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Abstract

In this paper I seek to inquire upon audience's perceptions of creativity in online advertising - a heretofore poorly understood area. This paper initially outlines current academic understanding of creativity in online advertising, mainly derived from quantitative assessments. It then advances a qualitative methodology including diary-interviews and ethnographic online interviews across 41 participants. My starting point is a critique of the most comprehensive conceptual intervention in the area of advertising creativity - Smith and Yang's (2004) typology of "relevance" and "divergence". I assess to what extent this typology emerges from my participants' data. Two key features of relevance - contextual relevance and intrusiveness - are explored in depth, producing deeper insights into their nature as perceived by participants.

Keywords

Online, Advertising, Creativity, Qualitative, Typology, Diary, and Relevance

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A Qualitative Approach to Understanding Audience's Perceptions of Creativity in Online Advertising

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In this paper I seek to inquire upon audience's perceptions of creativity in online advertising – a heretofore poorly understood area. This paper initially outlines current academic understanding of creativity in online advertising, mainly derived from quantitative assessments. It then advances a qualitative methodology including diary-interviews and ethnographic online interviews across 41 participants. My starting point is a critique of the most comprehensive conceptual intervention in the area of advertising creativity - Smith and Yang's (2004) typology of "relevance" and "divergence". I assess to what extent this typology emerges from my participants' data. Two key features of relevance - contextual relevance and intrusiveness - are explored in depth, producing deeper insights into their nature as perceived by participants. Key Words: Online, Advertising, Creativity, Qualitative, Typology, Diary, and Relevance

Introduction

Problematising Online Advertising Creativity

In this paper I seek to understand audience's perceptions of creativity in *online* advertising. Online advertising is the fastest growing advertising media sector, increasing to $4.9 billion in the first quarter of 2007 (IAB, 2007). However, due to its comparative recency (compared to offline advertising) coupled with the complexity of researching media audiences users' perceptions of online advertising are poorly understood.

In recent years, more audience research into online advertising has been undertaken. However, this largely consists of *quantitative* experimental and survey research to determine key advertising-related features of online audiences, such as internet demographics and psychographics (Assael, 2005; Rodgers & Harris, 2003), perceptions of online advertising's value (Brackett & Carr, 2001; Ducoffe, 1996), online advertising's interactivity (Liu, 2003; Tse & Chan, 2004), and online advertising's effectiveness (Dahlen, 2001; Dahlen, Rasch, & Rosengren, 2003; Gallagher, Foster, & Parsons, 2001; Havlena & Graham, 2004; Martin, Durme, Raulas, & Merisaco, 2003). There is much less naturalistic, *qualitative* research focusing on how people perceive and engage with online advertising (see Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry, & Raman, 2004), and even less looking at how audiences perceive creativity in online advertising.

As Bell (1992) points out, creativity in advertising is slightly different from creativity found in other spheres due to the constraints of marketing objectives, budgets, the advertising brief, hierarchical approval of creatives' work and collaborative

constraints. In advertising, the role of a creative department within an advertising agency is to give form to the strategy for the advertisement - strategy consisting of the target market, how the advertisement should speak to the target market (for instance, tone of voice), and the media best suited for reaching that target market. As such, creativity is the visual and aural component of the strategy made manifest (see Sasser, Koslow, & Riordan, 2007) for a discussion of how strategy may impede creativity in multiple media integrated marketing communications [IMC] campaigns).

Ironically, despite the centrality of creativity to determining advertising effectiveness, researchers repeatedly note the paucity of literature on creativity in both online and offline advertising sectors (Boyd, 2006; Cunningham, Hall, & Young, 2006; El-murad & West, 2004; Plummer, 2004; Romeo, Denham, & Neves, 2004; Sasser et al., 2007; Smith & Yang, 2004; Till & Baack, 2005; Zinkhan, 1993). Only a handful of researchers have investigated creativity in advertising empirically (Boyd; Koslow, Sasser, & Riordan, 2003; Till & Baack; Sasser et al.). Smith and Yang also note that major reviews of the conceptual space of creativity lack any significant reference to advertising (citing Amabile,1996; Sternberg, 1999). Although this is starting to be redressed with the expansion of the discourse on the cultural and creative industries from government (House of Commons, Culture, Media & Sport Committee, 2007) and academia (see Bilton, 2007), few books on creative industries significantly examine advertising (Hartley, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Negus & Pickering, 2004).

Where creativity in advertising is explicitly addressed, it is found to be the least scientific aspect of advertising and the least understood or agreed upon concept by practitioners (Koslow et al., 2003; Ogilvy, 1985; Reid, King, & DeLorme, 1998), lay-people (White & Smith, 2001) and academics (El-murad & West, 2004). The small amount of research on creativity in advertising finds creativity to be a complex and ambiguous term (Ambler & Hollier, 2004), or even a random process (El-murad & West, p.188), with little research clarifying how creativity happens (see Hill & Johnson, 2004). Creativity is thus a fuzzy term with multiple meanings and usages depending upon profession and background.

Given the centrality of creativity to advertising, and the lack of understanding therein, it is, perhaps, surprising that there is a marked lack of *qualitative* academic research into creativity and advertising – both online and offline. As such, I advance a qualitative methodology to generate insights into a little-understood area - users' perceptions of creativity in online advertising. Given that I am exploring audiences' interactions with the online environment, I elucidate a number of methods that enable this specific, difficult-to-access environment to be understood.

Critiquing Existing Typologies of Advertising Creativity

The most comprehensive conceptual intervention in this area so far comes from Smith and Yang (2004) (see El-murad & West, 2004 for a discussion of other typologies). Recognising that no systematic research has been conducted to define advertising creativity or examine how this relates to advertising effectiveness, they draw on psychology, marketing and advertising literature to develop a typology of creativity in advertising offline (which they then use to theorise the broader interface between creativity and advertising). Of particular significance is their conceptualisation of

"relevance" and "divergence" each as components of offline advertising creativity. "Relevance" entails that the advertisement must be "meaningful, appropriate or valuable to the audience" (Smith & Yang, p. 36). "Divergence" necessitates that the advertisement contain elements that are "novel, different, or unusual" (Smith & Yang, p. 36). Smith and Yang argue that advertisements adhering to *both* divergence and relevance factors are deemed as creative adverts (see Figure 1). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given its aggregating nature, this typology is similar to Runco and Charles' (1993) measurement model for creative outputs, which is based on two variables – appropriateness and originality – a model that Koslow, Sasser, and Riordan (2003, 2006) suggest has become the most widely accepted.

Whilst each advertising medium is unique, online advertising broadly shares the same creative principles of advertising as offline advertising, as all advertisers and their agencies must understand patterns of consumption and design messages best suited to audiences at the time of viewing. On this basis, and given that Smith and Yang's (2004) typology is the most comprehensive typology to date, and given its similarity to the most widely accepted measurement model for creative outputs, their typology was used as a starting point with which to explore creativity in online advertising. However, it must be stressed that this was only a starting point, given the various limitations to Smith and Yang's typology, many of which stem from their methodology.

Smith and Yang (2004) develop their typology of relevance and divergence as components of advertising creativity largely through a literature review of creativity in advertising, dating back to 1950. They augment this by exploring one practitioner's perspective with regards to their hypotheses on creativity. From this, they theorise the effects of relevance and divergence as components of advertising creativity on consumer processing and response. However, rather than relying on a literature review and one practitioner's perspective (hardly a sustained analysis), I argue that the best to way to ascertain what divergence, or indeed, relevance, constitutes, and which is the more important (or effective), is by qualitatively studying audience's perceptions of advertising creativity. After all, as mentioned earlier, creativity is deemed central to determining advertising effectiveness, and the best judge of effectiveness is perhaps the audience itself (Amabile, 1982; Bell, 1992).

Whilst offering a useful synthesis of various components of creativity, Smith and Yang's (2004) presentation of these components is highly summarised, amounting to no more than a short definition of each component as derived from the marketing and advertising literature (see Figure 1). For instance, they state that "appropriateness" (i.e., "fits its context") is part of their definition of relevance, but no explanation or insight is offered into how or why appropriateness manifests itself in creatively relevant advertising (Yang, p. 35). This thin description (Geertz, 1973) therefore adds little to our understanding.

Recognising that their definitions of relevance and divergence offer "little consensus on the processing and response variables employed" (Smith & Yang, 2004, p. 39) (in other words, no information on audience perceptions), they go on to combine their relevance-divergence typology with an ad processing model (MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989) to identify key stimulus, processing response variables and further theorisation on advertising creativity. Yet, their theorizations are based on their *expectations* of consumers' responses to the advertising text based on previous models, rather than

actually researching consumers' responses directly, as at no point do they engage in any study of the audience themselves.

Figure 1

Conceptualizations of Ad Creativity

Source	**Divergence factors**	**Relevance factors**
Jackson and Messick (1965)	*Unusualness* (i.e., infrequent)	*Appropriateness* (i.e., fits its context), *Condensation* (i.e., warrants repeated examination)
Sobel and Rothernberg (1980)	*Originality* (i.e., newness)	*Value* (i.e., worth)
Besemer and Treffinger (1981); Bellamer and O'Quinn (1986)	*Novelty* (i.e., newness), *Elaboration* and synthesis (i.e., stylistic details)	*Resolution* (i.e. functionality)/ *Appropriateness* (i.e., solves problems)
Amabile (1983)	*Novelty*	*Appropriate, useful, valuable*
Haberland and Dacin (1992)	*Originality* (i.e., deviates from expectations)	*Meaningfulness* (i.e., conveys meaning), *Condensation* (i.e., warrants repeated examination)
Thorson and Zhao (1997); Wells (1989)	*Originality* (novelty of the creative product)	*Meaningfulness/appropriateness/relevance* (personal concerns or interests)
Tells (1998)	*Divergent* (different from what is currently being done)	
Duke (2000); Duke and Sutherland (2001)	*Imaginativeness*	*External confluence* (similarity with similar products); *Internal confluence* (similarity across executions within a campaign)

(Smith & Yang, 2004, p. 35)

Qualitative Methodology for Studying Online Audiences

Given the fuzziness of the concept of creativity, and the paucity of qualitative research exploring both creativity in advertising online and online audiences' perceptions of advertising, I explore users' (herein termed *participants*) perceptions of creativity in the online advertising realm.

As a qualitative piece of research, this study is broadly phenomenological in its orientation. It aims to represent the lived experience of the object of study - in this case, users' perceptions of online advertising creativity – and understand how people construct meaning out of the world about them (Husserl, (1913/1988). In such an endeavour, researcher reflexivity is important (Morse, 1994). Significantly, my position towards online advertising is somewhat ambivalent. My early attitude to online advertising was one of antipathy to the encroachment of commerce online. However as time and this study (extending over three years) have elapsed, I have become more acquiescent and accepting. Advertising has facilitated a growth in tools that I regularly use (such as email, blogs and forums) and I consider it unfair for these product providers not to be paid for their services. Concurrently I think free services should clearly state their advertising

remit and offer greater opt-in/opt-out options. Currently, many services are riddled with adware and spyware – the latter a covert technique that does little to inculcate brand relations with products and brands advertised. Yet, I also maintain a romantic flame for a version of a Web predicated on community, open-source and co-modification of online tools rather than commodification of the Web as an agora in which to announce wares and brands. Given that my position is riddled with contradiction and tension, I am arguably well seated to appreciate perspectives from study participants who share one, both or neither of these views.

Phenomenological research requires the researcher to enter into dialogue with others to gain experiential descriptions from which transcripts are derived and examined (Morse, 1994). Phrases from the transcripts are sought that reflect participants' perspectives. These are then synthesised to identify common structures of experience (Morse). These structures then provide the researcher with an understanding of the research object upon which later theory can be developed. This is broadly how this research was conducted, although the phases were not clear-cut, and reflexivity was maintained throughout. This research, therefore, uses qualitative hermeneutics to generate empirical and theoretical insights. Data gathering and qualitative analysis were both initially guided by relevant theory (on creativity, advertising, online advertising, audiences, new media and the online environment itself). Nonetheless, throughout the analysis, and ongoing data gathering, maximum care was taken to allow naturalistic data to emerge, and to ensure that data was not forced into preconceived analytical boxes.

Initial Data-Collection Techniques

This research blends traditional research tools with those unique to the Internet environment using Denzin's (1978, p. 291) method of "triangulation". Triangulation is achieved by utilising multiple data sources and data-gathering techniques. Here these include: closed-ended questionnaires to identify the initial participants for this study; diaries of these participants' perceptions of online advertising; interviews with diary-keeping participants; and open-ended questionnaires conducted online with a specific online community to widen and deepen emergent findings. Each of these techniques is explained below.

Arguably, triangulation of data sources and methods, each with its own claim to representing reality, helps keep data interpretations as close to objective as possible, reducing distortion from the researcher's own biases, and so increasing validity. However, triangulation does not in itself ensure that we are actually measuring what we intend to measure. Woolgar (1988, p. 29) warns that the researcher must be wary of being seduced by the idea that different elements in the text converge independently upon the same external reality. The use of reflexivity helps highlight this issue, if not solve the problem (although the problem may be reduced since McCall & Simmons, 1969 argue that validity is increased if the researcher is alert to bias and distortions from selective interpretations).

A closed-ended questionnaire distributed to one hundred people across a range of socio-demographic factors, was employed for the purposes of initially finding participants, and to then qualitatively sample them. There were 41 completed returns. Qualitative sampling techniques encourage both theoretical development and

identification of patterns since they are concerned with representativeness of concepts rather than populations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The closed-ended questionnaire designed for this study aimed to identify and select participants who fell within various parameters of "maximum variation" (Miles & Huberman, pp. 27-28), facilitating documentation of diverse variations and common important patterns. The factors of variation sought here were those of: time spent on the Internet; the use of the Internet to buy products and services; and exposure to online advertisements. Variation was also sought in that participants from a range of occupations were sampled – ranging from those working within the advertising industry to those whose only experience of advertising was as an audience. The closed-ended questionnaire identified 13 participants who were willing to keep a diary. These participants included four people working within the UK advertising industry, three of which work within the traditional offline advertising sector and mainly have experience in above-the-line advertising, and the fourth being an advertising graphics professional who runs his own design consultancy for both online and offline advertising materials. The other participants comprised a range of professional people working within the information sector and law; non-advertising university students, semi-skilled workers from a range of office based environments; "un-skilled" workers working in a range of environments and the officially unemployed such as a mother with new born children living in a semi-rural environment. Ages for both female and male participants ranged between 22 and 60 years, with the gender balance being split six to seven in favour of females. See Appendix 1 for a breakdown of participants' Web usage, shopping frequency and methods of accessing the Internet (this also details subsequent participants added to the study at a later date as described below). It was expected that variation in these factors would produce a rich data set, generating participants with a range of experiences, and hopefully, perceptions of, online advertising. For instance, those who spend a lot of time on the Internet are likely to be exposed to a wider range of online advertising than those who spend minimal time online. Those who are comfortable enough with the Internet to shop online are likely to be exposed to a range of targeted advertising. Advertising professionals are likely to have a different relationship and understanding of their own consumption of online advertising compared to lay-people.

Informed consent (Mann & Stewart, 2000, p. 48) was generated from participants at this recruitment stage. Participants were informed about the research's broad intentions, about who would see their data, and in what form. Complete confidentiality was also guaranteed. In generating informed consent, many participants required anonymity and so this paper refers to participants by background, industry, economic and professional status rather than by name.

Having selected the initial 13 participants, a naturalistic account was sought of their perceptions of online advertising. Although direct observation would have been preferable, due to the personal and private nature of individuals' typical Internet usage, this would have been impossible to achieve without inculcating an observer effect (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003) and invalidating the collection of naturalistic data. To circumvent this, the interpretive micro-ethnographic research technique diary interview method, where a diary-keeping period is followed by an interview asking detailed questions about the diary entries, was used as one of the main tools of data gathering (Corti, 1993; McDonough & McDonough, 1997).

Elliott (1991, p. 77) prescribes that a diary should contain introspective accounts of an individual's feelings, attitudes, motives and understandings in relation to things, events and circumstances and should be kept on a continuous basis. It is utilised here as a first-person account of participants' reactions to online advertising. As Bailey (1990, p. 215) also notes, the diary should be documented through habitual, candid entries in a personal journal and then analysed for recurring patterns or salient events. Although diaries are generally considered as an open-ended narrative genre, the diaries that participants were asked to keep here contained thought prompts. For instance, they were asked to reflect on how they felt when an uncannily targeted email arrives in their inbox, or, if there was anything particularly notable about advertisements that they decided to engage with. The diaries employed were relatively structured, for two reasons. Firstly structured diaries helped respondents to understand what they were asked to reflect upon, circumventing them from not using their logs because of fear of a "getting it wrong". Secondly, structured diaries encouraged the recording of information contemporary to the moment as opposed to being filled in entirely retrospectively.

Although the diary guided participants' reflection on specified fields, it was constructed to maximise rich qualitative data. Participants were also urged to be as candid and free-flowing in their notes as possible. However, as McDonough and McDonough (1997, p. 124) note, diaries cannot be expected to be a "true record" of events. Although users were encouraged to log their thoughts as events occurred online, I expected that at least part of the diary would be retrospective. This need not detract from the autobiographical voice however – if the diary conveys a sense of what it was like for the user to be at their terminal, at a specific time, at a given site then it fulfils a purpose unachievable through any other means.

In line with other diaries aiming to capture frequent and everyday activities, such as the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys' *National Travel Survey* and the *Adult Dietary Survey* (Corti, 1993), seven-day diaries were used. This period was long enough to capture behaviour or notable events without jeopardising successful completion by setting research candidates an onerous task: a longer data collection period would have been unlikely to yield richer data due to participants' boredom, tedium and undesirable retrospective entries – a finding later confirmed by participants.

The design of the diary was heavily influenced by Corti (1993). The diary was provided in the form of an A4 booklet of 15 pages. A "Plain Language Statement" (Mann & Stewart, 2000, p. 48) was included (see Appendix 2), describing the aims of the project and what the findings would be used for. The inside cover page contained instructions on what was expected from participants in the completion of their diary. Language was colloquial yet informative and stressed the importance of recording events and thoughts as soon as possible after the occurrence. This page also urged the respondent not to allow diary-keeping to affect their normal, everyday responses and practices regarding online advertising. This section also re-iterated that complete confidentiality was guaranteed. Within the diary, a brief description was offered of the range of online advertisements that participants were likely to encounter. These were put into plain language to facilitate participants' understanding. The diary offered some illustrative answers of how participants' diaries could be completed. Although this could arguably bias the method of diary entry, it also gave respondents a format of how to enter their thoughts and events thus relaxing the respondent and hopefully engendering greater honesty in their entries.

This was done by using a range of colloquial language and including reference to deviant websites such as pornography.

Each page denoted a day broken down into 24-hour periods. Pages were clearly ruled with prominent headings and ample space to enter desired information (what advertisements were being viewed, were they interactive and what was the nature of engagement, in what Web context, what time and how they felt at the time). At the end of the diary, I asked participants if the diary-keeping period was atypical in any way compared to their usual Web-based activities. Participants were also asked to comment on their diary-keeping process and clarify any peculiarities relating to their entries. In accordance with Corti's (1993) method of diary data-collection, I ensured that diaries were collected personally so as to clarify any problems with the completed diary and to facilitate the post-diary interview (where possible diaries were also distributed, and explained, in person, depending on the geographical location of participants).

I did not expect participants to be able easily to recall reactions to, and usages of, online advertising days or weeks after the event. As such, post-diary interviews were conducted with diary participants on collection of the completed diary, soon after the completion process (no more than several days later). The diary entries proved extremely useful to conducting the interviews. At their best, diaries provided a rich source of information on respondents' behaviour and experiences on a daily basis that could be further explored in interviews. At their worst, diaries provided points of entry into the interview, prompting participants to reflect further on what were sometimes, minimalist entries.

Thus, interviews were used to frame and explore the overall perspectives held by participants. The post-diary interview served three purposes. Firstly it allowed me to collect the diary in person thus helping to ensure diary completion whereas a postal return may have resulted in an uncompleted diary. Secondly, it allowed participants to be thanked and rewarded for taking part in the project. Thirdly, it allowed the participant time to reflect on the process of the diary project and to garner and discuss after-thoughts away from the computer, so leading to a more complete and considered perspective on their perceptions of online advertising. The interviews also exposed participants' gaps in knowledge and misunderstandings of online advertising and associated technical processes. No attempt was made to fill in any of these knowledge gaps, as this would have biased their perceptions of online advertising. Although topics and themes of discussion were intended to arise out of participants' experiences, common questions involved assessing: whether their week was atypical in any way, what kind of formats caught their attention, advertising they felt negative about, any sense of personalisation, factors that engendered trust and any specific factors that may have created empathy with an advertisement or an advertiser.

To facilitate relaxed topical dialogue this research utilised a semi-structured interview format. Mason (1996, p. 38) uses the term "qualitative interviewing" to refer to in-depth semi-structured or loosely structured forms of interviewing. Burgess (1983, p. 102) describes semi-structured interviews as "conversations with a purpose". Rather than being a formal question-and-answer process, semi-structured interviews tend be more discussion-based in format. For the purposes of recording interviews, this research utilised an Apple iPod and a small Belkin microphone that plugs into the iPod. This ensured that data could be transferred directly into my computer. Usage of the iPod may also have helped to alleviate participants' nerves as the machine operates silently and

unobtrusively as it is primarily a music player rather than a voice-recorder. The quality of recording is also much higher than tape.

Establishing Qualitative Themes and Ongoing Data-Collection Procedures

As McDonough and McDonough (1997) point out, diary material of this nature fits into data-first procedures. This fits particularly well with the exploratory nature of this study. Although participants were broadly guided in what to consider entering into their diary, this research expected the most important information to lie in the minutiae of their entries, and in post-diary interviews. Therefore themes and recurrent notions had to be "teased out" from the mass of data. Themes were established in accordance with Rudestam and Newton (2001) and Moustakas (1994) who suggest the qualitative researcher isolate key meanings of the participant's experience and organise the unchanged meaning units into themes. Themes were developed in a circular fashion in that a number of key pre-existing notions and theories were already initially present as a lens to analyse the emerging data. These initial themes were derived from reflections upon the literature reviewed and methodological tools. New themes were generated as data analysis was conducted. Previous data was then combed and re-combed as new themes emerged. That is to say, as a theme appeared to emerge, I reflected upon the relevant literature and/or sought new literature to understand the relevant and key concepts within the theme; looked back across the entire data set for examples to solidify and deepen the theme; and analytically married data examples with concepts from the academic literature where relevant. Throughout this process, I constantly interrogated the data and literature to seek deeper understanding of the emerging theme.

As themes emerged and consolidated, further data sampling was initiated in order to explore emerging themes more deeply. This involved two processes. The first was a return to diary participants to ask further questions, and to clarify points. This took the form of follow-up emails to enquire on avenues of data either requiring greater detail in aiding interpretation from participants or to aid in developing a notable theme or sub-theme that had emanated from participants. The second process that was initiated necessitated data collection from a more specific set of users. In line with theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), that is sampling based on emergent theory, it became clear that more participants with exposure to a range of online advertising were needed. Such participants needed to be heavy online users as this would ensure maximum exposure to online advertising in terms of frequency and exposure to new advertisements, and it was deduced that regular users of online discussion forums would fit this profile. To this end, 28 further participants were recruited and semi-structured interviews were conducted utilising the same sampling process of "progressive focussing" (Sapsford & Jupp, 1996, p. 79). It should be stressed that investigations of this nature do not attempt to represent statistically the correct proportions of different types of individuals in the population (Sapsford & Jupp), but rather aim to select participants that are likely to generate qualitatively rich and relevant data, so enabling theory-building. The number of 28 finally emerged as by this point, no new themes or sub-themes were being generated (as established by on-going data analysis).

With the 28 new participants, the whole interviewing process took place online, and the participants were all recruited from a discussion forum – *snowHeads* – with

which I was already inculcated as an insider (having been a participating member for over a year). I was therefore familiar with the codes and conventions of using this forum, and already had an online presence as a regular contributor. Indeed, this was the most ethnographically-focussed part of the work as I engaged in participant observation with a group with which I was already inculcated, so occupying the position of complete participant on the "participant-observer continuum" (Gold, 1969, p. 30). Thus, relationships of trust and understanding were already in place between the researcher and participants, although I also had to clarify online my particular interest in pursuing this line of questioning in a thread on *snowHeads*. Again, informed consent was sought, and anonymity guaranteed.

The discussion forum, *snowHeads*, describes itself as a skiing and snowboarding forum for those interested in all things 'snow'. It is populated by people mostly from the UK, from a range of backgrounds, although many are professional and relatively wealthy (in line with the profile of those who engage in snow sports). I noted throughout the study that the majority of their responses were better informed about advertising and marketing techniques than other participants in other demographics, although their overall perceptions were as broad as the initial 13. This skew in demographics was felt to be acceptable given the exploratory nature of this study. To recruit participants, the forum administrator was contacted for permission to place a semi-structured questionnaire (see Appendix 3) in the *Après Zone*, a general conversation area of the forum where topics outside of snow-related events are discussed. The questionnaire sought general perspectives on online advertising, including creativity, this latter aspect notably more directed than in the diary-interview research method. When questionnaires were collected, willing candidates were contacted for further discussion that was conducted through both traditional and non-traditional communication channels.

The advantages of using online questionnaires and discussion forum threads was that participants could respond at a time convenient to them, and also, if they wished, engage in real time conversation with me via Internet Relay Chat (IRC) or telephone. The subsequent conversations were conducted privately, rather than in the public chat room space, this ensuring confidentiality and anonymity within the online community (Jones, 1999; Mann & Stewart, 2000). Drawbacks of interviewing online in this way are that online materials may not be given the attention the researcher hopes. In this sense they may have ephemeral characteristics (Thatch, 1995) in that they do not contain the same gravitas or real-life significance that a diary might. However, the fact that these online questionnaires were followed by regular subsequent contact arguably facilitated an attention level worthy of study.

Data-First

Starting with, and delving into, a range of participants' perceptions allows the researcher to avoid imposing researcher-derived, or indeed, industry-derived understandings and preconceptions of the concept of creativity. However, research does not operate in a vacuum, and prior to conducting the research with participants, I sensitised myself to possible avenues of user perceptions of online advertising creativity through a literature search. As explained earlier, Smith and Yang's (2004) typology of creativity and advertising offline was used as a starting point, with the assumption that it

would aid understanding of advertising and creativity online (see Figure 1). Smith and Yang's typology was augmented through wider reading regarding on advertising and the online environment, exploring the role of media planning, personalisation, intrusiveness and interactivity. These literatures were accessed throughout the study - some before the participant study was conducted, and some in conjunction and afterwards, in order to more fully understand emerging themes.

Care was taken to attempt not to lead participants in any way, however, most notably by delaying interviews with participants until they had completed the week-long diary on their exposure to, and thoughts about, online advertising. Furthermore, in diaries and in post-diary interviews, creativity was not explicitly asked about, instead encouraging participants to record what online advertising they were exposed to, and then exploring what aspects of the adverts worked (or otherwise), or were memorable or noteworthy, for participants. As new participants were sought from the Web forum, a more focussed and direct approach became necessary to explore more deeply some of the emergent themes on creativity from the initial stages of the research. Again, care was taken to minimise leading participants in that only one out of the eight questions were explicitly on creativity. Other questions invited answers that may have been of a creative nature (such as "any last thoughts on online advertising you want to share?") Throughout the data-collection process, much interpretive work was done to understand and amalgamate this unstructured data into insights about creativity. As a result, sub-elements of Smith and Yang's (2004) typology are referred to in this paper, but only where they emerged in the data generated from participants. As well as revealing which aspects of Smith and Yang's over-arching typology occur in the online advertising environment, more importantly, this research elaborates on how and why, also generating sub-themes that were absent from the typology. In this way, a more meaningful explanation of creativity in online advertising emerged.

Limitations

This research is small-scale and qualitative in design, therefore in no way can the findings be generalised to wider populations. However, hopefully this is mitigated by the depth and variety of subject positions and perceptions towards online advertising that could not have been unearthed from a survey-type, broader-based analysis.

The phenomenological method itself is open to critique. Arguably individuals are made up of multiple selves, personas and multiple realities. There is also an issue with adopting the subjective position of the "other" and subjective researcher bias. However, because participants were contacted subsequent to the data collection and during ongoing analysis of research materials, there were opportunities to clarify ambiguous thoughts, phrases and expressions. Furthermore, as Goulding (1997, p. 865) argues, phenomenology is still the embracing position for much qualitative research.

Key Findings: Participants' Perceptions of Relevance

Whilst both relevance and divergence were explored in my study, for reasons of brevity, the rest of this paper focuses solely on the concept of relevance rather than divergence, and only on two of its key features - one that Smith and Yang (2004)

identified as a component of creative advertising (contextual relevance), and one that they did not (intrusiveness). The focus on relevance also stems from a wish to extend the literature on understanding of effectiveness in online interactive advertising that is well explored using quantitative approaches (Dahlen, 2001; Dahlen et al., 2003; Gallagher et al., 2001; Havlena & Graham, 2004; Martin et al., 2003), yet little understood in qualitative terms. That is to say, where user clicks and metrics are well analysed, a more robust qualitative analysis of effectiveness and relevance is not. Within this, focusing in on contextual relevance – a theme both in Smith and Yang's typology and generated from my study of participants I highlight that their typology has utility in classifying online advertising creativity. In focusing in on intrusiveness – a theme absent in Smith and Yang's typology, I highlight that their typology is incomplete. For completeness, Figure 2, Column 1, highlights those elements of Smith and Yang's typology that did not emerge in this study, either suggesting features unique to the offline advertising realm or irrelevant to participants. Figure 2, Column 2 highlights elements in Smith and Yang's typology that also emerged from this study, thereby indicating the transferability of these elements of offline advertising to online advertising. Where appropriate, I have grouped together similar aspects of Smith and Yang's typology, and given them a new label. Figure 2, Column 3 highlights elements derived from participants and absent in Smith and Yang's typology, suggesting features unique to the online advertising realm.

Figure 2

Components of Relevance

In Smith & Yang and not affirmed by participants	**In Smith & Yang and affirmed by participants**	**Additionally derived from participants**
Meaningfulness (i.e., conveys meaning)	Appropriateness (i.e., fits its context) - here termed **Contextual relevance**	**Intrusiveness**
External confluence (similarity with similar products); Internal confluence (similarity across executions within a campaign)	Value (i.e., worth), Resolution (i.e., functionality)/ Appropriateness (i.e., solves problem) / Appropriate, useful, valuable – here termed **Usefulness**	**Interactivity**
	Meaningfulness/ appropriateness/ relevance (personal concerns or interests) – here termed **Personalisation**	
	Condensation (i.e., warrants repeated examination) – here termed **Frequency of exposure**	

Contextual Relevance

Smith and Yang's (2004) relevance category of creativity includes 'appropriateness' in terms of fitting its context – here termed *contextual relevance*.

Contextual relevance is about relevance to the context of viewing. As Cho (2004, p. 93) notes, anything that impairs efficient interactions between advertisers and consumers such as timing, placement or size of advertisement, can affect perception and be viewed as clutter. In discussion of out-of-home work activities and exposure to online advertising, Participant 22 sums up participants' intense dislike of pop-up adverts in terms of context, timing and irrelevant offerings. He comments:

> […] because they get in the way of what I am looking for. I never ever read them and delete them immediately. I particularly dislike it when they make the 'x' [the symbol that closes windows on PCs] difficult to find. (Interview, April 24, 2006)

In discussion of display online advertising and relevance, Participant 24 (a non-advertising professional) comments that the advertising viewed has:

> […] no relevance to what the page is about anyway. In a nutshell I don't like advertising at all, and it normally puts me off the product, if I need something I'll actively search it out and compare different products/prices before I decide and I really don't think excessive in your face advertising really works. I guess everything from the home page to a pop-up is advertising but I tend to draw a line once I get to a homepage or an "independent" site and not really think of it as advertising because it is giving me the technical information I am looking for. (Interview, April 9, 2006)

It is pertinent to note Participant 24's distinction between advertising and Web pages. Whereas what she considers to be advertising is push based, what she considers as desired "technical information" - Web pages - is pull based. As such advertising is considered as innately irrelevant and status of relevance can only be attained when materials are requested. Yet, the UK's Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) counts websites, as well as advertising on websites, as materials for investigation should an infringement occur. Users' perceptions of what constitutes online advertising highlights the shift towards wider communication (IMC) strategies and for branded content to be embedded within the copy and the overall feel and architecture of a site or homepage.

Participants' complaints of push online advertising were virtually identical in that many advertisements were not relevant to the page they were viewing. Whereas search advertising was considered highly relevant to participants' reasons for being online, display advertising was almost without exception considered irrelevant. Referring to search advertising, Participant 25 comments: "Google's got it about right" later describing their search links as "at least somewhat relevant" (Interview, April 11, 2006). Participant 35 similarly notes that online advertising is relevant for: "Informative stuff which comes up when you Google something that you particularly want to buy". She sums up her view of online advertising commenting that: "Most of it is a pain. If I want to buy something, I will look specifically on a search engine" (Interview, May 24, 2006). Participant 16, a computer programmer who displayed extreme weariness of advertising solicitations conceded, "although I do find that occasionally the Google ad campaign ads

highlight specific points, but very, very rarely" (Interview, April 10, 2006). A key notion to arise from participants is advertising as information providers. This fits with the overall dynamic of the Web as an information retrieval system, and advertising that works within informational flows rather than against them appear to fare well.

Arguably, contextual placing of advertisements may have led to participants not noticing well-planned media purchases, but the vehemence with which they argued to the contrary was significant. Participants complained about the lack of relevance of display advertising to the product advertised as well as the lack of relationship of advertisement to the site viewed. Participant 24 comments: "Honesty rather than flashy non-product related clever adverts would be better - i.e., some advertising person thinks that it relates but all I think is "what has this got to do with it?"" (Interview, April 9, 2006).

Participant Four (a professional graphic designer) also describes the need for relevance of advertisements and hyperlinks to other commercial sites. He illustrates well the nature of relevant hyper-linking if advertisers are to successfully garner attention for their products and services.

> I would think, unless I'm leisure surfing there's usually something specific I want to find out or do but then I end up getting sidetracked and end up on a coffee site and think shall I buy coffee from ….., oh that's interesting, it's shown how I should make it, or that I didn't know it is that easy to get it, or there's an interesting book or an interesting museum and I will sort of follow those routes down rather than actually, erm, an insurance company pop up […]. (Interview, April 13, 2004)

Rather than following display advertising such as banners, pop-ups and arguably crude methods of solicitation, participants need to experience a deeper sense of relevance gained through brand association. In the same way that branded offline stores maintain an internal logic in terms of flow, product areas and the guiding of consumers, Participant Four similarly eschews advertising and marketing that bears no relevance to him

Thus, Smith and Yang's (2004) category of *appropriateness* in terms of fitting its context appears to be highly applicable to users' perceptions of relevance in online advertising. Through this qualitative approach, however, we now have insights into what contextual relevance constitutes as regards online advertising – namely, relevance to the Web page the participant is viewing and hyperlinks therein, relevance to the context of viewing and relevance to the product advertised. We also have insights into how and why contextual relevance works in online advertising.

Intrusiveness

Intrusiveness is arguably a highly *effective* advertising strategy used to gain attention by any means necessary (McMillan, 2004). Whilst intrusiveness does not appear in Smith and Yang's (2004) typology of creativity, it emerged as an important factor influencing participants' conception of relevance.

Participants tended to prefer non-intrusive adverts on the basis of simplicity and clarity: "I liked the simplicity of the John Lewis ads, erm, they were usually very good, fairly discreet laid back and not in your face" (Participant Two, Diary, March 11, 2005).

Participant 11 enjoyed a range of advertising texts citing in particular a campaign for *Sony Ericsson*:

> […] what I liked about it, was that it was something that came up spun round a couple of times and went 'Ericsson, blardy blardy blah cool phone' and then disappears again and I didn't see it again 'til probably the next time I logged on and I saw it after then two or three times but it sticks in my head as a good piece of time and I didn't find it too intrusive. I actually looked at and thought that's quite cool. (Interview, August 26, 2005)

Notably, this advertisement was short, containing graphics in keeping with the *Sony Ericsson* brand image, a brand of phone that he uses. More commonly, participants complained about online advertising upsetting their Internet usage and the ability to perform a function online. The fact that certain types of online advertisement refused to go away upset participants. In reference to pop-ups, Participant 13 complained:

> […] it's like a foot in the door, door-to-door salesman type thing, that's what that reminds me of. Totally, totally intrusive. Absolutely in your face and won't go away. Which one would like to think is a thing of the past… door-to-door salesman, you certainly don't want that on your computer. (Interview, February 16, 2005)

Another example of intrusive push-based visual design comes from Participant Nine, who complains about the fact that pop-ups hamper the viewing of a desired Web page: "It's just big and noisy. They're bloody big and fill the screen up" (Interview, April 1, 2005). In addition, Participant Thirteen describes how online advertising disrupts her Internet usage by impeding her ability to perform a function online:

> And the accompanying ad which was again like one something was placed slap bang in the middle of the Web page obscuring the link I actually wanted to click on; and it was really bloody annoying, it was right in my face and didn't go away either. … I just find the whole thing totally quite intrusive. (Interview, February 16, 2005)

An example of online advertising upsetting users' Internet usage through impacting on their mental state comes from Participant Three:

> I can actually ignore the top of the screen but when you have your mail box on the left hand side of the screen and then spinning eBay images on the right hand side of the screen I find that extremely distracting…. It's pulling my eye to the ad that either I'm attracted by that motion but I'm being distracted from what I want to be on that website for. (Diary, March 3, 2005)

The intrusiveness of online advertising upsetting users' Internet usage through impacting on their mental state is explained by Participant Five:

> The one that really annoyed me mostly, erm, probably 'cos it was Valentines day and I hadn't received any Valentines cards, something to do with being a sad singleton, and erm I had to click onto Streetmap as usual and I noticed this banner ad for the Hilton and it was really rubbish and it had these expanding hearts that kept growing and filling the screen and then there was these words that flashed up stating something like: take your perfect someone to the Hilton for the weekend and had prices that were really pricey and they just kept flashing and changing colour. And I don't know - when I was trying to do my work and filling all the little details and find out all the estate agents - it really irritated me. (Interview, March 25, 2005)

The intrusiveness of this advertisement appears to come not only from its push factor (it was unavoidable), but from the fact that it crudely intruded into this participant's life on an emotional level, with an incorrect assumption regarding the subject position of the user, thereby touching a raw nerve, and in a work-based context. Intrusiveness thus linked to a mismatch between the advertisements' projected subject position and the actual subject position of the user. Given that advertiser intrusiveness is such a topical debate within both the online and the offline sector (Mehta, 2000; Shavitt, Vargas, & Lowrey, 2004) it is surprising that this issue has not been addressed to greater depth by agencies working with the Web.

Describing how certain forms of online advertising are intrusive in terms of getting in the way of working and leisure practices, Participant 11 contrasts the situation with television where there is an accepted agreement between commercial content providers and viewers. When asked whether he found online adverts indiscriminate he comments:

> […] unsolicited is probably a better word to use that you know if you watch ITV you expect an ad break every 15 minutes and you know you are going to one and you make the choice whether you are going to watch them or leave the room. With a computer you are not aware of what you are about to bump into and it's only once it has spent its time downloading itself onto your machine and it's already downloaded that you can be subjected to it, erm, I do find it a little bit too intrusive. Like I was saying before about banner advertising I find it less intrusive because it loads up as part of a page and y'know within a couple of lines it's telling you about a product. (Interview, August 26, 2005)

Specifically it is the over-use of rich media that has annoyed participants, contravening respect for personal space. Although claiming higher click-through rates (IAB, 2004), participants have largely complained about push-oriented advertisements that contain excess movement without adding anything to the advertising idea of the campaign or execution. Participant Three similarly remarks:

> … if it distracts me from what I'm doing merely by the fact that it vibrates, spins, turns cartwheels, whatever, I immediately dismiss it as far as I can from my consciousness and it actually has a very negative effect… I am seriously considering purchasing a laptop and I would neither go to Dell nor EBay specifically because their ads annoyed me. (Diary, March 3, 2005)

As Shea (1994) observes, users in the online space do not appreciate having materials they are not interested in being forced upon them. Furthermore, the use of intrusive media is certainly not appreciated. Advertising of this nature ignores several key rules of netiquette (Shea) including privacy, performativity (looking good), knowing where they are in cyberspace and abuse of power in that advertisers are forcing themselves into users' viewing areas.

Participants deemed non-intrusive adverts as those that were simple, clear, short, predictable in location and form, and generally with non-distracting visuals in keeping with the brand's image and the central advertising idea. For example, Participant One (Diary, June 19, 2005) highlights an advertisement for Expedia observing:

> "Lovely blue strip – Neat ad. Bags with travel destination tags changing quickly, ending with "Book Now". Reminds me (1) I need to book a holiday and (2) Expedia were good last time I used them - the perfect ad!"

This builds on Ducoffe's (1996) observation that low intrusiveness values online are intimately connected to timeliness, convenience and relevance. Participant Thirty Seven notes that timeliness is a key factor. Although she generally dislikes advertising and marketing, she appreciates:

> suggestions of other products that have been bought in conjunction with what you have already opted into buying. Sometimes they are very good suggestions and I like to buy things in bulk off the Net cos it saves on delivery cost. Apart from that I can't think of any because I hate being marketed to. (Interview, April 11, 2006)

Key facets of intrusiveness were disruption to participants' work practices, Internet usage, state of mind and thought patterns. Reflecting a common sentiment, Participant 19 states: "Most, nearly all, online advertising is annoying, time wasting, bandwidth wasting and invades personal privacy and personal control over what you see" (Interview, April 10, 2006).

Discussion

In assessing participants' descriptions and accounts of creativity within online advertising, Smith and Yang's (2004) overarching theme of relevance accounted for the majority of perspectives, although some additional sub-themes were required to flesh out the usefulness of this over-arching analytical category. By utilising a qualitative, user-

centric methodology, in discussing just two of the sub-themes – contextual relevance and intrusiveness - we now have a much richer understanding of how users perceive creatively relevant online advertising.

Contextually relevant advertising is advertising that works within the informational flows that the Web is used for, and this includes timing as well as content, with display advertising largely deemed as irrelevant whilst search advertising is considered so relevant that it is not even perceived as advertising. Although long promised by agencies and soothsayers this scenario appears to be a desirable outcome for users as well as advertisers, although with caveats. Although participants were not directly asked about opt-in/opt-out advertising there appeared to be a consensus that highly targeted and personalised advertising was acceptable although many participants remained distrustful of advertising online both in terms of content and providers. This may have significance for more recent developments regarding tie-ups between Internet service providers and advertising providers that require users to opt-out of advertising. As such, advertising that offers users a sense of self-determinism and asks participants to opt-in may fare better than advertising requires participants to opt-out, particularly if an incentive is offered. This is arguably more so online than offline, which is predicated to some extent on passivity, rather than high involvement media such as the Web (Johnson, Bruner, & Kumar, 2006).

Intrusiveness arising from disruption is also common across other forms of advertising. Shavitt et al., (2004) note that each platform maintains varying levels of perceived intrusiveness. These range from media that are self-selected advertising experiences, for example catalogues and business classifieds, to televisual advertising which is deemed to be the most intrusive of traditional media formats. Across the entire spectrum of demographics, media that offer self-selecting advertising experiences were deemed the least intrusive. Although online advertising is allegedly more empowering to consumers through the growth of pull advertising formats, this study suggests that these seem to only hold true for the larger brands. In contrast smaller advertisers utilising push formats ensure their presence and result in the viewer being unable to modulate their consumption. Indeed, to some extent the high accountability of the pop-up format through its click-through response rate, explains its success, even though positive branding levels are low with this advertising form. Although the advertising industry signals a wider shift towards less intrusive formats, users' experiences appear to indicate the contrary due to annoyance with less familiar brands.

Future Research

As online and digital advertising continues to develop, deeper assessment of their impact will be required. This paper has focused on microelements of users' daily experiences and it will be useful for other aspects to be understood and taken into consideration, for example the role that issues such as dataveillance play in understanding user orientation to online advertising artefacts. In addition, as mobile and locative advertising eventually succeed online as the most popular digital format, it will be useful to similarly gain qualitative insight into usage and perception of creativity in mobile advertising usage. Although digital technology readily lends itself to large-scale quantitative analysis, small scale qualitative lends a degree of understanding

hermeneutically impossible to achieve otherwise. This has significant bearing not only for academic understanding, but also for creators of digital advertising interested in how the form and content of their messages will be perceived and acted upon.

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