

Advertising Ideas in the Digital Age: Changing origins, methods, and roles.

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Student certificate of Original Authorship

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, **Andrew McCowan** declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of *Doctor of Philosophy (humanities & Social Sciences)*, in the School of Communication of the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Statement indicating the format of thesis.

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Abstract

Advertising development is a creative endeavour. Historically the ‘individual genius’ has been celebrated and lionised by the industry as being key to achieving ‘creative excellence’. This association is a normative reverence for the *intuitive* creative practice of individuals, often working in pairs or small groups. In this practice, the advertising material is conceived through subjective means, dependent upon the experience and perspective of the practitioners involved.

However, an evolving application of social sciences generally, and psychology particularly have been used over the past 150 years of advertising practice to *inform* this use of creativity. This brought a systematic, empirical and allegedly objective approach to the techniques used to capture people’s attention and influence their attitudes and behaviour. Additionally, it had implications for the organisation of creativity within the structure of the advertising agency. This reflects the multiple influences and origins for the field of communication studies, within both the arts/humanities and scientific/ social science paradigms, as well as the commercial dynamics related to its role in delivering marketing programs. There are ongoing implications for industry practices, professional techniques and critical evaluations of advertising from this dynamic evolution in how creativity is applied to advertising development within the context of advertising agencies.

Central to these practices and techniques is the phenomenon of the advertising idea. This concept has evolved, albeit inconsistently, as part of industry practice into playing a spectrum of roles, including being a formative, summative and evaluative tool within creative development. However, a new emerging paradigm of *precision* in the targeting and creativity of advertising practice has evolved over the past forty years. This has been driven by two inter-related drivers of practice:

- i. the growing use of media data analytics over the past forty years, which has resulted from increasing adoption of digital and addressable media technologies which enable precise targeting of people,
- ii. the emerging use of behavioural data, provided by the so called ‘big data’ sources generated using marketing technology systems, and used to determine the most effective messages or prompts. Use of this data is informed by theories of behavioural economics, building on the psychological theories that have informed advertising practice since the early twentieth century.

This evolution in practice raises questions over whether the concept of an advertising idea continues to be relevant, particularly when related to behaviour change, or whether the new methods have made it an unnecessary element. This study explores and evaluates the essential attributes of an advertising idea within the context of normative practices, impacted by continuing technological, social, commercial, and cultural change. It examines the evolution of advertising to identify its central characteristics and principles today and explore future directions. This examination has implications for practice and the role and ethics of advertising in creating desired behaviour change.

Social and organisational creativity frameworks ground analysis of these implications for the creative ecosystem within the advertising industry, providing the theoretical context for the blend of intuitive and informed creative practices, and for the social, economic, cultural, and organisational context in which they occur. These creative dynamics are at the heart of the changing place of advertising within the broader marketing, corporate and strategic communication environment.

In summary, this paper explores the thesis that:

1. Advertising practice has traditionally taken a humanistic approach that was heavily based in the *intuitive creativity* of key individual practitioners who applied subjective judgement to develop and craft an advertising execution.
2. During the twentieth century advertising evolved beyond being a tactical form of communication driven by executional considerations by drawing on the social sciences, particularly psychology, to understand how people process information and the influence of emotions on decision-making and behaviour and so *inform creativity*, and enable advertising to address longer term, strategic objectives.
3. Advertising practice evolved to blend intuitive and informed creativity
4. In the twenty-first century, through digitalisation and datafication, advertising practice has come to be influenced by deductive and analytical techniques involving behavioural, attitudinal and involvement data that became central to managing the delivery of advertising that can be shown to meet the objectives set for it. These new methods are claimed, by their advocates in the industry, to afford *precision* advertising and so enable the development of an advertising idea that is more effective at achieving its objectives as well as being more cost efficient to implement.

This thesis explores changes in advertising practice over the past forty years, examining whether data-driven approaches are changing how creativity is applied to the development of advertisements and what that means for the concept of the advertising idea and determine whether and how it continues to be part of the practice of advertising development.