Aesthetic Advertisements and Scientific Evaluations: Divergent Philosophies in Advertising Production

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This paper explores the historical division between art and science in advertising, and draws from interpretive data collected in an Irish advertising agency. A discourse analysis of ethnographic interviews conducted with advertising planners, copywriters and art directors reveals that implicit models of advertising evaluation based in the traditional scientific paradigm of prediction, measurement and control are employed by large corporate clients to evaluate and rationalise advertisements through research, and this is identified as a source of creative conflict and philosophical division. Some suggestions for a cultural and aesthetic approach to research knowledge are offered as a viable alternative to the scientific paradigm in advertising production.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Art or Science? Advertising in Historical Perspective

Advertising has been recognised for its embodiment of aesthetic qualities (Brown 1995; Venkatesh and Meamber 2006), and some theorists have suggested that advertising in itself is a legitimate form of art (Gibbons 2005; Scott 2005). However, advertising fulfills a commercial business function for client sponsors, and the conflict between art and commerce within advertising agencies has been an omnipresent macro theme of advertising history (Frank 1997; Jackall and Hirotta 2000). In the early twentieth century, there was a concern amongst clients and advertising agencies to minimize the risk associated with advertising through the application of scientific approaches to predict, measure and control the production and reception of advertisements (Kreschel 1990; Marchand 1985). The most significant proponent of the “scientific” approach to advertising was Claude C. Hopkins, who’s landmark textbook “Scientific Advertising” (Hopkins 1998 [1923]) was extremely influential on how advertising was practiced during this time period, and his work inspired other practitioners to write highly popular and influential books on scientific and rule-based scientific approaches to writing, developing and testing advertising that were pivotal to both commercial and creative success (Ogilvy 1963; Reeves 1961).

The 1950’s and 1960’s however brought about a global period of cultural and social change, and with it what became known as the “creative revolution” in advertising (Frank 1997). A new generation of creative advertising practitioners had arrived such as Leo Burnett and William Bernbach, who had a more aesthetic appreciation of advertising and rejected the scientific dominance and rules of the Hopkins advertising tradition. While the creative revolution in advertising took place in the mid-twentieth century, the divergence between aesthetic and scientific philosophies in advertising production has been an enduring feature of the industry up to the present day (Fox 1997; Steel 1998; Tasgal 2003). This philosophical divergence is most apparent in client’s use of scientifically-orientated copy testing in the creative process, which is often based upon a “neo-positivist epistemology” (Hackley 2003, p. 324) to predict and measure consumer response to advertising, and is regarded as “pseudo-science” by creative teams (Kover 1996, p. 8). Creative cultures in advertising agencies have artistic ideologies (Hackley 2003; Hirschman 1983), while client cultures are increasingly adopting scientific approaches to creative processes (Tasgal 2003), and this philosophical division has sustained the conflict between art and science in advertising production (Bogart 1989; Eighmey 1988).

Research Method

The primary research for this paper draws from interview data collected during an ethnographic study of a full-service advertising agency in Dublin, Ireland in 2003. The purpose of the paper is to explore how advertising practitioners describe the dominant philosophies, ideologies and conflicts that exist in the production of advertising in a contemporary agency, and to investigate if the historic division between art and science in advertising is manifested within these discursive accounts (Fox 1997). Ten ethnographic interviews were conducted in total (Spradley 1979); five interviews with advertising account planners, and five interviews with advertising creative teams of copywriters and art directors. The broad interview agenda was to gain informants reflections and observations on the process of producing advertising, the nature of everyday work practices in an advertising agency, the role of advertising clients in the creative process and the methods of advertising research used to evaluate the advertising produced within the agency. The interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed into over 80,000 words of text. A discourse analysis approach was adopted for the collection, analysis and interpretation of the interview data (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wood and Kroger 2000), to explore how advertising practitioners described and accounted for the practices and processes of developing advertising campaigns with corporate clients.

Data Analysis

Four central “interpretative repertoires” were developed from the interview data, which are the stylistic sets of terms, figures of speech and metaphors drawn upon by advertising professionals in the interviews to describe their work within the agency and the advertising process more generally (Hackley 2000). “Client Ideology” described the power relationship between large corporate clients and the advertising agency, which was based upon the economic dependence of the agency on the business of the client. This power relationship was reinforced in the ways in which advertising agency processes and practices in the development and evaluation of advertising ideas for large clients were constructed through dominant client ideologies. “Scientific Rationality” described the conflict between certainty and risk in advertising production, and how large clients rationalised the creative process within the agency through the application of scientifically-orientated copy testing methodologies to evaluate advertising. “Tunnels of Mediocrity” was drawn upon by the creative practitioners to describe how the “systematising” of advertising by clients through copy testing led to the production of advertisements that were “middle of the road” and “safe”, and in this process advertising became “acceptable to all and exciting to no one” (Steel 1998, p. 226) from the creative perspective. Finally “Managerial Accountability” described how client representatives were increasingly being held personally accountable to managerial superiors within client organisations for advertising campaign decisions, which reduced the risk-taking propensity and bravery of clients in the creative process.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the historical conflict between art and science in advertising production, and has shown how this philosophical division is still both relevant and apparent in contemporary practice in an Irish advertising agency. While the study focuses upon one advertising agency within a specific cultural context, some conclusions can be drawn and recommendations for advertising practice can be made. The scientific paradigm of prediction, measurement and control was an implicit framework used by clients to evaluate the advertising produced by the agency, which was a source of underlying creative conflict and divergent philoso-
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A key finding of the paper is that the advertising cycle between art and science continues to perpetuate itself in contemporary advertising practice in Ireland (Fox 1997), and that science was the dominant paradigm for the evaluation of creative advertisements by large clients. Some suggestions for a cultural and aesthetic approach to research knowledge are offered as a viable alternative to the scientific paradigm in advertising production.

References