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**An ethnographic interpretation of the work environment within a creative culture in the advertising sector**

**Abstract**

**Purpose and rationale**

The purpose of the exploratory research is to provide a deeper understanding of how the work environment enhances or constrains organisational creativity (creativity and innovation) within the context of the advertising sector. The argument for the proposed research is that the contemporary literature is dominated by quantitative research instruments to measure the climate and work environment across many different sectors. The most influential theory within the extant literature is the componential theory of organisational creativity and innovation and is used as an analytical guide (Amabile, 1997; Figure 8) to conduct an ethnographic study within a creative advertising agency based in Scotland. The theory suggests that creative people (skills, expertise and task motivation) are influenced by the work environment in which they operate. This includes challenging work (+), work group supports (+), supervisory encouragement (+), freedom (+), sufficient resources (+), workload pressures (+ or -), organisational encouragement (+) and organisational impediments (-) which is argued enhances (+) or constrains (-) both creativity and innovation. An interpretive research design is conducted to confirm, challenge or extend the componential theory of organisational creativity and innovation (Amabile, 1997; Figure 8) and contribute to knowledge as well as practice.

**Design/methodology/approach**

The scholarly activity conducted within the context of the creative industries and advertising sector is in its infancy and research from the alternative paradigm using qualitative methods is limited which may provide new guidelines for this industry sector. As such, an ethnographic case study research design is a suitable methodology to provide a deeper understanding of the subject area and is consistent

with a constructivist ontology and an interpretive epistemology. This ontological position is conducive to the researcher's axiology and values in that meaning is not discovered as an objective truth but socially constructed from multiple realities from social actors. As such, ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings and the creative advertising agency involved in the research is an appropriate purposive sample within an industry that is renowned for its creativity and innovation. Qualitative methods such as participant observation (field notes, meetings, rituals, social events and tracking a client brief), material artefacts (documents, websites, annual reports, emails, scrapbooks and photographic evidence) and focused interviews (informal and formal conversations, six taped and transcribed interviews and use of Survey Monkey) are used to provide a written account of the agency's work environment. The analytical process of interpreting the ethnographic text is supported by thematic analysis (selective, axial and open coding) through the use of manual analysis and NVivo9 software.

## **Findings**

The findings highlight a complex interaction between the people within the agency and the enhancers and constraints of the work environment in which they operate. This involves the creative work environment (Amabile, 1997; Figure 8) as well as the physical work environment (Cain, 2012; Dul and Ceylan, 2011; Dul et al. 2011) and that of social control and power (Foucault, 1977; Gahan et al. 2007; Knights and Willmott, 2007). As such, the overarching themes to emerge from the data on how the work environment enhances or constrains organisational creativity include creative people (skills, expertise and task motivation), creative process (creative work environment and physical work environment) and creative power (working hours, value of creativity, self-fulfilment and surveillance). Therefore, the findings confirm that creative people interact and are influenced by aspects of the creative work environment outlined by Amabile (1997; Figure 8). However, the results also challenge and extend the theory to include that of the physical work environment and creative power.

## **Originality/value/implications**

Methodologically, there is no other interpretive research that uses an ethnographic case study approach within the context of the advertising sector to explore and provide a deeper understanding of the subject area. As such, the contribution to knowledge in the form of a new interpretive framework (Figure 16) challenges and extends the existing body of knowledge (Amabile, 1997; Figure 8). Moreover, the contribution to practice includes a flexible set of industry guidelines (Appendix 13) that may be transferrable to other organisational settings.

**Keywords:** Organisational creativity, creative work environment, enhancers and constraints, ethnographic case study research design and the advertising sector.