



**BRITISH ACADEMY
OF MANAGEMENT**

BAM
CONFERENCE

3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER

ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

About BAM

The British Academy of Management (BAM) is the leading authority on the academic field of management in the UK, supporting and representing the community of scholars and engaging with international peers.

<http://www.bam.ac.uk/>

Meritocracy and diversity politics in professional advertising organisations
(Working paper)

Dr Nessa Adams
Regent's University London

Introduction

The advertising industry has a global worth of over \$560million, with a rapid annual growth (Statista, 2018). Within this expansion, diversity communication is becoming normalised as the industry continues to recognise its economic benefits, particularly in the UK and US where some of the largest agency hubs are based. This recognition is not only amongst advertising practitioners in the agencies themselves, but within professional advertising organisations (PAOs); the independent organisations run by senior members of the industry to facilitate networking events, develop reports on industry trends and create standards of 'good practice'. The concept of 'good practice' is inevitably subjective, particularly in relation to communication strategies that are less standardised across the industry, such as 'diversity'; a concept which has been highly criticised for neglecting relational elements of racial discrimination and inequality.

There is a developing area of research that examines diversity politics amongst creative industry practitioners in fields such as advertising. However, this paper develops the field further by examining the wider industry bodies that have direct influence of shaping mass perceptions to the practitioners who then have the role of developing communications. This working paper argues that those in higher positions in PAOs are meritocratic in promoting the positives of diversity initiatives, while neglecting the unconscious ways that BAME groups are disadvantaged. Thus, by neglecting the problems with racism and structural inequality, issues of racism are disguised under facades of diversity discourse. As this is a working paper, preliminary findings from interviews and non-participant observations within two PAOs in the UK and US will be outlined, with a full-paper being constructed following the completion of data collection and analysis. To keep the identities of practitioners hidden, their names and organisations they represent have been anonymised.

The 'field' of advertising

PAOs have a significant level of control over how industry practitioners perceive 'good practice', but the industry itself is becoming increasingly complex. Advertising is one of the most multifaceted contemporary industries due to its continuous development of new types of organisations, technology and global influence (Cronin, 2004; Featherstone, 1991; Nixon, 2003). This complexity is due to the interrelations between stakeholders such as clients, regulators, competitors and internal structures of how the industry determines best practice strategies across the field. Pierre Bourdieu developed field theory as he was interested in how different institutions in the same industry are interconnected and the extent to which they are autonomous to each other. Thompson and Bourdieu (1991: 14) define a field as "a structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources or 'capital'".

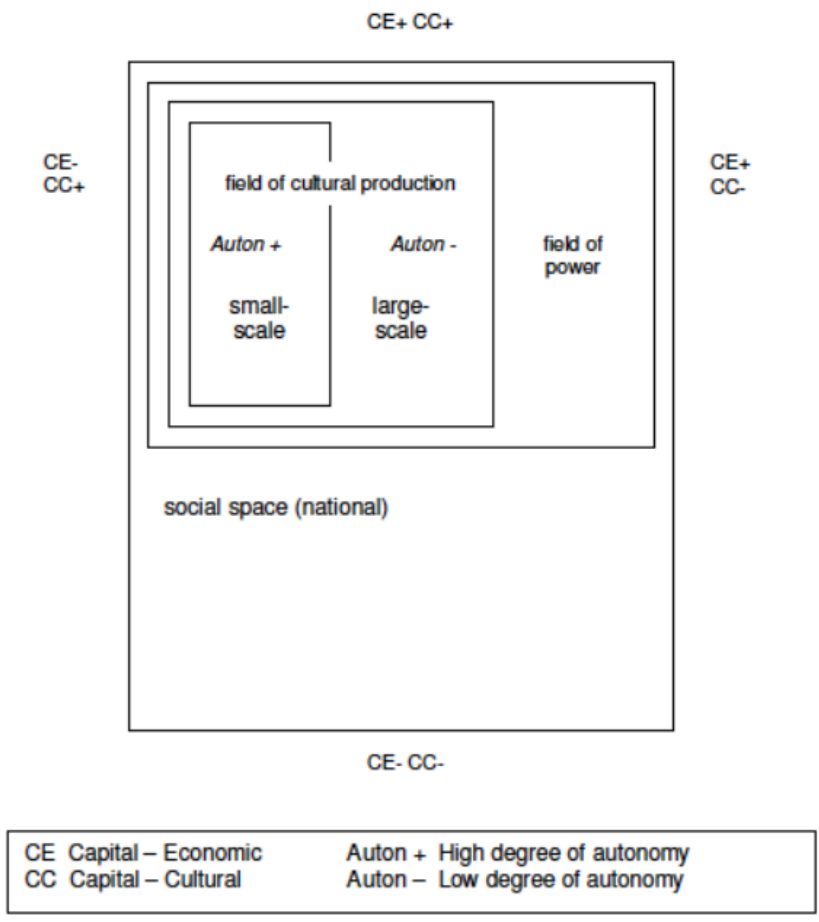


Figure 1: Field theory diagram (Bourdieu, 1996)

Ultimately, field theory focuses on how individuals aggressively operate and struggle within their given industry (Figure 4). Bourdieu differentiates between the ‘field of cultural production’ and the ‘field of power’. The former refers to productive activities that take place in different industries such as smaller, in-house marketing teams and larger advertising agencies. The ‘field of power’ refers to the economic and political fields that are likely to be associated with high levels of education, intellect, and Bourdieu’s specific focus of the artistic and literary fields. This field identifies those who have high levels of economic capital, but low levels of cultural knowledge and, thus, have no direct involvement in cultural production (as indicated by CE+ and CC- in Figure 4).

Bourdieu’s field theory is essential for identifying the level of control, power and influence that PAOs aim to have across the industry. Whilst PAOs do not necessarily have to have regulatory powers, practitioners associating themselves through memberships automatically gives them access to a wider network, potentials for awards and recognition, and resources that are aimed to influence ‘good practice’. Thus, they play an essential role in how the industry mobilises and operates.

Meritocracy and normalising diversity

In the past decade, the topic of diversity has become normalised in everyday discourse across the advertising industry. Within advertising agencies, the economic benefits of communicating with black and minority ethnic (BAME) groups has become widely apparent as their global spending power increases annually. Similarly, PAOs have acknowledged this trend, becoming a forum for educating and popularising diversity. Although the concept of diversity is itself widely contested and criticised, it is still the most widely used concept across the industry to promote the positive sides of communicating with different ethnicities and cultures in advertisements.

Whilst positivity is an effective way of selling diversity, the problem occurs when relational issues such as racism, discrimination and equality are neglected. In recent studies, Angela McRobbie (2015), and Taylor and O'Brien (2017) argue that "younger respondents who are well paid are less likely to hold critical or socially transformative attitudes" (ibid: 28). Thus, their younger respondents are unlikely to provide resources for the prevention of discriminative or racist as it may be assumed that the advocacy of positive diversity agendas will solve all problems. The preliminary findings presented in this extended abstract will evidence how such problems are evident not only for younger practitioners, through two networking events in the UK and US.

Methodology

The data was collected at one PAO in the UK and one in the US, both with the remit of promoting positive strategies for diversity communications. Permission was asked by the event organisers for the data to be collected, with the participants and contents of any confidential data being undisclosed. All organisers and participants remain anonymous throughout this paper, in order to detach any personal viewpoints from the organisations in which they are associated with.

The UK PAO examined in this paper has been established for nearly 15 years and markets itself as the leader for sharing 'good practice' for diversity communications. The forum consists of over 2,000 senior and junior practitioners from across the industry, all with some form of dedication to developing these 'good practice' strategies. Their membership mainly consists of BAME practitioners; however, there is also a small proportion of white practitioners who work within multicultural agencies. A landmark event that took place was the 'Diversity Open Day', attended by 80 undergraduate students and practitioners in a contemporary function hall in Victoria, London. Consent was gained for participant observation by participants whose extracts from their talks are included in this paper. Four participant extracts are included as part of this paper for examination, whilst a further two semi-structured interviews took place at the end of the event to further prompt some of the key issues they had raised in their talks or workshops.

Similarly to the UK, the US PAO has been running for over ten years and has around 350 advertising agencies signed up to their mailing list, and 25,000 practitioners from around the US with membership. The forum aims to commit to promoting CD communication strategies, as well as ways to appropriately talk about CD in the industry. I attended one of their 'Networking Forums', where four senior practitioners were delivering a half-day workshop on dealing with diversity in the 21st century. The event was attended by around 60 practitioners from different agencies across the US. The event took place at the head office of the networking organisation, based in Madison Avenue, New York.

Diversity politics and the problems with tokenism

The UK PAO event was important for two purposes. Firstly, it was one of the first in the UK that claimed to bring together the next generation of practitioners. Secondly, the senior practitioners leading the events talked about the statistics that prove CD communication is essential, but it was how they interpreted this data that was important.

The day was based on a recent research report published by the IPA (2014), namely 'Multicultural Britain', which consists of three main sections. Firstly, the report outlines the changing demographics of BAME groups in the UK and how they will be double the size by 2045. Secondly, the report highlights the spending habits of BAME groups and how they are "60 per cent more likely to buy a product or service if it were advertised in their media" (ibid). Lastly, the report dispels myths associated with BAME groups, such as the assumptions that "they don't spend", "they behave the same as whites", and "they are too hard to target" (ibid). The day was divided into two parallel workshops which addressed a) how to perceive 'good practice' in response to the report's results, and b) how the undergraduate students could become the next leaders in the industry. The first workshop was named 'Advertising in 2020: Envisioning the Future of Diversity'. The aim of the workshop was to interpret the results of the report and discuss what 'good practice' looks like.

The workshop was attended by around 30 individuals, and was headed by Saeed, the CEO of a multicultural agency. The workshop was held in one of the four break-off rooms from the main networking entrance. Upon entering the room, Saeed was applauded by those in the room. Rather than sitting, he chose to stand and circulate around the room as he spoke, as if to assert his authority to the crowd. Saeed opens by talking about what he believes is 'good practice':

"When we talk about great practice, we need to make sure that we are talking to our audiences. Making sure we listen to what is important to them. How do we do that? [...] When communicating with, let's say, a black audience, what is important to them? [...] When they turn on BET [Black Entertainment Television], they want to see themselves in the advertisements. And not only that, they want to

see positive images of themselves, with families and being happy [...] playing sports in the park, things like that.”

Saeed evidently speaks positively about black audiences in front of this crowd, speaking about family and sports being important. Throughout his 20-minute speech, he repetitively speaks about black people and the positive elements of addressing their needs. Upon looking around the room, around two thirds of the audience appear to be of black heritage and young practitioners eagerly taking notes. It is, therefore, necessary to address whether Saeed was addressing black culture in this positive manner just to satisfy the crowd.

I conducted an interview with Saeed back at his agency, and he had a different way of speaking about black people. During the interview, Saeed and I were discussing our cultural backgrounds, following the formal questions I had in my schedule. After telling Saeed that my cultural background is Jamaican, he immediately stated that people from the Caribbean “do not have their own culture” and had sympathy for anyone who comes from a Caribbean country:

“I mean unfortunately for you, well for the Africans it’s different, but if you had, if the Caribbean’s had their language. I mean, your religion is Christian, you speak English, the only thing is colour [...] I mean if you only had your own language [...] that’s the only thing that keeps the glue that binds you together...”

It is arguable as to whether Saeed is consciously being racist. Firstly, Saeed talks about Caribbean people as being part of the masses, as he believes there is no ‘glue’ that binds the Caribbean together or differentiate them. In this sense, Saeed may not necessarily be intentionally racist, but believes that black people do not have anything unique that differentiates them from British audiences. Saeed talks positively about black culture at the event and indicates that he believes in positive representation. However, Saeed’s use of discourse signifies a hidden meaning, where, in fact, he demises black people and believes they are “cultureless”.

Secondly, this hidden meaning shows one of the problems with creating ‘good practice’ strategies. Saeed’s statement also reinforces how black audiences often do not have a unique space in advertising communications. In some cases, black audiences do not fit within general communications, as they have historically been excluded from media representations (Hall, 1980). In other cases, black audiences are seen as not having enough culture to develop communication strategies. Therefore, although Saeed talks about black audiences and what ‘good practice’ means, his actual working practices exclude them from being important in CD communications and evidences how he is meritocratic.

From this scenario, it is evident that Saeed is serving his own interests of promoting South Asian cultures as being “*the diamond*” of CD communication. During his parallel session, he talks about how Londoners now speak “*300 different languages*” and his ability to “*do one campaign in 14 languages, so our ability, you can multiple by 14 times*”. Wacquant (1993) makes reference to these ‘processes of professionalisation’, where the “main function [of senior management] is to reproduce a structure [...] namely the management of their internal divisions” (ibid: 19). However, his selection of discourse also reinforces the problems with the creative economy, assuming that we have moved past a post-racial society that is reflected in the industry’s diversity. However, these subliminal forms of discrimination still exist (Oakley and O’Brien, 2015; Saha, 2017; Hesmondhalgh, 2013) and used as a method of tokenism. Therefore, although Saeed may not be consciously racist, his selection of discourse reproduces racist ideologies.

The US PAO ran a similar diversity day that was attended by senior practitioner members from across the US. The day was divided into two main sessions that were run by Judith, a Senior Diversity Officer at a global media agency; one session focused on ‘excellence’, while the other was on ‘standing out’ in the industry. Judith stood and circulated as she commenced to speech about ‘excellence’:

“Why do ‘good’? We want excellence. We want minorities to see our campaigns and say, yes, this brand gets me [...] Excellence is about researching, always researching, finding out what is important. But we’ve got to take time, take time to show we are different from whites.”

From Judith’s perspective, excellence is about understanding the demographic of BAME groups before you attempt to target them. On several occasions, the audience intervened with their own ideas. For instance, while Judith was talking about a campaign she had run, she chose to include South America’s historical background. An audience member intervened and stated, “*but doesn’t excellence also mean contemporary representation [...] to me, it doesn’t make sense that any cultural nuance means excellent, it has to be real.*” Following this assertion, Judith seemed irate and snapped back with a response:

“Remember, what you think isn’t always right. Look back at the best, award-winning ads over the past decade. They’re powerful [...] follow what works but insert your personal touch.”

Judith goes forth in reiterating the importance of cultural values being included in cultural production, but reinforces the need to also follow work that has been successful for winning awards (Grunig, 1992). While it is positive that diversity is being recognised, there are subtle

ways in which the audience was being reminded about the importance of winning awards to be “*accepted*” in the field. Thus, there are still limitations to sticking to what the industry expects, and this could potentially lead to occasions where some BAME groups are disadvantaged.

What is interesting about both of these events in the UK and US is that they were facilitated and run by senior practitioners in the field and evidences how such opinions are not only limited to less experienced, younger member of staff as previous studies suggest. To some extent, the senior practitioners spoke about the positive elements, such as being included in such a ‘prestige’ organisation. Although not one of the participants of this study, BAME practitioner Yousaf Khalid, wrote an interesting blog report of a similar event that took place in 2014. Khalid reflects on some of the key findings from the updated version of the IPA report (2014), believing that the output of the report and networking events should “attract more people from BME backgrounds who wouldn’t normally consider the industry as a career option”. In the blog report, Khalid reflects on the atmosphere at the networking event he attended:

There was certainly a feeling with all the speakers and contributors that more could be done with better representation in key decision making roles like creative, planning/strategy and analytics.

Khalid advocates these events for providing access to the industry, but also having a network to openly discuss diversity. However, from my data, the senior practitioners make it clear that, although these forums are for ‘open’ discussions about diversity, they are still managed and run by those at the top who are deemed to know best. In particular, Judith makes reference to the difficulties in getting “*the boss [of the PAOS] to understand*” where she is coming from when advocating diversity communication. These scenarios are evident of how senior practitioners, although given a voice in a PAO, have a limited amount of power in shaping diversity practices:

“These days are so essential for us, it promotes our work, our staff, our dedication [...] but it’s frustrating. These events happen annually, two times if we’re lucky, a major report has been released or something.”

Judith highlights one of the difficulties in making diversity an important topic in networking spaces, but finds herself in a power battle with the PAO owners. Although Judith is a senior practitioner in her own agency, she is not as senior in the wider structure of the advertising industry. Bourdieu (1993: 184) addresses these power difficulties that cultural intermediaries face:

The power relationships between the 'conservatives' and 'innovators', the orthodox and heretical, the old and the new, are greatly dependent on the state of external struggles.

Bourdieu refers to are the owners of the PAOs, and Judith represents the 'new innovators' attempting to advocate diversity communications. It may seem that these events are a natural part of promoting 'good' advertising practices. However, there are limited opportunities for these types of 'good practice' to be shared amongst her peers. In this case, there is a partial relationship between the way that structural racism is enforced and instrumentalised, as practitioners are given opportunities, but are limited and dictated to about how much is appropriate by the field of power.

Summary

This working paper has aimed to give an insight into the influence PAOs on promoting 'good practice' standards across the industry. Although diversity is being discussed more and used in advertising communications, there is less recognition about how misrepresentation, stereotypes and racism still occurs.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1993) *The field of cultural production: essays on literature and art*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1996) *The rules of art: genesis and structure of the literary field*, translated by S. Emanuel. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cronin, A. (2004) *Advertising myths: the strange half-lives of images and commodities*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Featherstone, M. (1991) *Consumer culture and postmodernism*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Grunig, J.E. (1992) *Excellence in public relations and communication management* (eds.) Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hall, S. (1980) 'Race, articulation, and societies structured in dominance', *Sociological theories: race and colonialism*. Paris: Unesco. pp. 306-345.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2013) *Why music matters*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

IPA (2014) *Diversity in advertising*. Available at: <http://www.ipa.co.uk/Page/Diversity-in-advertising#.V-uLTo-cHIU> (Accessed on 14 November 2011).

McRobbie, A. (2015) *Be creative*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Nixon, S. (2003) *Advertising cultures: gender, commerce, creativity*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Oakley, K. and O'Brien, D. (2015) *Cultural value and inequality: a critical literature review*. Swindon: Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Saha, A. (2017) 'The politics of race in cultural distribution: addressing inequalities in British Asian theatre', *Cultural Sociology*, ePub.

Statista (2018) *Global advertising spending from 2010 to 2018 (in billion US dollars)*. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/236943/global-advertising-spending/> (Accessed 13th October 2018).

Taylor, M. and O'Brien, D. (2017) "'Culture is a meritocracy': why creative workers' attitudes may reinforce social inequality", *Sociological Research Online*, 22(4), pp. 27-47.

Thompson, J.B. and Bourdieu, P. (1991) *Language and symbolic power*. Translated by Raymond, G. and Adamson, M. Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press.

Wacquant, L.J.D. (1993) 'From ruling class to field of power: an interview with Pierre Bourdieu on La Noblesse d'Etat', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 10(3): pp. 19-44.