 10I).
Time affects quality (61%)	"[The time] varies greatly according to the care you give to each job.... 'Look, this one here is a really cool job; I think we must give focus, to create N solutions for it.' [Other jobs] you look at and say, man, let's do it fast and finish it." (Art Director - 9I).
	"The more time you have to create, things get better, because you can go back on the idea." (Copywriter - 3I).
Constant change in focus (28%)	"On a daily basis there's a constant rush for small tasks." (Art Director - 12I).
	"It's complicated because it's very, very, very, very, very rare that we are doing one project at a time. Usually, we do two or more, three or more." (Art Director - 9I).
Teamwork	
Harmony in the group (33%)	"When you have a challenge with a cool team, it gets more fun to solve. This same challenge with a disunited team who is acting cool is hell. You cannot take off because everything gets stuck." (Copywriter - 2I).
	"We get help from each other. We are doing the campaign of [brand name], and everyone is involved in the creation; we made a film by collaborating." (Art Director - 11I).
Friendship (50%)	"I've always make very good friends at companies I worked for." (Copywriter - 1I).
	"My best friends are in advertising. My best buddy is in advertising. I go out with him on the weekends. I go to the beach with him." (Writer - 4I).

Continues

Table 4 (continued)

Theme	Quotations
Rivalry (22%)	"In a normal [large] agency, [it happens] that you approach someone working in a computer and the person turns the monitor off or changes the screen so that you cannot see what s/he is doing because of the fear that you will copy the idea." (Art Director - 11I).
	"When you go to big agency, it has too much competition internally. You have teams, and those teams compete among themselves and, of course, create dissension. And then it generates an unofficial culture of stealing ideas from one another and that's bad." (Creative Director - 16I)-.
Sharing of experiences, views, and opinions (72%)	"Generally, ... when you have large campaigns, almost everyone engages in order to share the job." (Creative Director - 16I).
	"It is ... a constant exchange with [my colleagues]." (Art Director - 10I).

Validation

After the creation phase, the content undergoes a validation process. The interviewees characterized this process as a process in which an idea proceeds through **filters**. We identified three agents who operate in the validation process to establish filters: the creative, the creative director, and the client. The first filter is established by the creative him/herself, who evaluates and selects the ideas that s/he produces. The interviewees reported that they always seek to create something different and innovative and indicated that when they do not believe that an idea is very good, they do not submit it for approval. The second filter is established by the creative director. Because creative directors are usually experienced, they have precise perceptions when judging an idea and providing guidance on how to improve it. The interviewees reported that some directors provide sensitive guidance; thus, creatives' relationships with these directors foster the development of ideas. Other directors, by contrast, are ill-mannered and generate fear, which is considered detrimental to the development of ideas. The third filter is established by the client. The interviewees reported that many clients expect new ideas but that they are actually conservative when approving and making decisions because they fear the potential effects of their decisions on the public. The interviewees observed that this entire process is exhausting and frustrating because the first proofs that are prepared are rarely approved; hence, a set of alternatives must be developed until one of them passes through all of the filters. Table 5 presents quotations to illustrate the identified themes.

Table 5

Representative Quotations for Validation

Theme	Quotations
The creative (56%)	"I take the briefing and develop my ideas. Then, I am my own first filter. What I do not like, I do not take to the creative director. I take only what I think is cool." (Copywriter - 4I).
	"I start working on this title.... Then, I look again, and that's not good … Then, I work more, more, more..." (Copywriter - 5I).
The creative director (67%)	"[When I present my work to the director], she has a way of saying she did not love it. I already know that 'I did not love it' means 'it is not good; do it again'. She knows very well [what she's talking about].... She always gives nice feedback.... She is close to us in creation." (Copywriter - 5I).

Continues

Table 5 (continued)

Theme	Quotations
	"I admire [my boss].... You have to admire your boss [to accept his direction]. When you think your boss is incompetent, the work is hell, because you do not respect it; you do not consider his/her opinion, and then you feel a bit helpless." (Copywriter - 2I).
The client	
Fear (33%)	"Today, the fear [of the client], I think that's the biggest barrier. The client says, oh, I'm afraid people do not understand; I'm afraid that someone will take offense; I'm afraid ..." (Art Director - 11I).
	"The advertising client in Brazil is, in general, too afraid to be bold. So, usually the coolest things are the ones that do not survive." (Copywriter - 1I).
Struggle (39%)	"That's the way people live every day … We have to go there, have an idea, work hard on it and go to the client. We go to the client and try to sell, sell, talk, talk, talk ... and see if the client buys your idea." (Copywriter - 4I).
	"It is up to the creative … to insist on an idea, speaking to the client ..., insisting, so you're the guy pitching an idea so that the client finally agrees." ([Art Director - 10I).
Exhaustion and frustration (50%)	"The first ten ideas that you think are cool, you just play out. So, the thing is kind of dull .... I am working with a staff member that is extremely creative …. I took five pages of text to our manager ..., and he said, no, there's nothing here, sorry." (Art Director - 10I).
	"It's a job where you deal with frustration all the time.... The way things work here, there are many failures." (Copywriter - 3I).

Outcome

After the proposal has proceeded through the filtering process, it is implemented into practice. The interviewees reported that a large part of what agencies produce is not creative but **pasteurized**. Such standardization is considered a demotivating factor. Another recurring theme in the interviews was the search for **audience success**. According to the interviewees, the high point of the profession is witnessing the publication of an advertisement that presents a different idea and hearing positive comments from the public. Recognition from advertising critics is also important for the status of agencies and creatives, which is why they participate in advertising festivals. Deviant practices appear to be common, however. Some interviewees reported that many agencies produce **phantom campaigns** to compete for prizes. Such campaigns are not approved by a client and do not go public; rather, they are developed merely to enter a competition for awards and thus to improve an agency's reputation. Table 6 presents quotations to illustrate the identified themes.

Table 6

Representative Quotations for Outcomes

Theme	Quotations
Standardization (39%)	"I think the job became mechanical .... Currently, it's so hard to find a good idea out there." (Copywriter - 4I).
	"Currently, it is very difficult ... to bring new things because the customers are very afraid [of new concepts]." (Art Director - 11I).

Table 6 (continued)

Theme	Quotations
Approval by clients and peers (50%)	"It is very pleasant when you can find an idea. You realize the quality of that idea, and other people accept and admire it. It is a very pleasant thing." (Creative Director - 16I).
	"When you have the chance to put something creative on the street and have a good reach, then you do have a public response. Wow, it is nirvana." (Art Director - 9I).
Approval by critics (22%)	"The market has created a factory of ghosts. The ad that I create will not be enrolled in a festival. But then I create an ad, and I say that I published it, but nobody knows. A super idea with a sophisticated message with a smart, different concept, and I will participate in this festival.... So, Brazil began winning prizes wildly in the last 20 years.... For the Brazilian market, it worked." (Creative Director - 16I).
	"The agencies are hired because they are creative and because you are too.… Then, day by day, you try to do creative things, but they are denied. You have to work on something for Cannes, pretend you published it, and then go to Cannes ... and win prizes." (Art Director - 11I).

Discussion

In this section, we discuss three aspects revealed with the interviews that are directly related to the limits and restrictions imposed on creativity by the organizational environments of the advertising agencies that we researched: the collective nature of creative work, the tension between originality and acceptance, and the role of time. We conclude this section by proposing the concept of bounded creativity, which these aspects outline.

The collective nature of creative work

Creativity in advertising agencies manifests as a collective phenomenon. The interviewees in this study revealed that the production of an advertisement results from insights that originate from the work of two or more professionals. Creation in groups is generally viewed to be positive. The relationship between creatives is based on a partnership that is mediated by harmony, which fosters creativity (see Polzer *et al.*, 2002). The interviewees also mentioned actions such as seeking and offering help, which Hargadon and Bechky (2006) have noted foster group creativity. Furthermore, the interviewees revealed that a climate of openness to new ideas provides a source of satisfaction and facilitates creative work. Such a climate usually involves a creative director who supports the work of the team. According to Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta and Kramer (2004) and Zhou (2008), such behavior is beneficial and creates a climate of psychological safety.

Nevertheless, the collective nature of creative work also generates some concerns. In fact, we observed two cases of a breakdown in psychological safety, which can hinder creative work. First, a creative director who expresses him/herself crudely and attacks the team's work may negatively affect the psychological safety of the team and ultimately its creativity. Second, competition between professionals who are responsible for different client accounts may impede creative work. The interviewees indicated that physical proximity between different teams may lead to predatory competition and may reduce the level of trust between individuals and teams. In this sense, our results corroborate findings by Shalley and Oldham (1997), who showed that the presence of rivals in a work environment without physical barriers reduces creativity. In fact, some of the interviewees stated that

smaller and isolated teams or teams within smaller agencies can more easily foster a climate of collaboration and strong exchange based on ties of trust and shared responsibility.

Furthermore, the collective nature of creative work can also limit individuals' sense of motivation and recognition because the collective creation process involved in advertising generates doubts regarding the identity of an advertisement's author. This ambiguity limits individuals' intrinsic motivation, which is guided by the desire to create and publish advertisements of one's own authorship. This characteristic of work involved in creative industries was previously analyzed by Bendassolli and Wood (2012) and Elsbach (2009), who argued that creative professionals are motivated partly by the desire to generate work that reflects their own identity and that expresses some content or value that is intrinsic to them as a professional.

The tension between originality and acceptance

In the advertising agencies that we studied, creative work is influenced simultaneously by the motivation to generate something innovative and by the need to provide an acceptable solution for a client, generating tension between originality and acceptance. In fact, the literature underlines the paradoxical dimension of the creative professional's actions that lies between the intrinsic and extrinsic valuation of the professional's work (Bendassolli & Wood, 2012).

This tension requires flexibility from professionals and demands detachment from their original idea. When coping with the friction between their original idea and the limits imposed by the professional context, creatives aim to preserve the essence of the original idea so that it does not become strange or deformed (see Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007). This **battle** occurs both inside and outside advertising agencies. Internally, the tension may be mitigated by the existence of flexible organizational structures that facilitate communication and conflict resolution (see Amabile *et al.*, 1996; Kanter, 1988). Externally, however, tensions arise because of fears regarding the public's potential reaction to the suggested idea.

Given this work context, the professionals interviewed in this study frequently view themselves as problem solvers who adapt more than they innovate. The advertising agency environment is perpetually infused with the hope that advertisements will be artistic and innovative, combining both audience success and critical success. However, according to the interviewees in this study, this ideal appears to be achieved only rarely. Further, Frey and Jegen (2001) suggested that performing a task in exchange for monetary benefits tends to undermine individuals' intrinsic motivation in various circumstances — including those characterizing advertising agencies.

The role of time

Work in advertising agencies, as in other project-based organizations, is strongly influenced by defined timescales and deadlines. According to the interviewees, work is conditioned by the time restrictions that are imposed by the characteristics of the projects themselves: advertising campaigns must be developed and published quickly to generate the intended results. Concerning the time variable, indeed, it is common sense that it is a constraint in a large number of organizational contexts. With regard to creativity and the creative process, time is an especially important variable to facilitate or hinder creative activity, so it is relevant to be taken into account in this research. The restrictive influence of time has consequences for the acquisition of the required knowledge and for the ultimate quality of the generated ideas.

With regard to knowledge acquisition, the interviewees indicated that creative professionals seek to gain points of reference from a wide variety of sources. Many interviewees, however, complained that they lacked time to stay current with trends and to seek new perspectives and sources of inspiration. The difficulty in acquiring of such knowledge distances creative professionals from their audience and their own peers, thus negatively affecting their work.

With regard to idea quality, the interviewees indicated that a lack of available time restricts their ability to develop and polish their ideas. This finding corroborates the position of Amabile, Hadley and Kramer (2002), who stated that great ideas need time to mature; hence, excessive time pressure is prejudicial to creation (Baer & Oldham, 2006). Conversely, sufficient time provides adequate conditions for the generation of insights and the exchange of information with peers and superiors, which fosters the development of more elaborate ideas (see Simonton, 1999). According to Rietzschel, Nijstad and Stroebe (2007), the lack of time is compensated for by the way in which individuals access and use knowledge. Some creatives refer such use of knowledge as **creative muscle**, which is obtained through practice.

Bounded creativity

Our interviews, complemented by our observations of creative work *in loco*, lead us to propose that creativity in advertising agencies is bounded. The scientific literature contains accounts of the concept of bounded creativity; however, our conceptualization of bounded creativity differs from that in the literature. The concept was mentioned by Brown and Cagan (1996) in their study of the generation of designs based on a basic, predefined computer language that limits path options and combinations. In a subsequent study, Hoegl, Gibbert and Mazursky (2008) differentiated unbounded creativity, which is associated with the random search for possibilities in an effort to find an idea that is **outside the box**, from bounded creativity, which refers to exploration of limited possibilities based on predefined paths, such as budget.

We propose an alternative concept of bounded creativity. We understand bounded creativity to be a phenomenon related to a weakening of the creative experience caused by work and business contexts. Specifically within the context of advertising agencies, creativity is limited by (a) the collective nature of the work, (b) the tension between originality and acceptance, and (c) factors arising from the influence of time. Because of these restrictions, creativity no longer involves the creation of something **simply new** and rather becomes the creation of something that is **relatively new**; furthermore, creativity in this context is socially constructed in an internal environment that moderates creation and validated in an external environment that conditions such creation.

Such limitations can be argued to be inherent to the nature of the business of advertising agencies, which aim to simultaneously achieve objectives that do not necessarily converge: generating creative advertisements and meeting the commercial objectives of clients according to the restrictions imposed by time and resources. Bounded creativity, therefore, arises from a creative experience that involves an overload of activities, timescales that are frequently perceived to be insufficient, strong external control over the end results, restricted opportunities for the informal acquisition of knowledge, activities that are more adaptive than innovative, restrictions on free expression, and a degree of instability with regard to psychological safety.

We consider that the relevance of the concept of bounded creativity is linked to the degradation of creative experience in the organizational context. And this degradation of creative experience is linked to how people relate to each other, how processes and people are managed, and how time is managed. The experience is precarious, and that explains how creativity is bounded.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the phenomenon of creativity in the context of advertising agencies by attempting to identify and understand the limits and restrictions imposed on creative work in this organizational context. We conclude that although individuals work creatively within advertising agencies, their creativity is bounded by the specific characteristics inherent to the organization of advertising work, which aims to meet commercial goals.

We believe that this study's main contribution to studies on creativity is that it defines and draws attention to the concept of bounded creativity by revealing how certain environmental factors condition and restrict creative work. We believe that this contribution may be applicable to the study of creative industries in general, which include other sectors with characteristics that are similar to those of advertising agencies.

Further, we believe that the results for this study may be useful for advancing managerial practices in advertising agencies and in similar contexts. By becoming aware of the factors and complex dynamics that condition the creative process, managers will be able to act with better judgment, recognize the contradictory pressures affecting such work, and seek compromise solutions that improve the end results. Such solutions may include measures related to (a) the development of creative directors to improve their leadership competence, (b) the management of working conditions to reduce predatory competition between teams, and (c) improvements in project planning to reduce task fragmentation and allow for a more concentrated focus on campaigns.

Finally, this study's limitations should be noted. As mentioned previously, these limitations stem from this study's qualitative and exploratory nature, as the research was conducted in a limited number of organizations with a limited number of professionals. Future research may test the conclusions of this study with larger samples of advertising agencies and creative professionals. Future research may also include other creative industry sectors to ascertain how creativity manifests in these contexts and which factors stimulate and restrict creativity. Finally, future research can seek to gain a more in-depth understanding of how creative professionals manage the limits and restrictions imposed by their organizational context. We believe that such studies can contribute to a more robust and extensive understanding of the concept of bounded creativity.

Note

[1] A previous version of this article was presented at 8th Iberoamerican Academy Conference 2013.

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