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A Vanishing Act: Creative Women in Spain and the United States

Abstract

This study is the first to explore the experiences of female creatives across cultures, Spain and the United States. A total of 36 interviews with top female creative directors were conducted across both countries. Their responses suggest that the challenges are not only more difficult for women, but that the difficulties are rooted in a “fraternity culture” or “territorio de chicos” within creative departments across both cultures. Within this environmental structure a series of similarities and differences emerged within two main categories: creative process experiences and creative project assignments. Ultimately, the data suggest that the gender-bound structural system that underpins advertising creative departments, influencing creative process and leading to how work is assigned, is not equitable. In the end this study suggests that this structure may not enhance creativity or creative outcomes, especially for women, nor does it accurately reflect our globalized marketplace.

Key Words: advertising, creative, creative department, gender

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Introduction

A successful career in advertising creative is challenging to both develop and sustain. Adapting to the rapidly changing advertising world, within the gender-bound creative environment, can be especially challenging. Considering that women make up only 20 to 25 percent of creative departments, this appears to be especially tricky proposition for women (cite deleted for blind review; DiSesa 2008; Jordan 2009; Mallia 2009; Sampey & O’Leary 2005).

The specific objective of this study, the first of its kind, is to comparatively explore females’ experiences in creative departments across cultures in order to assess if gender imbalances, within creative departments, persist across the globe. Exploring similarities and difference will shed light on the issue, potentially highlight solutions and possibly lead to more successful retention of female creatives.

This research is important on several fronts. At a very basic level, everyone deserves a fair shot at the same job, within hospitable work environments. In terms of the advertising industry, having more diverse perspectives might lead to advertising with a wider range of creative messages that are more culturally insightful — messages that are more likely to persuade the target consumer, which are largely female. Finally, considering social consequences, more balanced and positive portrayals of women in advertising may influence the overall perception of women around the globe. One way to address these issues is to hire — and retain — female creatives.

Why the United States and Spain?

The United States spends more on advertising than any other country in the world (Euromonitor International 2008). Further, its cultural influence is truly global. In fact,

some view the concept of globalization as “Americanization” due to its aggressive penetration of global markets since the 1980s (de Mooij 2010). Spain is one of the hubs of European creativity and advertising as evidenced by its hosting of the Festival el Sol, the largest and most prestigious advertising awards festival in the Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American professional community.

There are limited scholarly studies exploring the lack of women in creative departments, with only a few addressing gender within creative departments in the United States. (Cite deleted for blind review) take a broad-brush look at gender issues in creative departments, while Mallia (2009) explores the lack of women of at the top. In Spain Martín (2007a; 2007b) also explores the lack of women in creative.

Looking to the rest of Europe, there is scant research addressing gender issues specifically within agency creative departments. Those that do are on a country-by-country basis. A decade-old study from Sweden (Alvesson 1998) looked at gender identities in the advertising industry in broad strokes. Three studies have been produced in the United Kingdom: Baxter (1990) and Klein (2000), whose work was industry funded, and Nixon (2003), whose critical book explores the culture of advertising creative departments in Britain. Beyond these European and American studies, we found no others probing the issue of gender within creative departments. Thus, this study represents pioneering cross-cultural research at the intersection of advertising creative and gender.

Literature Review

Women in Creative

The fact that there are not many women at the top in creative departments should matter to everyone, if for no other reason than the fact that women make 80 to 85 percent of all consumption decisions (Barletta 2007; Jordan 2009). Women's lack of presence impacts advertising agencies, their clients and, of course, employment options for women entering the advertising workforce. In the United States, women make up about one-fourth of the creative staff (art directors, copywriters, creative directors and creative executives — collectively known as “creatives”) within creative departments (DiSesa 2008; Jordan 2009; Mallia 2009; Sampey and O’Leary 2005). Yet there is only one female Chief Creative Officer among *Advertising Age’s* Annual 2009 “Top 25 U.S. Agency Brands” (2009, p. 48). In Spain, numbers are even more discouraging, with women making up about one-fifth of the staff within creative departments (Hernández, Martín, & Beléndez, 2008).

In the United States there is limited industry recognition for female creatives’ work. The two most prestigious creative awards (*Clios* and *Cannes Lions*) are rarely awarded to women, and men overwhelmingly dominate the judging panels. “If there are ten judges, eight or nine are guys and the rest, the women, are trying to be just like the guys” (Jordan 2009, p. 29). The One Club Hall of Fame, located in New York City, has had only three female recipients since its inception in 1961. Only two women have been inducted into the Art Directors Club Hall of Fame, also in New York. In Spain, industry recognition for female creatives’ work is also weak. The judges of the most important international advertising festival in Spain (*El Sol*) are primarily men. Women made up 17 percent of the judging panels from 2003 to 2008 and appeared in even smaller numbers as award winners.

Creativity, an international English-language industry publication on commercial creativity, features “The Creativity 50” issue each year. This list showcases “the bright and shining lights in the world of brand creativity... a worldwide group of doers, thinkers and dreamers testing the limits of where their ideas and hard work can take them” (Creativity 50 2006, p. 5). This group is comprised of creative individuals and creative duos and trios.

In 2006, *Creativity*’s 20th anniversary issue featured 67 people, 64 men and three women. No women appeared on the cover. In 2007 it identified 70 men and seven women. Again, no women were featured on the cover. In 2008 76 men and six women were featured. In 2009 it identified 56 men and seven women. Women first made their way to the cover in 2008 and again in 2009 — though only two women each year. The number of women on *Creativity*’s list averages less than 10 percent, an even smaller percentage than within advertising creative departments. Similarly, in a book on Spanish advertising creative work, 15 top creatives were praised for their creative contributions to the advertising industry (González-Andrío 2005). None were women.

Clearly there are very few women in advertising creative departments and even fewer at the top. However, college classrooms are filled with women. Female students usually outnumber male students (cite deleted for blind review; Mallia 2009; Weisberg & Robbs 1997). In the United States, Fullerton and Kendrick (2008) tracked six years, from 2003 to 2008, of the National Student Advertising Competition sponsored by the American Advertising Federation. Their work suggests that female students outnumber male students, year after year, nearly two to one. In Spain, college classrooms are also

filled with women. In fact, three of every four advertising students in Spain are female (*El Instituto Nacional de Estadística* 2009).

In a review of six creative portfolio programs in the United States (Brainco, Creative Circus, Miami Ad School, Portfolio Center, and VCU Brandcenter), it appears that enrollment is fairly gender balanced. In Spain there are two professional portfolio schools (Complot and Miami Ad School). There is a similar pattern in the Spanish portfolio schools with about an even male to female student ratio.

Gender and Creativity

Gender appears to impact the way creative development is played out in professional environments, particularly within advertising. The “development and career paths of women are more diverse than those of men...[and] relationships play a larger role in women’s creative efforts” (Runco 2004, p. 669). In addition, female creatives’ experiences suggest “gender has a powerful influence within advertising creative departments” (cite deleted for blind review). Yet women face unique barriers and need to “make more of a conscious effort to devote themselves to creativity than do men” (Runco 2004, p. 669). While theories of creativity don’t necessarily address gender, “thorough historical analyses do uncover differences that may reflect bias and favoritism” (Runco 2004, p. 669). This bias is ironic as women tend to be more flexible, not to mention make the lion’s share of all consumption decisions.

It can also be argued that advertising imagery is framed by the politics and production of desire (Helstein 2003). Twitchell (1996) suggests that ads are produced “in active collusion with the male viewers” (p. 232). If we consider that creative departments are largely made up of male creatives, it’s fair to suggest that what Helstein referred to as

“the politics of desire” is more often than not defined from a male viewpoint. Further, the politics of desire may lead to less desirable images of women, at a minimum, and at the extreme the objectification of women, through gender-bound images “internalized directly from the culture” (Gutwill 1994, p. 17). These repeated symbols frame women “in the same old modernist poses ... and men are caught in the same old modernist gazing” (Lambiase & Reichert 2003, p. 274). The roles creatives play within advertising creative departments aren’t far afield from this theoretical framework. Thus, our concentration is focused on how those who cross the threshold of creative departments are received and what their workplace experiences are.

Global Implications

The implications for the global advertising industry are vast. Cultures are disseminated globally at head-spinning speed. In both the United States and Spain — as it is worldwide — women make the majority of the consumption choices. Yet a decade into the twenty-first century, creative departments across the globe retain and promote far fewer women than men. Creative ideas are the product of real people — individuals who live, work, and play in a rapidly shrinking world. Advertising creativity emerges within a social system, one that is more globalized each day. Yet men, particularly at the top, continue to dominate the advertising creative social system (cite deleted for blind review).

Some might say when it comes to landing a job, “[a] great portfolio will get any candidate hired” (Mallia 2009, p. 4 of 18). Yet who rises to the top is often predicated not only by reality but also by perception. These perceptions may be driven as much by gender, and the social system in which creatives function, as they are by the portfolio that

got an individual hired. Does the creative system vary culture by culture, country by country? Or does the advertising creative system supersede the cultural system?

Methods

This research is part of a larger long-term study exploring gender dynamics within advertising creative departments.

Participants

Our work is based on interviews of 21 top creative women in Spain and 15 top creative women in the United States. In-depth interviews were conducted with senior creative women across the United States with the title of “creative director” or the equivalent, or women who had held these positions currently or recently. In the broader study, the pool of respondents included 21 women across North America, with six from Canada. The initial list was derived from women featured in *The Wall Street Journal* Creative Leaders Series and from the Creative Skirts website as well in other articles in trade publications such as *Advertising Age*. The list was then adjusted to reflect geographic diversity by pooling names regionally in five categories: United States (East Coast, Mid-America, West Coast) and Canada (Eastern and Western). For this study we are focusing on only the three regions within the United States.

In Spain names of senior creative women were initially selected from the *Club de Creativos* database. From here women at two types of agencies were selected to create an initial pool. The first type is top award-winning creative agencies. The second type is agencies with top earnings. These top-earning agencies aren’t necessarily considered to be top creative agencies, though they may be. In Spain top creative agencies aren’t necessarily the ones with highest earnings. Noting the lack of women in senior positions,

a snowball technique was used to select the final pool of interviewees. A total of one-third of the final pool was ultimately interviewed and most were from Barcelona.

Collectively, their years spent in the advertising industry range from 15 to 35 years under a variety of titles. In the United States the titles ranged from chairman of the flagship office of the largest advertising agency network in the world to executive VP/executive creative director to chief creative officer to associate creative director to a former creative director who left the agency world to start her own very successful consulting company. In Spain, titles range from Creative Director to Executive Creative Director, though the majority were Creative Directors. Spanish creative women are or were currently employed at multinational advertising agencies, as nearly one-third of these women were let go during 2009. Most of these women have started their own agencies or function as freelancers. None stopped working, though some left the advertising industry.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted via telephone in the United States, while in Spain they were conducted in person. Each lasted 45 to 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Using verbatim comments the co-authors created thematic clusters based on respondents from Spain and the United States individually. They then compared the cluster groups allowing cross-cultural thematic categories to emerge. For this comparative study we focused on two research questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences between creative department in Spain and the United States?
2. How does gender inform the similarities and differences?

Results

Voices of Spanish Creative Women

When considering the impact of gender on the creative process, five categories emerged. First, final creative solutions, what is sometimes called the “big idea,” are chosen by Executive Creative Directors, 90 percent of whom are men. Second, the bigger the project, the more significant the role of men becomes in the creative process. Third, women favor a democratic process when selecting ideas or creative solutions. Fourth, in presenting work, women tend to be either marginalized or isolated. With male clients they tend to be sexualized and thus marginalized, and with female clients there is little expectation for mixed gender presentation teams. Fifth, and most interestingly, while there may be undercurrents, these creative women don’t overtly express feelings of discrimination when it comes to their creative work. However, when one looks at the lack of promotion and retention of women, it becomes evident.

Gender also had an impact on project assignments, which emerged in five categories. First, assignment are often based on ones gender and the perception of the masculine/feminine quality of the brand (men’s products v. women’s products), which appears to repeat stereotypes. Second, these Spanish women indicated gender-based cultural codes, which often make them more comfortable with some “women’s products” and at the same time don’t prepare them to work with some “men’s products.” This sometimes had negative consequences by closing doors to working on male products. Third, the women long to work on brands that allow them more creativity, which tend to represent the biggest clients with the most creative potential, but feel that they can’t say “no” to any account assignments. Fourth, most of the women believe that the

masculine/feminine division for product assignment shouldn't exist and is a detriment to the client and their own career advancement.

These Spanish women also addressed why creative women leave advertising agencies and where they go. Three categories emerged. First, women choose to forward their careers in positions that involve less stress, often by opening their own agencies or freelancing. Second, the women move because they feel there's an overall sexist environment. They're paid less than their male counterparts and, perhaps more importantly, they feel an overall lack of respect. Third, they leave the workforce and return to family, though this is sometimes temporary. These choices are mostly driven by having children and the need for a more flexible schedule.

Voices of American Creative Women

The impact of gender on the creative process was also considered with the American women, and the six categories emerged. First, humor is a highly valued creative attribute, and male humor, which tends to be sophomoric and sexualized, is more valued. Second, of the women who talked about empathy they considered it essential to creativity. Empathy was considered a female trait and was rarely attributed to men. Third, women expressed frustration related to the way time is used and valued. Productivity tends to be equated with the amount of time spent in the office, whether it is productive or not. Women were more focused in their work so they were able to go home to their families, though they often returned to work at home after family time. Men, on the other hand, may socialize during offices hours then tend to stay in the office late into the evening to finish their work — and get credit for doing so. Fourth, many of these women don't always see the playing field as level both at awards shows and within creative

departments. They tend to see both as part of a fraternity culture that values male creative ideas. Fifth, intellectual capacity appears to be a significant component of the creative process and both in this regard. Sixth, these women felt a strong need to “be brave,” to stand up and defend themselves and their work.

Like their Spanish counterparts, American women also addressed the impact of gender on project assignments. Five categories emerged. First, men tend to be assigned the types of accounts that win awards. Second, male-bonding experiences tend to be part of departmental dynamics and, because creative directors are predominantly male, this impacts the delegation of assignments in ways that benefit junior men. Third, women also tend to be less assertive about fighting for project assignments, which results in the award-winning accounts often being assigned to men. Fourth, project assignment tends to be influenced by the masculine/feminine qualities of a product. Thus women tend to be given more feminine products, which can lead to being pigeonholed into the “pink ghetto.” Fifth, women tend to trip themselves up by deflecting glory from themselves. That is, they tend to accept praise for their team rather than as individuals, and this negatively impacts perceptions related to their individual ability to handle work.

Finally, women seem to do vanishing acts. That is, creative women disappear from advertising agencies, and they leave for a variety of reasons. First, women leave because of the “fraternity club” culture that permeates creative departments. Second, their salaries tend to be lower than their male counterparts, which frustrates these women. At the same time, they also admit women, as a group, tend to be less assertive about demanding equal pay. Third, the work/life balance becomes crucial to women once they

have children. Many expressed that the childbearing years are when they see other women leaving creative departments.

Discussion

Similarities dominate the experiences of top female creative at advertising agencies in both Spain and the United States. However, there are a few differences.

Creative Process Experiences

Differences. The most striking contrast between Spanish and American women is that Spanish women often didn't express feelings of discrimination directly. They talked about inequities but were reticent to express these inequities as discrimination, despite the fact that their other comments would suggest it exists. By contrast, many of the American women spoke openly about discrimination, with a few speaking very strongly. Across both cultures, while experiences of discrimination may have differed, the end results are unfortunately similar. There are few women at the top in creative departments in either country.

Discussions, or the lack of discussion, about humor was another area of difference. Spanish women rarely brought up the topic of humor as related to the creative process. However, for American women, humor played a marked role in the creative process. They discussed male humor as being more highly prized and humor itself was nearly always referenced as a male attribute (cite deleted for blind review). Yet, as will be discussed, Spanish women do talk about male humor, but they discuss it in term of the overall environment within creative departments, which leads to reasons for leaving.

Another topic related to the creative process brought up by American women was the role that intellectual capacity plays in the creative process. They saw intelligence as an important aspect of the creative process. The findings among American women suggest that they view both men and women as being equally valued for their intellectual gifts. Spanish women rarely, if ever, discussed either humor or intellectual abilities as related to the creative process. This may represent cultural differences or a reticence to speak openly about these aspects of creativity. However, as noted, Spanish women did discuss humor as part of the broader creative environment.

Similarities. Overall, this research suggests many similarities across the two cultures when it comes to women's experiences working in creative departments and the creative process. One similarity was that both Spanish and American women agreed that final creative decisions — the selection of the big idea — are highly influenced by the men who dominate the top ranks within creative. Spanish women expressed this in terms of male executive creative directors choosing the big ideas. They also spoke of the increased role of men on bigger, higher profile projects. American women expressed this in terms of their need to “be brave” and in “defending ourselves/our work.” Spanish women expressed similar experiences saying, “we are not brave enough.” Comparatively this suggests a male-dominated structure within creative departments with men holding a position of power across both cultures.

In contrast, in both countries the women embrace collaboration as an important part of creative process. For Spanish women this came out in discussions framed around favoring a democratic process when working toward creative solutions. They saw an open exchange of ideas as imperative to the creative process. For American women

empathy, the ability to understand others, enhanced the collaborative aspects of the creative process. Research also suggests that within creative departments men and women may not equally prize empathy. However, neither empathy nor collaboration is valued in patriarchal creative departments. In an industry that functions in a team environment, this speaks to a need for more women in creative management who value and promote collaborative efforts.

Unquestionably, all creatives put in long hours. However, the American women felt that men received accolades for working more, when often it was actually a reflection of poor time management or a different set of priorities. Once they have children, women tend to be more focused during their work hours. “Once I had kids it made me more efficient when I’m at work. I don’t just goof around.” This efficiency while in the office allowed the women to go home and be with their families. On the other hand, staying late tended to win men praise, which the women often argued was not deserved.

Across both countries frustration with a male-dominated, patriarchal structure and culture within advertising creative departments was expressed as a negative influence on the creative process. This was articulated in phrases such as “fraternity culture,” “boys club” or “territorio de chicos” (boys land). Women in both cultures referenced this masculine dynamic and noted its impact on the awards shows, where men dominate the judging panels (Jordan 2009). In both countries the awards shows, the markers of a successful creative career, are dominated by the same “fraternity culture” that is evident in creative departments. This is not surprising as theories of male gaze (Mulvey 1989) suggest the power of patriarchy (Gutwill 1994). Patriarchal structures — those that inhibit women from winning awards — are detrimental to both the “development and career

paths of women” and the larger role female creatives could play in advancing successful “creative efforts” (Runco 2004, p. 669).

When it comes to presenting their work, women in Spain and the United States have similar experiences. In the United States women specifically discussed being part of presentation teams. However, even if they are part of the team, their male partners tend to have lead roles in the presentation. These women pointed out the mistake in letting this happen. It’s through the presentations that creatives receive recognition, which in turn leads to better assignments, more rapid promotions and higher pay. Spanish women addressed this in terms of an environmental issue. They may be physically included in a presentation, however the dynamics are framed by male/creative director to male/client interactions. Spanish women expressed an inability to build long-lasting trust with clients, unless the client was female which is rare. The inability to establish trusted relationships in turn negatively impacted their career trajectory. While the experiences of creative women as participants on presentation teams may be expressed differently across these two cultures, the end result are by in large the same. Men dominate on presentation teams.

Creative Project Assignment

Differences. On the surface it may appear that American women’s discussions about male bonding and deflecting glory differentiated them from Spanish women, who focused on cultural codes. A deeper look shows this is not the case. For Spanish creative women, male bonding, which dovetailed with women deflecting glory, appeared as an environmental issue with great similarity. Cultural codes appear to be the only difference

among the women when it comes to project assignment. However, even that has similarities.

Cultural codes emerge from life experience. In all cultures those life experiences have some articulation of a gendered reality, though perhaps in Spain the gendered reality is a bit starker than in the United States. Some cultural codes come from the physical manifestations of gender: women know the codes around sanitary products and men know the codes around condoms. The cultural components of these codes, however, are equally deeply ingrained in broader ways such as how and where girls or boys play, or how and what life choices women or men make. In that sense, it could be said cultural codes or gender insights come from cultural and social experiences. If you know the cultural codes you can more easily connect with consumers. In Spain, just as in America, cars and beer are considered male and, therefore, female creatives have historically not been assigned to these accounts. This despite the fact that, at least in the United States, women equally (if not more) influence car purchases (Jordan 2009).

Cultural codes are powerful. However, many American women also argued that any good creative can traverse the gender divide, because it's the job of creatives to "get inside the skin" of the target consumer, whether that is male or female. According to this perspective, gender should be irrelevant. Yet some Spanish women discussed how at times they didn't feel prepared to work on men's products because they didn't inherently understand male cultural codes. The barriers both within the broader culture, as well as inside creative departments, didn't allow them to easily learn these codes.

In the same vein, Spanish creative women brought up their innate sense of female cultural codes and some talked about being more comfortable working on products where

they could leverage that knowledge. However, they also spoke of the danger in doing so. That is, by working only on products that target women, doors would be closed to working on men's products. As mentioned previously, these women didn't feel prepared to work on men's products because they didn't inherently understand male cultural codes. Interestingly, this suggests that Spanish cultural may have less permeable walls dividing the genders.

Similarities. The idea that women deflect individual glory and prefer shared accolades was a common theme for creative women in both countries. However, it wasn't something they necessarily saw as positive. In fact, it appears that this behavior has the potential of minimizing their individual contribution, which could have far reaching consequences for their careers. Men, on the other hand, appear more comfortable taking a compliment as theirs alone. As one American woman said, "Women need to learn two words, 'thank you.'" Spanish women's experiences were similar. Overall many women in both countries saw deflecting or sharing glory as the right thing to do. Interestingly, nearly all also saw it as negatively impacting perceptions of them among their creative peers and, perhaps more importantly, creative management. By not taking individual credit for work well done, these women felt it might send the message they can't handle the work on their own.

One of the most powerful similarities was these women's experiences of creative departments as a "boys club," or a "territorio de chicos" (boys land). Many of the American women spoke openly about the "fraternity culture" and the Spanish women spoke passionately about the difficulty of working in a "cosas de chicos/tíos" (thing of boys). For the Spanish women, the underlying message was that the bonding experiences,

the “club social,” shared by men led to camaraderie, or “colegueo” (when you go out with male friends to drink and pick up “girls”), from which the women were excluded. Both American and Spanish women implied that the “fraternity culture” and male bonding or camaraderie has the potential to influence project assignment in ways that are detrimental to women.

It is interesting that American women also spoke of humor as being a significant part of the creative process, while Spanish women spoke of humor in terms of a sexist environment. American women equated humor as a creative attribute, something prized by men, as long as it was humor other men could relate to. Not surprising, it’s also the same type of humor that one tends to see in award-winning campaigns. Spanish women talked about humor in terms of having to endure “bromitas” (sexist jokes). The Spanish women referred to the use of this humor as men’s means of promoting “buen ambiente” (good atmosphere). Yet many Spanish creative women found the atmosphere anything but good. “You have to swallow many things.” Comparing the Spanish and American women’s experiences it could be easily argued that bonding and humor, in male culture, go hand in hand. As frustrating as these experiences are, they aren’t surprising. For Gutwill (1994) would argue that messages and their meanings are “internalized directly from the culture” (p. 17).

A striking thread among both American and Spanish women — a thread that reflected the “fraternity culture” — was the masculine/feminine division when it comes to product assignment. Spanish women, cultural codes aside, expressed frustration by being boxed into assignments that repeated stereotypes. The Spanish creative women felt that while men and women could leverage their personal experiences based on cultural

codes, it should not define product assignment. Further they expressed stereotypical frustration with favoritism based on being “a nice woman,” which culturally means having big breasts and a nice body. They, like American women, felt that the masculine/feminine division of product assignment was a detriment both to clients and to their individual careers. “The worst thing you can do is get stuck on women’s accounts.” In fact, a number of them argued that these assignments leave them in the “pink ghetto.”

The American women clearly linked product assignment by gender and the ability, or in the case of women the inability, to work on accounts that have strong potential to be award winners. These award-winning accounts tend to be masculine products, although one of the few campaigns for a female product that has been able to transcend this is Dove “Evolution,” which won the 2007 Grand Prix Cannes Lion (High, Morrissey & Parpis 2007). The Spanish women express fears in saying “no” to any assignments, which left them in the position of saying “yes” to mostly feminine accounts that, with a few notable exceptions, have little potential to win coveted creative awards. The consequences of being denied work on award-winning accounts is born out in the lack of female award winners (Jordan 2009). “It’s that testosterone driven thing,” said one American creative. This supports Twitchell’s (1996) argument that ads are produced “in active collusion with the male viewers” (p. 232).

Finally, the gender division of project assignment impacts the portfolios of female careers across both countries — and one’s career trajectory is highly influenced by maintaining a strong portfolio. Spanish women spoke of being denied access to work with the biggest clients, the assignments with the most creative and awards potential. One American woman spoke of the need to “stop looking at yourself as a woman and they’ll

(men) look at you as a good creative.” The inability to be viewed as a “good creative,” despite efforts equal to their male counterparts, sometimes leaves women in the “pink ghetto,” that is being assigned to non-award winning feminine products. We suspect that the Spanish women would concur with finding themselves in the pink ghetto — a place where feminine and family products rule, awards are few and your colleagues are predominately female. In the pink ghetto, your career path narrows quickly.

Vanish Acts

While creative careers may stagnate in the “pink ghetto,” the trouble actually begins the day female creatives enter the masculine “boys club” or “territorio de chicos” (boys land), also known as the advertising creative department. It appears that life in a “fraternity culture” is leading to women vanishing from creative departments across cultures. When looking at these vanishing acts — why women leave — we see only similarities.

Environmental factors play a significant role in why women from both countries choose to leave the industry. Many of the women, though not all, spoke openly about a “fraternity club” and the “cosas de chicos/tíos” (thing of boys) and how these cultural frames permeated advertising creative departments. Spanish women did not frame it as bluntly as their American counterparts. However, they too spoke of the need to find less stress and work in offices where there were less gender-biased assignments and more creative freedom. For Spanish women that meant generally leaving to set up their own shops, which was also a common solution for American women.

Both Spanish and American women spoke of frustrations with inequitable pay. One American woman simply said, “We’re still low paid for what we do.” American

women spoke of working harder just to keep up, to “prove ourselves.” Spanish women had the same experiences with lower pay. Said one Spanish creative, “menos sueldo” (we work the same, but get less). They spoke of working “los currantes” (like laborers). In the end, creative women often simply give up, “tiras la toalla” (to drop the towel).

A final reason women in both countries leave creative departments is for a work/life balance. This issue becomes of particular importance when women have children. Women in both countries expressed the intense time commitment as a frustration. Over and over the need for flexible scheduling was mentioned. It appears that this is a problem more common among women, as many of the male creatives have stay-at-home wives who are willing to devote their lives to caring for their husbands and their children. Said one American woman, “we all need wives.” Many of them said they put off having children for a long time in the hopes of not damaging their careers and encourage young creative women to do the same. “I advise young women to wait to have kids because once you have kids everything is different.” Others simply give up on having children all together.

Conclusion

It appears that the structural system that underpins advertising creative departments, and which influences the creative process as well as work assignment, is certainly not equitable. Nor does this structure accurately reflect our globalized marketplace. Ultimately, this research suggests a structural system, in both countries, that is framed by a pervasive “boys club” or “territorio de chicos” (boys land). We suggest this structure also does not enhance creativity. Further, we suspect that this patriarchal

cultural structure will be found in more countries than Spain and the United States. In fact, with the Americanization of global culture (de Mooij 2010) it may be a pervasive global phenomenon. Taking this research on the road to other countries — to talk with men and women and to compare what is actually happening — is the logical next step.

A limitation of this study is its focus on women at the top. Future research will delve into the male prescriptive and those of junior creatives, both females and males. Additionally, Spain and the United States represent only two countries. While they are global leaders in advertising and culture, more research needs to be done to bring the insights of creatives from multiple countries.

It is our hope that this and other studies will make young professionals entering the advertising creative system more aware of what appears to be global gender biases within advertising creative departments. We also hope that this study, and others like it, will lead to creating an improved work environment, leading to more balanced and successful work for clients. Finally, we hope our work leads to changes that help create a more hospitable, equitable, and inevitably better creative departments for all creatives.

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A Vanishing Act: Creative Women in Spain and the United States

Submitted to: *The International Journal of Advertising*

2 August 2010

Dear Professor Taylor,

Please find attached our submission, *A Vanishing Act: Creative Women in Spain and the United States*. We have attached the manuscript, titled as such, and a covering letter, also titled as just. The manuscript begins with an abstract and has had all citations related to the authors removed for blind review. The covering letter, as you can see, contains my contact information as well as the names and affiliations of my co-authors. We would be happy to submit detailed author biographies should our paper be accepted.

We selected *The International Journal of Advertising* because of its high standards, and because we believe this work fits well with the mission of your journal. We thank you for your consideration of our manuscript. Should you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

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