



Sociomateriality in the Creative Process in Advertising Agencies

Sociomaterialidade no Processo Criativo em Agências de Publicidade

Sociomaterialidad en el Proceso Creativo en Agencias de Publicidad

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Abstract

Traditionally, studies on creativity have favored approaches centered on individual cognitive abilities or, more broadly, on social and environmental factors. The objective of this research was to analyze how aspects of sociomateriality shape the creative process in advertising agencies, a sector in which the phenomenon of creativity constitutes the core of organizational activities. Within the context of creative industries, the study starts from the understanding that advertising production involves not only individual skills but also continuous interactions between professionals, artifacts, digital technologies, and workspaces. This is a qualitative research study, employing participant observation in an advertising agency, with the activities of the creative department as the empirical reference. The results indicate that the creative solution emerges from a creative assemblage, constituted by humans and non-humans, which is articulated in a synthetic virtual world enabled, above all, by the intensive use of the internet and digital tools. By understanding creativity as a situated and relational practice, and by assuming the inseparability between humans and artifacts, this study contributes to a socio-material shift in creativity studies, broadening the understanding of the phenomenon beyond exclusively psychological or social perspectives. The study offers contributions to the field of creativity by highlighting how materiality enhances and shapes the creative process in everyday organizational life, strengthening the understanding of creativity as a socio-material practice.

Keywords: sociomateriality, creative process, publicity agencies, creative industry.

Resumo

Tradicionalmente, os estudos sobre criatividade têm privilegiado abordagens centradas em habilidades cognitivas individuais ou, em um nível mais amplo, nos fatores sociais e ambientais. O objetivo desta pesquisa foi analisar como os aspectos da sociomaterialidade configuram o processo criativo em agências de publicidade e propaganda, setor no qual o fenômeno da criatividade constitui o núcleo das atividades organizacionais. Inserido no contexto das indústrias criativas, o estudo parte da compreensão de que a produção publicitária envolve não apenas habilidades individuais, mas também interações contínuas entre profissionais, artefatos, tecnologias digitais e espaços de trabalho. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, com a realização da técnica de observação participante em uma agência de publicidade, tendo como referência empírica as atividades do departamento de criação. Os resultados indicam que a solução criativa emerge a partir de uma assemblage criativa, constituída por humanos e não humanos,

que se articula em um mundo sintético virtual viabilizado, sobretudo, pelo uso intensivo da internet e de ferramentas digitais. Ao compreender a criatividade como uma prática situada e relacional, e, ao assumir a inseparabilidade entre humanos e artefatos, este estudo contribui para uma virada sociomaterial nos estudos sobre criatividade, ampliando o entendimento do fenômeno para além de perspectivas exclusivamente psicológicas ou sociais. O estudo oferece contribuições para o campo da criatividade ao evidenciar como a materialidade potencializa e molda o processo criativo no cotidiano organizacional, fortalecendo a compreensão da criatividade como uma prática sociomaterial.

Palavras-chave: sociomaterialidade, processo criativo, agências de publicidade, indústria criativa.

Resumen

Tradicionalmente, los estudios sobre la creatividad han privilegiado enfoques centrados en las habilidades cognitivas individuales o, en un nivel más amplio, en los factores sociales y ambientales. El objetivo de esta investigación fue analizar cómo los aspectos de la sociomaterialidad configuran el proceso creativo en agencias de publicidad y propaganda, un sector en el cual el fenómeno de la creatividad constituye el núcleo de las actividades organizacionales. Inserto en el contexto de las industrias creativas, el estudio parte de la comprensión de que la producción publicitaria involucra no solo habilidades individuales, sino también interacciones continuas entre profesionales, artefactos, tecnologías digitales y espacios de trabajo. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa, que empleó la técnica de observación participante en una agencia de publicidad, teniendo como referencia empírica las actividades del departamento de creación. Los resultados indican que la solución creativa emerge a partir de una assemblage creativa, constituida por humanos y no humanos, que se articula en un mundo sintético virtual viabilizado, principalmente, por el uso intensivo de internet y de herramientas digitales. Al comprender la creatividad como una práctica situada y relacional, y al asumir la inseparabilidad entre humanos y artefactos, este estudio contribuye a un giro sociomaterial en los estudios sobre creatividad, ampliando la comprensión del fenómeno más allá de perspectivas exclusivamente psicológicas o sociales. El estudio aporta contribuciones al campo de la creatividad al evidenciar cómo la materialidad potencia y moldea el proceso creativo en la cotidianidad organizacional, fortaleciendo la comprensión de la creatividad como una práctica sociomaterial.

Palabras clave: sociomaterialidad, proceso creativo, agencias de publicidad, industria creativa.

Creativity is fundamental to organizational growth and performance (Mumford, Hester & Robledo, 2011). However, what constitutes creativity? According to Mumford, Hester and Robledo (2011), creativity can be understood as a form of high-level cognition that results in the production of original, high-quality and elegant problem solutions.

Within the field of creativity studies, advertising agencies represent a particularly relevant context, as these organizations are strongly oriented toward the continuous stimulation of marketing activities (Akmeraner-Kökat & Pellandini-Simányi, 2025). In this setting, creativity permeates everyday organizational practices and is relevant not only to communication effectiveness (Dahlén, Rosengren & Törn, 2008), but also to sales performance and profitability (Bernardin & Kemp-Robertson, 2008).

Despite the recognized importance of creativity in advertising, knowledge about how the creative process is configured remains limited (Stuhlfaut & Yoo, 2013). Overall, the development of creative practice is often associated with situations involving sensitivity and affect, as well as with individual talents perceived as unique or exceptional. From this perspective, creativity is commonly viewed either as an inherent attribute of individuals or as a phenomenon emerging from collective work (Harvey, 2014). Consequently, the creative process is typically framed in ways that emphasize the human subject (Cropley, 2006; Duff & Sumartojo, 2017).

Although existing studies highlight the psychological and social dimensions of creativity, they also point to the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how this phenomenon unfolds. In particular, research has given limited attention to how material elements are intertwined with the creative process (Jones et al., 2016; Corazza & Glăveanu, 2020). A more direct understanding of creativity as a sociomaterial process implies recognizing that any idea, whether a graphic piece or a communication artifact, requires some form of material expression for its realization (Corazza & Glăveanu, 2020).

This insight supports the adoption of a posthumanist stance, which seeks to avoid privileging the human over the material in creativity research (Anjo & Tureta, 2022). Such a stance rejects binary distinctions between humans and non-humans (Gane, 2006) and instead directs attention to the materiality that constitutes the social dimension of this phenomenon (Orlikowski, 2007).

From this perspective, sociomateriality offers an important contribution, as it posits that people and things do not exist in isolation but are constituted through ongoing interaction. This approach is grounded in a reality entangled with meanings and materials that jointly produce a given phenomenon (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). In other words, entities (both human and non-human) do not possess inherent properties; rather, they acquire forms, attributes and capabilities through their interpenetration. This relational ontology assumes that the social and the material are inseparable and mutually constitutive, rejecting the notion of independently defined entities (Orlikowski, 2007).

Previous studies have demonstrated the central role of materiality in the creative process (Rantisi & Leslie, 2010; Islam, Endrissat & Noppeney, 2016; Duff & Sumartojo, 2017). Therefore, expanding the analytical focus to include material elements embedded in creative practices is essential (Duff & Sumartojo, 2017), as it enables a deeper understanding of the relationship between humans and non-humans (Jones et al., 2016; Anjo & Tureta, 2022).

Based on this discussion, this article challenges the anthropocentrism that characterizes much of the research on the creative process and seeks to provide a more symmetrical approach to creativity. To do so, it integrates the sociomaterial perspective (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Orlikowski, 2010) into the study of creative processes in advertising agencies.

The study aims to “give voice to objects,” tools and technologies involved in the creative process within the creative industries. It also seeks to refine and extend existing research by highlighting the relevance of material dimensions in the interactions between humans and non-humans during the creative process (Orlikowski, 2007).

Accordingly, this article is guided by the following research question: how do sociomaterial aspects shape the creative process in advertising agencies? The objective of the study is to analyze how sociomaterial aspects configure the creative process in these organizations. By proposing this articulation, the study seeks to move beyond the idea of the human as the central agent in creativity and to recognize the agency of non-human elements, framing creativity as a sociomaterial practice (Anjo & Tureta, 2022).

In order to address the research question, non-participant observation (Angrosino, 2007) was conducted in an advertising agency located in the city of Vitória, state of Espírito Santo, Brazil, over a period of 4 months. Considering the importance of creativity and innovation in explaining organizational growth and performance (Mumford, Hester & Robledo, 2011), examining the interplay between social and material elements in the creative process may provide valuable insights into how material aspects, together with human elements, shape everyday organizational activities and recent transformations in creative work.

This approach also contributes to the advancement of research on the creative process by examining the dynamics through which sociomateriality shapes it. It not only challenges dominant perspectives that focus primarily on individual characteristics or group interactions (Mumford, Hester & Robledo, 2011), but also incorporates materiality into creative practices as a potential driver of organizational problem-solving, an aspect that remains underexplored in the literature (Duff & Sumartojo, 2017).

Furthermore, this study illustrates how the creative process is shaped by the material forces present within the agency. From a practical standpoint, this implies understanding strategic changes, constraints and variations arising from different material forces that are part of the agency’s operational environment.

This article is structured as follows: in addition to this introduction, a theoretical framework is presented, discussing the conceptual aspects of the creative process and sociomateriality. Next, the methodological procedures are described, including the research design, data collection and analytical procedures. The results are then presented, followed by the discussion. Finally, the study concludes with its final considerations.

Theoretical framework

Creative process

Defining creativity as the production of high-quality, original and elegant solutions entails several implications. According to Mumford, Hester & Robledo (2011), this conceptualization reflects an anthropocentric view of the phenomenon. Creativity is understood as a form of performance, something that individuals or groups do. Creative achievement is seen as the product of human cognition, often at a high level, resulting from a conscious decision regarding the use of scarce resources to generate a solution to a given problem.

Within this same perspective, which examines creativity through a lens that places humans in a central and distinct position, Woodman, Sawyer & Griffin (1993) propose three levels of analysis: the *individual level*, in which creativity emerges from antecedent conditions, cognitive styles, skills and knowledge; the *group level*, where it is influenced by group composition, group characteristics and contextual factors; and the *organizational level*, in which creative outcomes arise from a complex social system shaped by group creativity and contextual influences, including those originating from the external environment.

Similarly grounded in a predominantly human-centered view, Harvey (2014) develops an alternative approach to studying the creative process, referred to as creative synthesis. According to the author, group members can combine cognitive, social and environmental resources that support group creativity and enable the achievement of higher levels of creative performance. Harvey (2014) identifies a set of resources that facilitate group creativity, including the skills of group members, optimal group composition and both internal and external environmental conditions.

Although these approaches are relevant for understanding creativity, they tend to relegate artifacts, objects and material elements involved in the creative process to a secondary or even negligible role. However, recent studies have begun to incorporate the material dimensions of creativity. Duff & Sumartojo (2017), for instance, propose the concept of creative assemblage, defined as a more or less temporary mixture of heterogeneous material, affective and

semiotic forces within which creativity emerges from practices involving both human and non-human elements. Within this assemblage, the creative process consists of encounters between humans and non-humans, challenging the idea that creativity is an innate attribute of individuals (Duff & Sumartojo, 2017). While not denying human agency, these perspectives emphasize the importance of recognizing the agency of materiality within the social domain (Corazza & Glăveanu, 2020; Anjo & Tureta, 2022).

Moeran & Christensen (2013) also address the role of materiality in creativity by examining the space of a photographic studio in an advertising campaign. The authors observe that different individuals are assigned to specific areas within the studio and its adjacent spaces, with significant symbolic costs associated with spatial positioning. In this context, spatial constraints become evident in both the display and execution of creative work.

Creativity is often conflated with the related concept of innovation, which warrants clarification. While creativity refers to the generation of novel and useful ideas, innovation corresponds to their successful implementation (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). In examining the drivers of innovation in the creative industries, Jones et al. (2016) argue that materiality enables innovation by providing new opportunities for expression, particularly for unconventional actors, while also offering a degree of stability essential for more conventional practices.

Sociomateriality

The field of organizational studies has long neglected the material aspects of organizing (Orlikowski, 2007). However, there has been growing scholarly interest in materiality in recent years (Dameron, Lê & LeBaron, 2015). According to Orlikowski (2007), this “material turn” is characterized by the incorporation of studies that highlight the relevance of material dimensions in human actions and interactions. As a result, the intrinsic relationship between the social and the material leads to the understanding of social practices as sociomaterial practices (Orlikowski, 2007).

In this context, material artifacts, technologies and objects gain prominence and are no longer treated as secondary or absent elements in the analysis of social and organizational reality (Orlikowski, 2010). In examining sociomateriality in organizational life, Orlikowski (2007) argues that, as in a software development environment, spaces such as rooms and offices, along with equipment, tools, screens and documents, can form part of an immersive three-dimensional online environment for collaboration, referred to as a synthetic world.

Within this virtual work environment, users interact in real time through audio, text and images, while sharing content, knowledge and practices. These interactions are mediated by various devices, including keyboards, microphones, paper and audio equipment. According to Orlikowski (2010), in such a synthetic world, even when project members are geographically distributed across offices, cafés, public spaces or their homes, their avatars may be co-located in an online environment that facilitates interaction.

The sociomaterial perspective assumes that people and things exist only in relation to one another, always in interaction (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). According to this view, entities (both human and non-human) do not possess inherent properties. Instead, they acquire form, attributes and capabilities through their interpenetration. This relational ontology conceptualizes the social and the material as inherently inseparable, forming a constitutive entanglement that does not presume distinct and essential characteristics for entities (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008).

This perspective also suggests that any technological artifact is created through social interaction. Consequently, any effects such artifacts may have within organizations are shaped by these interactions (Orlikowski, 2010).

Thus, organizational practices are not constituted solely by human social elements, but by materially heterogeneous assemblages that include chairs, tables, tools, documents, spaces and texts, among others. The unfolding of organizational practices therefore involves material agency, which actively participates in the production and stabilization of actions (Orlikowski, 2007).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is committed to developing an interpretive understanding of human experience. It involves a set of interpretive and material practices that render the world visible through interviews, observations, field notes and other forms of data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Within this approach, the study draws on ethnographic inquiry (Angrosino, 2007), whose purpose is to learn from people and to describe reality in their own terms (Spradley, 1979). This choice aligns with the intention to follow everyday activities as part of an effort to carefully and consistently understand the phenomenon of creativity through a sociomaterial lens.

In this article, participant observation was employed as the primary data collection technique. As noted by Angrosino (2007), although observation is widely used in ethnographic research, much of what we know about our surroundings comes from observation, yet research requires a more systematic and formal process. This type of research is based on regular and repeated observation of people and situations, often with the aim of addressing theoretical questions about the nature of behavior or social organization (Angrosino, 2007).

The empirical setting consisted of an advertising agency with more than 20 years of market experience, located in the Greater Vitória region, in the state of Espírito Santo. This organization was selected because it provides a

suitable environment for observing the object of study, namely the creative process. Creativity plays a central role in advertising agencies, permeating their daily activities (Dahlén, Rosengren & Törn, 2008) and contributing to sales performance and profitability (Bernardin & Kemp-Robertson, 2008).

One of the authors conducted the fieldwork over a period of 4 months. Access to the field was facilitated by her academic background in Advertising and her professional experience in the field, including prior service provision to the studied agency. During this period, she participated in briefing meetings, brainstorming sessions and concept discussions. She also maintained a consistent presence in the creative department, moving across workstations to observe the relationships established in the agency's daily activities. Data on everyday life in the research setting were recorded in field diaries (Cavedon, 2008).

The creative department was selected as it represents a privileged space for observing professionals directly involved in creative processes, including creative directors, art directors, copywriters, designers, web designers, social media analysts and audiovisual producers. Furthermore, the role of this department within the agency places it in a unique position for examining material artifacts, tools, objects and technologies involved in the creative process. It is within this space that advertising campaigns, advertisements, radio spots and scripts for television and cinema are developed, from conception to materialization. Observations were conducted for an average of 3 hours per day. Field notes were initially recorded in a notebook and later transcribed into Microsoft Word®.

Content analysis was used as the method for data treatment (Mozzato & Grzybovski, 2011). Data coding followed methodological procedures outlined by Corbin & Strauss (2015). Initially, open coding was conducted, in which events, actions and interactions recorded in the field notes were assigned conceptual labels through an interpretive process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this first stage, excerpts from field notes were organized in a spreadsheet, from which 13 codes emerged, grounded in key concepts of the sociomaterial perspective (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Orlikowski, 2010; Leonardi, 2013).

In a second stage of open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), these 13 codes, derived from events, actions and interactions, were grouped into similar concepts in a separate spreadsheet tab. For example, codes such as *constitutive entanglement*, *relational perspective* and *inseparability of the social and the material* converged toward the idea that the social and the material are inseparable: there is no material without the social, nor social without the material.

In a third stage, still within open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), analytical notes (theoretical memos) were developed. This procedure allows not only the recording of ideas but also the formulation and refinement of theoretical insights. At this stage, based on the identified codes and analytical notes, four categories were established. In a subsequent spreadsheet tab, codes were grouped into the following categories: i) *neither miracle nor magic, creative assemblage*; ii) *inspiration is for amateurs*; iii) *nothing is as useless as you think*; and iv) *put it into practice and it will work*.

From this point, axial coding was conducted, in which relationships between categories were explored to identify further patterns in data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Categories ii) *inspiration is for amateurs* and iv) *put it into practice and it will work* are related, as both suggest that the material and the social are not merely associated with the creative process but are deeply entangled. This indicates that the creative process is not fixed or complete, but rather fluid, boundaryless and unstable, shaped by diverse human and non-human elements. Additionally, categories ii) *inspiration is for amateurs* and iii) *nothing is as useless as you think* are related in that both point to a more symmetrical approach between human and non-human elements, moving away from the notion of a central human subject.

Finally, selective coding was performed, through which all categories were integrated around the core analytical idea of the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this research, the creative process is understood as a mosaic in continuous co-constitution. That is, the creative process involves neither magic (conceived as the exclusive ability of select individuals or groups) nor miracles (understood as fixed formulas or extraordinary human capabilities). Instead, it begins as a mosaic that is provisional, incomplete and temporally situated, without an ontological distinction between people and things. Each element, whether human or non-human, is grounded in specific historical and cultural contexts, subject to multiple interpretations and contingent processes.

Results

The creative space of the advertising agency

The primary setting in which the phenomenon analyzed in this study unfolds is the agency's creative department. Although other spaces could have been considered, this department was defined as the central environment where human and non-human actors involved in the creative process operate more consistently and systematically.

In describing this space, the analysis focused on sociomaterial aspects, highlighting the relevance of material dimensions in human actions and interactions (Orlikowski, 2007). In addition, the investigation was informed by the notion of a synthetic world (Orlikowski, 2010), used to characterize an immersive three-dimensional online environment for collaboration. This environment allows the various actors involved in the creative process to be co-located, even when geographically dispersed.

The physical structure of the agency consists of a two-story house, with the creative department located on the upper floor. The walls are white, as is most of the furniture, which features red accents, the color of the company's

logo. The walls are decorated with graphic stickers of cartoon characters as well as a notice board displaying printed news articles, photographs, collages and humorous phrases. When asked about the decision to locate the agency in a house, the creative director explained:

The house relates to a sense of freedom, where you can move freely across different spaces, come and go whenever you want. This connects to the freedom to create, as if you were at home. The message is: feel at home! (field note).

The creative department employs 16 professionals: one creative director, one creative coordinator, one digital media coordinator, five art directors, one freelance designer, three copywriters, one social media analyst, one programmer, one copywriting intern and one creative intern.

There are no walls separating the creative workstations, nor are there private offices for the creative director or coordinators; all professionals work within the same shared space. Dress codes are informal, with employees typically wearing shorts, casual T-shirts and flip-flops. There is no strict dress requirement. Some individuals have long hair, visible tattoos and piercings. Two employees (a copywriter and an art director) frequently leave the room to smoke, which does not appear to disturb others (field notes).

Regarding equipment, there is a clear predominance of Apple® devices and Adobe® software. In addition to MacBooks® used by most professionals, as well as laptops used by the creative director and coordinators, accessories such as mice, keyboards and drawing tablets are also Apple® products. Most employees, with the exception of two, use iPhones®. When asked about this predominance and why the programmer used a PC instead of a Mac, the creative director explained that “Macs do not respond as well to programming languages as PCs running the Windows operating system” (field notes).

The preference for MacBooks® and Adobe® software has historical roots linked to the trajectory of advertising agencies in the region since the 1990s. According to the creative director, it is now common to hear that Macs are superior because they are more stable than PCs and that using software other than Adobe® is associated with amateur work. However, he noted that “when we started, Macs were terrible, they crashed all the time and everything was very expensive, both Macs and Adobe software” (field notes).

He further explained that, in the early 1990s, desktop computers became more widespread, allowing work to be previewed on screens. At that time, Adobe® products functioned well on Apple® devices and had not yet been developed for Windows®. “Our reference here in Espírito Santo was agencies in São Paulo, so we began to migrate. As a general rule, those who worked with Mac and Adobe were considered professionals, while amateurs used PCs and CorelDRAW®” (field notes).

The agency’s structure includes three creative workstations: two with four desks each and one with five desks. Professionals work face-to-face, separated by small partitions, which facilitates the exchange of ideas. There are also three separate desks occupied by the creative director and coordinators. Unlike other local agencies, this agency does not operate with fixed creative pairs (i.e., a copywriter and an art director assigned to each client or project). As noted by the creative director, “I find working in fixed pairs too restrictive. Here, projects circulate freely among people. The idea is that everyone becomes familiar with each client and can collaborate across projects” (field notes).

There is flexibility for remote work, as project files are shared via cloud platforms. At any given time, one or more professionals are working outside the agency, and it is rare for the entire team to be physically present. This flexibility allows employees to work in environments where they feel more creative, such as their homes, cafés, parks or the beach. They periodically return to the agency to present the progress of their work.

According to the creative coordinator, this extension beyond the agency’s physical space is essential, as the resources available within the department, such as briefings, meetings and project documents, are not always sufficient to address client demands. He noted that it is often beneficial to leave the office, observe real-life contexts, interact with people, visit supermarkets to see how products are used or simply go to the beach to relax and allow ideas to mature (field notes).

Thus, the space in which the creative process occurs extends beyond the physical boundaries of the creative department and takes on new configurations, reaching wherever the virtual environment allows. Through internet connectivity and cloud-based file access, professionals do not need to be physically co-located to collaborate on projects.

On one occasion, the freelance designer approached the researcher to better understand the purpose of the study. She explained that she was temporarily working at the agency but found it easier to create when working alone at home, where she had access to her own computer, typography resources and unrestricted online browsing. She stated, “I cannot stay more than a month inside an agency. I completely freeze in this kind of environment” (field notes). Given the flexibility of remote work, she did not perceive the need to be physically present in the agency to carry out her tasks.

The creative process in advertising agencies

In the studied agency, the stages of the creative process begin with a meeting with the client to collect the briefing, conducted by the Department of Account Management. When necessary, a professional from the creative

department also participates in this meeting. Supported by a document referred to as the “Job,” which contains key guiding questions, the meeting aims to gather the essential information required by the creative department to develop the project.

After the briefing is collected, the creative director determines which professionals will be assigned to the project. Typically, a copywriter and an art director are designated as the core team. With the Job document in hand, a briefing meeting is held to discuss the collected information and assess whether it is sufficient.

Once the briefing is defined, the assigned professionals conduct a brainstorming session to generate ideas and develop a concept for the campaign or requested materials. After the concept is established, the team presents it to the creative director or the creative coordinator. When working with new clients, a rough version of the idea is often prepared prior to full production in order to illustrate the concept and avoid investing time in materials based on a concept that may not be approved. For recurring clients, this step is typically unnecessary, as the team is already familiar with the brand guidelines.

Following concept approval, the copywriter develops the textual content, after which the art director creates the visual materials, such as folders, posters and flyers. The production process may also involve other professionals, including external collaborators. This is particularly common in audiovisual production, such as television commercials or radio spots and jingles, which may require the hiring of specialized production companies.

Once the materials are completed, a presentation meeting is scheduled, depending on the nature of the campaign and the client. If the proposal is not approved, the Account Management Department prepares a new Job, effectively restarting the creative process, as the developed materials did not meet the client’s expectations.

Material dimension of organizational interaction

The findings indicate that the creative process in the agency emerges from the interaction between social and material elements. From the initial briefing meetings with clients to the final production of materials, there are continuous exchanges of information, images, typographic resources, videos and other content among team members. The creative process unfolds through sketches on paper, online research and multiple forms of communication, including emails, messaging applications and digital platforms.

During briefing, brainstorming and concept presentation meetings, the use of mobile devices is frequent, particularly for sharing images and videos from other campaigns as references. Ideas are thus supported by both physical sketches and digital files.

Once the production phase begins, creative work does not emerge from a blank slate. Rather, it is not solely the result of individual talent. Before reaching a final output, professionals engage in extensive research, downloading fonts, images and vector files from the internet, while continuously exchanging ideas, opinions and materials throughout the process.

I knew they were under intense pressure to produce materials for a bid. I asked one of the art directors how the work was progressing and how they were managing the tight deadline, since there were only 3 days left and a significant amount of work remained. He replied: we are rushing, working late and helping each other. There is no miracle, the secret is just work. We keep putting the pieces together and in the end the campaign comes out (field notes).

When facing difficulties in developing a layout, professionals frequently seek assistance from colleagues: “Take a look at this, man, this layout needs a different font” (field notes). Such requests often lead not only to collaboration from the addressed colleague, but also to the involvement of others, who gather around the layout to contribute: “Try this font, I’ll upload it to the network”; “This image does not reflect the concept, I’ll search for another one for you” (field notes).

Creative outputs are rarely the result of a single individual or of isolated inspiration. After prolonged effort to finalize a folder for a university, one of the art directors requested help from a colleague: “This layout is not working” (field notes). The colleague responded:

Inspiration is for amateurs. Keep trying and you’ll get there. You started wrong, you began with the fonts. Start with the images, the image calls for the font. I’ll send you a great website so you can find more references (field notes).

Interactions extend beyond strictly work-related activities. Professionals frequently share music, jokes and edited images, often created from photos of colleagues sourced from Facebook®. Among these exchanges, music sharing is particularly common. Most employees work while listening to music using headphones and often request recommendations for specific tasks: “What’s the name of that band? I need something hardcore to finish this text!” (field notes). In some cases, the music being played directly influences the creative output.

A copywriting intern asked a colleague for feedback on a Facebook post. The text included the expression “what a pity.” As she presented the idea to the creative coordinator, one of the art directors played a segment of an old song by *Raça Negra*, “É Tarde Demais,” for everyone to hear. When the chorus began, the team sang along together, “what a pity, what a pity, my love, what a pity...” laughing and enjoying the moment. At the end, she remarked, “Who said there is no poetry in this song? Nothing is as useless as you think!” (field notes).

When an art director was not fully satisfied with a piece but did not have sufficient time to continue working on it, it was common practice to temporarily “abandon” it in a shared cloud folder labeled *peleja* (struggle). The expression “put it in *peleja* and it will work out” (field notes) suggests that, although the work was not considered ideal at that moment, it could later be revisited, either by the same professional or by another team member, with the aim of refining it and making it more original and bold, whether for the agency’s portfolio or for award submissions.

Discussion

The creative process unfolds through the articulation between the social and the material, resulting in the constitution and presentation of creative solutions. The creative department emerges as a space in which human and non-human elements are interconnected within a diffuse and heterogeneous network (Orlikowski, 2010), forming a creative assemblage (Duff & Sumartojo, 2017). This space extends beyond physical boundaries, with the internet functioning as an open gateway to a synthetic world (Orlikowski, 2010), an online environment that enables geographically dispersed professionals to interact continuously throughout the creative process. This dynamic reinforces the relational dimension of creativity as a sociomaterial practice. Accordingly, the creative act cannot be understood as the exclusive product of human ability. Rather, it constitutes a mosaic in continuous co-constitution. Within this process, there are neither miracles nor moments of pure inspiration. Materiality, through artifacts and objects, whether physical or digital, plays a central role in shaping creative outcomes (Anjo & Tureta, 2022).

Creative solutions are therefore the result of a creative assemblage (Duff & Sumartojo, 2017), a more or less temporary composition of human and non-human elements in which no ontological distinction is assumed (Orlikowski, 2007). This assemblage unfolds within specific historical and cultural contexts, remaining subject to multiple interpretations and contingent processes (Duff & Sumartojo, 2017). In this sense, creative outcomes would not be possible without the ways in which humans engage with technologies and objects, mobilizing them within a relational perspective (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Corazza & Glăveanu, 2020; Anjo & Tureta, 2022).

Human interests, intentions and capabilities are deeply embedded in the creative process (Duff & Sumartojo, 2017). However, the final layout transcends individual subjectivity. It emerges from extended periods of online research, continuous exchanges of content, information and references, mediated by technologies such as WhatsApp®, social media platforms and email, thereby highlighting the role of technological mediation (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008).

The final production of creative materials involves the accumulation of collective effort over time, in which different preferences and perspectives intervene in the development of the advertising piece. This process typically involves the use of multiple editing software tools, such as Photoshop® and Illustrator®. Once the material is approved by the client, what is presented is not the outcome of a singular moment of inspiration, but rather the result of an entanglement of relationships, processes, materials, affects, bodies, moods and norms within a constitutive web (Orlikowski, 2007; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). In this context, creative practice emerges through assemblage, integrating texts, images, opinions, emotions, rules, applications, software and digital communication.

Conceptualizing the creative process as a creative assemblage (Duff & Sumartojo, 2017), while abandoning the notion of a central human subject and rejecting the reification of any essential element through ontological distinctions between humans and non-humans (Orlikowski, 2007, 2010), enables a broader understanding of how multiple elements, such as memes or music, can participate in and contribute to creative solutions.

Akmeraner-Kökat & Pellandini-Simányi (2025) further argue that the creative process has become increasingly fragmented and distributed across technological artifacts, including artificial intelligence. This shift implies a redistribution of sociomaterial creative practices within the advertising sector. In this context, a creative assemblage is continuously (re)configured through interactions, negotiations and shifts in roles during the generation and development of ideas involving both human and non-human actors (Duff & Sumartojo, 2017; Corazza & Glăveanu, 2020; Anjo & Tureta, 2022).

Formal rules, such as those embedded in the briefing, along with informal norms emerging from interactions among actors in the creative process, contribute to the stabilization of interactions within the assemblage. These elements help maintain coherence by limiting the inclusion of generic or disruptive components, whether human or non-human. However, this stability remains provisional and may be disrupted at any moment. The production of advertising materials involves heterogeneous material elements, technologies and tools that are created, manipulated and reshaped through social interaction with human actors whose interests may diverge or even conflict (Orlikowski, 2010; Leonardi, 2013).

The findings also indicate that certain creative outputs are stored in shared network folders and later reactivated by other actors for new creative processes (Orlikowski, 2010). This is made possible by virtual environments that facilitate the circulation of materialized ideas, enabled by digital technologies (Orlikowski, 2010). Consequently, the creative process is not a finished entity, but rather fluid, boundaryless and temporary, continuously shaped by interactions between human and non-human elements.

By examining how the creative process is configured in advertising agencies through the lens of sociomateriality, this study advances the understanding of creativity beyond purely social interactions. It incorporates material arrangements into the analysis, demonstrating how they enable, constrain and shape activities and actions within everyday organizational life.

Final considerations

This study aimed to analyze how sociomaterial aspects shape the creative process in advertising agencies. To achieve this objective, participant observation was employed to describe the space in which the creative process is configured. The findings indicate that this space extends beyond the physical boundaries of the agency, incorporating artifacts, particularly technological ones, as active participants in the creative process. This expansion enables new configurations of everyday activities and working relationships, allowing the sociomaterial creative assemblage to transcend the limits of the organizational setting.

From this perspective, creative solutions can be understood as a mosaic composed of people and things in continuous co-constitution. Within this view, the creative process does not involve magic (conceived as the exclusive capacity of select individuals or groups) nor miracles (understood as fixed formulas, secret knowledge or extraordinary human abilities). Rather, it emerges from the articulation of relationships, processes, materials, affects, bodies, moods and norms within a constitutive entanglement.

The creative process is thus revealed as fluid and unstable, continuously shaped by both human and non-human elements. As a methodological limitation, this study acknowledges the absence of photographic records and other forms of visual documentation of the investigated phenomenon. Future research may benefit from following the creation and transformation of artifacts throughout the creative process. It is also important to examine the impact of artificial intelligence on creative work, particularly in terms of reconfigurations and emerging forms of labor. Additionally, further studies could explore performance gains in creativity by examining how material arrangements may be managed to facilitate and enhance creative development.

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