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Toward a general theory of creativity in advertising: Examining the role of divergence

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Abstract. *Despite the widespread recognition of the importance of creativity in advertising by practitioners and scholars, no systematic research has been conducted to define ad creativity or examine how it relates to ad effectiveness. The present research attempts to fill this gap by reviewing past literature in psychology, marketing and advertising. From this base, a model is developed which defines a creative ad as both divergent (i.e. novel or unusual) and relevant. The effects of divergence and (to a lesser extent) relevance on consumer processing and response are examined and a series of theoretical propositions are developed. Next, a general theory of creativity in advertising is developed that calls for research in five primary areas: advertising as a communication process, management process, societal process, group process, and personal process. Finally, contributions to advertising theory and implications for future research are discussed, along with commentary from a prominent advertising executive. **Key Words** ● advertising ● advertising theory ● creativity ● divergence*

Introduction

The relationship between creativity and advertising is long, rich and textured. Creativity is considered to be an important determinant of advertising effectiveness and advertising textbooks normally devote one or two chapters to creative strategy and tactics. Major industry awards (e.g. Clio's) are given to 'creative' advertisements and salaries to 'creative' personnel represent a considerable portion of ad agencies' expenses. In addition, there is a strong focus on creativity in advertising trade papers like *Advertising Age*, *Ad Week* and even *Creativity*



(published by *Ad Age*). Indeed, few advertising and promotion executives would question the centrality of a good creative strategy and execution (Martin, 1995).

Despite the importance attributed to creativity, there has been very little research on this issue in marketing and advertising. Indeed, Zinkhan (1993) surveyed the previous 15 years of the *Journal of Advertising* and found that only five published papers (1.4 percent) dealt explicitly with creativity. Zinkhan (1993) concluded by noting the importance of creativity and calling for more research on creativity in advertising. Unfortunately, this lack of systematic theory development in advertising creativity has created a vacuum in the literature. Specifically, major reviews of the conceptual space of creativity lack any significant reference to advertising (for example, see the *Handbook of Creativity* [Sternberg, 1999] or *Creativity in Context* [Amabile, 1996]). These gaps highlight the current lack of development of theories of advertising creativity. Accordingly, the major goals of this article are to:

- define creativity and its two major determinants – divergence and relevance;
- develop the *divergence* component in greater detail;
- examine conceptual issues regarding ad divergence and consumer processing/response; and
- develop a structural format for a general theory that considers the broader interface between creativity and advertising.

Defining creativity

Definition of creativity

According to Webster's dictionary to 'create' means: to bring into existence, to invest with a new form, to produce through imaginative skill. The Encyclopedia Britannica uses a similar definition: the ability to make or otherwise bring into existence something new, whether a new solution to a problem, a new method or device, or a new artistic object or form. These definitions highlight two primary determinants of creativity. First, there must be something new, imaginative, different, or unique – this component is generally referred to as 'divergence'. Second, the divergent thing produced must solve a problem or have some type of 'relevance'.

Ad creativity versus personal creativity

People are creative when they produce ideas, solutions, inventions, or products that are divergent and relevant. Note that divergence and relevance are determined by context or the 'social recognition criteria' (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; MacKinnon, 1962). This means that an ad that is creative to one group (e.g. senior citizens) may not be considered to be creative by another group (e.g. teenagers). Ultimately, ads are products of people, just like ideas and inventions. Accordingly, the concepts of divergence and relevance can be applied to



anything people create including advertisements. This is important because three different types of creativity are related to advertising. First, there is the creative team who develop and implement the creative strategy and actually produce the ad. Second, there is the level of creativity that the ad is perceived to possess by the target market. Third, there is the level of creativity in the audience members who are exposed to the ad. While there are likely to be interactions among these three types of creativity (as hypothesized below) the defining characteristics of creativity – divergence and relevance – do not change. Instead, it is the context that changes. In an attempt to note the important differences that do exist among these contexts, the term ‘personal creativity’ will refer to the divergence/relevance of creative talent (e.g. creative directors, copywriters, etc.); ‘ad creativity’ will refer to the divergence/relevance of an ad (or campaign) as perceived by the target market; and ‘consumer creativity’ will refer to the divergence/relevance of the audience members exposed to the ad.

Creativity in psychology

One of the first formal definitions of creativity was developed by Guilford (1950) who was interested in the relationship between creativity and intelligence. Guilford believed that the standard IQ tests of the 1950s omitted important cognitive functions – specifically the ability to think divergently and be creative. ‘Most of our problem solving in everyday life involves divergent thinking. Yet, in our educational practices, we tend to emphasize teaching students how to find conventional answers’ (Guilford, 1968: 8). To fully account for creativity, Guilford (1956) developed the ‘Structure of Intellect Model’ which attempted to organize all of human cognition along three dimensions:

- 1 Five thought processes or operations: (cognition, memory, evaluation, convergent production, divergent production);
- 2 Four types of content to which the operations can be applied: (figural, symbolic, semantic, behavioral);
- 3 Six products or results of the operations on the content: (units, classes, relations, systems, transformations, implications).

The result is 120 ($5 \times 4 \times 6$) different mental abilities, many of which Guilford and his associates devised tests to measure. In this model, creative thinking occurs when *divergent* thoughts are produced. The divergent production system is involved in 24 of the 120 mental abilities and thus represents an important cognitive domain. In this model, creativity is defined as divergent thinking and is an important component of human intellect. This suggests that all consumers have the potential to identify creative stimuli and respond favorably to them.

Abraham Maslow was another prominent psychologist to examine human creativity. Maslow (1970, 1971) identified two stages of creativity. *Primary creativeness* comes out of the unconscious and is the source of new discovery. This is what Maslow called real novelty, and is equivalent to the divergence component of creativity. *Secondary creativeness* is based on logic, common sense and reason-



Table 1

Creativity as a function of divergence and relevance

	Divergent	Non-divergent
Relevant	Creative	Relevant but common
Non-relevant	Divergent but irrelevant	Non-creative

ing and is built upon previous knowledge. This stage is equivalent to the relevance component in most definitions of creativity. Thus, creativity is conceptualized as a function of divergence and relevance. The first and most essential element of creativity is *divergence* which ultimately stems from the ‘divergent production system’. Once a divergent idea is produced, it must be shaped in a manner to make it relevant (i.e. able to solve a problem, achieve a goal, etc.). This secondary stage of creativity is determined by the ‘convergent production system’ in Guilford’s Model (1956).

In a review of creativity definitions in psychology, Mumford and Gustafson (1988) identified three major approaches. The common thread was again that both divergence and relevance are needed for creativity. Their final conclusion was that creativity can be defined as ‘the production of novel, socially valued products’ (Mumford and Gustafson, 1988: 28) and this was consistent with the earlier conclusions of Amabile (1983), Ghiselin (1963) and Harmon (1963). Thus, the key determinants of creativity are displayed in the Table 1.

Creativity in advertising

In the marketing/advertising literature, creativity has been approached from a variety of perspectives as summarized in Table 2.¹ Similar to definitions in psychology, creativity in marketing is usually defined as having two characteristics: divergence and relevance (sometimes called effectiveness). For example, Amabile suggests that a ‘product or response will be judged creative to the extent that it is a novel and *appropriate, useful, correct, or valuable* response to the task at hand . . .’ (1996: 5, emphasis added). Similarly, Tellis defines creativity as ‘productive divergence’ (1998). Thus, because an ad has a specific goal, the level of creativity is to some extent based on its ability to achieve that goal (Duke and Sutherland, 2001; Finke, 1995; Kover, 1995; Kover et al., 1995; Reid et al., 1998; Tellis, 1998; Wells et al., 1995). This line of reasoning leads to the conclusion that creative ads are those that are perceived to be divergent *and* relevant.



Table 2

Conceptualizations of ad creativity

Source	Divergence factor(s)	Relevance factor(s)	Effectiveness factor(s)
Jackson and Messick (1965)	<i>Unusualness</i> (i.e. infrequent)	<i>Appropriateness</i> (i.e. fits its context), <i>Condensation</i> (i.e. warrants repeated examination)	<i>Transformation</i> (i.e. forces us to see reality in a new way)
Sobel and Rothenberg (1980)	<i>Originality</i> (i.e. newness)	<i>Value</i> (i.e. worth)	
Besemer and Treffinger (1981); Besemer and O'Quinn (1986)	<i>Novelty</i> (i.e. newness), <i>Elaboration and synthesis</i> (i.e. stylistic details)	<i>Resolution</i> (i.e. functionality)/ <i>Appropriateness</i> (i.e. solves problem)	
Amabile (1983)	<i>Novelty</i>	<i>Appropriate, useful, valuable</i>	
Haberland and Dacin (1992)	<i>Originality</i> (i.e. deviates from expectations)	<i>Meaningfulness</i> (i.e. conveys meaning), <i>Condensation</i> (i.e. warrants repeated examination)	<i>Reformulation</i> (i.e. modify brand attitude)
Thorson and Zhao (1997); Wells (1989)	<i>Originality</i> (Novelty of the creative product)	<i>Meaningfulness/ appropriateness/ relevance</i> (personal concerns or interests)	<i>Impact</i> (stopping power, connections to ad)
Tellis (1998)	<i>Divergent</i> (different from what is currently done)		<i>Productive</i> (redeeming value, contributes to brand's welfare)
Duke (2000); Duke and Sutherland (2001)	<i>Imaginativeness</i>	<i>External confluence</i> (similarity with similar products); <i>Internal confluence</i> (similarity across executions within a campaign)	



Conceptualization of divergence and creativity

Based on the psychological and marketing literature reviewed, creative ads are defined as those that are both divergent and relevant.

Divergence

The first and most fundamental characteristic of ad creativity is divergence – the ad must contain elements that are novel, different, or unusual in some way. While the concept of divergence is clearly central to creativity it has received surprisingly little development in marketing/advertising. Usually, it is represented as a one-dimensional construct (e.g. originality or novelty) with little conceptual development (see summary in Table 2). This is an important omission because divergence plays a major role and is a complex construct.

Relevance

While divergence is central to any definition of creativity, the ad also must be relevant – it must be meaningful, appropriate or valuable to the audience. Thus, relevance can be thought of as a stimulus property where some aspect of an advertisement is important, meaningful, or valuable to the consumer. Normally, relevance would be expected to be related to the brand/informational properties of the ad (e.g. was useful information attained). However, relevance can also be produced by execution elements such as music. Indeed, at least two specific types of relevance can be important for advertising:

Ad–consumer relevance This type of relevance is achieved when stimulus properties of the ad create a meaningful link to the consumer. For example, using Beatles music in an ad could create a meaningful link to Baby Boomers and, thereby, make the ad relevant to them.

Brand–consumer relevance This type of relevance occurs when an ad creates a meaningful link between the brand and the consumer. For example, the ad could make the brand seem right by showing it being used in circumstances familiar to the consumer (Lacznia and Muehling, 1993; Mishra et al., 1993; Thorson and Zhao, 1997).

Effectiveness

A third characteristic found in some definitions of creativity in advertising is the notion of *effectiveness* – the ad must be productive or capable of achieving its goals. However, in this conceptualization, incorporating the notion of effectiveness confounds advertising creativity with its consequences. That is, creative ads are *defined* by some researchers as ones that are effective at achieving their goals. However, the primary reason why researchers and advertising practitioners are



interested in advertising creativity is as an explanation for why some ads are more effective at achieving their goals than others. To make effectiveness part of creativity itself is to eliminate its usefulness as an explanatory variable. It is illogical to say that ads are more effective because they are creative, if they are creative, in part, because they are more effective. Therefore, we argue that notions of effectiveness, productivity, and impact should not be part of the definition of ad creativity.²

Ad versus brand elements

It is also important to identify two different types of ad elements. First, with few exceptions, ads usually contain prominent brand-related (or ‘information’) elements. These include the persuasive message, pictures of the brand, showing new uses for the product, and so on. In addition, the ad also contains some non-brand (or ‘execution’ elements) that are not necessarily related to the brand. These would include the layout and design, use of non-brand photographs or graphics, color, music and other ‘peripheral’ cues. This conceptualization is consistent with distinctions between execution factors and messages factors recognized in past advertising research (e.g. Kim and Leckenby, 2002; Stewart and Furse, 1984).

Focus on divergence

While both divergence and relevance are determinants of ad creativity, relevance has received extensive treatment in the advertising literature under the term ‘involvement’³ (Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984; Krugman, 1965, 1971; Lacznia and Muehling, 1993; MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989; Mishra et al., 1993; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Petty et al., 1983; Thorson and Zhao, 1997). Conversely, divergence has received very little attention. Indeed, the studies summarized in Table 2 show that advertising applications of creativity have been primarily one-dimensional in the development of the divergence construct. This is problematic because divergence is the most primary element of creativity and needs to be better understood and modeled. Accordingly, the next section develops the *divergence* component in significantly greater detail than previous advertising models.

Theoretical development of divergence

In the creativity literature, Guilford (1950, 1956) was one of the first to focus on divergence and proposed several facets of creativity that reflect the divergence and relevance components. Of the factors, seven were related to divergence: sensitivity to problems, fluency (number of ideas), novelty, flexibility, synthesis, redefinition/reorganization, and complexity; and one factor was related to relevance: evaluation/shaping. Torrance (1972, 1987, 1988, 1990), who was also interested in the psychometrics of divergence, spent years empirically testing the components of Guilford’s (1950, 1956, 1967) model. Torrance focused on the



Table 3

Determinants of divergence with examples

Factor	Definition	Advertising example
Fluency:	The ability to generate a large number of ideas – more than expected.	Absolute Vodka® campaign, 'Got Milk' campaign
Flexibility:	The ability to generate different ideas. The ability to shift from one type of subject matter to another. Ideas that fall outside the logical or expected.	Arm & Hammer® baking soda and Bounce® 'multiple use' campaigns
Originality:	Ideas that are rare, surprising, or move away from the obvious and commonplace. The ability to break away from habit-bound and stereotypical thinking.	Apple® computer's '1984' Super Bowl ad, 'Joe' Isuzu® 'liar' campaign
Elaboration:	Thinking of unexpected details. The ability to finish, extend, and detail basic ideas so they become more intricate, complicated or sophisticated.	'Scratch and Sniff' ads, interactive ads
Resistance to premature closure:	The ability to keep ideas open and resist quick, easy or obvious solutions. The ability to keep working is essential for the incubation processes to function.	Energizer® Bunny 'keeps on going' campaign, Folger's® 'soap opera' (installment) campaign.
Unusual perspective:	Seeing things from a different or unusual outlook. Ability to produce internal visualizations (see beneath the surface), rich imagery, break or extend normal boundaries, and provide unusual contexts.	Lamisil® ads using cartoon 'fungus creature', Bac'n Bits® ads showing a cartoon dog's perspective
Synthesis:	The ability to bring together items by combining, connecting, or blending normally unrelated objects or ideas. Includes bold mental leaps and merging ideas freely without self-imposed restrictions.	Budweiser® 'Frog' campaign, Current GE® 'imagination at work' print campaign
Humor:	The ability to be expressive in a comical way, to amuse people and make them laugh.	Early Miller Lite® campaign, recent ESPN® campaign
Richness and colorfulness of imagery:	The ability to arrange shapes and colors in an attractive way. The ability to produce artistic impressions or art of any kind. High production value.	Early Infinity® ads (forest scenes and classical music), Michael Jackson Pepsi® ads
Fantasy:	The ability to generate non-real ideas, worlds, or creations, often marked by highly fanciful or supernatural elements.	On-star® 'Batman' ads, Capital One 'What's in your wallet'
Expression of emotion:	The ability to convey an idea through the feeling and use of emotional, poignant, and/or sensitive material.	Hallmark Card® ads, Zolof® campaign

continues



Table 3 (cont.)

Determinants of divergence with examples

Factor	Definition	Advertising example
Empathic perspective:	The ability to use an attitude or viewpoint that understands the thoughts and feelings of others.	Child abuse prevention ads, Many medical product ads
Provocative questions:	The ability to use analysis and queries that are intended to incite, arouse, or elicit an interesting response.	Bennington® campaign, 'Teaser' ads
Future orientation:	The ability to prospect or envision future possibilities; to see and express future events.	Galyan's campaign 'What's Next,' Sharper Image® ads

divergent production system and developed a subjective test to measure the main indicators of creativity that has become the most widely used creativity test (Baer, 1993). After conducting many factorial studies Torrance (1987) identified 14 major determinants of divergence. Each factor is listed in Table 3 along with a summary definition and advertising examples.

Accordingly, any model of creativity in advertising should cover the major facets listed in Table 3. Together, these factors are conceived of as defining characteristics of creativity rather than as reflections of it. That is, divergent thinking is a function of a person's fluency, flexibility, originality, elaboration, resistance to premature closure, unusual perspective, synthesis and so on, rather than the underlying cause of these characteristics.⁴

It is important to note that divergence can be used in the execution elements of the ad (layout and design, celebrity spokespeople, unusual graphics, etc.) and/or the brand/informational elements of the ad (clever copy, showing new uses for the product, unusual transformations of the product, etc.).

Ad processing model

The studies summarized in Table 2 have shown little consistency in operationalizations of ad creativity. In addition, each study examined different aspects of creativity with little consensus on the processing and response variables employed. To provide a more theoretically precise approach, the MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) ad model is used to identify the key stimulus, processing and response variables.



Pre-attentive processing

According to Greenwald and Leavitt (1984), ad processing begins with a 'pre-attentive' stage. When consumer involvement is low or ad clutter is high (both conditions often apply in the marketplace) it is difficult for an ad to get noticed. To achieve this goal the ad must be frequently repeated or include 'colorful, moving, novel, unexpected, or affect-evoking stimuli' (Greenwald and Leavitt 1984: 584).

Motivation to process

Once the consumer's attention has been drawn to the ad, holding it becomes the next goal. In the MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) model, the consumer's motivation, ability and opportunity to process the ad determine the amount of attention given to it.

Attention/capacity

According to MacInnis and Jaworski (1989), attention reflects the level of focus given to the ad, specifically, whether ad processing is a primary or secondary task. As attention increases, greater amounts of working memory (i.e. short term memory capacity) are allocated to the stimulus.

Depth of processing

This reflects the consumer's level of understanding regarding the ad's information and ranges from simple message recognition to constructive processes like relating the message to one's personal life, role-taking, or imagining the product in use. Depth of processing has played a central role in determining the type of encoding and ability to remember (Craik and Lockhart, 1972). In this model, Level I codes are superficial (analog) codes that can be remembered via rehearsal. Level II codes are more organized representations and take advantage of categorical structures to enhance recall (Ornstein and Trabasso, 1974). Level III codes are creative or elaborate encodings (e.g. personal connections) that attach the new information to existing knowledge structures, thus maximizing recall (Krugman, 1965).

Consumer response

In the MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) model, processing effects are linked directly to consumer responses. These can be *cognitive responses* (e.g. thoughts about the ad, brand, or the context), or *affective responses* (e.g. emotional response to the ad, attitude toward the ad, and brand attitudes), that together determine purchase intentions.



Theoretical propositions

Divergence and consumer processing

One of the problems with past research on ad creativity is the lack of consideration for how divergence and creativity affect consumer processing. Often it is assumed that creative ads attract more attention than non-creative ads but more elaborate models and hypotheses have not been considered. Accordingly, the discussion that follows examines variables that could be expected to explain or moderate the effects of divergence and creativity on consumer processing and response.

Contrast effect By definition, divergent ads are different and novel so at the most basic level a contrast effect should be created. This contrast is produced via the ad's divergent, which makes it stand out from other ads and thus attracts pre-attentive processing (such as orientation reactions) where the consumer notices and directs processing resources to the ad. An example of a contrast effect would be the Gap® ads that present no message but show their logo while playing popular music. Thus it is predicted that:

P1a: Ads with high divergent will receive significantly more notice than ads with low divergence.

An interesting related hypothesis would be:

P1b: Divergence related to ad execution elements will play the bigger role in attracting attention, while divergence related to brand/message elements will play the bigger role in motivation to process the message and depth of processing.

Closure effect Divergence should also increase the consumer's motivation to process an ad. This is because divergent stimuli are unusual and often ambiguous and people have a basic need to know and understand (Maslow, 1970). In addition, previous research has shown that people have a need for closure and completion and are interested in ambiguous and unusual stimuli (Peracchio and Meyers-Levy, 1994). For example, 'teaser' ads are specifically designed to create ambiguity (and the resulting desire for closure), thereby increasing the consumer's processing motivation.

P2: Consumers will have significantly higher motivation to process divergence ads than non-divergence ads in order to attain closure.

Correspondence effect Guilford (1950, 1956, 1967, 1968) developed the concept of 'creative continuity' which suggests that *all* humans produce divergent cognitions and thus have some degree of creative potential:

Whatever the nature of creative talent may be, those persons who are recognized as creative merely have more of what all of us have. It is this principle of continuity that makes possible the investigation of creativity in people who are not necessarily distinguished. (Guilford, 1950: 446)



Thus, creativity is seen as an innate cognitive resource that every consumer possesses to some degree. In addition, creativity can be specific to a certain type of divergence (e.g. a person can be high in verbal fluency but low in future orientation). An interesting question to examine is whether the effects of divergence are increased when the criterion of 'correspondence' is achieved. Correspondence occurs when the ad's divergence matches up with the consumer's divergence. For example, ads rated high on imagination should have stronger effects on consumers with strong imaginations than on consumers with weak imaginations.

This proposition can be supported by implicit cognitions and attitude-function literature. Research regarding implicit cognitions (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995) has demonstrated that attitude objects related to self-identity will receive more favorable responses (even when subconscious). From an attitude function perspective, people are more likely to exhibit positive attitudes toward objects that express their self-identity (Shavitt, 1990).

There is also some evidence that different groups may show significant differences in their orientations toward divergence. Duke and Sutherland (2001) asked award-winning creative professionals and advertising faculty to assess validity and relevance for their 'confluence' model of creativity.⁵ Results showed that academics preferred different variations of divergence than creative professionals.⁶ Thus,

P3a: When an ad's divergence corresponds with the consumer's divergent production system, the consumer will have significantly more motivation to process the ad.

P3b: When an ad's divergence corresponds with the consumer's divergent production system, the consumer will have significantly more favorable responses to the ad.

The elaboration effect It is predicted above that divergent ads will cause consumers to try to achieve understanding and closure. It can be further predicted that achieving closure for divergent ads will often require more processing depth. Divergent ads should be more challenging to decode and interpret than convergent ads and thus require more elaborative processing to achieve understanding. As an example, McQuarrie and Mick (1992) examined 'ad resonance', which is defined as a combination of wordplay and pictures that create ambiguous or incongruent stimuli. Predictions of positive effects for ad resonance were based on Berlyne's (1971) work on the psychology of aesthetics that suggests ambiguous or incongruent stimuli produce positive reactions. The underlying mechanism is that ambiguity and incongruity trigger the consumer's desire to decode the message which results in a pleasurable response when understanding is achieved. Both of these stimulus properties are among the 'collative variables' found to stimulate arousal.

For maximum brand effects the deep processing should be brand-related rather than execution-related. An example of a divergent ad producing deep processing (of both the ad and the brand) is the famous '1984' Big Brother Apple® ad. Although this ad was shown only once during the Super Bowl, its creative and layered meanings are still being studied and analyzed 20 years later.



P4: Ads rated high on brand-related divergence will receive significantly more processing depth than ads rated low on brand-related divergence.

Resistance to wear-out Another way for divergence to influence ad processing is by resisting ad wear-out. Ad wear-out occurs when ads are repeated frequently in the marketplace (MacInnis et al., 2002; Pieters et al., 1999). This causes adaptation to the stimulus over time and decreases consumer interest and motivation to process the ad. At the extreme, ads become monotonous, and ultimately can become disliked – causing *negative* consumer responses. It seems reasonable to predict that at least some types of divergence (e.g. originality or fantasy) can be expected to wear out at a significantly slower rate than non-divergent ads.

P5: Some types of divergence should resist wear-out significantly longer than non divergent ads.

Route to persuasion According to Petty and Wegener (1999), variables such as divergence can play multiple roles in information processing and persuasion. Divergence can serve as a peripheral cue when consumers do not have the motivation or ability to process information contained in the ad. In this case, the ads are persuasive due to ‘affect transfer’ from the divergence in the ads. Specifically, divergence is an important element of the ad’s ‘production value’ and it is well known that perceptions of ad quality are transferred to ad attitudes (MacKenzie et al., 1986). Note that the source of divergence in this case is more likely to be associated with execution elements rather than with brand or message elements (due to lack of central processing). This proposition is very consistent with the way creativity has been developed in advertising textbooks (i.e. a device to increase the consumer’s attention and attraction to the ad).

P6a: Divergence related to execution elements is most likely to serve as a peripheral cue in the persuasion process.

However, divergence also can enhance the likelihood that consumers will elaborate the ad’s message. In essence, relevant divergence can serve as an argument for consumers to be persuaded by the ad because it causes them to mentally consider new and salient factors (e.g. deeper level of processing, more personal connections, etc.). Divergence and creativity’s role in the central route to persuasion have not been contemplated or examined in the literature but may be more forcefully linked to brand responses like attitudes and purchase intentions.

P6b: Divergence related to brand/message elements can serve as a motive for central processing of the brand message.

Effects of divergence on consumer response

Cognitive and affective response It is predicted that divergent ads will produce significantly more favorable cognitive and affective responses. This favorability will result from the primary value of divergent stimuli. Researchers have long acknowledged that consumers possess internal dispositions related to creativity.



For example, novelty-seeking (Finger and Mook, 1971), exploratory drive (Nissen, 1951), incongruity seeking (Hunt, 1963), innovative proneness (Rogers, 1957), exploration 'erg' (Cattell, 1957), and variety seeking (Faison, 1977; Maddi, 1968) are all examples of consumers seeking divergent stimuli. In addition, there is strong evidence from social-psychology research that consumers can be expected to produce and appreciate creative ideas (Guilford, 1967). Thus, people like new things and produce divergent thoughts and ideas themselves. Therefore, it can be predicted:

P7: Ads rated high on divergence will produce significantly more favorable cognitive and affective responses.

This general effect can be examined more specifically depending on the nature of the ad's divergence. When divergence is tied to execution elements, the deeper processing (P4) will be execution-related and should produce more desirable *ad responses* (e.g. ad cognitions or A_{Ad}). However, such processing may distract consumers from the ad's message (e.g. using Beatle's music to attract the attention of Baby Boomers may cause them to recall forceful personal memories that interfere with message processing). Conversely, when divergence is message-related the deep processing will produce more desirable *brand responses* (e.g. brand cognitions or A_B).

P8a: When divergence is execution-related it will produce more favorable consumer responses in terms of ad cognitions and ad attitudes than when divergence is brand-related.

P8b: When divergence is brand-related it will produce more favorable consumer responses in terms of brand cognitions, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions than when divergence is execution-related.

Memory of advertising Divergent ads are also expected to facilitate memory and retrieval of ad and brand information. This proposition is based on the expected increase in both attention (P1–P3) and processing depth (P4–P5). Both of these variables have been linked to better encoding, transfer to long-term memory, and accessibility/retrieval in the Levels of Processing model of memory (Craik and Lockhart, 1972).

P9a: Consumers will have better memory for ads high in divergence (on execution elements) than for ads low in divergence.

P9b: Consumers will have better memory for brands in ads with high divergence (on brand/message elements) than for brands in ads with low divergence.

Effects of creativity – divergence plus relevance

Relevance has received significant treatment in the marketing/advertising literature. Research suggests that relevance can increase pre-attentive processing and attention, motivation to process, and depth of processing (Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984; MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989). Thus, one can expect a main effect for relevance and a main effect for divergence on ad processing and response. The



interesting issue is whether the main effects for divergence and relevance will be simply additive or whether a fan-shaped interaction effect will occur where creative ads (relevant and divergent) are unusually effective in gaining notice, motivation and depth.

P10: Relevance and divergence will show a significant interaction effect on ad notice, motivation to process the ad, depth of ad processing, and consumer responses.

Moderating role of involvement

The effects of divergence are expected to be moderated by the level of consumer involvement. In this model, involvement reflects a consumer's continuing interest in a brand. For example, consumers often experience an increase in involvement right before and after purchase and become more attentive to brand stimuli and ads. When involvement is low, the pre-attentive effects of divergence should be magnified. This is because consumers will be attracted to the divergent execution elements even if they are not currently in a purchase cycle for the product (i.e. low brand involvement). Conversely, when consumer involvement is high, the pre-attentive and attention effects of divergence will be minimized. This is because the consumer is already attentive to the brand, so ad-related divergence is less effective.

P11: An interaction effect is predicted for consumer involvement and divergence. When consumer involvement is low, the pre-attentive, attention and motivation effects of divergent execution elements are significantly higher than when consumer involvement is high.

Managerial issues

The resource allocation hypothesis At a conceptual level one can think of how the total resources in an ad are allocated between divergence elements and relevance elements. The resources of an ad include the amount of space, time, budget and so on. It seems likely that different communication-effects goals will require different combinations of resource allocation for maximum effectiveness. For example, in the early stages of the campaign where attention and awareness are the goals, most of the ad's resources should be devoted to divergence (especially execution elements) to maximize contrast effects. As goals move up the hierarchy of effects to interest and comprehension, more of the ad's resources should be devoted to relevance (especially brand/message elements) and less to divergence.

In addition, the divergence elements of the ad campaign can also be expected to change as new goals are pursued. Specifically, during the beginning of the campaign most of the divergence should be related to execution elements to attract attention. As goals move up the hierarchy of effects, the divergence should be increasingly related to the brand or message elements (which will facilitate deeper processing and better memory). Thus, future research should investigate the optimal level of resource allocation for divergence and relevance elements for different ad objectives throughout the campaign.



P12a: Different levels of ad divergence and relevance will be needed for different communication-effects goals.

P12b: Different types of ad divergence (execution-related versus brand-related) will be needed for different communication-effects goals.

Toward a general theory of creativity in advertising

While the above model developed some of the key *processing and response* issues associated with ad divergence, the interface between creativity and advertising includes a much broader conceptual domain. Specifically, it is important to consider creativity in advertising from a number of different perspectives.

Creativity in the communication process

Advertising is a major form of communication between companies and their customers. Issues involved here include how creativity affects persuasion, information processing, consumer response and what variables interact with creativity to influence ad effectiveness. Processing issues were considered in detail above but related issues include how to:

- use creativity to position the image of the company;
- introduce new products or brand extensions;
- recommend new usages for their existing products;
- encourage consumers to participate in promotional activities (e.g. sales promotions);
- recognize the possible negative effects of non-creative ads; and
- identify when consumers prefer creative or non-creative ads.

Creativity in the management process

Advertising is an element of the promotional mix and must be carefully managed to maximize sales. Promotional management issues related to creativity include:

- hiring, managing and motivating creative personnel;
- understanding and stimulating the creative process;
- developing creative strategy and tactics;
- determining whether creative goals have been met;
- planning creative advertising campaigns; and
- facilitating a creative atmosphere in the organization.

Creativity as a societal process

Advertising has significant effects on society and some of the important ones are directly related to creativity. Issues here include:



- effects on popular culture;
- advertising as commercial art;
- cross-cultural differences in processing creative ads;
- appeals to 'out-group' consumer movements (e.g. anti-consumption);
- teaching advertising; and
- using creative ads to educate consumers on important societal issues (such as the dangers of drunk driving or how to reduce the risk of AIDS).

Creativity as a group process

Advertising creativity is usually a product of group collaboration and therefore it is critical to assess how creative ideas are generated in a team setting. Issues here include:

- effects of majority/minority influence;
- the role of personal/social identity;
- group creativity and the factors that facilitate or prevent group members from producing creative ideas; and
- the effects of variables like rewards, promotion/prevention focus, mood, and shifting of self-construal levels, on the production of creative ideas.

Creativity as a personal process

Advertising creativity is processed by individual consumers and can have personal ramifications. Issues here include advertising as a source of:

- consumer growth;
- consumer creativity;
- consumer self-actualization;
- consumer self-concept; and
- the impact of these individual difference variables on the effectiveness of creative ads.

A practitioner's perspective

The processing/response propositions and general issues identified above are deductive and speculative until empirical evidence can be examined. For an inductive or experience-based perspective on ad creativity, a prominent advertising executive, Bob Boelter,⁷ was asked to comment on the theoretical propositions and general issues in this article.

Mr Boelter's conceptual observations include the identification of another type of relevance (ad-to-brand), and another divergence factor (artistic expression). Also, he suggests that divergence can be expected to play a lesser role when the product has news value as creativity may distract from the story. He also identifies boundaries for when creativity may not be appropriate for the target market



(e.g. older consumers may prefer less creativity than younger consumers) or the product (e.g. creativity may be inappropriate for medical or health-related products). He also questions whether the predicted interaction between involvement and divergence will always hold – even when the consumer is involved, the marketplace is still very competitive so divergence can have an effect.

As for the broader issues, Mr Boelter notes that consumers are not only exposed to many creative ads but that they are free and do not require much time so there is a positive impact on society. Also, he notes that many brand managers are cautious and risk averse and thus prefer ads that are more familiar and comfortable – an ‘anti-divergence’ attitude. ‘If a deeper understanding of the divergence factors could help these people better appreciate the important role of creativity in advertising – that would be a big plus.’ A summary of Mr Boelter’s major thoughts and criticisms are paraphrased in Table 4 and provide interesting examples and valuable ideas for consideration and future research.

Contributions to advertising theory

Conceptual focus on creativity in advertising

In advertising, there is a consistent theme that creative strategy and the level of creativity in ads can be critical to success. Unfortunately, there is very little systematic research available to help in understanding, assessing, or implementing creativity in advertising. While promising perspectives sometimes appear in academic conferences (e.g. Broyles, 2000; Clow and Baack, 2001; Frazer, 2002), there is little systematic overlap among them. To help address these problems, this research first focused on defining creativity by tracing its conceptual and empirical roots in psychology. The broader conceptual definition offered should help orient future research toward creativity’s key determinants: divergence and relevance. Next, the major divergence factors were identified, explained and exemplified in Table 3. By focusing on divergence, this article provided new details about its complex nature and specific determinants.

The lack of past conceptual development on ad creativity has caused problems for those involved in creative endeavors and also marketing managers who must somehow evaluate the extent to which creative strategy is being achieved. Advertising is a prime example where the ‘creativity’ of a proposed ad campaign must be assessed in relation to the objectives specified in the creative strategy. However, this has been a difficult task for advertisers who have relied on measures of ad divergence (usually one-dimensional) that do not reflect the full array of factors developed in Table 3. This is theoretically and managerially important because some types of divergence may be able to achieve a specific creative strategy better than an alternative type of divergence.



Table 4

A practitioner's perspective

Issues related to advertising creativity	Comments from Bob Boelter ⁷
Relevance: 1. Ad-to-consumer 2. Brand-to-consumer	<p>There should probably be a third type: ad-to-brand relevance, which would reflect the level of coordination between the execution elements and the brand elements of the ad. I have found it to be very challenging to build a good creative strategy that is still closely related to the brand. I think a good example of this is the recent AFLAC® commercials where name recognition is the focus but it has been achieved creatively.</p> <p>Note that AFLAC is now putting little message points into the commercials. This is consistent with the idea that different creative strategies are needed as the goals of the advertising campaign change.</p>
The divergence factors	<p>I would consider another factor called 'artistic expression'. There are many ways an ad can be artistic other than through 'richness and colorful imagery'. Photography, lighting, design and layout, editing and the other elements of the ad can achieve a level of artistry when done effectively.</p>
Flexibility	<p>A good example of this was the Bob Dole and Britney Spears Pepsi® ads.</p>
Unusual perspective	<p>A good example of this is the Chevy Trucks® campaign where the trucks are enormous and out of scale with the rest of the background.</p>
Originality	<p>The new Las Vegas ads represent a totally different approach than the family-oriented campaign they had been using. The new tagline is 'what happens here stays here'.</p>
Divergent ads tend to produce more favorable consumer processing and response	<p>Exceptions to this generalization would be when the product has news value. In these situations excessive divergence will only take away from the story. An example would be when Polaroid® cameras developed instant picture technology. The demonstration of the technology was the key, excessive divergence would have interfered with the message.</p> <p>Another example might be certain product categories where creativity would be deemed inappropriate. For example, medical products, utilities, or providers of essential services typically want to stick to the straight facts and might consider divergence to be negative.</p>
Divergence on execution elements will create more favorable ad response	<p>This is generally true but you must consider the target market – if the consumer does not relate to, or care about, the ad strategy they will not take the time to consider it. Also, it is not unusual to find creative talent doing creative work just for the sake of creativity and this is probably some of the least effective divergence.</p>

continues



Table 4 (cont.)

Issues related to advertising creativity	Comments from Bob Boelter ⁷
The correspondence effect	I have definitely observed that different groups of people have different levels of creativity and divergence. For example, we have had clients who target working-class consumers and tell us not to use clever double entendre meanings because it would be ineffective and interfere with the message getting through. Similarly, I've worked with engineers and we are in 'different worlds' in terms of the divergent production system.
The predicted interaction between involvement and divergence	I am not sure that this proposition will always hold. Even if the consumer is highly involved in the product, the market place is still very competitive. With all the stimuli shouting for the consumers' attention I think that divergence can still be effective even when involvement is high – at least in some circumstances.
Resistance to ad wear-out	I tend to agree that divergent ads will resist wear-out with the exception of some types of humor. If the ad's humor is charming or endearing it can be replayed with effectiveness. However, slapstick, 'goofy' ads, or 'one note' jokes typically do not wear well in-market from my experience. One example of this is the current Di-Tech [®] campaign which was funny at first, but has worn thin on me.
Memory effects of divergent ads	I suspect that divergence would have the greatest impact on unaided brand recall as compared to aided recall or recognition measures.
What is the relationship between creativity and production value	Production value is usually related to overall production cost and in my experience the single most important determinant of production cost is lighting. Television commercials today have so many cuts and every scene has to be lit the exact same way for continuity. I like to define production value as 'polishing out distractions'. Talent, editing and postproduction also influence production value.
The relationship between creativity and the management process	My experience suggests that many brand managers and client representatives are cautious when it comes to divergence. Often they avoid risks and prefer what is familiar and comfortable – you could think of this as an 'anti-divergence' attitude. If a deeper understanding of the divergence factors could help these people better appreciate the important role of creativity in advertising – that would be a big plus.
The effects of creativity on society	I definitely agree that consumers are exposed to many creative stimuli via advertising. And it's free and doesn't take a lot of time. I do believe this has a positive impact on the general level of creativity in society and that is a good thing.
Creative ads that do not stimulate sales	An example of this might be the Taco Bell [®] Chihuahua dog commercials. They tested very popular with audiences but sales did not respond. Once the commercials were removed, sales started trending upward again. Maybe a small dog was not a good association for selling tacos.



Effects of divergence on consumer processing

Past research has not addressed how creativity, especially divergence, influences the processing and persuasiveness of advertising. This article attempts to fill this gap by formulating a total of 18 preliminary propositions regarding how divergence and creativity affect ad processing and response. Another problem with past research was the use of many different variables to represent relevance/effectiveness depending on the focus of the particular study. In this article, the processing/response model of MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) was used to clarify and organize past research as well as to articulate the propositions. The resulting hypotheses represent some of the most detailed treatment yet as to how ad creativity achieves its effects.

Ad relevance

Although ad relevance was not the focus of this article, important issues involving it were examined. After conceptually defining relevance we identified two ways that ads could achieve it (i.e. through an ad-to-consumer link or a brand-to-consumer link). This is important because different types of relevance (and divergence) may produce different processing and response from consumers as suggested in some of the propositions.

Creativity as an interaction between divergence and relevance

An interaction effect was predicted between relevance and divergence such that ads containing both features will be significantly more effective. This represents an important area for future research and highlights the need to better understand the complex relationship between the two types of relevance and the 14 different types of divergence listed in Table 3.

Basis for developing scales to measure ad creativity

A major implication from this study is that the 14 divergence factors and two relevance factors can be used to develop scales to measure perceived ad creativity. Development of such scales would allow advertising researchers to investigate how divergent properties of marketing stimuli affect consumer processing and response. This is considered critical because the advances in understanding how consumers process and respond to persuasive messages has not yet been forcefully applied to the area of creativity – despite its manifest importance in generating marketplace success.

Scales could be developed to assess the 14 divergence factors delineated here which could then be used by consumers, marketing managers, or expert judges to assess the divergence of a proposed ad or campaign. The development of such scales also would be beneficial to areas beyond advertising such as assessment of new products or management techniques (Andrews and Smith, 1996). In addi-



tion, creativity in advertising scales need to include measures of ad-to-consumer relevance and brand-to-consumer relevance. Indeed, precise measures of the different types of relevance and divergence would add significantly to our ability to test ad creativity in the laboratory and in the market.

In addition, the divergence components in Table 3 can serve as a guide for ways to make an ad divergent. This would be a useful tool in brainstorming sessions to make sure ideas are considered from the full set of divergence components.

A general theory of creativity in advertising

After examining consumer processing and response issues in detail the discussion moved up in level of abstraction to help identify the general conceptual space of 'creativity in advertising'. Five major paradigms were identified (creativity in communications, management, society, groups and individuals). This model suggests that advertising is a major field of application for creativity. For example, modern consumers are exposed to many creative advertisements each day – indeed this is probably a major creative interface for many people in economically advanced societies. Thus, the general theory section identifies a number of different ways that advertising creativity is important. Hopefully, as marketing researchers develop and refine creativity in advertising theory, it will come to be included in broader reviews of the construct (e.g. *Handbook of Creativity* [Sternberg, 1999]).

Practitioner's perspective

This article also provided observations on the theoretical propositions and issues from an experienced advertising executive, summarized in Table 4. There are a variety of implications here including the addition of ad-to-brand relevance, a new divergence factor, situations where creativity may be inappropriate, and boundaries for some of the predicted effects.

Future research

Another contribution of the conceptualization presented here is that it identifies specific areas for future research. This platform for future explorations is needed due to the current paucity of research on advertising creativity.

Research on the divergence factors First, little is known about how the divergence factors operate in marketing settings. For example, there has been speculation in the trade papers as to why award-winning ads sometimes do not stimulate sales effectively. The divergence factors can be used to investigate the hypothesis that award-winning ads tend to rate high in imagination and originality but low on relevance while ads that generate more favorable sales impact should possess divergence *and* relevance.

The divergence factors developed here also make it possible to study how



ad creativity influences attention, processing depth, ad/brand memory, self-referencing, ad attitudes, and brand attitudes. It also will be possible to examine which factors are most important (and when), and which factors are best at achieving specific communication-effects goals. For example, it could be hypothesized that the divergence factors best at influencing motivation to process and attention value might be different from the factors that are most successful at influencing depth of processing or purchase intentions. In addition, there is the issue of the magnitude of divergence – how much divergence is needed to achieve creativity and when does the degree of divergence become too extreme? It can also be expected that perceptions of creativity are influenced by factors such as consumer age, gender, education and culture.

How long does divergence produce its effects? In the marketplace, ads are repeated frequently and the effects of divergence will likely show a wear-out effect. That is, the creativity effects could be expected to decline as consumers repeatedly view the ad and become accustomed to what was once divergent. While divergent ads are expected to resist wear-out longer than non-divergent ads, these effects will not last indefinitely and may vary by the type of divergence. Indeed, it is possible that some of the advertising wear-out function is due to the short life of the divergence component.

Research on processing and response Future research is also necessary to examine the research propositions advanced in this article. Experiments can be designed to manipulate the key independent variables and interaction effects can be examined (like those predicted for involvement).

Research on macro issues Research is also needed on how cultural differences may impact the processing and effects of ad creativity. What cross-cultural differences exist in the effectiveness of creative ads? For instance, do Asian consumers and American consumers value different factors of divergence to a varying extent, or attach different importance to divergence and relevance? Other demographic variables that could be investigated as possible moderators of ad creativity effects are gender differences and generational differences.

General theory issues The broader issues identified in the general theory section also represent fertile ground for future research. These issues cross disciplines and will require multiple perspectives and research methods for triangulation to occur. Research involving these five areas can help to gain a deeper understanding of fundamental creativity issues including: what is ad creativity, what are the effects of creative ads, and how to generate creative ads.

Research opportunities Finally, there are many mature research areas in advertising that continue to attract the attention of new researchers. Ad creativity is an important frontier that has barely been examined by marketing scholars and therefore possesses significant unexplored territory.



Conclusion

Creativity is sometimes considered the ‘artistic’ side of marketing/advertising that is difficult to measure and assess. Some marketing executives wisely sub-contract the creative function to specialists outside the firm (ad agencies, creative boutiques, etc.) but ultimately they must somehow determine if creative goals are being achieved. A conceptual understanding of ad creativity is required before this important goal can be realized.

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Notes

- 1 The authors thank William K. Darley for his contribution to this table.
- 2 The authors thank Scott B. MacKenzie for this observation.
- 3 Consumers are ‘involved’ if the ad contains brand or non-brand elements that are ‘personally relevant’.
- 4 The authors thank Scott B. MacKenzie for this observation.
- 5 Their model includes three components: *internal confluence* (similarity across executions within a campaign), *external confluence* (similarity with advertising concepts of similar products), and *imaginativeness*.
- 6 While academics valued *high* internal confluence most, *high* imaginativeness second and *high* external confluence third, creative professionals valued *high* imaginativeness first, followed by *low* external confluence and *low* internal confluence.
- 7 Bob Boelter is Chairman of Boelter & Lincoln Marketing Communications. Mr Boelter received a BS in art (1968) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and served as principal creative director and art director for advertising agencies in Milwaukee, Chicago and Madison. Currently, Boelter & Lincoln bills US\$28 million annually with offices in Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin. The agency serves marketers of consumer services with marketing, research, advertising and public relations. The agency has significant experience in tourism, hospitality and recreation and has won numerous advertising awards for creative and ethical business practices.

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