Sick of awards: Hidden costs of signaling for advertising creatives

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Abstract:
This qualitative study explores the signaling costs associated with winning Cannes Lions, considered the industry's most prestigious award ceremony. The dynamic componential model of creativity and signaling theory are utilized as a theoretical framework. Grounded Theory was employed for the analysis of eighteen in-depth interviews conducted with Cannes award-winning creatives from Brazil (one of the top three most awarded countries in the festival). *Corporate creative tyranny* emerged as the central category, which leads to excessive workload, competitive obsessions, and stress. Findings suggest that winning awards is linked to negative costs related to reputation (scam work) and health (physical and psychological damages), contradicting the dynamic componential model of creativity and showing the hidden costs of achieving awards in the advertising industry. Managerial advice is given to reduce these costs.

Keywords: Signaling, advertising awards, advertising creatives, creativity festivals, motivation

Introduction

Achieving awards is a strategy advertising agencies employ to reap benefits in different areas of the business (e.g., Kilgour, et al., 2013; Polonsky, et al., 1995). In the same vein, awards help creatives to establish their personal "creative power" (De Waal Malefyt, 2013; Gehrlein & Kher, 2004) since they advance their careers through peer recognition (McLeod et al., 2009) by signaling their skills and abilities to recruiters (Harrison & Jepsen, 2015). In this manner, they improve their working conditions and monetary benefits (Nixon, 2006; Kübler & Proppe, 2012), and gain access to prestigious agencies and projects (McLeod et al., 2011; Hirschman, 1989). Creatives utilize awards to accumulate recognition in hopes of becoming 'stars' (Round & Styhre, 2015; O'Barr, 2008; Nixon, 2006) by achieving celebrity status quickly (De Waal

Malefyt, 2013; Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009) due to the short-lived nature of advertising careers (Nixon, 2006). But at what cost do they obtain all the signaling benefits of winning? Academia has explored the effects of gaining recognition through awards (Gallus & Frey, 2017; Kübler & Proppe, 2012), but there is a price creatives pay in their emotional and physical health, sometimes called the 'dark side of creativity' (Josefsson & Blomberg, 2020). David Griner (2015), creative and innovation editor for Adweek, informally introduced some negative outcomes of winning Cannes Lions, the most coveted award in the industry. After analyzing the responses, he concluded that creatives: 1) Will experience an intense euphoria for a brief period of time, 2) will become an instant star (even as an unknown talent), 3) will overthink where to display the trophy, 4) will feel like they have worked forever for that lion and that more will follow, 5) will fear living in the lion's shadow, 6) will notice that it will make no difference to family and friends (they will not be too impressed, unless they are colleagues), 7) will be asked for tips on winning and will not have good answers, 8) will become far more attractive to certain potential employers, 9) will face resentment from clients who will question the creative's motivation to create, 10) will appreciate Cannes beyond trophies (connections and sessions), and 11) will move on to pursue new awards. Therefore, the main objective of this research is to explore the signaling costs of awards on advertising creatives, and present new findings to understand how they affect practitioners' reputation and health beyond the known positive aspects. It also provides a literature review of the negative side of signaling quality, contributes to the theoretical framework of awards as a motivational tool by introducing an emerging core category labeled as *corporate creative tyranny*, and offers recommendations to protect practitioners from it. Finally, this article answers previous calls for research in Latin America

(Taylor, 2012), as it focuses on high caliber creatives from Brazil, an unexplored creative powerhouse.

Awards as signals and opportunity costs

Awards have a strong signaling function (Frey, 2007) and act as privileged symbolic resources of creative potential because traditional markers (e.g., degree, résumé) are considered irrelevant in advertising creative employment (Kopman, 2015), and the traits that identify creative individuals are not easily observable (Malakate et al., 2007). Signaling theory is a natural approach to the study of awards, since they are signals of recognition and distinction (Jones, 2002). Signaling theory (Spence, 1974), introduced information asymmetries into economic models of decision-making. Mainly, signaling theory refers to stakeholders' search for signals, observable actions that supply information about unobservable characteristics (Spence, 1974), such as the quality and abilities of employees. In this respect, sending signals of quality can be regarded as strategic action (Jones, 2002) and an investment in job markets.

Signaling theory suggests that non-monetary rewards (awards) can lead to higher motivation because they are less likely to be seen as controlling or as destroying the signaling value of certain actions as opposed to money (Bénabou & Tirole, 2006; Frey & Jegen, 2001; Frey, 1997). Intrinsic motivation has been informed as a key element for creativity (see meta-analyses in De Jesus et al., 2013 and in Liu et al., 2016); and for advertising creatives (Sasser & Koslow, 2012; Stuhlfaut, 2010). Furthermore, based on "the dynamic componential model of creativity and innovation in organizations" (Amabile & Pratt, 2016), awards should act as a synergistic extrinsic motivator, since they convey information about the individual's work value and

competence, and may also have additive effects on intrinsic motivation, by boosting their involvement with work and adding meaning to their tasks without undermining their sense of self-determination.

However, signals may be associated with hidden costs for individuals. These *opportunity costs* include monetary and psychological investments, as well as time and effort (Spence, 1973). Research unrelated to advertising has also unveiled two main additional costs: damaged reputation and health concerns (physical and psychological).

Reputational costs of winning awards

Reputation, widely shared information via third parties about a person's character, skills, reliability, and other attributes (Jones, 2002) frames how signals are interpreted. Advertising creatives consider reputation as the main extrinsic motivator in their careers (Stuhlfaut, 2010). In this regard, winning awards, as a signaling strategy, may lead to reputation building (Grabhner, 2002), since career advancement in advertising creativity relies on visible markers of success in the form of awards and peer recognition (McLeod et al., 2011), allowing them to switch agencies (Fletcher, 1999) because managers recruit talent based on the *glorification of outsiders* (Pfeffer, 2001). Therefore, creatives must build a reputation for professional advancement.

Although awards should serve as an opportunity for *honest* professionals to signal their quality (Gallus & Frey, 2017), peer recognition can motivate cheating and dishonesty (Edelman & Larkin, 2015; Schweitzer et al., 2004). Individuals may produce desirable signals of quality to win awards (Johnstone & Grafen, 1993) without deserving them. This behavior known as

"employee gaming" (Gubler, Larking & Pierce, 2013) presents the risk of unleashing *rat races* that could negatively affect organizations and professionals (Bender & Theodossiou, 2014).

The quest for recognition may invite strategic action because it is obvious which criteria entries must meet to win (e.g., entering work without touch ups, client approval). However, individuals may feel encouraged to focus all energy on meeting the criteria to the point where they may fake their performance and manipulate the criteria in their favor (Holmström & Milgrom, 1991). In advertising, creatives may generate "fake ads" (Kübler & Proppe, 2012), "scam work" or *truchos*, that is, ideas created to participate in creativity festivals that may or not have been approved by clients (Roca et al., 2017). The euphemisms "proactive work" and "work presented to the client but was not approved" have been quoted to describe these advertisements, as a way to be promoted and lift their reputations (Wilson, et al., 2018; Waller, 2010; O'Barr, 2008). This phenomenon seems to occur with clients that are risk-averse or with *clientelist* agencies (Bilby et al., 2021).

When an award is presented to a professional known to be undeserving, the prestige of the giver and the distinction is damaged, therefore, trust in the award is essential for its value (Gallus & Frey, 2017). When the signal violates industry expectations, uncertainty increases and perceptions of a professional's effectiveness decreases (Jones, 2002). Although spec ads are used as a legitimate practice in the beginning of creatives' careers to build their portfolio (Koppman, 2015), awards may damage someone's reputation if they are obtained unethically (Frey & Gallus, 2016), thus "the misuse of this signal may stall rather than spur a career" (Jones, 2002, p. 212).

Upon winning an award through scam work, resentment from non-winners may occur (Harrison & Jepsen, 2015) in the form of envy (Feather, 1989) or professional jealousy because non-winners desire to have something they do not possess, or they simply refuse to accept that someone else possesses what they lack (Heinich, 2009). Negative remarks and the diminishment of someone's accomplishments is cause for preoccupation for professionals, who feel that their efforts are not being recognized. This kind of behavior from colleagues may discourage winners, who crave validation from peers.

In view of this, the following research question is proposed:

RQ_1. What are the signaling costs advertising creatives pay regarding their reputation upon winning industry creative awards?

Health costs of winning awards

A creative's career may lead to some negative outcomes that deeply contrast from the positive perceived benefits from being in a creative industry (insecurity, inequality, exploitation, and self-exploitation) (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009), constituting a particular creative identity that rejects bureaucratic values and seeks peer-recognition (Hackely & Kover, 2007; Alvenson, 1994). All this, coupled with the environmental commercial pressure from advertising agencies in the form of excessive workload (Ensor, Pirrie & Band, 2006), specially increased for competition (e.g. preparing entries for festivals), may lead to obsession (Gotsi at al. 2010; Fletcher, 1990) and stress (Eisenberg & Thompson, 2011; Mumford 2000; Kover & Goldberg, 1995), which can inhibit creativity (Ensor, Pirrie & Band, 2006) and impact employees'

well-being and productivity (LaMontagne et al., 2014). Organizational stress can be understood

"as the process by which workplace psychological experiences and demands (stressors) produce

both short-term (strains) and long-term changes in mental and physical health" (Ganster &

Rosen, 2013, p.1088). Different processes related to stress may become chronic and, even, lead

to death: diseases (cardiovascular alterations, diabetes, blood pressure issues, and cholesterol),

psychosomatic issues (sleep disturbance, headache, and fatigue), and psychological disorders

(fear, tension, anxiety, and depression) (Ganster & Rosen, 2013).

Awards may encourage workaholism to satisfy organizations and its members (Shultz, 2014),

leading to positive short-term outcomes but negative repercussions long-term (Ng et al., 2007).

This might explain why excessive workload on creatives predicts agencies winning awards over

time, and positive effects on creativity (Verbeke et al., 2008), while subjecting advertising

creatives to higher levels of pressure (Fletcher, 1990), which they cannot meet in the long run

(Johnson et al., 2005). As a result, award winners may be negatively affected when performance

expectations are raised so high that they become increasingly difficult to fulfill (Harrison &

Jepsen, 2015). Stress, reported as the main "potential cost" of higher-status positions, may offset

those rewards related to these workplaces (Schieman et al., 2006) and it has been reported among

advertising creatives (Cheow & Chaidaroon, 2016; Pandey, 2003), particularly in gender studies

(e.g., Windels & Mallia, 2015). Different factors such as clients' risk-aversion (Bilby et al., 2021;

El-Murad & West, 2003), tight deadlines, long working hours (Round & Styhre, 2015; McLeod

et al., 2011), have been reported to be great stressors in the field. Practitioners (account, media

and creatives) use different strategies to cope with stress (Pandey, 2003): active problem-solving

(e.g., planning work), recreational (e.g., listening to music); relaxation (e.g., meditation); social

support (e.g., sharing feelings with friends) and avoidance (e.g., consuming alcohol).

Furthermore, the search for glory may cause frustration, elation, anxiety, desperation, and

depression (McLeod et al., 2011). It is not surprising, therefore, that advertising was named an

"ulcer-making business" (Jugenheimer, 1978); moreover, creative departments appear to be a

"manxiety", "status anxiety", and "gendered anxiety" space to develop obsession for brilliant

ideas (Priday, 2016; Gill, 2015; Nixon, 2003). Also, advertising creatives' personalities have

been found to be more "open to experience and neurotic" (anxious) than those of managers,

which can lead to emotional instability and conflict due to commercial pressures (Gelade, 1997).

Considering these matters, a second research question is proposed:

RQ$_2$. What are the signaling costs that award-winning advertising creatives pay regarding their

health?

Methods

The chosen methodology to explore the hidden costs of signaling through awards on advertising

creatives was qualitative. In-depth interviews were conducted following Grounded Theory

Research guidelines (Goulding, 2002). GTR is a well-established methodology within the social

sciences and more recently within the field of advertising (e.g., Parker et al., 2018; Nyilasy et al.

2009; Blythe, 2007). Of the four versions of GTR described by Charmaz (2000) (classic,

evolved, constructivist, and transformational), constructivist GTR was selected because it is the

tradition recommended for studying advertising creatives (Goulding, 2017), and allows

researchers to portray the subject's experiences in fullness (Charmaz, 2000).

Theoretical sampling

In GTR, sampling is determined by theory (Goulding, 2002). Theoretical sampling is the process in which researchers intentionally save more data from sources that will further develop specific, previously observed themes to refine emergent theories (Charmaz, 2006). Sampling continues until no new knowledge emerges (Groen et al., 2017). Theoretical saturation occurs when no new categories arise; in this research, it was reached at 18 interviews.

It has been stated that recruiting creatives for research can be difficult because having access to them is a constraint (Sasser & Koslow, 2008) due to the nature of their work, therefore purposive sampling (snowballing) was employed to recruit participants. Since creatives must meet specific requirements to participate (having won at least one Cannes Lion), interviewees referred peers who met the criteria (average of 0.58 per year); participants were invited via email. Interviewees were creative directors (100%) including men (12) and women (6), who on average were 40.3 years old and had 18.5 years of experience. Interviewees completed a bachelor's degree (most studied advertising) and four pursued graduate degrees. Most worked for networks (15), while others were employed by local agencies (2) and by an in-house agency (1) (see table 1 for details).

 Insert here: Table 1. Demographics of interviewed award-winning creative directors fromBrazil

Table 1. Demographics of interviewed award-winning creative directors from Brazil

CD#	Gender & Age	Education Degree & Major	Agency type	Years of experience	Lions per year
1	M, 39	BA Advertising/Marketing	Network	18	1.00
2	M, 40	BA Advertising, MA Design	In-house	17	0.58
3	M, 39	BA Advertising	Network	19	0.26
4	M, 47	BA Advertising	Network	29	0.83
5	M, 36	BA Advertising	Network	12	0.75
6	M, 41	BA Communication MBA Marketing	Network	22	0.23

7	M, 41	BA Advertising	Network	18	0.28
8	F, 47	BA Psychology	Network	20	0.20
9	F, 45	BA Advertising	Local	20	0.05
10	F, 34	BA Communication	Network	12	0.42
11	M, 45	BA Communication & Marketing	Local	23	0.74
12	M, 46	BA Graphic Design	Network	26	0.30
13	M, 36	BA Graphic Design	Network	15	1.13
14	F, 45	BA Communication & MA Advertising & Marketing	Network	23	1.78
15	M, 32	BA Advertising/Marketing	Network	11	0.91
16	F, 37	BA Advertising/Marketing	Network	13	0.31
17	M, 36	BA Visual Arts & Design	Network	14	0.21
18	F, 41	BA Communication & MA Advertising	Network	22	0.55
	Average: 40.39		Network: 83.33% Local: 11.11% In-house: 5.56 %	Average: 18.55	Average: 0.58

Data Collection and analysis

A pilot study was conducted to 1) test research questions and 2) discover main emergent categories. Six Cannes Lions winners tested and validated research questions, and changes were applied in the final questions guide, which included the following questions: 1) What are the outcomes of winning at Cannes? 2) How does the pursuit of awards affect your career negatively? 3) How does winning Cannes Lions affect your health? 4) How does winning Cannes Lions touch your emotions?

For the final research, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype with 18 Brazilian creatives between May and November of 2019. On average, interviews lasted forty-nine minutes, and were conducted in Portuguese, recorded in mp3, transcribed, and then translated into English. A professional translator reviewed the documents to guarantee an accurate translation. After this, the process of open coding, thematic analysis, category generation, and modeling began (Charmaz, 2000). Frequencies were used to analyze answers, following the work of Chong

(2006) to establish the intensity of each mentioned code; they are shown in parentheses within the text.

Findings

The findings for each research question are summarized in this section. The constant pressure from management to obtain more awards may damage the reputation and health of creatives to comply with the institutionalized practice of measuring success with trophies at international competitions. These matters are further explained in the voices of our 18 participants.

RQ$_1$: What is the signaling cost advertising creatives pay regarding their reputation upon winning?

Pressure to win awards (18) was identified as the main category of the research since it triggers all other categories. Creatives must fulfill impossible agency expectations and to achieve them, their workload becomes excessive (6). The industry has institutionalized awards as the metric for success, which is why agency management demands awards to meet corporate objectives, while creatives pay the price.

> When the industry determined that Cannes Lions are the measurement of success, the pressure grew. If you work for networks, the pressure is ever-present (CD#18).
>
> My stress levels are high all year long. My superiors want awards, but then clients do not approve award-winning ideas. Convincing clients to buy creative work is my main cause of stress. If I do not produce this kind of work, my job is in danger (CD#1).

When daily work does not meet the criteria to win awards and clients are risk-averse, creatives resort to scam work (8). Some creatives consider this a "disservice", "opportunistic" or "dangerous" and it may affect individuals, the industry, and even the image of a whole country:

"Brazil became largely known for producing scam work and the country's image was

jeopardized" (Interviewee 9, creative director). It was revealed that creative departments operate

in two realms to accomplish different missions: 1) creation of daily work that retains clients, and

2) production of work that wins awards after working hours (overtime).

> Scam work is a disservice to the industry. It doesn't build brands and it is harmful. Work
> becomes art in advertising when the idea is strategic, intelligent and the business is the
> inspiration. When you do work based on those elements, and you do it well, then it is art
> (CD#15).

> Scam work is also a danger. You must win with ideas that were produced. If you win with
> this kind of idea, you are being dishonest (CD#13).

> If you think you can balance daily work and brainstorming ideas to win awards from nine
> to six, you're mistaken. To come up with award-winning ideas you must think, study,
> follow trends, see what people are doing and look outside of advertising for inspiration.
> Award-winning ideas need a lot of time (CD#3).

The industry holds conflicting opinions regarding the production of scam work, which is why

creatives known to win using this strategy can damage their reputation; a signaling cost a

considerable group of creatives is willing to pay because they defend it by stating that it's a

high-level exercise to demonstrate their true talents (10).

> Everyday work is very hard for creatives, and that is why sometimes we must create spec
> or scam work. We create proposals for clients and some people criticize them, but they
> are exercise for the brain (CD#4).

> It's a place where you see spec work that clients didn't have the guts to produce. If a
> client approved the idea, then it is not scam work. You can see that kind of work as
> "trends" (...) Then to me, it's ok to send it to Cannes, if it was at least approved by the
> client (CD#6).

Winners are often accused of producing scam work by colleagues who resent their victories.

Interviewees acknowledge that there is an abundance of jealous practitioners who reject

award-winning work that was created specifically for festivals (11). Scammers have become so

used to this reaction that they just ignore it, although it may damage their reputation:

> People have told me that I was bitten by the awards bug and that awards are poison. Those people are only jealous and do not know what it is to work hard and be appreciated by a whole industry. Winning a Lion is a great accomplishment, even if it is through scam work (CD#2).

> Lions can create empathy, but also apathy in the form of envy. People try to diminish your victories [accusations of producing scam work] because they have not won. It's sad, but it happens (CD#12).

Along those lines, a secondary practice that damages a creative's reputation is using creative

formulas to try to replicate previous victories (4). This is common for creatives that have won

their first Lion, since they may tend to duplicate the kind of idea that made them winners,

showing a lack of versatility that may end their careers. A third practice that may damage a

creative's reputation is taking credit for work they did not conceive (4):

> I know people that the Lion caused them to stop learning and evolve, and they were left with what they knew when they won a Lion. Nowadays, they don't even work in advertising. If you're known for doing the same thing over and over again, colleagues will lose respect for you and your reputation will suffer. Creative formulas are an advertising no-no (CD#8).

> Unfortunately, opportunism is also present at the festival. People doing scam work or trying to take credit for work they didn't do is quite common (CD#14).

RQ$_2$: What is the signaling cost advertising creatives pay regarding their health?

Creatives have faced situations that directly affected their well-being because of the pressure to

win awards. They clearly recognized the hidden costs of the *glamorous* signal by means of

sacrifice and suffering; physical and psychological impacts are constant in the pursuit of

international recognition:

People think that working in advertising is so glamorous. Well, depression, burnout, and trouble sleeping are not glamorous at all. We smile at Cannes, but we cry in Brazil making ideas happen (CD#17).

You sacrifice your health, your sanity, and your wellbeing, but when you win it is so magical that you know it is worth it (CD#6).

The main emerging thematic category triggering other health-related signaling costs is stress (18) to produce award-winning ideas. This leads to negative outcomes that include sleeping disorders (17), and burnout (5), which in a few reported cases can even push toward suicide (2). The quest for the next Cannes Lions becomes almost an obsession (12):

I know many creatives who have emotional problems, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, alcoholism, and problems to socialize. I have met people who committed suicide because they didn't feel good enough (CD#9).

Many creatives see their work as part of them and experience great pressure to create the best ideas. Sometimes that pressure, along with other personal problems may lead to suicide. I lost a great friend of mine because he committed suicide. He never felt good enough, and I think that was part of the problem (CD#13).

I'm under a lot of stress, but I guess I know how to manage the pressure from my clients, the agency managers and the expectation of awards.(...) I have so much pressure. I sleep 5 hours a day (CD#4).

The remedy some creatives use to deal with the pressure based on high expectations (18) from different key actors (e.g., managers, global creative directors) is the use of legal drugs related to psychiatry (10); through them, they try to alleviate anxiety or panic attacks (13), recover from depression (12), and sleep (6). Creatives feel so pressured to deliver awards that they become obsessed, pushing their bodies and minds to the limit. They confessed that it is common to be on psychiatric treatments and even purchase *non-prescribed* drugs to perform and focus at work:

I have seen people get panic attacks at work and develop lots of health conditions. Some of my colleagues (...) take Adderall [medication for Attention Deficit Disorder] to concentrate and perform (CD#5).

I have taken sleeping pills for over five years. I cannot totally relax at home after work, especially when I have a campaign that I think has the potential to win at Cannes (CD#10).

I have worked many years in advertising, and it has taken a toll on my health. I've had panic attacks, trouble sleeping, depression (...) I was hospitalized on two occasions because I was burned out. I had to slow down and learn how to deal with the pressure in a more productive way (CD#13).

Another way some creatives cope with the stress caused by the pressure is alcohol (7) and illegal drugs (6) consumption. Regular drinking at work helps creatives decompress from the demands they receive, while smoking weed is a mechanism to calm the anxiety that work generates, feel positive and boost novel ideas:

I smoke weed every day to relax, have a positive attitude towards work and see ideas from a different perspective. I also have beer and whiskey at work to take a break from all the demands and responsibilities (CD#7).

Weed keeps me sane. Beer keeps me happy. Whiskey keeps me sharp at work. If you work as an advertising creative, this combination will keep you grounded (CD#16).

The pressure of meeting deadlines and the need for more time to focus on generating ideas for awards leads to a sedentary lifestyle. They rely on fast food for nourishment, and, consequently, report weight gain due to unhealthy eating habits (13) and lack of physical activity (11). This dynamic, sustained over time, precedes serious *invisible* physical health problems such as heart complications (5), stomach conditions (5), and other health concerns that may end in hospitalization (6):

The cost of winning a Lion is high. You sacrifice your personal time, your health, time for the gym, and your mental health. Because of the constant pressure I'm on medication for a stomach condition, I have had allergies all over my body and have been hospitalized (CD#10).

I'm not in the best shape (...) I've taken medicine for a heart condition I've developed. It was caused by stress (CD#3).

I have sacrificed my health a lot. I sleep less, I don't take care of myself, I don't go to the doctor, I eat poorly, and I drink a lot. I'm constantly stressed out. I have gained weight and I exercise less. I had stomach problems due to stress and had to go to the doctor to get treatment (CD#5).

The constant pressure that encourages excessive work overload to pursue awards emerges as a subtly imposed practice by top management that forces creatives to sacrifice their health and personal time, generating health issues that are overlooked by the hierarchy of advertising agencies (agency management, agency headquarters, and global creative directors), but that eventually damages creatives:

My heart is not doing well because I stress a lot. My superiors want more awards, and now they want pure gold. A finalist in Cannes or a Bronze is not acceptable anymore. Do you know how difficult it is to win Cannes Lions? They don't care, and they just add more pressure to make awards happen. I like to win, but I think that the pressure is just too much (CD#16).

The pressure to win more Lions after winning the first one is brutal, especially after you become director because your position depends on awards. You must win to protect your livelihood (CD#9).

Awards are not seen as a plus for a job well done, since the pressure is present all year long. According to creatives, this practice is rooted in the *unreal headquarters' expectations* that benefit agency networks while prejudicing their well-being in many facets (e.g., hospitalization, lowering self-esteem...). The glamor of winning has its foundation in a painful creative process, considered only "easy" by those who demand victories:

Winning Cannes Lions is great, but the pressure to win is a big pain. My superiors expect me to win every year, and it doesn't work like that. The year that you win is the exception, not the norm (CD#3).

> Cannes is pressure all year long. Headquarters want you to win. Agency management wants awards, and global creative directors demand Cannes Lions. Winning is all they talk about, and they actually think it's easy (CD#9).

> The problem with winning at Cannes is that your boss believes that winning is possible and, therefore, thinks it's easy. It is not easy at all. The pressure is horrible and when you don't win you feel like a loser because everyone was counting on you. The pressure takes the fun out of the process (CD#16).

Agency management has imposed awards as the "measure for creative success" and persuades creatives to believe that they must win awards to justify their position as creative directors and bring glory to the agency. The pressure to win more and more prestigious awards represents a constant weight in a creative's health and wellbeing:

> When you are a creative director, you have to think about clients' needs, awards, supervising the team and coming up with the best work (...) If you work as an advertising creative, you have to prove yourself every day. This causes great stress and the pressure is always on. My health has been affected by this (CD#11).

> I do not know one creative who isn't stressed out, especially when Cannes is around the corner. Once you see that you have nothing, stress takes over (CD#8).

The introduction of more categories in the Cannes Festival of Creativity has created the impression among management that winning has become easier. Thus, this corporate mindset can have a boomerang effect by demotivating and even shaming creatives. After receiving a great amount of pressure from upper management, if a win does not materialize, creatives feel defeated:

> Cannes is now more focused on innovation, and my superiors are asking for ideas that are beyond my intellectual level. Now, creatives need to know about engineering, technology, data, mathematics, and more to be able to participate in categories such as Innovation. Before, it was just Communications, now it surpasses the field (CD#15).

> To come up with a great campaign I go through stress, depression, anxiety, everything!

Especially after winning a Lion, you feel pressure because your next campaign must be at least as good as that last one. If you go to the network's creative meetings and have nothing good to show, you die of shame (CD#1).

On the other hand, winning produces an *addictive effect* (12). Creatives experiment sort of a drug withdrawal that generates more sparks of anxiety to create better work. In this regard, creatives are trapped between their own obsession and the headquarters' interests that obligate them to pursue awards and their signaling benefits, which imprisons them in an unhealthy lifestyle that may lead to abandoning the industry:

To produce award-winning work, you must invest a lot of time and mix daily work with pet projects. People get burnt out and stress is a major factor. I know many people who have abandoned the industry because they cannot handle the pressure (CD#2).

I don't sleep well. I think too much about work, and sometimes I dream about work too. They say that lack of sleep produces Alzheimer. I guess I'll get Alzheimer in about three years [laughs] (CD#17).

After you win one, two, three, four and see that you are capable of winning, the anxiety skyrockets because you force yourself to win. If you don't win, the level of frustration is overwhelming (CD#13).

Discussion

This exploratory research extends the knowledge about the effects of awards on senior creatives. While previous studies have focused on positive outcomes for agencies and creatives (De Waal Malefyt, 2013; Nixon, 2006), this study highlights the hidden signaling costs of winning awards. For this purpose, the dynamic componential model of creativity and innovation in organizations (Amabile & Pratt, 2016) was employed to understand how advertising agencies trap creatives into a *motivational loop* that makes them more productive using different types of strategies. In this regard, signaling theory (Spence, 1973) was used as a general framework to connect the synergetic motivation and the hidden costs creatives must pay to acquire and keep the signal

under the invisible rules of the awards games. This study's protagonists are the voices of 18 top

Brazilian creatives who revealed power dynamics that were labeled under the central category of

corporate creative tyranny to win awards in advertising (see figure 1).

Insert here: Figure 1. Proposed model for corporate creative tyranny in advertising
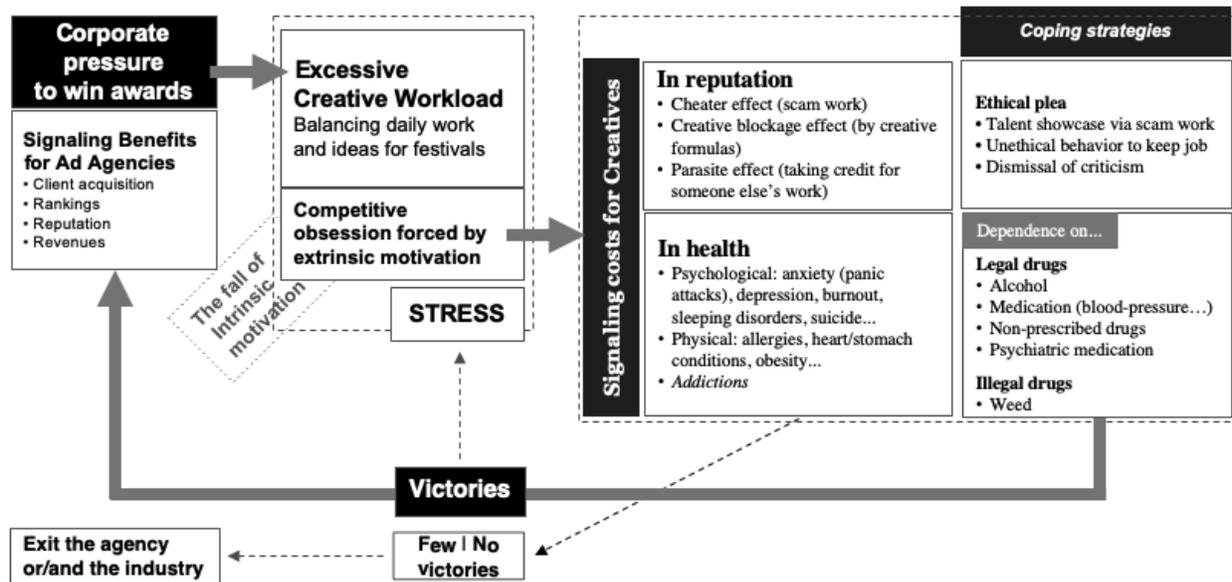

Figure 1. Proposed model for corporate creative tyranny in advertising

Corporate creative tyranny

The same management support that enhances creatives' passion (Sasser & Koslow, 2012) may

degenerate into a corporate creative tyranny, which emerges as a veiled control strategy arranged

by upper management from agencies and networks. Organizations utilize awards as an allegedly

synergetic motivator for creatives to improve agencies' client acquisition, rankings, reputation,

and revenues. It arises in the form of increased pressure on creatives, who are expected to

constantly win awards (Roca, et al., 2017), and thus, awards become just an external motivator.

This pressure results in excessive workload and in competitive obsession, which jeopardizes

intrinsic motivation and leads to stress. From a personal perspective, synergistic motivators (Amabile & Pratt, 2016) not only seem to fail to boost intrinsic motivation, but may generate two main signaling costs: unethical practices that may damage creatives' reputation and risky behaviors that may seriously damage their health. While corporations reap the signaling benefits of the victory, creatives are the ones paying the hidden signaling costs. This tension between business and creative work is best summarized by this interviewee:

> One year you win 10 Lions and the next one you win 2, and then you'll believe you're shit. Last year, a really famous agency from Brazil had the worst year they've had in a long time. (...) They won 12 Lions, including a Gold Lion in Film! Can you believe it!? But they were not satisfied. That's sad. I was the only one saying, let's celebrate and drink. They were sad because they usually win 18 through 22 Lions per year. I think that's craziness! That's not healthy and it's not real. That kind of mentality doesn't build better brands or professionals (...) it just feeds big egos and gives money to old people who are playing golf with other old people (CD#1).

The componential model that includes synergistic motivators (Amabile & Pratt, 2016) seems to find an exception in the advertising industry, since intrinsic motivation is adversely affected. Instead of motivating creatives to self-actualize through their work and generate concepts as a necessity to express their creative nature, they try to win awards to satisfy external pressures in order to keep their jobs. It is not surprising, therefore, that awards rank at the tail of external motivators found by Stuhlfaut (2010) for advertising creatives. Creatives realize that the signaling costs for earning recognition are too steep, and what was at first considered a personal accomplishment, has become a burden that has normalized their exploitation to benefit agencies. Creatives sacrifice their well-being in the quest for awards, which if achieved leads to positive outcomes for the agency network but for the professional, a short-lived victory and dire consequences for his/her health, and even on their reputation. Who is then the real winner in

creativity festivals? Agencies are; they take the glory and will keep awards even after creatives leave to work somewhere else or abandon the industry.

The signaling costs advertising creatives pay regarding their reputation upon winning

Reputational effects

To comply with agencies' impossible expectations regarding awards, employees resort to dishonest practices (Edelman & Larkin, 2015) that produce three effects that may damage their reputation: cheater effect (by scam work), creative blockage effect (by using repeated creative formulas that succeed in the past), and parasite effect (taking credit for someone else's work). Producing scam work developed specifically for festivals (Wilson, et al., 2018), triggers the most notable of these effects: the cheater effect. Although an award should serve as an opportunity for *honest* professionals to signal their quality (Gallus & Frey, 2017), corporate pressure leads creatives to engage in unethical behaviors (Holmström & Milgrom, 1991) to get peer recognition (Edelman & Larkin, 2015; Schweitzer et al., 2004). Data revealed that scam work production is a common practice to win Cannes Lions and to remain in positions with the creative department. It is also often justified as a way to showcase talent since clients tend to be risk-averse (Bilby, et al., 2021). This position leads winners to dismiss criticism of their scam-related victories by calling detractors 'envious' and 'jealous'.

Coping strategies: Ethical plea

On the contrary, the signaling cost of being regarded as a scammer damages a creative's reputation within the field since some creatives demonize the practice of creating fake ads, which raises ethical concerns. but does not affect his/her own creative identity because scammers

justify their behavior in order to raise creative standards. It neither harms the reputation of

agencies that encouraged this unethical behavior to benefit management interests (e.g. be in the

top of rankings, capturing more clients, selling the image of glamor to attract talent…). As an

example of this dynamic of tyranny, some agencies have reacted by terminating the employment

of the creatives involved in this practice and the Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity has banned

certain creatives (O'Sullivan-Gavin & Amazeen, 2009), blaming individuals but not the

organization that encouraged this behavior. Therefore, corporate creative tyranny damages

creatives' reputations, but has little repercussions for the agencies that benefit from this

'unethical' practice.

Signaling costs advertising creatives pay regarding their health

Health effects

Maintaining high-quality levels to keep gaining recognition and validation from peers (Nixon,

2003) places stress on individuals (Johnson et al., 2005), which has been identified as the

determining factor that unfolds psychological and physical health concerns in creatives. They

have a tendency to obsess (Gotsi et al., 2010), in this case over new trophies, neglecting their

wellness to spend more time at the agency creating ideas for festivals. Creatives feel unwell and

develop health issues (heart and stomach conditions, lack of sleep, allergies, burnout…), to the

point of being hospitalized.

Corporate and personal control over the awareness of health issues regarding creatives, hides the

cost of this signal for different stakeholders (clients, young creatives, students). Most

practitioners know about the production of scam work (even academia), but health issues are

covered by the glamor of the signal. Creatives accept this reality with resignation since they don't want to be perceived as weak or that the signal may be perceived as loose because damping negative signals can minimize impact (Jones, 2002).

Coping strategies: dependence on drugs

As a remedy to the described health costs, some creatives take prescribed medications, legal drugs (alcohol) or illegal drugs (weed) looking to control frustration, elation, anxiety, desperation, and depression (McLeod et al., 2011; Surlemont & Johnson, 2005). When all these coping strategies fail, they may leave the industry, and when awards suffocate winners emotionally (Johnson et al., 2005; Gergaud et al., 2006), they may abandon the industry or even commit suicide in exceptional cases.

Managerial implications

This research shows that Cannes Lions are a key part of the driver of corporate creative tyranny based on a supposed synergetic motivation. It might explain the proliferation of categories in the last few years (Cannes Lions, 2019). With a broader offer of prizes to be awarded, management believes that winning has become easier and expects creatives to win in the new categories, which forces creatives to acquire knowledge beyond the advertising industry (e.g., creating a TV ad for IBM moving atoms in a laboratory), which is the case of Innovation and Creative Data. In line with this trend, data suggest creatives have become overwhelmed, since health-related signaling costs are substantial. When they express their concerns about agency pressure to win awards and are aware of the game (not attracted by synergetic motivations), they are expelled by the industry and replaced by younger minds open to putting at risk their reputation and

sacrificing their health. In this regard, agencies should protect creatives by providing psychological assistance to deal with stress if they want to keep a healthy industry and avoid loss of talent (i.e., The Charity National Advertising Benevolent Society has dealt with practitioners' mental issues since 2018 in the United Kingdom) (Dallaire, 2018). Additionally, advertising companies should develop "Manager training" to regulate job-related stressors and promote mental health in the workplace (Gayed et al., 2018).

Also, companies should recognize their responsibility in unethical behaviors such as the production of scam work. Furthermore, festivals should ban not only creatives, but also agencies known for producing it (O'Sullivan-Gavin & Amazeen, 2009), although that would represent less revenue. Finally, creative managers should speak up in order to stop labor exploitation, and make health issue's trending topic. As the South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han states: "Now one exploits oneself and thinks one is fulfilling oneself." What some academic articles call "creative passion" could be renamed as "creative passion for labor self-exploitation". Do managers care?

Limitations and future research

The scope of qualitative work is limited because the sample is not large enough to argue that the 'dark side' of creativity is pervasive throughout the industry, at least in Brazil. Therefore, future studies could explore the experience of creatives from other geographies to strengthen our findings. Results from this research have some commonalities with other investigations in Latin America, thus more data from developed countries would allow comparisons between costs of signaling quality. Another possibility could be exploring the impact of not winning awards; what

happens to creatives that cannot signal their quality? How do they deal with corporate creative

tyranny? Finally, to learn about how award-winning boutiques and small agencies deal with

gaining recognition would be part of a formidable research agenda regarding trophies and the

signaling costs necessary to obtain them. From a quantitative perspective, papers assessing the

model presented here and creative job satisfaction in general are, indeed, necessary. This

business should encourage the production of great ideas, while protecting those responsible for

generating them.

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