

## Relational conflict across networks in the advertising industry

### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the tensions and basis for conflict which reside in relationships embedded in, and connecting advertising and other agencies involved in the process of advertising planning. Utilising a social network perspective, the paper draws from twenty two depth interviews to account for the emergence and consequences of conflict found in such relationships. Four key themes are identified covering issues of involvement intensity, role ambiguity, cultural stereotyping and finally conflicts of interest. The paper provides a valuable contrast to dyadic client – agency perspectives recognising the importance of multiple, simultaneous relationships. The findings consider the implications of tension and conflict in advertising relationships, highlighting how overt and covert actions influence perceptions of network trust. Outcomes range from collaborative tension through to intra-organisational conflict.

**Key words:** Networks, negative relationships, power, advertising

### Introduction and Review of Literature

Modern advertising agencies work within complex network environments involving internal relationships between agency staff and external relationships with a variety of agency partners including media, research and other marketing agencies. It is unsurprising therefore that collaboration through complex networks of social relationships has emerged as an important dynamic of advertising client-agency relationships (Malefyt *et al* 2003). Despite this, extant research has concentrated on dyadic client-agency relationships (c.f.: Mitchell 1986; West and Paliwoda 1996). While recent studies have started to conceptualise the complex networks of collaborating and competitive relationships inherent within contemporary advertising and creative industries (Grant and McLeod 2007), empirical studies of the processes, interactions, impact, management and negotiation of such networks have received little research attention.

This paper considers the emergence and impact of conflict within such networks. Social scientists have long recognised the existence of political tensions, power struggles and negotiated relationships redolent within traditional advertising agencies (Moeran 1996, Kemper 2001, Malefyt *et al.* 2003, Miller 2003). Similarly, Malefyt (2003: 139) suggests that “the world of consumption in which agencies operate is never neutral – it is about power and position”. While such historical accounts provide valuable insights into the dynamics of internal, often dyadic sets of relationships, they reveal little of interactions amongst multiple actors working across organisational boundaries. Furthermore, extant research has concentrated on the positive impact of cross-boundary relationships within the advertising industry. Thus, a more critical consideration of the impact of overlapping relational networks is warranted. Support for this is offered by researchers including Labianca and Brass (2006) and Taylor (1991) whose work suggests that in certain organisational circumstances, negative relationships may provide insights into the dynamics and structural realities of many contemporary industries. IMP researchers have in the past focused on conflict when cooperating (Laine 2002, Tidström and Hagberg-Andersson 2008), conflict in industrial settings (Vaaland 2001), conflict and exit strategies (Freeman 2001), conflict and complexity (Håkansson and Vaalnad 2000) and finally conflict and ambiguity (Geersbro and Ritter 2006).

Specifically, this paper seeks to explore the phenomenon of negative relationships and underlying conflict in networked relationships (connecting advertising and other agencies involved when planning advertising campaigns), its main characteristics and possible outcomes.

#### *Social networks and negative relationships*

Research interest in relationships, partnerships, alliances, joint ventures, networks and various forms of collaborative arrangements has grown at a fast pace (c.f Varadarajan and Cunningham, 1995; Hakansson and Ford, 2000; Ford *et al.*, 2003; Low and Johnston, 2008). As the management of such arrangements and

relationships has become a contemporary organisational imperative, business and management researchers have borrowed from network theory and its related concepts (Granovetter, 1973;) to explore and understand the relational context and its impact on contemporary organisational management and performance (Ebers, 1994; Ford *et al.*, 2003). This suggests that such interactions have positive and negative consequences. While this is long recognised by network researchers, most studies have concentrated on positive impacts including improved organisational performance, knowledge transfer (Granovetter 1973), personal contact referrals (Shaw, 2006) and collective trust (Burt 1997). Less consideration has been afforded to their negative impact (White 1961; Labianca *et al.* 1998). As Podolny and Page (1998: 73) advocate, researchers must “counterbalance the focus on prevalence and functionality (of networks) with an equally strong focus on (their) constraint and dysfunctionality” which might include both intra-organisational and inter-organisational restrictions on organisational performance.

Labianca *et al.* (1998) define negative relationships as an “enduring, recurring set of negative judgements, feelings, and behavioural intentions” with the purpose of disrupting another’s outcomes. An important distinction needs to be made between negative episodes or encounters (Kelley and Thibaut 1978) and longer term relationships.

Theorists have debated the extent to which negative relationships, and their possible consequences, including conflict, can result in positive or negative organisational outcomes (cf. Tjosvold 1991). Jehn (1995) suggests that under certain circumstances, conflict within teams can improve the quality of decisions, strategic planning, financial performance and organisational growth. Morgan and Hunt (1994) describe amicable conflict resolution as ‘functional conflict’. In certain situations for example, moderate levels of conflict can stimulate discussion and the formation of ideas. This perspective builds on Simmel’s (1903) suggestion that conflict is an essential socialised encounter, producing both positive and negative consequences. Specifically, research has identified the positive consequences of relationship-building and collaboration across organisations and/or between creative individuals (Ancliff *et al.* 2007, Perry-Smith 2006). Less attention has been afforded to negative consequences or related issues including the impact of power and conflict within creative industry relationships and networks. Writing on this, Thomas and Kilmann (1978) suggest that conflicting episodes can be managed in one of five ways which include collaboration, competition, compromise, avoidance and accommodation of another’s perspectives or wishes.

#### *Power and conflict in networked relationships*

Research within the field of industrial marketing has been instrumental in advancing knowledge regarding the existence, impact and consequences of power and conflict within business relationships (Hunt and Nevin 1974; Wilkinson 2001; Ford and Redwood, 2005; Hingley, 2005; Massey and Dawes, 2007). Such research has, for example, explored power within buyer-supplier relationships and connected this with the ‘grudging’ and ‘non-grudging’ yielding of control between parties (Hunt and Nevin 1974) and has established a connection between the use of coercive power and conflict within such relationships (Frasier *et al.* 1989). However, as Welch and Wilkinson (2002: 206) emphasise, “the focus of this theoretical and empirical research is almost entirely dyadic” focusing on disagreements and issues of interference in the attainment of goals between two firms.

Particular to creative industries such as advertising, relationships are more complex, spanning multiple partners. Research has described such industries as developing a network structure in which the various agencies involved (advertising, media, market research) are connected by webs of overlapping organisational and personal relationships (Malefyt *et al.* 2003, Shaw 2006). Within this industry context, analyses of individual sets of dyadic relationships are unlikely to provide a clear understanding of the influence of network relationships on organisational performance and client satisfaction. Some parallels with industrial marketing research can be identified. For example, Hadjikhani and Håkansson (1996) argued that sources of conflict may be more complex than those highlighted by early dyadic studies. Similarly, Mattsson (1985) has argued that an actor’s network position is determined by its relations with other actors in the network over whom it has some power. The actor’s position in that network is therefore a source of power (Thorelli 1990).

#### *Negative relationships and conflict within the Advertising industry*

The findings presented in this paper embrace four separate organisational roles, which, collectively, form a network of organisations involved in the process of planning advertising campaigns (Figure 1 Below). These

roles (or what others refer to as job titles/disciplines) include: internal (to advertising agency) *account managers* (predominantly account directors) and *agency creatives* (art directors and copywriters), external *researchers* and finally *media planners* (independent of the advertising agency). Their different manifestos are laid out in detail by Grant and McLeod (2007). They are defined not only in terms of their role in the overall process, but also in terms of personality stereotypes and as players occupying a role in a status hierarchy (Duckworth, 2005). Different opinions on the creative output can emerge from these stereotypes and provide a basis for conflict. This conflict can be explored by tracing the emergence, role and use of research within advertising agencies.

### *Insert Figure 1*

In summary, this study will explore those tensions and basis for conflict within relationships which embed and connect advertising and other agencies involved in the process of advertising planning, and consider the consequences of networking for advertising planning.

## **Methodology**

### *Approach*

Given the paucity of research concerning network relationships in the field of advertising management, we argue that a qualitative, grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was appropriate. Grounded theory remains an underused methodological approach in marketing (Gummesson 2003) and has rarely been applied in the field of advertising management research. Thus within this study, grounded theory provided the building blocks for theory development (Dubin 1978) because it is particularly suitable in areas where existing work is limited. As is the nature of grounded theory, the critical relational dimensions emerge from the data, and are not imposed by previous published literature. More specifically, grounded theory is a method where close inspection of the data allows the development of theory until a point of theoretical saturation of reached and further sampling is no longer required.

### *Sampling*

Scotland was chosen as the focal nation for sampling as “it is a self-contained advertising economy and community ...which provides a useful counterbalance to the conventional focus on the world’s largest economies” (Crosier *et al* 2003). In common with smaller nations such as New Zealand (Eagle and Kitchen 1999), it provides an almost complete microcosm of the networks that exist in larger advertising markets. In the first instance, the sample selection was guided by the selection of practitioners identified as either ‘elite/expert’ respondents (Dexter 1970) because of their knowledge of contemporary advertising planning and covered each of the four main types of ‘experts’ detailed earlier in the paper, their interconnected relationships illustrated in Figure 1. The fieldwork took place between Autumn 2005 and Spring 2006, which allowed the analytical process to inform and guide the research.

### *Analysis*

The nature of grounded theory meant that coding started as soon as there was data to work with and the emerging analysis of data guided the research in terms of theory and sampling. The researchers elicited codes from raw data through constant comparative analysis as the data was generated. The researchers judged the criterion of theoretical sufficiency (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to be met after 22 semi-structured, depth interviews across Edinburgh and Glasgow had been completed. Specifically, six advertising creatives, six advertising account directors, four independent media planners and six independent researchers were interviewed. Grounded theory allowed the researchers to explore the social process, social structure and social interactions (Annells 1997) within and between the expert practitioner participants, exploring variations between possible concepts before densifying into categories in terms of properties and dimensions.

All interviews were based around a topic guide, developed by the collective research team and influenced both by past research studies, practitioner experience and existing literature. Research themes were probed, with each interview tailored to the individual practitioner. Thus the researchers’ priority was to keep the interview as close to a natural conversation as possible. The use of the researcher as an ‘instrument’ in the collection (and analysis) of data was facilitated by their first hand knowledge of the advertising and market research, culture and discourse (McCracken, 1988). All interviews were digitally recorded and before being transcribed verbatim. In keeping with the principles of grounded theory researchers followed a process of open followed by selective coding (See Glaser 1992). The researchers’ goal was the generation of theory around a series of

core generated categories. The findings to emerge from this process are summarised in Figure 2 and discussed below.

In presenting findings, to maintain anonymity, codes are used to identify individual participants. These codes, together with the agencies they represented, are detailed in Table 1 below.

*Insert Table 1*

## **Research Findings**

As illustrated in Figure 2 below, four key themes emerged from the process of analysis described. Each theme together with their respective dimensions are discussed below.

*Insert Figure 2*

### *Planning Involvement: competing skill sets and motivations*

Grant *et al.* (2003) found that the degree of agency involvement in advertising planning was linked to several interlinked factors including agency clients' propensity to plan advertising, a direct consequence of their perceived importance of advertising with the client marketing planning. Within this study, many of the researcher and media participants had little direct, regular contact with advertising agency planners. This led to degrees of ambiguity as to how advertising planning was defined and the role each agency collaborator played in cross-agency planning. Frequency of interaction and closeness of relationship (with their shared clients) were therefore important considerations.

Research and media participants felt that advertising planners were "wheeled out for the annual strategy meetings..." (Media Planner, GE) or "only involved if the client is a big spender" (Media Planner, RB) or "all too senior in Scotland...the reason why there is too little planning involvement" (Media Planner, AN). In contrast, media planners and researchers believed that within the advertising agency structure, senior account management successfully fulfilled this planning void and were more appropriate for this role (than planners) given their familiarity and knowledge of the account as GT explains:

GT: If you show a complete understanding of why you're doing what you're doing, then the creative debate is kind of academic. You have more credibility. I remember I used to say to people, the more you understand your client's business, the more they believe you understand advertising ... If you know their business inside out, their brand and their consumer, they will trust you on recommendations for their advertising.

(Account Director, Creative Agency)

Indeed account managers saw planning as the "enjoyable aspect of the job" with their involvement contingent on an improved sense of job satisfaction and personal motivation:

MH: Planning allows you to think and I think a lot of account directors who are clever people...without the opportunity to think, we'd just be servicing. I think that's...less exciting, maybe a bit frustrating for someone that's got a few brain cells to rub together.

(Creative Director, Creative Agency)

Creatives in this research such as 'SM' considered that the best planners to be "...more creative than the creative...it's (the creative process) gotta start from planning". Like good creatives, skilled advertising planners were considered to be intuitive rather than scientific: they possessed a creative mindset. In the early stages of the creative process the planner's intuitive research and insights were considered important because they *contributed* to the creative process. This is in contrast to the formulaic and overly objective insights which AJ argues a typical media planner offers:

AJ: ...I was recently in a meeting with a massively upset media person. He presented a profile of the potential type of audience for these products and it was nonsensical. Basically their defense was that they'd fed in the information about the person and the machine had spat out what they read, what television they watched, what they liked to do, da-de-da, but it was hugely formulaic and there were no insights at all but they were presenting ...My worry about these is that it's not analytical...there's

no insight ...

(Creative Director, Creative Agency)

These findings suggest that the discipline and task of advertising planning, traditionally associated with the specialist advertising planner, provides fertile ground for power struggles amongst competing interest groups, both within and beyond advertising agency boundaries. The desired level of involvement was found to be an important construct, contingent on several factors including frequency of interaction and closeness to clients, job satisfaction and motivation towards planning as a discipline as well as perceived skill sets required.

*Role Ambiguity:* the blurring of roles and the struggle for agency status

The second theme to emerge was particularly redolent for the media planners. According to those interviewed, the roles of account planning and media planning have become increasingly blurred. Media planners argued that the creative agencies (particularly their account directors who are often seen as strategists ) lack the specialist media knowledge, insight and research required to gain insights into consumer media habits. For a number of years, media agencies have been investing in their research expertise, particularly in terms of the development of ‘consumer insight’ databases and research tools. Media planners in particular saw an opportunity to emerge as the lead agency by fulfilling a regular ‘hands-on’ planning role, something that is often missing on advertising accounts in Scotland. For example, one medium-sized media agency was found to have recruited a consumer insight specialist and was now offering an in-house qualitative research facility. Media planners believed that increasing their strategic involvement and research input afforded an opportunity to become the client’s lead agency:

AN: A lot of my time is spent doing consumer insight ...so it’s working out how people live their lives...where media fits into their lives but also where the brand that people are looking to advertise fits into peoples’ lives and kind of looking at the communications strategy between the consumer and the brand ...so we like to come up with a strategy ...a theme for the campaign as it were...I mean you might stand on some peoples’ toes ...I don’t see nearly as much account planning input as you might suspect on some things...especially in Scotland some of the clients are not as big and not as sophisticated necessarily ...and it also kind of depends on who is the lead agency as well ...because quite often we’ll be the lead agency.

(Media Planner, Independent Media Agency)

The issue of lead agency was particularly pertinent to media planners. Whilst all practitioners stated that collaborative working was their preferred method of producing insightful and integrated strategic solutions, the degree to which the different agencies embraced collaboration varied according to their share of the client’s budget and their long-term goals,

RU: There’s definitely a little kind of rub there when... you have agencies working for a client – the PR company, the DM company, the research company and they all, maybe can have a slightly different take on things. I think that can be a great thing... the client benefits from having five different people’s view on life...Different experiences with different clients that they can bounce around the table. So I think in general it’s a good thing but...coming back to maybe money I don’t know. There’s always a little rub as in who...particularly between the creative agency and the media independent ... maybe it’s in my head that you know ...everyone wants to be top dog.

(Media Planner, Independent Media Agency)

Hackley refers to this ‘rub’ explaining that “advertising is that ‘lovely area where art and business rub up against each other’ (Hackley, 2000). Going further, Hackley and Kover (2007: 67) explain that such ‘rubbing up’ generates friction when conflicting values are brought into juxtaposition. A lack of clarity regarding communications among the different parties and vagueness as to their respective roles further contributes to this rub and our findings suggest that confusion or ambiguity emerged when clients did not clearly articulate which agency was to lead on issues such as advertising strategy,

GC: Sometimes everyone is too polite ...but some clients are very good and will say ... “these guys do the strategy and you guys do the media” and “you can comment on it if you like” ...but mostly it’s not like that ...mostly it’s a greyer area than that...

(Media Planner, Independent Media Agency)

Clients' need for collaborative work practices were driven by the number of specialist communication agencies and the desire for integrated ideas. Media is now seen as an integral part of the creatives' challenge: "you can't separate the two" (Media Planner, GE). For media planners to liaise with a creative directly however, "would be a step too far", or as 'GE' stated, "it wouldn't be appropriate for me to contact them direct." This was perceived to be beyond both the role boundaries but perhaps more importantly beyond what was deemed politically acceptable. Certain media planners and researchers sensed that in some agencies the creatives were "protected" by the planners and account management, so that there could be no direct contact or interaction in meetings. In this sense, planners and account managers acted as gatekeepers, offering a degree of covert control over relationships with the creative hub. Account directors therefore operated as both the direct and the indirect centre of relational power with the network, a position at times contested by external partners.

The relational power base of the media planner was sometimes undermined by having advertising agencies as their direct client. In certain cases, it was noted that they "have to be very careful" in terms of their contact because the creative agencies may be their client,

GE: If we don't give (advertising agency) a good service. The next time they get a brief in, they might decide to use a different creative partner. So it's very important we build up good creative relationships – keep tight with them. Be on board with them. Don't conflict with them. (Media Planner, Independent Media Agency)

Indeed, according to the account directors interviewed, there was a need for media planners to tread carefully along what was evidently a very fine line, between opinion influenced by deep-rooted industry stereotypes and the necessity of collaboration.

GM: I think media companies are inherently lazy and I think that there's very little planning that goes on in these companies. They create divisions that are supposed to be about intelligence and research and they come up with gimmicks to try and make media value more interesting, I think. The vast majority of media planners out there, you give them a brief and they'll come up and go, here's a plan and it's going to achieve X percent cover ...and it's going to cost this and isn't that great .... there are a lot more other agencies involved in marketing now than there were in the old days. You've got sales promotion, field marketing, you've got the guys doing PR and all that stuff. They still look to us as the main agency and we deal with the accounts that we welcome. Someone's got to co-ordinate it and clients, for some reason, don't want to. They either haven't got the time or they haven't got the inclination...

(Group Account Director, Creative Agency)

These findings suggest that in networked agency relationships, the struggle for lead agency status remains a fluid but political ambition in which agency roles remain ill-defined and ambiguous. Contributing towards this perceived ambiguity are the expertise of those involved, the products and resources at their disposal, their attitudes towards collaboration, in some situations the role of gatekeepers and finally the degree of clarity/confusion with shared clients.

#### *Cultural stereotyping: Breaking boundaries or age-old resistance?*

A third research theme characterising relationships between networked actors builds on Duckworth's (2005) discussion of cultural stereotyping within the advertising industry. This was particularly evident when discussing the role of the researcher, a contentious element of advertising planning. In contrast to the traditional role stereotypes highlighted earlier, there was some evidence that creatively-led 'hotshop' agencies were creating new forms of relationships, moving away from old ways of thinking. GH explains,

GH: Intuitive media planning, I really love, you know, moving out of the box. A lot of people see a schedule or create a schedule going, "oh, I can get four 48 sheets there, two weeks of 6 sheets there and...". A computer system can do that... We're no experts in media and we don't want to be. We'll actually go find the best people and bring them into the team, slot them all in and then move along. As soon as that project is finished or that account is over with, they move up and do their own thing.

(Creative Director, Creative Agency)

Here the emphasis was on the quality of the collaborative thinking; brand ideas that could be applied across several different media and rise above confines of role-bound stereotypes. The definition of the discipline of what constitutes creativity within advertising, has been broadening for some time, and with it creative ways of working with partners. Earls (2002) argues for the term ‘media neutrality’: opportunities provided by technology for clients looking to reach audience through communication ideas applied across many forms of different media. The participants in this research did not always subscribe to this role-neutral world and whilst creatives sought to use media creatively (including traditionally below-the-line mediums), old stereotypes still remained, especially when it came to research-driven advertising evaluation,

GH: It depends what sort of research you’re doing. For me, researching work or concepts is just a waste of time...Research as in concepts, “here’s this TV idea” and a bunch of guys or people go, “I can’t see that, that must be rubbish”. Ideas die. Pre-research is much better. Strategic research is much, much better. It’s like, get your strategies into that area and then ask people what they think. If you think you’re confident in that area, then get on with the creative because that’s what its going to do is, is highlight that strategy, and complement it. (Creative Director, Creative Agency)

Several creatives believed that creative development research destroyed good ideas for the sake of “ticking the clients’ boxes”. They welcomed what Hackley (2003) describes as intuitive research, which informed their thinking as opposed to controlling, quantifying and post-rationalising their art. They considered that the outcome of the research could be influenced by many familiar variables; the skills of the researcher, the artificial group environment, the group dynamic. The creatives resented their work being “put out” to research because they felt that ‘the public’ were not educated to make valued judgements about their creative work. In this sense, independent researchers remain very much outsiders, with loyalties to their client but the source of much tension and even conflict amongst other agency partners.

The inherent tensions and stereotypes between the disciplines described above re well documented in the literature (c.f.: Hirschman, 1989; Duckworth, 2005; Kover and Goldberg, 1995; Hackley, 2003). This study found these stereotypes were learned early on in their careers, as part of the advertising culture,

RB: I don’t expect creative to liaise with researchers cos they don’t speak the same language. That’s the role of the planner. (Independent Researcher, Research Agency)

Underpinning these attitudes were the creatives’ ownership of their work and the removal of that ownership by people they believed did not understand the intuitive process of creation and creativity. Conversely the stereotypical image of the ‘precious creative’, out of touch with reality remained according to RB,

RB: I appreciate that many creatives don’t value consumer research insights that highly. I think some of them just go along just to hear what they’re saying, the language. I think it’s really useful. It kind of puts some flavour to it suddenly. Just to kind of remind yourself that these are the people you’re talking to ... this is the audience... I think that humanises them (creatives) and remind themselves who they’re talking, away from their fluffy, table footy world. (Independent Researcher, Research Agency)

While the research agencies were commissioned by advertising agencies, they rarely regarded them as clients; rather the opposite was true, seeing them as political competition rather than the ideal of a business partner held by early market research agencies who remained close to their advertising agencies (Fox 1984). Independent researchers were found to be keen to be strategically involved in their clients’ accounts, identifying this as a way of developing long-term relationships and retaining direct clients. With the exception of the public sector, which was obligated to tender research contracts, very few research consultancies had direct relationships with clients for communication work. Rather, communication work mainly came through advertising agencies with clients who needed independent research. In general, this is not an ideal situation for the researchers seeking to develop client relationships, not least because planners often sought to undermine independent researchers, using a variety of strategies, particularly if the findings of their research were not favourable. One such example of such ostracising behaviour was known as “loaded meetings”,

DE: Well loaded meetings ...I always know if I’m going into a meeting that there’s going to be trouble by how many agency personnel are there ...so if there’s five or six people from the agency there...I mean agencies do not normally put five or six people into a meeting because it costs a lot of money ...they

want to pack the room - you know there is going to be a battle taking place ...I mean that's not typical but that can happen ...you know there's an agenda ...there's a difficult decision going to be made today and I'm going to find myself in the middle. (Independent Researcher, Research Agency)

Schwartzman (1996: 42) reminds us that such meetings "give the appearance that they are guided by practical aims and reason when they really facilitate relationship negotiation and struggles for power". Some researchers sought to try to circumvent this situation by briefing or "arming", as one researcher put it, the client prior to the meeting with the creative agency to allow them to consider the research findings and their response to the agency. This is in keeping with what Goffman (1959: 1) calls an attempt to create a position of "advantageous power". Researchers challenged the role of planners as 'semi-independent observer'. They believed that the planner could use the research as a "façade",

MC: That's what makes me uncomfortable about it ...I believe research is used more of a selling tool...I hear planners in meetings...justifying the account management line by using planning as a façade if you like ...it's a tool that stops clients asking questions ...they'll say "don't you worry we've spoken to the consumers"...and "it's actually the consumers view that's matters - that's why you've got to believe us" and of course it's not the case. (Independent Researcher, Research Agency)

Although there were cases of harmonious relationships, these findings reveal that the traditional role of the researcher with independent status, loosely connected within the advertising planning network, remains contentious.

Many factors including continued blurring of discipline boundaries, disputed ownership of work, historical stereotypes, competition for recognition and finally manipulative practices all contributed towards instances of negative relationships across collaborating networks.

#### *Conflicts of interest: the struggle for planning power*

The concluding theme concerned conflicts of interests which emerged between those involved in advertising planning. To illustrate this, we turn to discussions about impartiality and independence when dealing with research and planning issues. For those independent researchers interviewed, in-house advertising agency research represented an important income stream, which is why so many agencies were keen to set up brand consultancies offering clients 'quasi-independent' research. Just as the status of the planner as an independent observer was questioned within the network, so too was the perceived independence of an agency's brand subsidiary fulfilling this planning/research role.

JL: Planners want to keep it in-house. It's a really good income stream which agencies are all fighting for out there. So they're all going "hey, there's money to be made here"... and to even have a separate brand...but she (the advertising planner) is in effect a planner for them but they wrap it up as a separate brand to give the impression of independence but that's absolute nonsense she's based at their office ...she works in their account teams. (Independent Researcher, Research Agency)

Independent researchers identified this as forming a basis for antagonistic relationships with advertising planners.. In the tussle for control over the research element of the planning process, planners were perceived to need to retain control, as much as for their own political reputation with the agency hierarchy. Parallels can be drawn with creatives' need for ownership and control of their own work,

RB: My experience of working with planners... I think if the planners are involved they tend to take ownership of it ... in these public sector kind of projects, they sometimes don't see the charts and have the debrief blind, we have to give them the "don't worry about it...or whatever" ... it's always a little bit uneasy. But when it's private sector...the agencies are obviously wanting to be involved, wanting feedback...wanting top lines of top lines and wanting it now, and there's always this kind of agency deadline which is like "we've got to have this by whenever" which I always know is bullshit. (Independent Researcher, Research Agency)

The media planners also questioned the extent to which advertising planners could be truly independent given their perceived loyalties to agency priorities and ultimately agency reputation. They felt that there was



inevitably some kind of collusion in selling the creative product despite the fact that the advertising planner was meant to remain impartial, and officially required to be wearing ‘different hats’,

RU: Not all our clients evaluate their campaigns unfortunately. Those that do probably about half of them have a direct relationship with a research company that they control and the other half does it through a creative agency. The creative agency said you should evaluate this we’ll appoint a research agency. I don’t think it works particularly well because I’ve seen the results and then I’ve seen what’s presented to the client and like there’s fudging here. So if I was a client I’d definitely be having a direct relationship.

(Media Planner, Independent Media Agency)

In the struggle to gain power over the planning process, different actors can therefore be seen have contradictory roles, with overt and covert political agendas. Such scenarios undoubtedly sewed the seeds for tension and ultimately future conflict and the ultimate breakdown in agency relationships.

## Discussion and conclusions

Our findings provide a healthy antidote to the prevalent but dated study of advertising industry relationships using dyadic client-agency perspectives. As creative industries such as advertising become ever more fragmented, so the importance of harnessing a network perspective becomes paramount. Our findings utilize a social network perspective to ensure that multiple, concurrent relationships are recognized and understood. Specifically, the research moves beyond the preference for studying ‘positive relationships’ to provide insight into the undertheorised area of conflicting relationships between, and within agencies. The chosen field of study is advertising planning, a discipline central to the production of advertising, hence at the very hub of inter and intra-agency collaboration.

The findings suggest that the emergence and ongoing existence of conflictual relationships are influenced by four key interrelated themes; the degree of planning involvement, the existence and manipulation of cultural stereotypes; the ambiguity across roles when planning advertising and finally, conflicts of interest in the struggle for relational power. Each of these themes may be viewed as antecedents contributing towards three main conceptual domains, namely control, trust and power/status relationships. It is anticipated that (planning) involvement may be the dominant motivation but the three other themes shape and heavily influence subsequent issues of trust, control and power/status. It should be noted that the study did focused primarily on relational elements and hence did not investigate other possible more individually orientated antecedents such as personal goals, values and attitudes which were beyond the remit of this study.

After a process of selective coding and further abstraction, three main conceptual domains emerged which are discussed below.

### *Insert Figure 3*

Firstly, embedded in many of the discussions was an ongoing struggle to maintain *control* over the process of advertising planning. This ultimately guides the creative output in an industry where there is contested negotiation over precise roles, a blurring of responsibilities, differing client loyalties and competing individuals struggling to initiate and maintain control.

Secondly, the findings have implications for the fostering and possible break-down of mutual *trust*. The findings provide many examples of both overt and covert attempts to manipulate the planning process, which undoubtedly undermine a collective sense of network trust. This has parallels with Håkansson’s (1982) concept of relational atmosphere in which feelings of mutual understanding and common action may be undermined by a lack of trust and commitment amongst parties. This is further supported by the concept of relational ‘direction’ which Mitchell (1969) conceived of to explore the direction from which a relationship is orientated. Mitchell suggested that direction provides an indication of the power dynamic within relationships and explained that it was influenced by the contents of a relationship. For example, where a relationship is comprised of a variety of contents (cf: economic exchange, information exchange, friendship exchange) and can be described as a ‘strong’ relationship, the power within such relationships is more likely to be equally balanced, encouraging mutuality, reciprocity, trust and a desire to maintain the relationship because of its multiplex nature. In contrast, where a relationship can be described as ‘weak’ containing only one form of exchange, typically an economic exchange, the power dynamic inherent to such relationships is likely to be

driven by the client paying for services. Where an advertising agency has a weak, transactional relationship with an external partner, it is likely that the direction of power will emanate from the agency and that this may act as a source of potential conflict in negotiations relating to control of the creative process and output.

Thirdly, those responsible for different roles in the planning of advertising struggled to achieve a position of *power and status* within the network as a result of agency ambitions, relational chemistry with their shared client and perceptual abilities to ‘own’ their creative product. The resultant power highlighted in this research has less to do with what Hunt and Nevin (1974) refer to as coercion and more to do with ‘positional power’ in which actors can influence others through shared values and expectations (French and Raven 1959). In such circumstances, attention should be paid to the covert and well as the overt, the indirect as well as the direct bases of power. This seems particularly apt in the loosely held networks to be found in creative industries such as advertising.

Our findings suggest that there may be a range of negative outcomes, more complex than previous researchers have established. Under certain circumstances, negative relational outcomes manifest themselves on a modest level, at what can be referred to as *collaborative tension*. Agency planning meetings, with a range of competing agencies voicing their ideas, was one such example (similar to the findings of Malefyt 2003); debates contributing towards the generation of ideas undoubtedly served the client’s interests in raising the collective output (cf. Jehn 1995) but contributed at times towards reduced agency status in the collective hierarchy. There were also examples of Sumner’s (1906) *antagonistic co-operation* with mutual distrust across collaborators but brought together to co-operate out of a sense of necessity; independent researchers required to work with agency planners when designing and conducting advertising research was a case in point.

Definitions of conflict suggest either a state of open, often prolonged fighting, a state of disharmony between incompatible persons, ideas or interests, or finally the psychic struggle often at an unconscious level between competing parties. Beyond tension, there were instances of what might be described as *covert conflict* between network actors. The perception amongst certain independent researchers that agency meetings, client contact and shared presentations were all manipulated by other actors illustrates an on-going, subtle relational conflict. In such circumstances, it was evident that a complex mix of cultural stereotyping, role ambiguity and conflicting priorities were all contributory. Finally, this research did not cover issues of client breakdown but the existence of what is described here as *overt conflict* often resulting in relational breakdown can be found in the client-agency literature (Doyle *et al.* 1980, Eagle and Kitchen 1999).

Our findings recommend that clients responsible for managing creative industries would be wise to proactively utilize their agency networks in the knowledge that their inherent structures and in-built relationships will naturally foster tension and conflict. By encouraging a sense of ‘healthy competition’ with transparency of agenda and improved network communication, it is hoped that creativity will flourish for the benefit of all. It should be recognized that this research was focused on a single, Euro-centric advertising market in which smaller agencies operate. We would recommend therefore that further research investigates the emergence and characterization of advertising networks across different cultural backgrounds and also from a multinational, advertising perspective. Furthermore, we would suggest that more work could be done to assess individual attitudes, values and behavioral intensions which might require a quantitative framework.

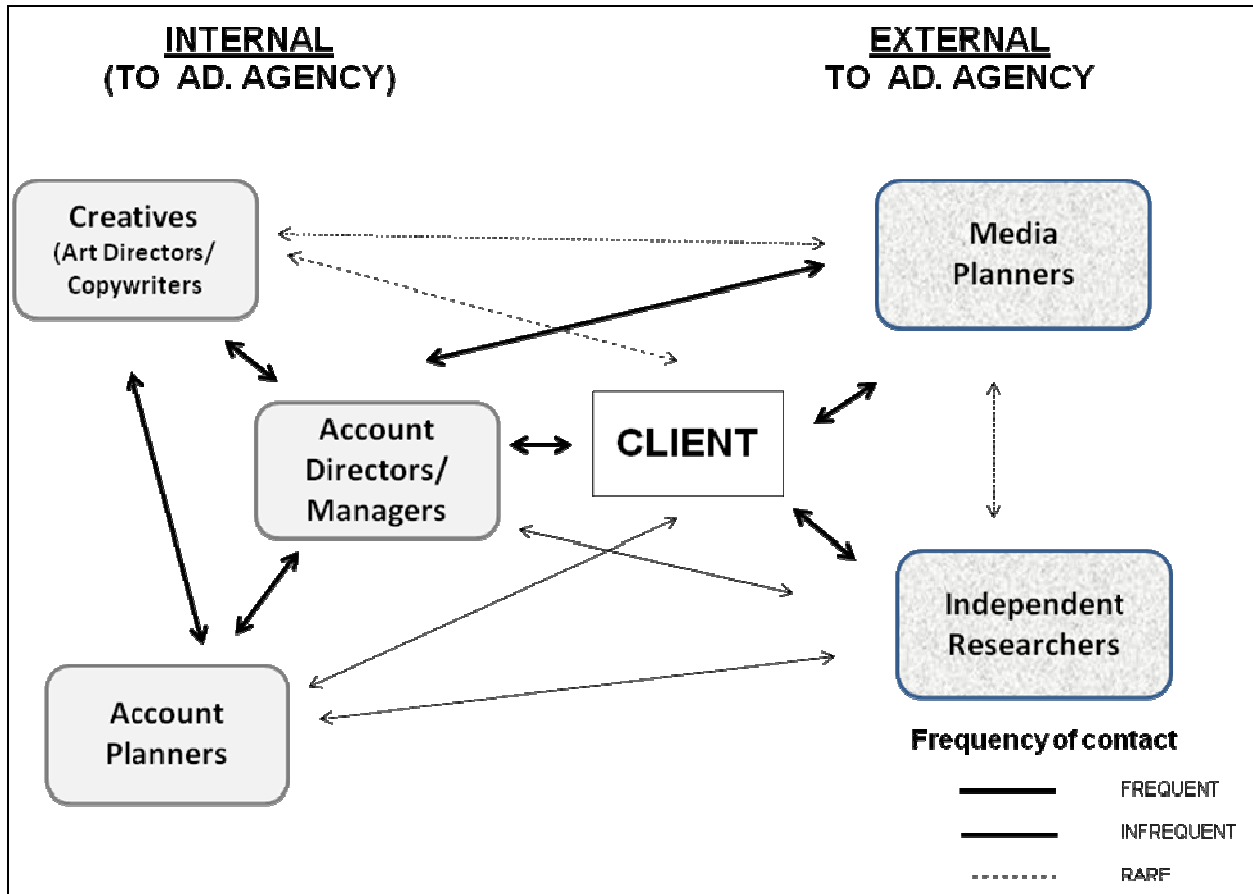
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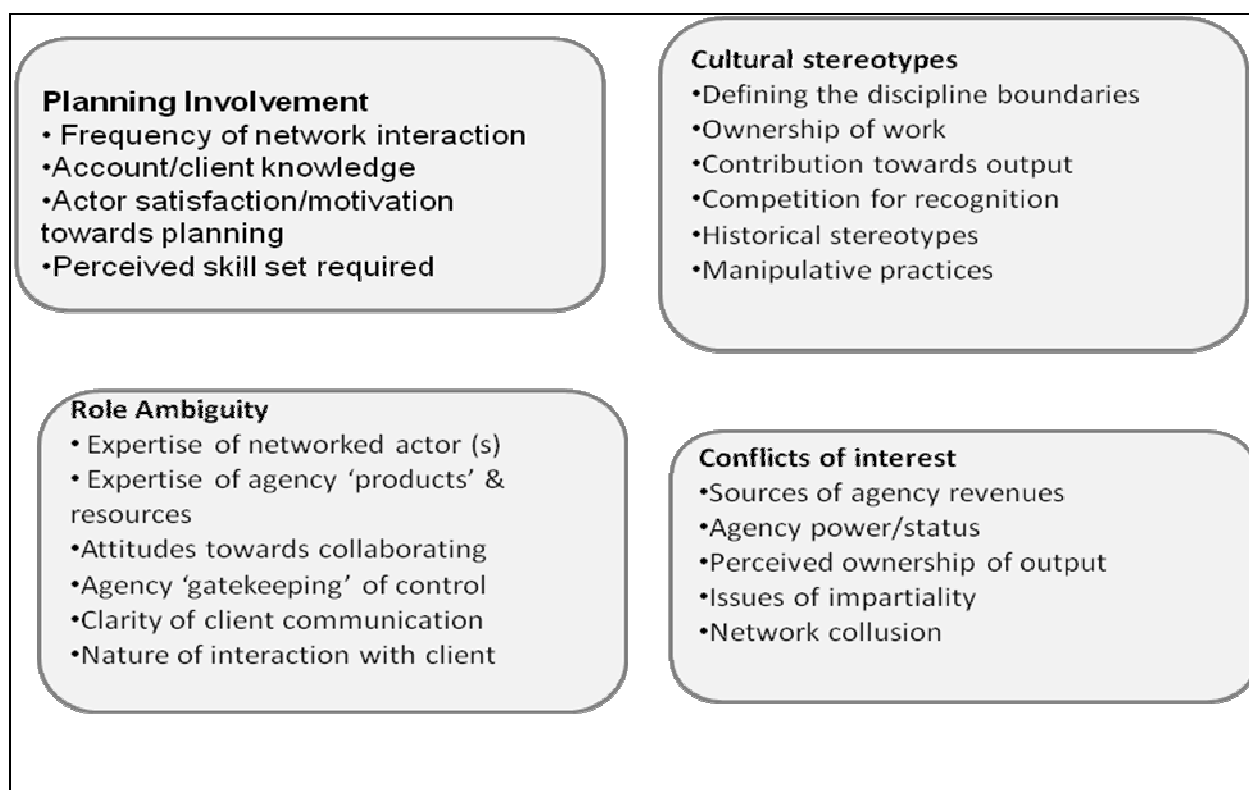
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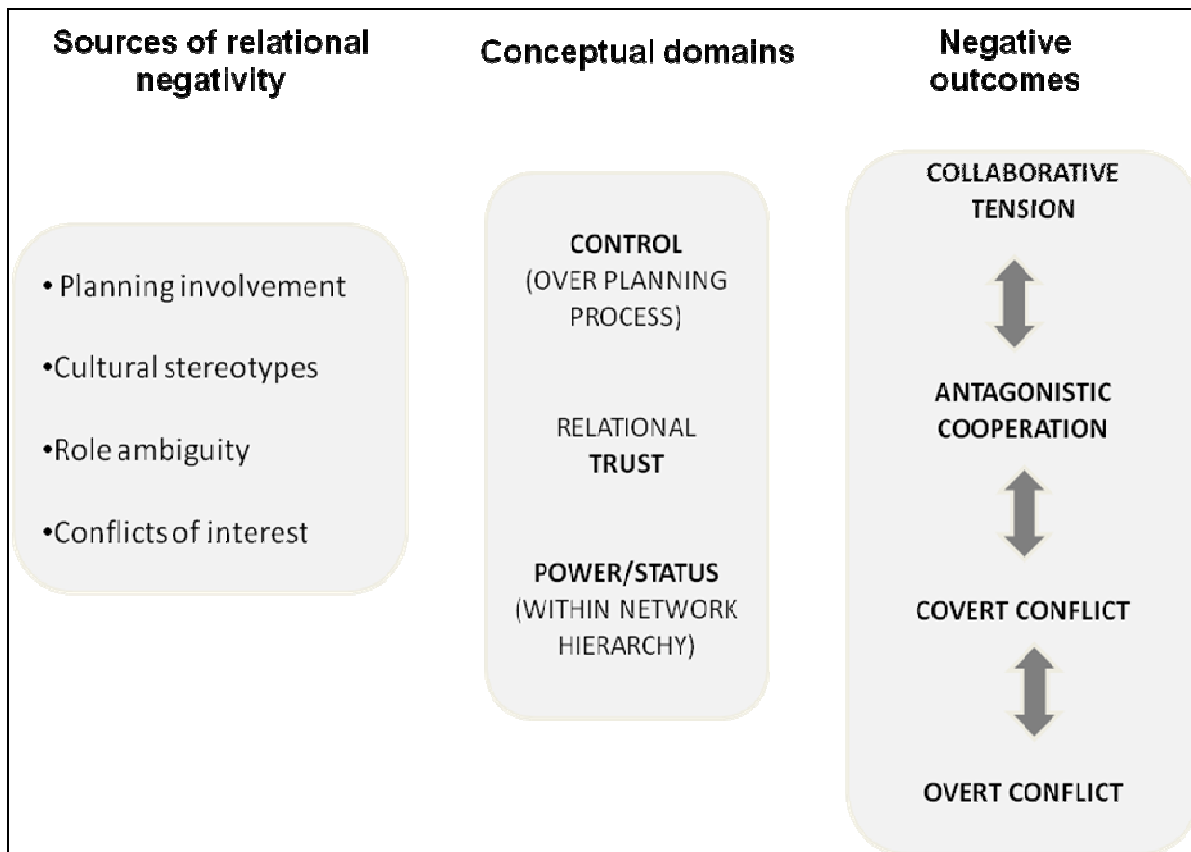
**Figure 1: Agency actors: Networked relationships**



**Figure 2: Emergent themes from coding**



**Figure 3: Conceptualising negative relationships with networked creative agencies**



**Table 1: Research Respondent Details**

<b>AGENCY TYPES</b>	<b>AGENCY CODE</b>	<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>POSITION (RESPONDENT CODE)</b>
<b>Creative Advertising Agencies</b>	<b>C 1</b>	<b>Edinburgh</b>	<b>Group Account Director (GM); Deputy Creative Director (MH)</b> <b>Account Director (MB); Creative Creative (FS)</b> <b>Group Account Director (GW); Creative Director (AJ)</b> <b>Account Manager (KE); Creative Director (AW)</b> <b>Account Director (GT)</b> <b>Head of Account Management (JS); Creative Partner (GH)</b> <b>Creative Director (SM)</b>
	<b>C 2</b>	<b>Glasgow</b>	
	<b>C 3</b>	<b>Edinburgh</b>	
	<b>C 4</b>	<b>Glasgow</b>	
	<b>C 5</b>	<b>Edinburgh</b>	
	<b>C 6</b>	<b>Edinburgh</b>	
	<b>C 7</b>	<b>Edinburgh</b>	
	<b>C 8</b>	<b>Edinburgh</b>	
<b>Independent Planning Agencies</b>	<b>M 1</b>	<b>Edinburgh</b>	<b>Associate Director (GE)</b> <b>Director of Consumer Insight (AN)</b> <b>Media Director (RU)</b> <b>Client Services Director (GC)</b>
	<b>M2</b>	<b>Edinburgh</b>	
	<b>M3</b>	<b>Glasgow</b>	
	<b>M4</b>	<b>Edinburgh</b>	
<b>Independent Research Agencies</b>	<b>R 1</b>	<b>Edinburgh</b>	<b>Research Director (RB)</b> <b>Research Director (DE)</b> <b>Managing Partner (MC)</b> <b>Managing Director (JL)</b> <b>Managing Partner (CE)</b> <b>Research Consultant (CW)</b>
	<b>R2</b>	<b>Stirling</b>	
	<b>R3</b>	<b>Edinburgh</b>	
	<b>R4</b>	<b>Glasgow</b>	
	<b>R5</b>	<b>Edinburgh</b>	
	<b>R6</b>	<b>Fife</b>	