

Current ways of collaboration in the digital advertising world

A study of possibilities of facilitating ongoing advertising campaigns in direct partnerships between brands and digital production companies

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Abstract

In the current world, many spheres of life are constantly changing. It can be agreed upon that big portion of changes is caused by innovation and digitalization. In the field of marketing and advertising, any innovation plays significant role and digitalization changed the industry enormously. Ongoing developments brought shift from occasional to continuous communication, from traditional platforms to new media and new channels, from automated or even random communication to highly personalized one. Ongoing advertising campaigns currently seem to be the main way of commercial communication, and therefore they are paid rich attention to. With their emergence and shift in need of design, production and performance also comes a need for new, more efficient ways of production of such campaigns. It has been suggested that such production could be achieved by implementing theoretical findings and new business model, however it has not been attempted yet. We aimed to change that with our research, by collecting data relevant for the topic from industry experts. The results derived from our research provide insights into direct collaboration between brands and digital production companies. They shown to be based on forming and maintaining strategic partnerships with foundation of ongoing communication and clear mutual expectations, and nurturing value co-creation by building friendly, transparent, mutually beneficial environment with space for creativity and open dialogue.

KEYWORDS: advertising, digital advertising, disintermediation, strategic partnership, value co-creation

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1 Introduction

The world of advertising is constantly developing. As a part of a promotion component of marketing mix, advertising has always been very dynamic field. To achieve the highest possible efficiency, it has to flexibly react to ever-changing environments; from reflecting on product development and socio-economic circumstances to incorporating technological innovations (Kotler & Keller, 2009). Advertising started changing rapidly with the emergence of the new media. Even though internet advertising is relatively young, it quickly became one of the most important parts of communication for many brands and business. (Kotler & Keller, 2015). A significant factor affecting consumer behaviour is the growth of digital platforms. New platforms, tools, distribution channels and data sources provide marketers with countless new possibilities to reach out to their audiences, interact, and engage them. On the other hand, this digital environment brings numerous challenges regarding decision making, strategic choices, dealing with growing competition, information overload and many others (Hemann & Burbary, 2018). To be seen in this competitive environment and meet customer requirements, brands and companies are shifting from traditional advertising and timed campaigns towards always-on advertising aiming to build and maintain long-term and deeper relationships with their audiences (Kotler & Keller, 2015). Advertising strategies play a key role in influencing consumers and digital platforms offer great possibilities regarding accessibility, real-time communication and precise targeting. For these reasons digital platforms have overtaken traditional media and reduced, in some cases even replaced, their representation (Kotler & Keller, 2015, Takemura, 2012). That naturally comes with a disruption of existing advertising value chains on many levels.

Whereas in the times of traditional media peak advertising agencies were on the top, needed for facilitating the media spaces for brands, shift to the new platforms brought up the importance of production companies. The basis of the intermediary role that advertising agencies used to play changed and, in many cases, they are no longer necessary for buying media. Many brands are connecting with their audiences directly through the social media, their own blogs or owned channels. Both, traditional media and traditional system have been challenged by the growing trend of dividing the media-buying function from the creative service including idea-making and production. That challenge escalated within past couple of years and turned into disintermediation in the advertising world. Disintermediation, often referred to as “cutting out the middleman”, stands for removing intermediaries in distribution channel. (John & Rowan, 2009, Ghorbani, 2014, Küng, 2017).

Due to the technological changes, disintermediation and unbundling belong to the most common business model changes currently occurring in the creative industries, media industries. To keep up with the market and maintain creating value for the customers, outdated models are being replaced by new, innovative business models. Now, we might see two ways of business model innovation; one on the side of the advertising agencies which are turning more towards the online world, mainly is sense of production and data-oriented approach, broadening their expertise and trying to create relevancy in new areas. Second, innovation in business model of brands and creative production companies, who in the new meaning of world start to see advertising agencies as superfluous for their collaboration (Küng, 2017, Sharma, 2017). Examples of brands bypassing agencies have been already emerging even amongst the biggest advertisers, same as business model innovation of some of creative production companies. Such bypassing seemed to be so far initiated by brands who started realizing the benefits of direct collaboration with production companies and also stopped seeing enough added value in work of advertising agencies. Mostly we can see the strategy of vertical integration supposed to higher the efficiency of the value chain, which implies buying new media platforms, possibly developing new technologies and making new strategic decisions (Küng, 2017). If all these steps are executed in a right way, the point of successful disintermediation will be reached, and new arrangement of collaboration and co-creation will emerge. In other words, there is a clear potential for and innovation of this part of the advertising industry.

In fact, it might already be more than even potential. As mentioned, there are many examples of existence of such collaboration and while networking or exploring the industry media and practices, it is not an uncommon topic. Therefore, we can say that the process of development of strategic partnership between these two marketing subjects have already begun (John & Rowan, 2009, Garrahan, 2017, Sharma, 2017, About MediaMonks, 2018). However, in current stage these are only speculations for the academic sphere, as the terms of collaboration and co-creation between brands and creative production companies have been so far covered mainly by trade journals, case studies and articles. Disintermediating the agencies from the traditional advertising value chains brings up the need of efficient direct collaboration between production firms and their clients. Such relationships were not scholarly explored. There is a wide research on strategic partnerships as response for disintermediation in various fields (Ireland et al., 2002; Stokes, et al., 2013; Nordin et al., 2013), however, none of the covers the topic of our interest. Similarly, the academic coverage of the ways for brands and production firms or similar partners to co-create mutual values is lacking.

Considering the presented facts and figures, it can be argued that such a research might be beneficial for the academic theory of the new advertising developments as well as it could bring practical implication specific for discussed type of co-creation and facilitation of ongoing advertising campaigns between the two parties.

With that being said, this research seeks to create the theory base, explore possibilities and identify core elements for efficient collaboration between mentioned subjects leading to successful facilitating always-on advertising campaigns with no need for work with the intermediating advertising agency. It will be done by answering following research question:

RQ: How can brands and digital production companies collaborate to facilitate always on advertising campaigns?

SQ1: How can brands and digital production companies form and maintain strategic partnerships to achieve successful collaboration?

SQ2: How can brands and digital production companies execute value co-creation process together to facilitate always on advertising campaign?

To be able to provide complex answer, research will be outlined as follows. First, on strategic partnership, which has been identified as mutually beneficial response to the industry disintermediation and which has significant importance in the collaboration and co-creation. Second, value co-creating will be discussed. We seek to build enough theoretical background focused on value co-creating, its relevancy to our matter and ways to create sufficient environment for value co-creation between our two parties. Then we should be able to carry out the exploratory research to identify core elements of the aforementioned related to the direct partnerships and facilitating ongoing advertising campaigns. Last, but not least, we hope to discover components of co-creating and facilitating ongoing advertising campaigns in general and possible specifics emerging within the direct partnerships. In order to achieve our goals and answer the main research question, we will be answering two following sub-questions:

2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for capturing any new developments within the creative industries is tricky to build. It is important to realize there are always going to be more elements affecting processes in advertising, due to the complexity of the field. Thus, it is crucial to approach related discussions with this acknowledgment, from an integrative point of view. Following chapter includes essential definitions and findings provided by the previous research in certain fields of media and advertising sectors, as well as co-creative intentions within similar environments, briefly touching upon some of the practical implementations to present the full context.

Before diving into the topic and analysing the current situation, it is necessary to gain theoretical knowledge about key concepts influencing the subject. Therefore, in the following part, several topics briefly mentioned in the introduction are explained more in-depth. They provide a closer look at the specifics of the topic and point out some of the main issues the field is currently facing. Except for the explanatory function, by discussing theoretical concepts we are establishing the basis for the practical research and guidance for exploring the patterns in the collected data.

2. 1 Changing landscapes of the advertising industry

2. 1. 1 Innovation in media and advertising

Over time, researchers and practitioners established innovation to be a crucial element for businesses to create value, gain and maintain competitive advantage, and boost performance (Baregheh, Rowley & Sambrook, 2009; Damanpour, 1991; Hauser, Tellis & Griffin, 2006; McDermott, 2002; Popadiuk & Choo, 2006). Defining innovation, however, deals with several issues. As Damanpour and Schneider (2006) stated in their work: "Innovation is studied in many disciplines and has been defined from different perspectives" (p. 216), which is demonstrated in various discussions and innovation defining studies across different disciplines (Baregheh, Rowley & Sambrook, 2009). Before the twenty-first century, innovation was defined mainly by a new idea and product development, the concept of newness, and an outcome of new technologies (Christensen, 1997; Damanpour, 1991; Ettlé & Reza, 1992). That slightly changed over time and recently the importance of innovation has been more stressed in connection with environmental, demographic, and socio-demographic changes (Baregheh, Rowley & Sambrook, 2009). Hence, different approaches to innovation were introduced. Schumpeter analyzed socio-cultural models, aiming to explain the relationship between innovation, society, and culture. Constructivist models cover the innovation process and its specifics dealing with the role of technology and participating subjects. Finally,

economic innovation models analyse profits from innovation, involved interests, and the impact of innovation on the markets (Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013).

The field of media is strongly related to all the aforementioned, therefore, innovation also became a common topic in the related academic environment, if not one of the most crucial ones. The aspect of a highly competitive environment keeps increasing as the industry progresses and new subjects enter the market. To keep up, market players bring advanced technologies, new know-how, and improved services, hence the new perception of media management innovation. Rather than one-time implementations or reactions, it is now seen as an ongoing process, as well as a solution for the challenges caused by technologies and other changes in the competitive environments (Baregheh, Rowley & Sambrook, 2009; Doğruel, 2014; Küng, 2017; Popadiuk & Choo, 2006; Takemura, 2012). Much attention has been focused on the two following directions.

First, innovative platforms carry significant importance to media innovation (Doğruel, 2014; Küng, 2017). Looking closely, innovative platforms in today's sense of the word started emerging at the beginning of the internet era. The internet caused the transformation from print to digital in most disciplines and brought about a significant change to the media and advertising landscape. Scholars and practitioners agree that especially the past couple of years have made a meaningful difference in the advertising world (Albarran, Mierzejewska & Jung, 2018; Evans, 2009; Küng, 2017). The new media environment gives consumers more possibilities. They can search for products and reviews before the purchase, access alternatives easier, be more active, and engage with the brands. They are constantly surrounded by commercial communication. There are almost no time or place-related limits to the content consumption and interaction, which makes both; the audience and the competition active basically all the time (Hackley & Tiwsakul, 2011; Keller, 2019). Consumers in the digital era make decisions and purchases based on their own information search, reviews, social media, comparisons or even their favourite influencers. For advertising, these phenomena have several impacts. New media, particularly social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and others, provide direct contact between brands and consumers. Advertisers need to put more effort into getting consumers' attention and adjust to the needs and behaviours of their audiences. Therefore, their communication also moves to these platforms, and the digital environment becomes the highest priority in many cases. Hence the focus on digital advertising.

With the move towards the digital culture comes a shift from short-term campaigns to building long-term relationships, from occasional to continuous communication, from practical and informative content to more creative and emotional content (Albarran, Mierzejewska & Jung, 2018; Dodson, 2016; Sinclair & Wilken, 2009; Dempster, 2015; Takemura, 2012). In a nutshell, brands need

to maintain continuous online presence and visibility and build engagement while keeping up with the market situation and their competition. In order to do so, flighting, intermittent campaigns slowly recede into the background, being replaced by continuous, always-on ones (Chaffey & Smith, 2017; Ryan, 2016).

Second often discussed media innovation topic; the relationship between innovation and organisation within the media industry. Especially the ways media companies and their partners adapt to the changes are crucial areas of the research (Doğruel, 2014, Küng, 2017). Such innovations challenge brands to re-envision their organization, as well as their products and communication. Some scholars refer to these as “disruptive innovations”, meaning they are disruptive to established environments (Christensen, 1997). They have the capacity to undermine existing structures, lead to new arrangements, and potentially change practices so far considered as traditional (Christensen, 1997; Küng, 2017). Such advances can lead to numerous transformations of market value systems (Porter, 2001). According to researchers, disruptive innovations play a key role in redefining media markets and changing business models (Christensen, 1997; Christensen & Overdorf, 2000; Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013). Considering advertising, that is how the new trends are born, shaping the current face of the industry and changing its functionality and business models; amongst others, its value chains. It follows naturally from the findings above that the industry’s business models are under challenge and several changes need to be done. Amongst the most typical changes in the business models caused by innovation belongs disintermediation. Several disciplines of media and creative industries already face its impact, advertising included (Küng, 2017; Sinclair & Wilken, 2009).

2. 1. 2 Disintermediation; a response to innovation

Disintermediation currently comes as one of the most common changes of business models in media. New ways of production, distribution, and consumption of content make it possible to cut out certain parts of the traditional value chains (Küng, 2017; Sinclair & Wilken, 2009), in other words, **disintermediate** them. The trend is often simply explained as “cutting out the middleman”. Breaking it down, the word disinter means “to displace” and mediate conveys acting like an intermediary agent (Ryan, 1999). Ryan (1999) coined disintermediation as removing intermediaries in a distribution channel, which briefly sums up all the aforementioned.

According to the scholarly research, disintermediation emerged from the technical innovation entering the market and has brought about a lot of changes, needs for adjustments and new solutions. In relation to the possibilities brought up by the web, a significant impact of disintermediation was established for example in the hospitality industry and tourism, where travel

agents are being cut out by various online systems (Law et al., 2009; Tse, 2003), financial services (Clemons & Hitt, 2000) or e-commerce (Akbari, 2016; Chircu & Kauffman, 1999; Jallat & Capek, 2001). Especially prone to disintermediation were proven the creative industries, due to their high dependence on the new trends and innovations (Küng, 2017; Ryan, 1999). To explain, we will look into creative industries related examples.

Largely transformed by disintermediation is, for instance, the television broadcasting sector. From format and content producers to streaming services, new players are entering the scene, flexibly reacting to dynamic changes and their consequences (Küng, 2017). In the 1980s, similar patterns lead to the dominance of cable television broadcasters, and now these new players are forming the industry's face. Audiences are shifting from channels to platforms, such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, HBO Now, and others. Platform providers get the content to their audiences while bypassing traditional broadcasters (Picard & Siciliani, 2013; Strangelove, 2015). Moreover, platform providers seize the opportunities, and in some cases, they are becoming content owners or even producers (Strangelove, 2015). That disintermediate previously needed subject material from the broadcasting value system (Liu & Picard, 2014; Picard & Siciliani, 2013; Strangelove, 2015).

Another sector experiencing significant changes regarding disintermediation following from disruptive innovation, is book publishing. It has been a little over two decades since the currently most popular online bookstore entered the market. Since 1995, Amazon has been selling books through the internet, cancelling the previously needed visit to a bookstore or similar. Advantages lying in the wide range of books and competitive prices started generating profit within the book sales (Jallat & Capek, 2001). In 2007, Amazon Kindle was introduced, becoming the first widely used platform for digital book consumption. The e-book evolution and digital distribution drastically reduced the marginal book costs, therefore reduced overall prices. Online platforms, including both the internet books distributors and self-publishing platforms, such as Amazon, Lulu, Smashwords, and others, also provide the authors with the possibility to offer their products directly to the customer, bypassing traditional publishing houses (Waldfoegel & Reimers, 2015). To sum up, disintermediation brings various challenges within the book publishing industry, mainly to book-focused retailers and traditional publishers (Greco, 2013; Küng, 2017; Waldfoegel & Reimers, 2015).

Finally, music industry is undoubtedly model example of disintermediation in creative industries. The digitalization of media industries brings up many questions regarding new technologies' effects on market revenue (Albarran, Mierzejewska & Jung, 2018; Waldfoegel, 2015). The music industry has been particularly analyzed by researchers and economists regarding file sharing (Liebowitz, 2006; Oberholzer-Gee & Strumpf, 2007; Zentner, 2006; Waldfoegel, 2015), which

has been enabled by the creation of new platforms, disintermediating subjects from the original industry value chains and causing serious shifts in the industry economics and overall functioning (Inskip, Macfarlane & Rafferty, 2012). With the digital technologies, independent music production has become the most common production model, using new ways of resourcing, such as social networks and community findings. Technological innovations and digital networked media, therefore, provide sufficient options for music production and publishing, disintermediating the traditional industry agents, such as record labels or artists' promoters (Bernardo & Martins, 2014; Winter, 2012). New music streaming platforms thus disrupt the traditional model of music distribution and promotion. Spotify, iTunes, Pandora, and others, create fully vertically integrated music distribution chains, putting aside traditional music distributors (Galuszka, 2015).

As we can see from the abovementioned examples; innovation and digitalization often result in disintermediation which heavily influences current market developments. It follows naturally that this trend has the most significant impact on the disciplines directly affected by digitalization, which media and creative industries most certainly are. As established, television, book publishing, visual arts, and music industries are more grounded and have been widely researched within disintermediation. However, there are newer disciplines facing the new market situation, still lacking sufficient research and theoretical background in the discussed area. Advertising would be one of them.

2. 1. 3 Disintermediation in the advertising world

Talking about the world of advertising, at this point, it is important to acknowledge the subjects between advertisers and their audiences. In the dawn of advertising, advertising agencies were simply the only businesses providing advertising services to brands and customers, doing a major part of building up the advertising discipline itself (Hardy, MacRury & Powell, 2018; Ogilvy & Fagg, 1983; Presbrey, 2000). Advertising agencies established themselves as mediators and they became the main direct partner for brands to connect with their audiences (Hackley, 2002; Hackley & Hackley, 2017; Kotler & Keller, 2015; McArthur & Griffin, 1997; Sheehan, 2013; Sinclair & Wilken, 2009). In this traditional model, the brand runs the advertising campaign with the agency, which facilitates media space by buying on commission and in most cases, strategizing and idea making to some extent. Then they cooperate further with creative and digital production companies, creative entrepreneurs or freelancers. This model was challenged for the first time with the dawn of the internet, which agencies mostly adjusted to by changing business models and expanding services portfolios. However, it has become more critical with changes in the preferred platforms, type of content, and users' preferences and behaviour (Hardy, MacRury & Powell, 2018; Kotler & Keller,

2015; Sinclair & Wilken, 2009). Today's consumers, also known as digital consumers, use technology not only to buy products or services, but also to access, compare and share information, engage with the content, and moreover, to create a relationship with a brand or product. The more efficiently consumers use new media and communication platforms, the more focus brands need to put into it. Using digital marketing, firms can target their audiences more precisely, deliver information in real time, and be responsive, which is what audiences currently require (Dinner et al, 2014; Stephen, 2016). The most powerful tools of external communication are for the most firm's social media platforms and websites, followed by other own channels, such as blogs or brand microsites. Besides changed preference in used channel, types of preferred shifted almost exclusively towards visual content; photos, graphics, videos... (Dempster & Lee, 2015; Hardy, MacRury & Powell, 2018; Lamberton & Stephen, 2016; Ryan, 2016; Stephen, 2016). According to Stephen (2016), the information consumed online has a major influence on consumer's opinions and decision making. Therefore researchers started focusing on the rise of the so-called DSMM culture; Digital, Social media and Mobile marketing culture, which is often used to define the current marketing era. Advertising scholars agree upon the fact that the spread of the new platforms resulted in the shift in the discipline paradigm. The way advertising campaigns are created, produced, facilitated, and run changed accordingly to the changes in customer requirements and behaviour. Communication is less anonymous, much intention is paid to personalised, ongoing, and direct contact with the audiences through new channels, which means these elements should reflect on campaigns' development (Chen & He, 2011; Du, Hu & Damangir, 2015; Ghorbani, 2014; Stephen, 2016; Ryan, 2016).

As follows from the previous findings, such campaigns currently stand and fall on digital production. Therefore, it became a priority for many businesses, and the traditional business model is no longer capable of delivering ideal results. That challenges its subjects to act and put effort into finding effective solutions (Doleski, 2015; Takemura, 2012). Ghorbani (2014) states: "The disintermediation has resulted in the breakdown of the traditional advertising model, where advertising agencies were usually the only interface with the customer". Even though big advertising agencies still exist, in an immense amount of cases innovative work is done by smaller companies, aside from the traditional structure. In some cases, clients have different agencies for ideation, media buying, strategy, and creative and production work which they in the end orchestrate themselves. On the other hand, many brands have their own digital and marketing departments, they do a lot of work in house and therefore they only need to outsource the production. Altogether, that implies the work could be done with bypassing some of the traditional chain subjects (Ghorbani, 2014; Hardy, MacRury & Powell, 2018; Sheehan, 2013; Sinclair & Wilken, 2009).

Initially, disintermediation within the advertising value chains appeared in a greater extent with the increase of on-going digital advertising and heavily data-driven marketing. First, Facebook and Google, the largest digital advertising players, started their own marketplaces (DoubleClick, Google Ads...) for selling the advertising place, building advertising platforms (Facebook Business Manager...), or connect different parties (Facebook Audience Network). These user-friendly platforms provide many possibilities for advertisers and make it much easier for them to at least partly facilitate advertising in-house (Curran, Graham & Temple, 2011; Sharma, 2017). As a result, in the area of media buying and data processing, advertising agencies started competing with consulting firms, as mentioned above, such as Deloitte, Accenture, or Omnicom. Those companies seized the opportunity and acquired creative agencies or started creative departments to broaden their service portfolios. In fact, there are even companies who took the next step in this direction and created new departments devoted to data analysis (Sharma, 2017). What remained unsolved at this point is the ideation, the creatives and production. It is common to execute one, or all these steps within the company, however, the majority of companies are still outsourcing at least part of the work, most often that being production, as it requires very specific expertise (Sinclair & Wilken, 2009; Sharma, 2017).

2. 2 Strategic partnership

Strategic partnerships, often also called strategic alliances, are the relationships between enterprises, which are usually part of their cooperative creation strategy, aiming for creating social and/or economic values (Dahan et. al., 2010; Sanzo et al., 2015). Commonly it is a partnership between two or more sides, where one of them has certain expertise to help the others achieve their business goals. In an ideal case, all sides have that which to offer and what to perfectionate, therefore strategic partnerships should be mutually beneficial. Combining each sides' strengths and minimizing their weaknesses lead towards co-creating mutual values (Dahan et. al., 2010; Haspeslagh, 1999; Sanzo et al., 2015). Dyer, Kale & Singh (2001) indicated four key roles of strategic alliances; the improvement of knowledge management and internal coordination, increasement of external visibility and problem elimination.

Several motivations towards forming strategic partnerships have been recognized. In the beginning, academics marked risk reduction and maximizing management efficiency as the main reasons together with reducing costs and gaining competitive advantage (Lambert et all., 1996; Nordin et all., 2013; Tuten & Urban, 2001). As the trend increased and spread in more fields, research was extended, and other rationales were identified. Amongst them, for instance, belong

reducing barriers, gaining access to resources that were not accessible for the company itself, restricting dependence, ownership of created values and profit or growth (Chan-Olmsted, 2004; Haspeslagh, 1999; Lambert et al., 1996). Tuten & Urban (2001) also built upon the research of Mohr & Spekman (1994) and they added overall efficiency, enhancing performance indicators and gaining mutual benefits to the list of drivers.

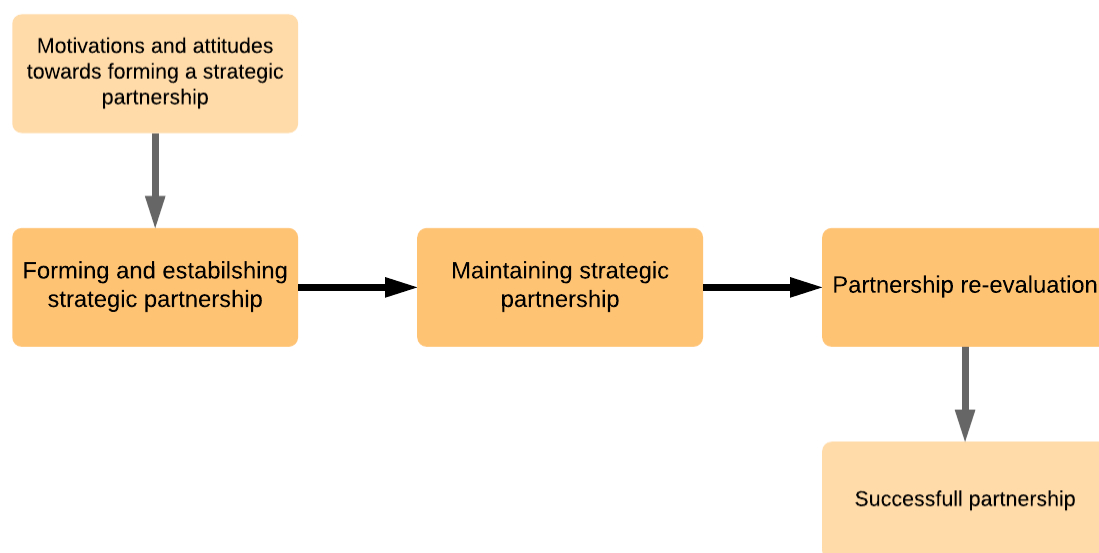
Throughout the research of strategic partnerships, many components were identified as important for maintenance of the partnerships or even crucial for their success. Several researchers agreed upon the importance of good quality communication. Attributes such as regularity, openness, good flow, participation, accuracy and information sharing were mentioned regarding communication within strategic partnerships (Austin, 2000; Lambert et al., 1996; Mohr & Spekman, 1994; Tuten & Urban, 2001). In the words of Austin (2000): "To realize the full benefits of an alliance, the partners need to have means of communicating effectively, efficiently and frequently." In their study about partnership development and implementation, Lambert et al. (1996) explored other elements necessary for partnership maintenance and success. Components of strategic partnerships applicable to the partnerships of our interest are joint planning, good quality communication, sharing risks and rewards, mutual agreement, often in a form of contract, and mutual trust. To the partnership "facilitators" belong for example sharing values and objectives, compatibility of the company structures and mutual learning. Some of these components were for instance also mentioned in the work of Nordin et al. (2013), who further elaborated on the importance of compatibility of the partners' organizational structures and know-how, and in the work of Tuten & Urban (2001), who also talked about setting expectations and the importance of meeting them. Amongst other key components are then mutual understanding, learning, willingness to adjust considering both-sided benefits, and proximity, which can supposedly "enhance the relationship" (Lambert et al., 1996).

In the media industry, according to Chan-Olmsted (2004), many firms struggle with a lack of balance between their competencies, resources, value they create, and the benefit they make from it. That also applies to the world of advertising, where digital production companies often work for brands via advertising agencies instead of co-creating directly with the brand. The whole process includes more sides from which every one of them puts in its own ideas and resources and possibly creative value. From the perspective of the production company, creating a strategic partnership directly with a brand might reduce the reliance on the performance of other sides, competition, and release more creative freedom. Digital production companies bring the experience and expertise of

digital content creation, unique skills and know-how. However, thus far, changes would most likely have to be implemented to replace the expertise that has been provided by advertising agencies.

The same applies to the brands' side. There would most likely need to be some adjustments to collaborate with a different type of company other than that which they were used to work with. High levels of commitment and engagement between the partners are crucial for forming a strategic partnership that would enable them to work directly together with effective results, achieving active cooperation and co-creation of advertising campaigns (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Besides these, some other elements were recognized as crucial for successful partnerships. According to Lambert et al. (1996), base for a successful partnership is created from openness, trust and sharing both, risks and success.

Fig. 1 Process of strategic partnership based on relevant literature



2. 2. 1 Need for a strategic partnership

In the previous chapter disintermediation was established as a common result of innovation in the advertising sector. Therefore, a solution for situations of disintermediation needs to be found. Strategic partnership was recognised as one of the main disintermediation mechanisms (Nordin, Brozovic & Holmlund, 2013). Partnering with another value producing party supports the overall value creation and thereby can improve relationships with the end customer (Ireland, Hitt, & Vaidyanath, 2002; Nordin, Brozovic & Holmlund, 2013), which is one of the main goals of advertising strategies and campaigns (Belch, G. & Belch, M., 2009; Kotler & Armstrong, 2016; Kotler & Keller,

2009). It is now established that some cases of bypassing agencies appeared in past and the whole of strategies devoted to the case are being developed. For instance, in 2012 the production company, 1stAveMachine, produced a campaign for the US multinational Qualcomm, whose management chose to skip the advertising agency in order to keep the ability to direct the work, support the creativity and give space to the production company's expertise. More reasons to work directly with production companies were mentioned by many industry experts and summarized in the assessment of John Winsor, former Victor & Spoil CEO (Timson, 2018). Amongst the reasons, he names the capability of maintaining real-time marketing, environment supporting creativity, skills and experience sharing, and moreover, high levels of expertise, losing dependence on third parties and last, but not least, possibly lower prices for adequate quality (Winsor, 2014).

To illustrate the situation, we will look at the example of marketing strategy of one of the biggest sport brands, Nike. Nike was always on top of the game amongst the brand advertisers and the brands' advertising strategy was supported by a big budget, invested in all the media. The brand's primary target group are young people, presently members of Generation Y. They do not pay attention to traditional media anymore and they are native to the digital environment. As Stokes, et al. (2013) describe in their case study, Nike acted on the trend and shifted marketing and advertising strategies from traditional media, such as TV and print, to the new platforms. After dropping expenses on advertising agencies, the company concluded that their digital media will be more efficient if moved in-house. To reach out to the digital based audience, the company started focusing on data analytics, social media engagement, and technological innovations. At that point, the brand no longer needed the full advertising agencies' services, as it was able to facilitate many tasks within its own departments. What was left, was some of the visual and other digital content production, finally reached by direct collaboration with production firms. These steps helped Nike to efficiently use the marketing budget, target desired audiences, and maintain ongoing, engaging digital based campaigns. Further on, share prices rose by 120% in two years, memberships grew significantly, and all the social media engagement numbers multiplied (Stokes et al., 2013).

Discussed examples show similar patterns, bringing the findings about disintermediation from the theoretical research into practice. Throughout the cases, disintermediation was established as a response to innovation, causing changes in market value systems and the traditional business model, which bring the need for a solution/substitute. There is a strong case to believe cutting out advertising agencies from certain digital advertising campaigns would be in the end beneficial for both, production companies and advertisers. It can be argued that an idea of such a business model is visionary and, for the future of the advertising industry, relevant. What needs to be done is

searching for the ways to facilitate such collaborations. Findings about strategic partnerships imply that they could be the solution providing options for value co-creation between the discussed parties. Hence, the calling for exploring how to build and maintain such partnerships and make them successful in the co-creation level.

As it follows, two subjects are left to touch upon in order to explore how the abovementioned would be possible. First, the desired value, being an outcome of such partnerships, should be specified to a certain extent. Once we are clear on the value, we can dive into the value co-creation itself and later combine our value specifics with findings of value co-creation in order to make an understanding of these principles within the researched topic.

2.3 The target value; ongoing advertising campaign

Taking into consideration all the information from previous chapters about innovation in advertising, current consumers, and advertisers' needs, we already identified ongoing advertising campaigns as one of the most important parts of many marketing and advertising strategies. To be able to find the possible options and specifics of co-creating these campaigns in the direct partnership between brands and digital production companies, we should look at the development process of these campaigns. In this way we can later discover whether this particular type of co-creation brings any differences or needs for any adjustments.

Advertising campaign development combines the business plan, brand assets, strategy, and many other aspects of the long-term functioning with creative ideas. It is a complex process with many steps usually organised into several stages (Blakeman, 2011). Once the reasoning behind the campaign is defined by the brand and all the participating parties are well introduced to the brand objectives, preferences, and key points, the first stage of planning and setting goals begins. The core message of the campaign and its goals are determined as well as practical matters. By practical matters we mean budget allocations, scheduling of both; work and the campaign. The target audience needs to be precisely characterised, which then leads to the choice of relevant advertising strategies and used media channels (Blakeman, 2011; Parente & Strausbaugh-Hutchinson, 2014; Hardy, MacRury & Powell, 2018; Tellis & Ambler, 2007). Subjectively to the type of brand, product or campaign, there might be additional steps in strategy and planning, however, according to Blakeman (2011), this phase should mainly lay sufficient ground for the next, design stage.

Generally, this part is called the creative process and usually follows the creative brief proposed by the client's side. It includes developing the creative idea, or multiple ideas that the

client chooses from, and the final design development for all the channels and media. Talking about the ongoing digital campaigns, the design process should be focused on consistency across the channels in order to create a strong, individualized voice. Designed content is then produced, varying from graphic or photo visuals to videos and in our case even other, often innovative, digital products, accompanied by selected wording and texting. Finally, technical solutions such as programming are implemented. The whole design process is centred around approval and feedback rounds necessary for successful development (Blakeman, 2011; Hardy, MacRury & Powell, 2018; May, 2018; Parente & Strausbaugh-Hutchinson, 2014; Tellis & Ambler, 2007). There are various strategies to organise the creative process between more parties. They usually involve different types of meetings and presentations or even testing, depending on mutual agreements and the ways the partnerships are set (Hardy, MacRury & Powell, 2018).

With an approved campaign, the stage of performance follows. The campaign is set up, launched on previously agreed upon channels and placed in validated media (Blakeman, 2011). Ongoing digital advertising campaigns allow a wide range of options within the performance stage. They gather data from the very first day of activity, therefore they can be utilized, optimized, and improved during their run to perform settled goals (McStay, 2016; Ryan, 2016; Stokes et al, 2013). With ongoing campaigns, performance goes hand in hand with seemingly the last stage, evaluation. The possibilities of tracking and measuring create a strong base for reporting and evaluation. Once again, the ways of evaluation may differ per campaign and partnership and should be settled before the campaign performance. In the evaluation stage, advertisers go through the reports to analyze data and metrics such as clicks, engagement, conversions and conversion rates, etc. Usually, the results of these analyses could be used for improving future campaigns and creating future advertising strategies (Blakeman, 2011; Hardy, MacRury & Powell, 2018; Sun, 2020). However, this is where certain specifics of ongoing campaigns come to the scene. These campaigns are always on and desirably as efficient as possible during their run. Meaning they need to be, and thanks to the digital environment, they can be optimised and improved on within the process. Practically speaking, always-on advertising is heavily data driven. Since its launch, the campaigns are monitored and measured, which allows for them to be refined and optimised as well. Various aspects can be measured, such as the number of visits, time spent, purchases made, engagement, click-throughs and many others. Performance of the campaigns can then point towards changes in design and the choice of creatives, to remarketing and retargeting and other possibilities of optimisation. Then the campaign's performance is further measured and evaluated after the tweaking, and that can go on and on, which creates its continuous life cycle (Blakeman, 2011; McStay, 2016; Ryan, 2016).

The challenge we are facing is to find out the most efficient ways how this complex value, these ongoing advertising campaigns, can be facilitated within a partnership between the advertiser and digital production or digital creative companies. In order to do so, knowledge of value co-creation is necessary.

2. 4 Value co-creation

Visions, methods, and goals might differ; however, certain value creation is a foundation of any successful business. In the developing business landscapes, co-creation is often the most suitable solution for many challenges that firms face. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that it is seen as a key element in various processes. In fact, many scholars came to the same conclusion being that co-creation currently stands for one of the most discussed paradigms in value creation, becoming more of a necessity than an option for several business disciplines (Baltova & Baltov, 2017; Gummesson et al., 2014; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

2. 4. 1 Defining co-creation

Value co-creation is seemingly a self-explanatory term; however, it represents a very complex concept interacting with various spheres. The traditional approach rooting in humanities stresses that people, groups, or any social subjects are always connected through social interaction, hence any organisational control is debatable, and any production has its base in co-creation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995 as cited in Ind & Coates, 2013). For the purpose of this work, the business perspective is considered, which explains co-creation as a business model element, the form of economic strategy or management initiative (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). The works of Prahalad & Ramaswamy published in 2000 and 2004 are often considered as a milestone for the topic of co-creation within business (Corsaro, 2019; Payne, Storbacka & Frow, 2008; Sanders & Stappers, 2008) and are often used as a base for further research. They pointed out the shift from a product centric system to a personalised customer experience, arguing that the right connection between a firm and its consumers increases engagement and leads to co-creation of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). That laid the foundations for extensive research of business co-creation. Sanders and Stappers (2008) define co-creation as: “any act of collective creativity, i.e. creativity that is shared by two or more people” (p. 6). More definitions and notes emerged throughout different disciplines. Many of them were gathered in the work of Mehrpouya et al. (2013), who analysed them and came to derive the components stressed in most of them; collaboration, creativity, active engagement and low entry barrier, enabling collaborators to contribute to the extent of their skills or values that they can offer. Researchers also agree that the main purpose of co-creation is to create positive values for

all the participants (Baltova & Baltov, 2017; Corsaro, 2014; Mehrpouya et al., 2013; Plattner, Meinel & Leifer, 2012; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

2. 4. 2 Relevant research of value co-creation

Over the past few decades, scholastic attention has been paid to co-creation, as a result of its recognition as an answer to various issues brought about by innovation. In the industries especially touched by the technical and digital developments, co-creation began to be often identified as a preferred way of creating values (Sanders and Stappers, 2008). In the commercial sphere and creative industries, the concept became subject of many academic and professional debates, which went hand in hand with the rising amount of conducted research. Thus, we can already benefit from many findings about co-creation. For example, a significant number of studies deals with co-creation within marketing, branding, e-commerce, and other akin fields. Moreover, there is wide research on co-creation in broadly applicable disciplines such as managing, entrepreneurship, and business modelling. Up to this day, co-creation is seen as an essential element of product innovation, management, marketing, branding, design thinking and more (Baltova & Baltov, 2017; Meuter & Bitner, 1998; Plattner, Meinel & Leifer, 2012).

Within marketing and advertising, co-creation was primarily researched in relation to customers' participation in co-creating values with the brands (Cova & Salle, 2008; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Even before the use of the term co-creation, marketing literature defined customer participation and its benefits in productivity gains. Clients were viewed as "partial employees" as they took part in the co-production of firm values and different stages of their involvement were proposed while proving positive effects on both; companies and customers (Mills & Morris, 1986). Later, three different types of customer participation were distinguished, from which two of them involved complete or partial customer participation (Meuter & Bitner, 1998). From that point onwards, research in this direction has been evolving slowly, until the start of the digital era and its drastic changes. With the shift in the industry, more researchers became interested in user-driven innovation of products and services and communication (Plattner, Meinel & Leifer, 2012). Afterwards, a lot of focus has been put into brands' value co-creation with the end customers. Co-creation of the value was stated as one of the core building stones in creating relationship with customers within the service-dominant logic, which started taking over in services and marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). It was established to improve customer experience through engagement and create a dialogue between a firm and its customers. Empowering the customers to co-create value has also many benefits for the business (Payne, Storbacka & Frow, 2008; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Such a dialogue helps to build strong relationships,

which contributes to customers' satisfaction and strengthens the loyalty to brand. It provides firms with better insights into customers' needs and desires and gives them the opportunity to outsource some of the customers' useful ideas (Baltov & Baltova, 2017). As co-creation with customers can be a source of inspiration or a certain kind of content, it also has the potential to reduce costs (Andreu, Sánchez & Mele, 2010; Baltova, 2013). It was pointed out that even though most of the conducted studies focused on the mentioned relationship of brands with their consumers, the base could be applicable to other client - customer relationships as well (Baltova, 2017).

Discussed findings brought new perspectives to the research of value co-creation. All the benefits that co-creation brings to marketing and advertising, together with the principles generalizable for other fields, moved the focus of research from co-creating product related values towards service related ones, and from the relationship between firms and the end customers towards other subjects of the value chain (Baltov & Baltova, 2017; Galvagno et al., 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Baltov and Baltova (2017) researched professional business services where they also identified value co-creation as one of the most important elements. They focused on the relationship between the company and customer in a business-to-business environment, paying attention particularly to marketing disciplines. According to their research, general principles of value co-creations are applicable, however, there are several differences in the interaction between organisations. The understanding of the business customers' needs is a necessity, as well as mutual information exchange. Such an exchange together with managerial approach leads to wider possibilities for joint creation of value (Baltov & Baltova, 2017), however, they agree value co-creation in the marketing business-to-business environment is not yet sufficiently scholastically covered (Baltov & Baltova, 2017; Cusumano, 2015; Galvagno et al., 2014).

2. 4. 3 Essential elements for value co-creation

In their work, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) pointed out and analysed co-creation as an answer to new customer needs brought about by digital innovation. They focused on a shift of company centred value creation to co-creation unique values with customers in the mutual communication. The study summarized the main impacts creating the new environment for customers, such as activism, networking, global view, information, and access. It was recognized that the new ubiquitous connectivity changed the role of stakeholders in the value creation process, which resulted in searching for a new framework for co-creation. Therefore, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) considered questions rising from the process and created the DART model; a list of elements essential for value co-creation between brands and consumers.

The first element of the DART model is dialogue. Dialogue should be an engaging and interactive two-sided form of communication of equally positioned stakeholders. There are several specifics to a dialog related to co-creation, such as focus on issues common for both subjects, requirement of a forum, or a suitable environment. The rules of engagement should also be set to achieve productivity. Second, A stands for access. Access is crucial for achieving successful co-creation. With no exception, all businesses create values, which shared, might provide a good base for collaboration. It is necessary for participating subjects to be able to access needed information, tools, and resources. Only then can both sides come to the full use of the existing know how. The study says that access creates new opportunities, which is demonstrated on an example of how access to the industries' value chains provided by advanced technologies lets customers become active members of these value chains in the stakeholder's roles. On that account, firms can create deeper relationships with their customers and the co-created values become more meaningful (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Findings about dialogue and especially willingness and ability to share information were stressed by many researchers dealing with co-creation of value. Across the disciplines and perspectives, scholars agree that access to information and communication between stakeholders is one of the cornerstones of forming and maintaining strategic partnerships and successful value co-creation (Andreu, Sánchez & Mele, 2010; Baltov & Baltova, 2017; Cova & Sale; 2008; Dyer, Kale & Singh, 2001; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Third element of the DART model is risk assessment. It indicates the possibilities of any harm to one or both stakeholders. Within risk assessment, all the responsibilities and potential consequences of non-performance should be settled, while critically assessing what can be the different parts responsible for. Therefore, which risks they bring and whether they would be able to manage them. Last, but not least, under the T is transparency. The need for transparency can be explained by advanced technology causing disappearing asymmetry in distributed information. Transparency brings clarity and supports value co-creation environment.

The authors believed that the combination of the abovementioned building stones can help firms to co-create values together with their customers. Moreover, the study suggests that combining different DART elements creates different capabilities, which makes the study flexible and applicable to a broader range of companies (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Even though the described study focused particularly on the value co-creation between firms and its customers, the trend was demonstrated on relevant examples from many spheres. The model was used for developing a scale firms can use to diagnose their readiness to start value co-creation and reflect upon their existing processes (Albinsson, Perera & Sautter, 2016) or for the validation of DART elements and their influence on innovation strategies (Taghizadeh et al., 2016), and many more.

Amongst the broadly researched fields, as mentioned before, is branding. The ongoing debates show that most scholars see co-creation as an essential element of stakeholder-oriented branding and brand building. It has been established that co-creation is an indisputable contribution to the brand value creation (Christodoulides, 2008; Merz, He & Vargo, 2009). Moreover, according to Merz, He & Vargo (2009), brands are often viewed as “collaborative, value co-creation activities of firms and all of their stakeholders” (page). In their work about brand co-creation, Hatch & Schultz (2010), used the elements of the DART model to explain/extend the branding phenomenon. Their research moved from the previously most often discussed - consumers and marketers - and begun describing brand co-creation with their stakeholders. By comparing Prahalad and Ramaswamy’s (2004) four elements of co-creation (the DART model) to the core concepts of branding extracted from academic literature, a new framework for brand co-creation was developed. The framework was used for a research conducted with data from the LEGO Company, resulting in some interesting findings. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) already noted that the elements of the DART model are interrelated, and their combination can bring different results. Hatch & Schultz’s (2010) study broadened the topic and provided a detailed, data-based description of the combinations. According to their findings, combining dialog and access in the process of co-creation create engagement. Transparency brings risk, and together they lead to self-disclosure. The study pushed the research of co-creation forward, especially in the area of branding and brand-building. However, the mentioned concepts were previously recognized as important in advertising and by this study, suggested them to be generalizable as well. Thus, the theory suggests these concepts are generalizable and applicable to other research with co-creation. The DART model was further referred to, or used in later studies and research, mainly aiming to explore keys to successful co-creation in various environments.

Another model of value co-creation was introduced by Tapscott and Williams. Compared to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), who’s DART model focused mainly on the building concepts for suitable co-creation environment and aspects of interaction, Tapscott and Williams touched upon co-creation for the firm’s internal organization. Their model offers a set of important factors supposedly beneficial for creating a co-creative mindset within the company. Such a mindset creates competitive advantage, supports co-creation processes, and increases the probability of its positive outcome (Tapscott & Williams, 2008). Amongst the proposed attributes belong sufficient planning and good overview, high-level skills, correct capability, transparency and appropriate culture (Tapscott & Williams, 2008; Skaržauskaitė, 2013).

2. 4. 4 Influences on B2B co-creation

Besides the extensive research of business-to-customer co-creation, a gap in the research of the business to business area was also recently recognized. In her work, Corsaro (2019) discussed value co-creation in business relationships and pointed out two areas where academic research is lacking. Compared to a rather complex theoretical background, a framework that would be applicable for firm management has not been proposed yet, even though value co-creation was identified by managers as a crucial concept. To summarize, it follows from both, the professional and scholastic environment, that a solution translatable into real life is needed. Accordingly, the literature revision that discovered aims for value co-creation management has been mostly unsuccessful, often leading to conflicts, tension, misunderstandings or even relationship downfall. It was suggested that a solution may lie in examining connections between value co-creation and other value processes. Considering the complex and interactional character of value co-creation, it is likely it would be influenced by other value processes and therefore it is beneficial to identify those and learn how to work with them. In order to do so, research based on previously studied processes was conducted (Corsaro, 2019). The main processes identified as related to value co-creation are value appropriation, communication, measurement, and representation (Corsaro, 2014).

Value appropriation is needed within co-creating value to distinguish the parts of co-created value that different participants have been acquiring and/or are in a possession of and responsible for. More powerful stakeholders are expected to have a larger share of the co-created value, while it is still important for both parts to be aware of their contribution (Corsaro, 2019). Regarding the co-creation of values between firms and production companies, this is an important issue to address, as the brand is in the role of client, so therefore expected to have more power. However, the value brought by production companies should be accounted for as well. Moreover, the production firm's know-how should be valued. Previous research also supports a connection between value co-creation and value communication. Value communication should in theory involve all the parties, which, in the case of co-creating and facilitating ongoing advertising campaign, is essential (Corsaro, 2019). In our case, participation in communication of the co-created values might be one of the key elements of well-functioning collaboration. It is established in marketing and advertising literature and in practice that communication of the campaign creates a majority of its success (Kotler & Keller, 2015; Hemann & Burbary, 2018). Hence, the belief that this topic could be a benefit within scholastic coverage. Co-created values also need to be somehow measured, for example by evaluating the performance, tracking the audience behaviour and customer base, managing information and analysing long-term value, and possibly returnability (Keränen & Jalkala, 2013; Corsaro, 2019). The

last concept explored in connection to value co-creation is value representation. Corsaro (2014) defines value representation as "how the actor translates its own idea of value in something that can be observed by the other actors, and its meaning shared among them" (p. 992). Simply, it can be said that it is a translation of the value from the intention to the effect, which occurs to be a common problem. This, again, could be an important area to explore within the direct collaboration between the brands and production companies we deal with. As explained before, in a traditional value chain, it is the advertising agency that mediates all the contact and process, therefore the advertising agency is the party almost exclusively in charge of value representation. Thus, with the shift to brand-production co-operation, the question of value representation and its role in value co-creation emerges.

The analysis of the aforementioned processes resulted in identifying key elements for each of them in order to reach an efficient and functioning co-creation. For value co-creation of business relationships; adaptation, bridging, and advising were extracted. Adaptation represents the need to see value-in-use as a foundation and the accepting (both) sides should actively participate in value co-creation. According to the study, adaptation is crucial when it comes to complex products and services and higher risk-perception. To maintain a prosperous relationship, adaptation should come on both; a technological and a relational level (Corsaro, 2019). Bridging then stands for: "mutual recognition and understanding that the success of each firm depends in part on the other firms lead to undertaking actions in order to provide a coordinated effort focused on jointly satisfying the requirements of the different market players" (Corsaro, 2019, p. 106). Bridging can supposedly eliminate uncertainties, generate continuity, thus open new opportunities. Advising then covers the gap in collaboration in case one of the parties lack a significant part of knowledge of co-created value or any of its aspects. Provider organizations, then not only becomes supplier, but also consultant to some extent and it is important for both parties to enhance and respect these roles where needed. Amongst the activities supporting value communication in business relationships, the management of touch points is essential. The higher the complexity of contact points is, the higher the alignment required from both sides will be. In a nutshell, the popular motto "keep it simple" might be the winning one in this case. That applies also to the combination of an interconnection environment, time pressure, and information overload, which is often characteristic for co-creation. Therefore, translation aims to explain and simplify ideas through communication. It carries importance in case of any distinct barrier, such as cultural or industrial, which may negatively influence relationships between businesses (Corsaro, 2019). For the purpose of this study, translation could supposedly eliminate the risks of a disciplinary gap between creative firms and specialized brands, as it was previously mostly covered by the mediating agency. Translation is

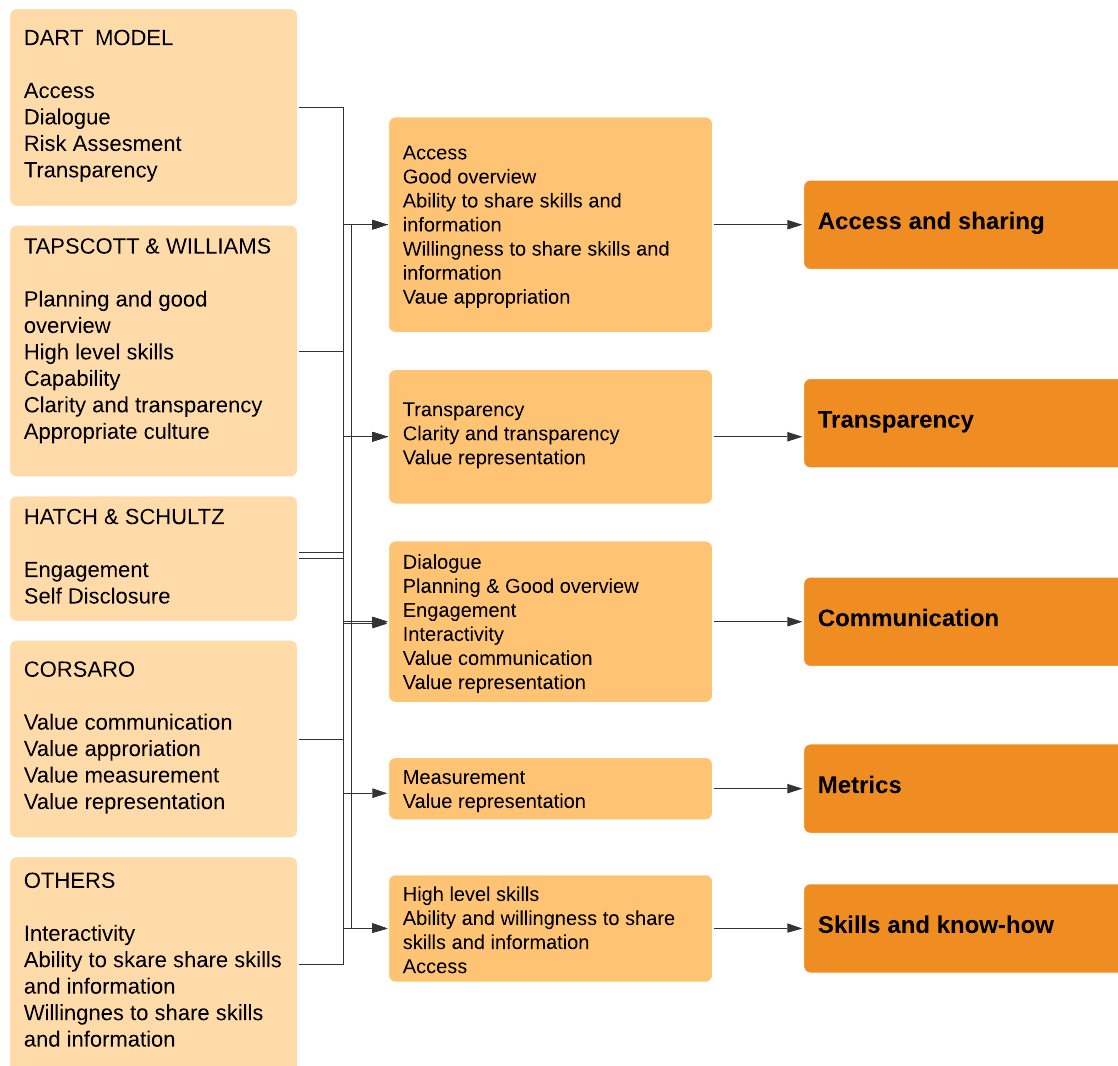
closely linked to also recommend the development of interpersonal interactions. Managers are confident their business-to-business (B2B) relationships would benefit from improving interpersonal ones and investing time in direct contact. It is believed similar interactions would contribute to a better understanding of the view of the collaboration and for that which both sides desire. Activities for value appropriation in business relationships include limiting opportunism, in order to limit inequity and allow more flexibility, and collective anchoring, which prevents misinterpretations, as well as it can work as a form of control mechanism. With value measurement, it is emphasized that the key performance indicators (KPIs) should be measured both; continuously throughout the co-creation and in the end for final evaluation. The described method prevents negative outcomes and mutual frustration. Contextualization then forestalls confusion caused by different measurements by ensuring that partners clarify their measuring parameters in advance. Lastly, two activities were suggested to support value representation within value co-creation: confronting representations and changing representations. Confronting representation means securing a mutual attempt to express visions of the value, and its expected benefits from both sides promises and contracts. Changing representation speaks for itself and points out the representations' ongoing nature. As representations are established while interacting, it is crucial to keep them flexible and adjustable according to demands (Corsaro, 2019). Results of previous study have shown that value co-creation is strongly influenced by other value processes. Many findings and advice on business to business (B2B) relationships within collaboration were presented as well.

Worth mentioning is a different perspective, possibly fruitful for our research, which was taken by Ng, Nudurupati and Tasker (2010), who focused on co-creation of value strictly in business to business services. Their research suggests seven attributes of value co-creation essential for delivering value-in-use, which should help organizations partner up and collaborate in the most efficient way in order to produce desired end. The attributes are process alignment, behavioural alignment, coherence in expectations of both sides, empowerment and perceived control, complementary competencies and behavioural transformation. Implementing them should bring a lot of positive influence on joint value creation (Ng, Nudurupati & Tasker, 2010; Skaržauskaitė, 2013). Looking at two previously described studies, we can also see some of the concepts overlapping; especially bridging stressed by Corsaro (2019) is strongly related the collaborative concepts introduced by Ng, Nudurupati and Tasker (2010).

Reviewing concepts from the previous studies, they widely correspond with many suggestions from marketing, advertising and communication research and shared practical experience. Therefore, the introduced findings have a significant potential to be a valuable

contribution to building a framework for cooperation and direct co-creation, specifically between brands and production companies, as is the goal of our research.

Fig. 2 Core elements of value co-creation process

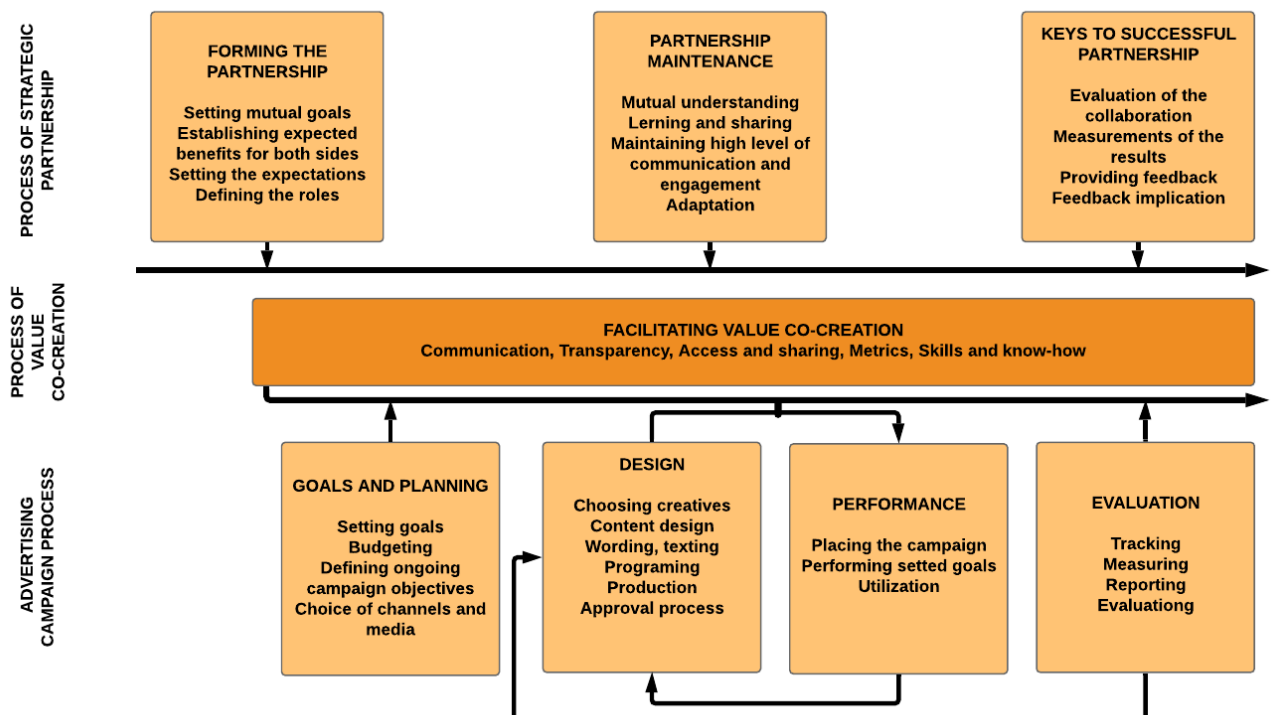


2. 5 Conceptual framework

Brands and digital production companies, two parties that have not had direct contact before, are now in need to collaborate in order to facilitate always on advertising campaigns together. In the theoretical framework, forming strategic partnerships and co-creating values within them have been identified as two key processes towards this goal. The goal being facilitating always on advertising campaigns, the process of creating the advertising campaign needs to be accounted for. Therefore, those are the main topics our research is focused on. In the theoretical framework

both, strategic partnership and value co-creation, have been explained. Their core elements have been found in academic literature and rich amount of studies from various areas of expertise. We used those to build a conceptual framework aiming to provide a base for researching how can those processes can be combined and put into practice in the field of our interest. We investigated the knowledge about strategic partnerships and identified three main stages and their important elements (Figure 1). We also analysed and compared models of value co-creation provided by different authors and related to our case and draw common key concepts for value co-creation from them (Figure 2), that should be present during the whole process of co-creating always on advertising campaigns. Stages of creating advertising campaigns were included to specify the process. We know from the theory that those processes are simultaneous and mutually strongly connected, thus combining them into a conceptual framework (Figure 3). We used the conceptual framework to design the interviews.

Fig. 3 Conceptual framework



3 Method

The following chapter provides detailed information on the methods and procedures used in our research study. Methodological choices related to sampling operationalization, data collection and analysis are discussed and expressed explicitly to ensure a high level of transparency and the validity of the research (Meyrick, 2006; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001).

3.1 Research design

The thesis examines how brands creative production companies can directly collaborate to facilitate always-on advertising campaigns. The topic of disintermediation in advertising has been trending in the professional branch, surrounded with rich discussions, yet it has not been grounded in the academic environment. Answering the research question should provide that base and point out the necessary changes needed to make in current business models in order to achieve set goals in co-creation between to-be-partners in the advertising industry. This research seeks a deeper understanding and identification of the core elements necessary for such collaboration to be effective and successful. It means the study is therefore rather inductive; it does not aim to test a hypothesis or produce findings generalizable for what is considered an entire population. Instead it aims to take a detailed look into the researched topic and gather in-depth information relevant to it. This goal can be reached by using qualitative research, which is directed exactly at providing such in-depth interpretations of certain phenomenon (Dworkin, 2012; Moriarty, 2011). In the words of Babbie (2016), qualitative research “aims to examine and interpret observations, for the purpose of discovering underlying meanings and patterns” (p. 382). Qualitative research is the one method to use for questions that cannot be resolved with simple facts and unambiguous answers, in other words, for complex issues. In its exploratory function, it builds upon the learning experience, which results in identifying key concepts and recurring topics, possibly also potential influences on the topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Based on common patterns and the key concepts extracted from qualitative data analysis, qualitative research seeks to provide explanations and useful suggestions, which is why it is used in new concept development. The aforementioned are all outcomes this thesis is aiming for, therefore we made the choice for the qualitative approach.

Carefully considering all the specifics and aims of present research, semi-structured in-depth expert interviews were chosen as the most suitable method (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Dworkin, 2012). As we intend to develop theory from data (Flick, 2008) in the dynamic nature of advertising industries, the data needed to come from knowledgeable, relevant sources. In the theory generating

interviews, interviewees are not only seen as informative sources, but also as sources eligible to provide expert knowledge and experience of the company or other subjects they are speaking for. They can provide access to the field of interest and share specific information, which may not be known outside of that particular branch (Van Audenhove, 2007). Since we are studying co-creation between brands and digital production companies, in-depth interviews with their expert representatives should produce the desired type of data.

In-depth interviews are characterized as meaning-making. To maximize that, to achieve the highest efficiency possible and to not miss any opportunity regarding gathering useful data, we decided to perform semi-structured interviews. Even though they are prepared and moderated, they are still flexible enough to provide researchers with broad options to explore the participant's perspective on the topic by using additional questions, probes and reacting on given impulses (Legard et al., 2013). To ensure relevancy and keep the research focused on topics directly related to the research question, interview topics were prepared beforehand, building up on the theoretical knowledge base (Bogner et al., 2009). Such preparation is also a way to achieve the amount of standardization required for academic research (Wengraf, 2011). However, by preparing the topics instead of closed questions, research remains flexible enough to explore and leaves space to discover the unexpected (May, 2002; Wengraf, 2011). According to Rubin & Rubin (2005) in a responsive interview the interviewer and interviewee create a certain relationship in a conversation where mutual interests are explored in depth and built upon. Achieving such a relationship together with the ability to adjust to new directions and findings provides sufficient support for generating meaning (Hermanowicz, 2002; Bogner et al., 2009).

3. 2 Sampling

Appropriate sampling is one of the keys of successful research (Bogner et al., 2009; Flick, 2008; Lewis-Beck et al., 2004; Van Audenhove, 2007). While conducting in-depth expert interviews, it is essential to approach sampling responsibly and consider all the aspects related to sampling that could possibly affect the study. Sampling for the present research started with two initial decisions; the choices of the way of selection and of the sample size. As our research question is specific, targeted at particular field and explorative, purposive sampling was evaluated as the most suitable. Purposive sampling seeks for participants with certain characteristics identified based on the research needs that assures data relevancy (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). It is focused on finding data from persons with a certain level of proficiency, relevant experience and interest, which brings

useful contribution to the study. Since we did not use pre-existing data, yet we wanted to reach subjects interested in the research, a combination of random and snowball sampling was used. Random sampling done within a population relevant to our study ensured that data collection sources were not chosen out of convenience, but for meeting the criteria. The purposeful snowball sampling allowed us to follow findings and the recommendation following from the research itself in the real time and also to enrich the data for the information gained from sources we may not have been able to reach ourselves. This combination provided us with the ability to select relevant and sufficient samples, sharing different points of view and valuable information (Yin, 2011).

Needless to say, both of the mentioned sampling methods were only applicable with specifying what “expert” means for this research. There are many definitions of who an expert is based on various criteria. Ultimately, experts are those with specific in-depth knowledge of the research field that the interviewer is interested in, for example with the knowledge of held procedures, behaviours, tactics, events, issues or structures (Bogner et al., 2009; Van Audenhove, 2007). They are often the people in high positions within the work environment who have privileged access to the information about it. In other words, they have expert roles in the research of social phenomenon. For our interviews, we sought out participants with personal experience and knowledge about the present topic, which is not otherwise accessible, therefore is unique (Bogner et al., 2009). In our case this mostly applies to managers, directors, C.E.O.s, etc. We are talking about professionals working within selected companies in positions who are not only directly related to decision making and/or strategic process, but also with those involved in business development and the processes and execution of partnerships and have good overview of the ongoing advertising campaign co-creation within their company. We focused on speakers from companies that have past/present experience with direct co-creation between digital production firms and brands or with companies who are seriously interested in starting such a collaboration. In order to obtain a complex picture, we gather information from both sides. The first group is characterized by experts working on the side of different digital production companies, who deliver digital products in advertising and would benefit from direct collaboration with the client. The second group are experts speaking for brands, which in this case are the clients usually working with digital production companies either directly or indirectly via the advertising agency. We chose such experts who use digital production companies’ work on a regular basis as one of the core elements of their marketing communication, therefore they put significant value in the already performed or future possible collaboration.

There are ongoing debates in the academic environment on the sample size in qualitative research. Scholars mostly agree that the answer to the question of the right sample size lies in so-called “point of saturation” (Dworkin, 2012; Mason, 2010). Saturation occurs when the data collection stops offering new, useful data. According to Charmaz (2006) in Dworkin (2012) saturation is: “when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of your core theoretical categories”. Talking numbers, large amounts of academic literature suggest that depending on many variables, the saturation point is somewhere between 5 and 50 participants (Dworkin, 2012). For the purpose of this research and assuring its feasibility, the selected sample may not reach the full saturation point, however, it was kept within the often mentioned suggested range. A total amount of 10 experts was interviewed.

All experts were sampled and approached based on the expert’s definition from last paragraphs. All of them were introduced to their rights within the interviews and regarding handling their provided data. Majority of respondents chose to remain anonymous and ask for anonymisation of certain parts of the data, such as companies they work or used to work for and companies they work with. Therefore, the overview provides anonymised information. and the list anonymised overview of interviewees can be found in Appendix I.

3. 3 Operationalization

By presenting operationalization, we can show how we came to the practical decisions and how we collected the information purposefully to answer the research question and explore the topic in depth (Saunders et al., 2009). The topic list for the interview was created based on the theoretical findings introduced in previous chapters, reflecting on core concepts relevant to the research and the research question. Considering those concepts, we were able to identify factors that have the potential to influence facilitating ongoing advertising campaigns between digital production companies and brands. Based on the chapters and subchapters about *the need for strategic partnership, co-creation, essential elements for value creation* and *the main influences on business to business co-creation* the topic list provides the major themes related to our topic which we used for building the structure of the interview. Every question is then extended with probes based on the findings from theoretical chapter. With further enrichment by information following from the interviews the topic list serves as a base material for data collection.

3. 3. 1 Topic list including sample questions

Table 1. Operationalisation

Process of strategic partnership	
<i>Forming the strategic partnership</i>	<p>“What are the motivations towards forming strategic partnerships directly with digital production companies / brands?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - maximizing efficiency - gaining access to resources and know how - reducing barriers / competition - financial benefits - restricting dependence on the third sides
	<p>“What steps do you take to form the partnership?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - setting mutual goals - establishing expected benefits for both sides - setting expectations regarding the collaboration - defining the roles - defining risks
<i>Partnership maintenance</i>	<p>“How do you maintain a partnership with a brand / digital production company?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learning and sharing - mutual understanding - maintaining high level of communication - re-alignment - establishing mutual routines / habits (meetings, reports...)
	<p>“Are there any changes you would need to incorporate within your company’s structure to maintain such a partnership?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - changes in used tools - changes in routines - changes in internal structure

<i>Keys to a successful partnership</i>	<p>“What are the keys to make the partnership successful?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - evaluation of the collaboration - results measurement - providing feedback - implementing feedback - co-designed process - risk management
Value co-creation	
<i>Facilitating value co-creation in mutual partnership</i>	<p>“How do you create sufficient environment for value co-creation with a brand / digital production company?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication - dialogue, communication tools, communication processes (briefings, brainstormings, status updates, innovation meetings...), mutual decision making, interactivity - Transparency - clarity, value representation, ownership of co-created values - Access and sharing - good overview, access to data, information sharing on regular basis - Skills and know-how - skills and know-how exchange, workshops, mutual learning
Process of co-creating ongoing advertising campaign	
<i>Goals and planning</i>	<p>“What are the fundamental elements for planning and setting goals of ongoing advertising campaign co-created with a brand / digital production company?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - budgeting - timing, creating schedule - ownership - defining roles in the creation process - choice of media and channels

	<p>“What are the crucial elements of ongoing advertising campaign for you?”</p>
<i>Design</i>	<p>“How do you design ongoing advertising campaign together with the partner?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - choosing creatives - specific steps of development process - approval process - level of interaction between partners - mutual needs
<i>Performance</i>	<p>“What are the steps of performance of an ongoing advertising campaign?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - performing settled goals - utilization, iteration - remarketing and retargeting - metrics
	<p>“What do you need or expect from your partner to perform an ongoing advertising campaign?”</p>
<i>Evaluation</i>	<p>“How do you evaluate ongoing advertising campaign with your partner?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - evaluation criteria - ways of reporting
	<p>“How do you implement the evaluation for further function of ongoing advertising campaign?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - how do you make understanding and use of the data for improving performance - how do you use evaluation for designing new creatives
<p><i>“Is there anything you consider important or beneficial for the topic that we have not discussed?”</i></p>	

3.4 Data collection

We have encountered several challenges during the stage of data collection. Originally, the interviews were planned to be conducted in person over a period of 5 weeks. However, due to unusual circumstances and restrictions caused by the occurrence of the COVID19 virus, changes have been made. Companies of our interest, working in digital marketing, were directly affected by the situation, therefore their approach to the research shifted. Some of the companies or expected participants were not comfortable with conducting the interview online, others found themselves in need to cancel or reschedule. Apparently, experts relevant to interview for our research are also the ones directly responsible for most of the extra marketing work related to the current situation, hence their increased occupancy. The data collection period was thus slightly complicated and extended. In the end, a total amount of 10 semi-structured in-depth interviews was conducted between the 12th of March to the 23rd of May.

The very first interview was conducted face to face and taped. The next nine interviews were then held during the time of recommended social distancing, therefore they were conducted online on various platforms suitable for the interviewees, such as Skype for business, Zoom and Google Hangouts, and recorded. Before conducting online interviews, many of their specifics were addressed. Practical requirements were ensured, such as a silent, private place for the interviews, as well as a high-quality internet signal for preventing possible technical issues from the researcher's side. Both, prior and during the interviews, much attention was still paid to developing a rapport with the interviewees to create a positive connection and motivate the interviewees to open up and contribute, similar to it being as possible like face to face. Transparency and a certain level of professionalism was maintained in order to build trust and support the legitimacy of the research (Legard et al., 2013). On the other hand, the researcher focused on creating a favourable impression and being friendly and open, to break down some of the barriers caused by non-personal communication and create a comfortable atmosphere for the interview (Morris, 2015). Reflecting upon the process, all of the interviews had a rather relaxed atmosphere and the respondents seemed to feel comfortable enough to share their experiences and opinions.

All the scheduled interviews were started with a re-introduction and a brief out-of-topic talk to set the atmosphere and connect with the respondents (Morris, 2015). Afterwards, the research was discussed. Its purpose and goals were made clear again, if needed, and in most cases some additional questions were answered. Interviewees were, once again, reminded of their rights and asked for their consent with recording the interviews. Once the respondents were ready and the

recording was on, the semi-structured interview was carried out. A pre-prepared question list based on the conceptual framework was used to guide the interview exploring the topics progressively from the most general, primary one towards the specific, more practical and subjective. Probing was used constantly throughout the interviews to encourage the interviewees to discuss in depth and express their opinions. Many additional questions were also formed during the interview based on gained information and particular answers, where different concepts and practical examples were introduced by the experts (Legard et al., 2013). The interviews were wrapped up with a rather hypothetical and subjective question to relax the atmosphere in the end and create free space for any additional thoughts. Then, every interviewed expert was asked to reflect upon the interview, pinpoint any possible gaps that may have not been covered, or, optionally share any other information they held as important and wanted to share for the sake of complex topic coverage. In many cases, this step generated extra information or further short discussion.

Eight interviews were conducted and transcribed into English, two of the interviews were conducted in Czech language and transcribed into English afterwards. A total amount of more than 8 and half hours have been recorded, resulting in average of 52 per interview.

3. 5 Data Analysis

In order to answer the research question, we sought after the most efficient way to make sense of the collected data. The decision was made to carry out a thematic analysis, which is considered to be the most sensitive method for discovering meanings through new data interpretation (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis has the largest potential to develop new concepts without any significant restrictions caused by an already existing theory. It gives the researcher the space to break down the data for further interpretation and eventually for the final report (Bailey, 2007; Boeije, 2010). Analysis of in-depth interviews requires diving into the information provided again and again, conceptualizing the data and searching for common patterns. Therefore, the interviews were transcribed by the researcher and the textual materials were used in the analysis process (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). The verbatim transcriptions helped to guide our analysis and allowed us to reduce the amount of collected data in every step we took through the analysis until we got to the main topics (Gilbert, 2008). Same as conducting the interviews, verbatim transcripts were all completed by the researcher. No other person played role in the data collection and analysis. Finished transcript were uploaded to the program Atlas.ti, which is one of the most commonly used programs for computer-aided analysis of qualitative data (Friese, 2019). The data segmentation process followed, including three phases representing three different levels of coding,

each of them related to a different point in the amplification of deducted categories. Those are open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Boeije, 2010; Bryman and Bell, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Nowell, 2017). In Atlas.ti, all the interviews were analysed line by line while using open coding and occasionally in-vivo coding to identify all possible themes and topics. While using open coding, data were carefully read with attention paid to any possible important content, divided into fragments, labeled and marked with keywords without changing their structure (Boeije, 2010; Nowell, 2017; Van Audenhove, 2011). This step helped to get a general feeling of the data and the first overview of the most occurring concepts (Boeije, 2010; Van Audenhove, 2011). It also reduced the amount of data used to work with and provided more clarity, as some of the irrelevant or repeated parts of interviews were ruled out (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding also already laid ground for creating categories, later used to group the codes in the following step of axial coding. In the axial coding process, codes were studied, compared, related together and clustered into categories that were created based on emerging patterns. Indicators and definitions of the categories were clarified, which further enables the analyst to reduce the data (Boeije, 2010; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Lastly, connections and relationships between the established categories were explored in the stage of selective coding (Boeije, 2010). The last mentioned stage helped researcher to explore mutual connections of the categories and to discover many unexpected relations between them. In the final step of the data analysis, selective codes emerging from summarising the categories were used to create final themes related to the research sub-questions and to create background for interpretation of the collected data.

3. 6 Research validity and reliability

Qualitative research can only be taken seriously if the criteria of validity and reliability are respected (Bailey 2007; Gilbert, 2008; Gilbert & Stoneman, 2016).

According to Gilbert (2008) “validity is conceptualized as correlation between a measure ... and a relevant independent criterion” (p. 217). He states that providing accurate measurements of the researched concept is what makes data valid (Gilbert, 2008). In the search for such measurements Bell, Bryman and Harley (2018) suggest using several different validity criteria, including external and internal validity, ecological validity and measurement validity. External validity represents the degree to which the findings can be generalized to a population. Internal validity refers to the correlation between researchers’ observations and the final conclusions following from the research. It can be ensured by holding to the research structure and systematically making sure that the interviewees are well aware of the research goal. Ecological

validity examines how the research predicts real world behaviour. In our case it was reached by asking relevant questions about the researched topic to those who directly experience the practices. Measurement validity is quite complex; however, it is possible to summarize it as a criterion that examines whether measures truly represents what they should represent and whether research studies what it is intended to explore (Bell et al., 2018). According to Bailey (2007), validity is within qualitative research associated with trustworthiness, therefore we paid close attention to the validity related components.

Compared to validity, reliability of the research is not measured by external criteria. It refers to the stability and degree of consistency of the method used and the dependability of the study (Gilbert, 2008; Silverman, 2011). In our research, reliability was reached by using the same criteria for sampling all of the interviewees, using the same topic lists and guidance in all interviews and transparently explaining the research method and the data analysis that was also constant through analysing all the gathered data.

3.7 Ethics

Numerous ethical principles need to be considered while conducting any type of social research. Interviews can be especially sensitive, therefore we had to make sure that ethical standards will be fulfilled. The researcher has responsibilities towards the subjects of his/her research, in our case towards the interviewees, respectively for the companies they speak for. As the main data for our study consists of possible sensitive information, a high level of confidentiality was ensured (Gilbert, 2008). Participants were approached with a clear, brief explanation of the study and its goal and were further contacted only in the case that they expressed an interest in participating. They were provided with an introduction letter disclosing reasoning behind the research and its goals (see Appendix I). In case they agreed to participate in the research, they were also presented with an informed consent stating interviewees' rights and possibilities of privacy choices. It was made clear to the participants that the interviews will be recorded, with their permission, and that they can cease their participation at any moment during the research, as well, that they can ask to be mentioned anonymously. Furthermore, they were informed about the way of handling, storing and using the data and ensured that the data provided by them were handled confidentially and only for the purpose of the research (Flick, 2011; Gilbert, 2008). A standardized consent provided by the ethics committee of the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication was used for that matter. The informed consent form provided to the interviewees can be reviewed in the Appendix II.

On that note it is important to mention, that except from one expert, all of the interviewees chose to remain anonymous and asked for partial anonymisation of their data, which is why from the ethical reasons there are no names, concrete examples or companies mentioned in the results section, unless it was agreed upon otherwise.

4 Results

4. 1 Process of strategic partnerships

4. 1. 1 Motivations towards forming direct partnerships

4.1.1.1 Direct communication

One of the very few motivations mentioned by all the interviewees is direct communication. The importance and benefits of direct communication were expressed multiple times regarding various topics and aspects of the partnerships and the value co-creation. In general, interviewees mostly agreed that communication is easier to navigate when there are no middle parties, as stressed by one Interviewee2 in following way:

If when we gather up with, not with the middleman, but with the responsible specifically for content creation, it's actually a little bit easier [...]. So it comes down to a brand manager with a digital marketing manager in a big corporation to control the both parties. And the more direct communication is, the easier it is to control.

Many respondents based their motivation towards direct partnerships in simplifying the work and dissolving an over-complicated work environment. In their opinions, such a step has many benefits for partnerships, but also for the overall work process. It was pointed out that direct communication is clearer and more efficient, as explained by Interviewee10

[...] the stresses and strains of your day to day job are just based around a lack of clear communication and a lack of direct communication. [...] we're often very much in a...in different silos. There was the production partner silo, there was the agency team silo, and there's the client silo or the marketing silo.

More specifically, direct, and therefore clear, communication was recognized to prevent misunderstandings, that often occur when the information is passed through another partner. The issue with that is that mediating partners can shape the communication with their own interest or they simply might have different interpretations. According to some of the interviewees, direct communication then helps to get desired results, as described by Interviewee6:

I am sure it is easier to keep it clear when less information from the submitter, [...], gets lost in the process, before it gets to the graphic designer or anyone who is working on it then.

Because when it goes through a contact person and account manager or another whole company, everyone has a bit different outtake and then the result doesn't have to be exactly as desired.

Direct communication is also perceived as more efficient, timewise. According to some of the experts, being able to communicate directly with the partner shortens the whole process of planning and designing campaigns, as there are no more parties to voice opinions, or undergo approval rounds. Interviewees agreed that it is beneficial for the process of co-creation to be able to reach out to the responsible person directly. For digital productions it is easier to guide the creation with direct feedback, as well as brand representatives voiced the benefits of providing feedback directly. It is easier for them to explain their needs if they can talk directly to a person responsible for a certain part of work, such as the producer or creative strategist. In the words of Interviewee5:

[...] when you're working with the production company itself, they are more flexible, they are usually faster, the communication is not going through XY circles. You can even communicate directly with, let's say, graphic designer and explain your needs, it doesn't necessarily need to go through an account manager where it's like a silent chain sometimes, information gets lost somehow... It is way more pleasant

The mentioned points were agreed upon by most research participants in general, not depending on the side of the partnership they were speaking for. However, there were also recurring explanations of being motivated by direct communication, common for workers on a certain side of the partnership. The brand managers implied that communicating directly with a digital production company and other partners makes it easier to orchestrate all of the involved stakeholders. It may seem unrelated, but it appears that the fact that the brands often work with multiple partners motivates them to communicate and work directly with digital or creative production, as it gives them more freedom and possibilities to synchronize their partners and connect their work where it is needed. Two brand managers described how they work with media buying agencies and digital production companies, and direct communication gives them the chance to connect these two stakeholders to share insights or work on improvements.

Control as a benefit of direct communication was also mentioned by spokespeople from digital production companies, although in a slightly different context. According to interviewed workers from digital production or digital creative companies, direct communication gives them more control over the process. They can provide their insight directly, ensured that the client receives them. They can share the production points of view and have open dialogues with the

clients. That makes it possible for them to help to shape certain decisions. In the words of a senior producer, it allows “making decisions that are aligned with the producers’ way of thinking” which later makes the production work much easier and possibly more efficient.

4.1.1.3 Direct access

Strongly related to direct communication, yet more practical, is direct access. Similar to direct communication, the interviewed experts see benefits in the simplified chain when it comes to assessing certain knowledge, skillsets and more. It emerged from the interviews with digital production workers, that directly accessing client’s assets gives them more possibilities regarding creation; it helps them to understand the brand and objectives of co-created value and deliver their best results, as said by Interviewee9:

I mean, we are their business partners and we need to deliver the best possible service, so, we need to have this good access to what we need from the clients [...].

There were also many specifics related to direct access mentioned during the interviews with production workers. They agreed upon the importance of access to certain client’s communication tools, joint folders, or graphic assets. Interviewee10 elaborated on some of these benefits. According to him, for example, having access to the client’s e-mail chain can be of great benefit to the work. A simple thing, such as accessing e-mail and company calendars to a certain extent can create more options, a better work environment, and it “embeds you as much more of a partner.”

Direct access has an extended meaning for some of the digital production workers. It was implied that directly accessing some of the clients’ assets gives them not only useful insight into the company’s structure and culture, but ultimately most of the digital production workers said, that it gives them better options to create relationships with the clients and lay down the groundwork for the partnerships. However, regarding the direct access to some of the technical solutions, servers, or client’s specifics, it is necessary to point out certain mentioned limitations the workers are aware of. As stated by Interviewee10: “I suppose access to servers is probably quite challenging for most people, but it's very important.” The same issue was recognized by Interviewee8, who explains why this type of access is motivating the company towards forming direct partnerships even with the limitations:

We still cannot access everything we would in the ideal world for privacy reasons of our clients, but it is still much easier than if we would have to deal with some of the disclosures through another parties.

Insights from brand workers, who talked about their privacy regulations and boundaries, mostly support these statements. However, interviewees from the client-side often also expressed a willingness to share as much access as they can in order to back up the production work and the partnership. In some cases, it was stated that it is ensured that the partners know they can openly ask for access assets they might need, and the brands then provide accordingly to their possibilities, such as in the example by Interviewee1:

[...] depending on the topic, you would also give them access to colleagues with specific knowledge. [...] you should give them insights into what you are doing and not just give them like a few lines and also allow them to discuss with the, with the specialist on questions they have, concerns they have, questions about competition, etc.

According to one of the experts “if you don't do that, then they will not be able to provide you with the best solution”, which is, in the end, one of the main values of the partnerships. Talking about motivations towards forming strategic partnerships directly with digital productions, the topic of specific expertise, knowledge and experience of these firms, emerged many times. In common opinion, thanks to being digital native and specifically focused, digital production companies have had a good experience in their field of work, the needed tools and technologies or just knowledge of the digital production work that the clients often lack, similarly to what was stated as one of the main motivations to form a direct strategic partnership by Chan-Olmsted (2004). In the words of a digital marketing manager: “they really have more knowledge, and if there's a middleman, you lose some of that knowledge.” The conducted research has shown, that a majority of the brand side's experts decide to work directly with digital production firms on a facilitation of ongoing advertising campaigns, because they perceive them as more creative, “edgy” and likely to “think out of the box.” As mentioned in theoretical research about advertising and confirmed by some of the interviewees, the brand's needs for advertising campaigns are significantly more leaned towards creative, engaging, quality production content, which is why accessing these assets from the digital production firms can be highly motivating. The relation between different needs for different campaigns, creativity, and access to it in the direct partnership was described by a digital marketing manager:

When it comes to something like a bit more creative and out-of-the-box, we wouldn't necessarily go to an advertising agency because they're not... They normally don't specialize in that. This is why content creation, not through a middleman, is a better choice.

From the interviews, it follows that the possibility to access creativity and know-how of production firms directly reduces the added value of services provided by traditional advertising agencies, which is in complete alignment with the findings of Stokes et al. (2013) about the shift in the digital advertising world.

4.1.1.2 Cost efficiency

Another motivation towards forming direct partnerships emerging from most of the interviews is cost efficiency. As we already established in the theoretical framework, it follows from previous research on motivations towards forming strategic partnership that lowering costs is one of the common drivers (Chan-Olmsted, 2004; Haspeslagh, 1999). Most of the interviewees from the client side expect campaigns co-created directly to be cheaper because there are fewer parties receiving the fees involved. They assume they should get the same service for the same price without the cut for the possible middleman, Interviewee5 explains as follows:

And last, but not least, in case of such collaboration I would also expect financial benefit, I would expect it to be cheaper. Because I have less people in the chain, less people on the counter side that need to be paid in some way.

Interviewee4 said: "a lot of media agencies work with a kickback fee. We call it assured commission or like a form of late income, a kind of kickback they get it if they buy certain publishers' media." According to the interviewee, digital production companies do not work with such fees, which lowers the costs as well. However, the wording 'cost efficiency' is carefully chosen here. Interestingly enough, not all of the interviewed experts expect direct collaborations to be necessarily cheaper. In all cases, they expect them to be more cost efficient. It has been pointed out multiple times, that low cost should not be the main driver/force while co-creating advertising campaigns in a direct partnership, thus the cost efficiency rather relates to the value obtained for the price. Workers from the client side would either like the price to be lower, or they are willing to pay the same price that they would with a mediating agency, but in that case, they expect better service or other benefits based on the money invested. It was mentioned that with direct collaboration it is more likely to distribute finances based upon the actual work and then give them to the people participating in the partnership, which may not always happen while working through a third party.

As it follows from the interviews, it helps to create and maintain financial clarity throughout the partnership. According to some, it can even lead to better results, because there is a possibility of financial motivation. From the experience of Interviewee5: “the agencies undercut the prices, so the people are not motivated at all. If they get 10 - 15% for managing PPC campaigns, then the PPC specialist doesn't work on it as well as if you motivate him/her with some fee.” Other interviewees mentioned the possibility to motivate their partners with sharing the success of the campaign or creating bonus fees, which in the end may lead towards highly efficient spending, budget allocations and in their opinion more creative, better quality work than they would get from a different kind of partnership. Workers from digital production companies also mentioned a relief from a third party's fee amongst their motivations.

Lastly, finance-related motivation to form a direct strategic partnership is not necessarily related to the costs of production or particular parts of work, but to an expected financial benefit resulting from the fact that it is actually a partnership; supposing the partnership lasts. In this scenario, as mentioned by two interviewees, such a partnership saves money on creating a consistent budget with one company, as described by Interviewee7:

You know, you want to have it within the same agency, so you make one budget, so it's also cheaper. Yeah. Because every time you go to someone else, then they rise... They raise the price.

On this note, there is a not too obvious, cost-related benefit to forming and maintaining strategic partnerships that have not been mentioned amongst motivations. However, it can be observed from the interviews that there is a certain correlation between the themes. Forming a strategic partnership with a production partner might in theory lower these investments for two reasons. First, there is a smaller amount of parties necessary to onboard and introduce to the company, used tools, products and more. Second, as mentioned in some of the interviews, it is not too uncommon to work with different digital or creative production partners for one or two campaigns and then to switch or receive the final work from different productions through a mediating agency. Thus, it could be implied that forming and nurturing long term strategic partnerships directly with production partners could be financially beneficial for those reasons as well. It may attract the parties, since lower costs were one of the most occurring motivations in our research. These findings agree with the findings of Lambert et al. (1996), who wrote that: “A potential for cost reduction provides a strong reason to partner”, which was later proven by many other researchers, who jointly determined costs reductions and efficiencies as one of the main drivers towards establishing direct partnerships (Nordin et al., 2013; Tuten & Urban, 2001).

4. 1. 1. 4 Creating a relationship

One topic that quite consistently re-appeared through most of the interviews dealt with creating relationships and connecting on other than business levels. Few respondents named better possibilities to create relationships amongst the primary motivations towards forming direct partnerships. Interviewee5 was comparing the aspect of creating a relationship with the partner from her experience from both, direct partnership with a digital production company and cooperation with an advertising agency outsourcing digital production firm's work. She expressed her opinion as follows: "it is a lot about the human click between the people, which you obviously cannot achieve with any of your production partners when you get their work through the middle agency," and compared her experiences: "with the advertising agency it is more difficult as they are usually more diverse, spread, not all focused on you per se... It is more business, less relationship." Many others then mentioned the theme further in the interviews while talking about particular parts or specifics of the partnerships and collaborations. It might, for those reasons, seem that the possibilities of creating relationships do not belong amongst discussed motivations, however, it follows from the context of the interviews that even though it may not be of the most obvious ones, it is a reason behind many decisions made towards forming direct partnerships. Many of the statements from the interviews agree with words of Austin (2002) that "... the personal relationships are the glue that binds the organizations together." The importance of "human connection" or "a personal click" was stressed several times in the context of partnership forming, maintenance, value co-creation or other stages of the partnership, while it circled back to primary motivations multiple times. It seems to be a subjective matter with a bit of different specifics for everyone, yet a matter all of the interviewees, without an exception, touched upon at certain point. For Interviewee7, the chance of creating a good relationship is one of the motivators as well as one of the criteria for choosing a partner:

[...] And mostly that's followed up by a conversation between the companies and then of course there is also the personal fit. So you first look at a strategic and and work fit, but in the end, the personal fit is also important.

Digital production workers mentioned that forming direct partnerships and therefore connecting personally with the clients makes it easier for them to become partners. A senior digital producer expressed, that without a middleman, creating a good, mutual relationship is much easier and almost gives them a "feeling like being part of the brand". On that note, it is also important to mention that the idea of a relationship with the partner and its purpose may differ. Concretely

speaking, a majority of the interviews were leaning towards creating personal or somewhat friendly relationships with the partners. One of the brand managers, however, expressed the need to have some kind of relationship with the partner in order to be able to set clear expectations and boundaries regarding other partnership activities.

It was particularly interesting to learn about this topic, as it was not too expected to emerge after conducting the theoretical research as a base for the interviews. Some of the resources mentioned personal level of relationships. For example, personalized bonds between partners were stated as beneficial for problem solving and smoothing out some misalignments (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010), the human factor, as a base for personal connection and alliance, was recognized to play a role in the company's capability to form direct partnerships (Kaats & Opheij, 2014) and personal relationships were established as a partial influence in the compatibility of the companies (Nordin, Brozovic & Holmlund, 2013). However, the importance of the personal relationships and their support was not extensively elaborated upon and was barely recognized amongst the main motivations. It was pointed out as one of the drivers by many researchers who focus on non-profit institutional partnerships. In their work, personal relationships were proven to belong amongst motivators, however, it was mostly in relation to the social purpose, less commercial partnerships, as for example in the work of Austin (2000). It may seem that given the commercial character of partnerships between brands and digital production companies, with the often commercially oriented goals, personal relationships would not play such a significant role. The data gathered from our research shows otherwise. It happened recurrently, that the interviewees compared relationship with their direct partners to personal or even intimate relationships, such as in the following example given by Interviewee5:

The customer is like your wife or husband; you also cannot push them away and that is the same for digital production companies and their clients. It is about partnership. There has to be great amount of mutual trust. Where there is no trust, there are issues and it ends bad.

Surprisingly enough, we can compare this statement to an excerpt from Willis & Huston's (1990) study, where they likened strategic partnership to a marriage, describing its similar aspects as "an atmosphere of mutual trust, extensive interaction between parties, sharing of plans for the future, and the full disclosure and discussion of problems to reach mutually agreeable solutions." (p.42) While it certainly does not imply creating intimate relationships within direct partnerships in

any away, it emphasizes the importance the industry workers attach to the “click on the human level” in their work life.

As mentioned within the last paragraphs, the topic of human level relationships is connected to many more themes emerging from the research. Many of them are rather related to other stages of the partnership. It is important to keep the above-mentioned findings in mind for the next subchapter where these topics will be discussed further.

4. 1. 2 Partnership forming

4. 1. 2. 1 Setting clear expectations

One of the most important elements of forming strategic partnership appeared to be setting clear expectations. However simple it may sound, setting expectations proved to be a very complex topic many experts consider to be the first building stone of the partnership. As said by Interviewee5: “when you start working together, just make sure you both know what you expect from the collaboration straight away. What are your goals, what are the partner’s goals?” The interviewee further described how important it is to state all the expectations, even if it feels unnecessary, as it proved to her as being a certain “security” in the relationship.

First, setting expectations can be used to form and navigate the partnership in order to make it sustainable and comfortable for both sides. During the first meetings and getting to know each other, expectations can be set about the nature of the relationship in general. Some of the interviewees use the initial phase to clear what level of attention, investment or collaboration they expect. Some of the common practicalities such as aligning communication tools and platforms were mentioned, as well as more of the expectations regarding communication boundaries, as can be seen in an example given by Interviewee5:

It is good to set boundaries and expectations about the communication right in the beginning of the collaboration. Even tell to some of the workaholics: “hey, I will be replying to you until 6pm during weekdays, then my private life starts, and then in the morning I am available since 9, I am communicating.”

Every company or worker has different brand needs and possibly even personal needs and preferences, which are way easier to implement in the partnership when clearly stated at the

beginning. The importance of the aforementioned was voiced by Interviewee2, who shared his process of setting expectations about the partnership nature:

It's about how how you build the overall partnership and setting clear expectations. Because like, naturally, I can't go to an agency and say that 'I don't want us to be friends. I just, I want you to do your job'. It's a bit rude. But I want to send them the signal, that personally I don't need as much attention.

Expectations are also discussed in the matter of finances; expected spending, fees and financial benefits and according to one of the interviewees, there should be “alignment over, [...], kind of savings”. Setting clear expectations was recommended a number of times regarding the actual work and desired end products. Voicing needs and expectations about the work seems to contribute to a successful partnership and higher work efficiency. One of the strategies to do so was shared by Interviewee8: “we've set up our own guideline of what we expect the company to do, because we've realized a lot of companies, like, they don't coordinate their whole marketing strategy at all...” According to him, the guidelines help in the next steps of planning and facilitating the production and campaigns together. On that note, significant importance was attached to setting expectations about the campaigns and setting goals. Expectations from the co-created campaigns should be, to some extent clear from the very beginning. Clearing these expectations was described as possible prevention of possible problems and misunderstanding, as explained in the following example:

So, of course, you sign a contract, so you have KPIs. But then sometimes what happens is that once the contract is signed, companies are like, oh yeah, but then I want these February. Well we said we would deliver these within the end of February, but we cannot do this in beginning, so you need to first of all set expectation, so everyone is at the same place. Things can change over time, so that's why setting expectations and kind of following on those expectations is very important.

In conclusion, findings from the data analysis confirm the theoretical findings stating the importance of managing expectations in the early stage of partnership. It helps to define the partnership profile and further, also helps to define the roles and responsibilities within the partnership (Mahlangu et al., 2019), as well, it helps while dealing with issues along the way (Kaats & Opheij, 2014). The data analysis also resulted in identifying two ways expectations and goals should

be set in direct partnerships. It is clear that in order to create partnerships with the purpose of facilitation always-on advertising campaigns together, partners should align their expectations on the process of partnership as well as on the campaign. It is thus possible to say that based on the data analysis it is recommendable for the parties to carry out expectation alignment on those two levels.

4. 1. 2. 2 Detailed onboarding

Another strong group of concepts emerging from the interviews regarding forming the partnership can be grouped under the theme of detailed onboarding. The results already revealed the importance of mutual understanding, alignment, and setting goals, and according to many of the interviews, that can be accomplished by putting effort into the proper onboarding of a new partner. When discussing the process of starting a new partnership, most of the interviewees who are part of the value co-creation within the partnership disclosed they are not directly involved with formal agreements in the beginning, such as preconditions reviews and contract negotiations. They were all aware of the formal process, its necessity, and even of some of the details. However, it was implied that the course of the partnership and facilitating campaigns rather depends on the more informal part of the initial stage, as explained by Interviewee3:

I am not that involved in the, in the steps prior to that. But I can... I can say that like we, we try, once the agency is signed up yes, I know that can happen like, it always needs to go through the global finance and procurement offices. Then of course, like we, we try to, to onboard them as much as possible [...].

Varying by the size of the company or desired reach of the campaigns, some of the interviewed experts mentioned that it is not always possible for them to carry out the initial onboarding in person. Nonetheless, all the interviewees, who do not collaborate with their partners long distance, clearly stated they prefer meeting in person at least for the initial sessions and going through most of the onboarding face to face. Considering that the whole topic of the research emerged from the ongoing shift towards a digital environment, this outcome might be slightly surprising. Especially taking into account further learnings about the onboarding process, that often includes introducing production partners to brands servers, digital folders and similar. However, it comes back to the recognized high value of personal relationships and so it is that meeting in person became a recurring topic. Interviewees have repeatedly expressed the benefits of having in person onboarding meeting, such as being “able to interact and fill possible gaps” and “get to know the

partner.” Several limits were pointed out though, mostly regarding long distances or time management issues. That is why some of the onboardings happen completely online or in a restricted capacity as described by Interviewee3: “we try to bring the agency people or at least let's say like a producer or like an account manager.”

The initial stage of partnerships and the onboarding was mostly profiled as introductory and its purpose is apparently mostly related to gaining mutual understanding, learning about core elements of the companies, their products, strategies and possibly even about their practical solutions, as described by Interviewee3:

[...] we try to like already give the agencies like some some idea of what we are trying to to achieve. What are the reasons we are making such a product and why we are doing such campaign. [...] And then we also like try to give them all the necessary tools, [...]. So we try to also like give them information on like all the specifics on all the platforms that we are using.

Furthermore, as Interviewee2 argues, providing a good amount of information about the brand and the goals, during the onboarding, helps the production partner to design solutions. He describes part of the initial process in the following quote:

And I would normally try to give as much of the the background as possible because from working at the agency, I know how difficult sometimes it is to to connect the pieces because like I know that a lot of clients and a lot of companies they're like 'we want something fun, we want something interesting', but they don't provide enough information.

Speaking of brand side's experiences, it is good to note at this point that although mutual goals and alignments on different topics were mentioned by participants speaking for both sides of the partnership, a majority of the interviewees agreed that onboarding is, for the most part, focused on the client. After being asked about gaining mutual understanding and building the grounds for the partnership, Interviewee9 stated: “well usually in that case the brand briefs the agency. Like, this is who we are, this is our product, and this is the message we want to convey with this campaigns.” Amongst the common points of onboarding, there appeared brand guidelines, digital marketing guidelines, some of the brand's general assets and much attention seems to be paid to defining brand values at the beginning of the partnership.

It's a big thing and we align on some preconditions. So you you share the brand guidelines, you share maybe some privacy guidelines and check with them, the GDPR is very important. Maybe some security guidelines from our company [...]. (Interviewee1)

This was an example of a brand's checklist of what needs to be clear before the actual co-creation. Besides specifics akin to brand values, onboarding of a new partner also brings many practical matters. For example, it was pointed out that at the beginning both partners need to decide what communication tools and platforms or joint servers will be used and the partner being "onboarded" in that sense needs to be granted the access and possibly explained to as how to work with the different tools and assets. Practically speaking, it follows from the interviews that a common example of such onboarding is sharing access to brand's server or folder with files, data or graphic elements, such as logos or colour schemes, the production firm is supposed to be familiar with and possibly is supposed to work with. In the words Interviewee3:

They have access to to do everything regarding our design language. And like all the components that there are, that we are using and possibly trying to use. And then it's basically up to them like to to play around like with all the possible elements and try to fit in the creative work. They also like basically can download the life sketch library we show them in the beginning of all those components and just work directly in it.

Last, but not least, there is one other concept worthy to mention regarding onboarding and the initial shaping of the partnership. Pointed out by some of the interviews, it is important for the digital production firm to be aware of all the stakeholders somehow involved in any part of planning, creating, or facilitating ongoing advertising campaigns. A senior digital producer expressed that one of the things he would like to change within the direct partnership with his clients is that: "often there are many stakeholders that they don't disclose at the start of the project."

Onboarding as described by the experts interviewed for our study seems to be a specific aspect related to the partnerships between brands and digital production companies or similar partners engaging in transactional partnerships. In general, the concepts correspond with the previous theoretical findings about mutual learning and understanding as spoken about by many researchers. However, it is enriched by particularities from the world of business to business partnerships in the advertising world.

4.1.2.3 Clear definition of roles and responsibilities

Another common theme related to forming strategic partnerships revolves around a clear definition of roles and responsibilities of the two involved parties, which was also suggested to be one of the keys to the future success of the partnerships. In many interviewees' opinions, defining roles and responsibilities goes hand in hand with previously discussed setting expectations and to some extent even with certain motivations towards forming direct partnerships. The topics overlap at the point of digital production companies' expertise, know-how, and skills. As direct access to those was highly motivating for brands and their implications fall under brands' expectations, many interviewees implied that some of the roles follow from the fact itself that the companies decided to work together. Particularly speaking, if the partnership is formed after connecting through tender, reaction to client's brief or the digital production firm's pitch, it is in many cases already quite clear what would be the main requirements and goals of the co-created campaigns. If that is so, and both sides have roles and responsibilities well defined within their own teams, it is likely that they will be assigned automatically, and mutual conversation will not be necessary. One of the production workers said that "with the roles, we actually do most of the work and just check with them, it sort of... comes naturally...". Based on that certain roles within the partnership are supposed to be clear from the beginning. However, even then alignment of the roles and responsibilities is still welcomed and advised to start with. It is essential to address at the beginning of the partnership since unclear ownership of roles and insufficient definition of responsibilities were identified as potential problem causes, for example by Interviewee10:

That's incredibly important. Ownership of roles. And, but that is also led by definition a clear definition of roles and responsibilities, [...]. And I've seen examples of where that's not done well and how that backfires.

Answers mentioning defining roles within the partnership touch on topics from communication to co-designing and performance of ongoing advertising campaigns. Communication-wise, it was pointed out that it is useful to define roles within the teams. That way everyone knows who to directly get in touch within various situations, which contributes to the smooth running of projects. That goes along with defining roles and responsibilities regarding different tasks, both, internally in both side's teams, but also mutually. According to some of the interviewees, clearly dividing roles and responsibilities ensures avoiding confusion and helps to meet the set expectations. The importance of this step and possible consequences of not undertaking it was emphasized by Interviewee5:

Yes, actually, that is an important point. Before you start any work, you need to clearly define roles of everyone working on the project. Everyone needs to be aware what is expected from him, what are his tasks, what is his role in the relationship. Otherwise you get this confusion and also, it is ways easier not to hold up to your end of the deal when the roles and responsibilities are blurry.

To conclude, we can say that our findings confirm the implication of academic research about definition of roles and responsibilities in direct partnerships (Austin, 200; Sanzo et al., 2015)

4. 1. 3 Partnership maintenance and partnership success

4. 1. 3. 1 Ongoing communication

The topic of communication during the whole partnership turned out to be very rich throughout most of the interviews. As proposed earlier, questions related to partnership maintenance and core elements of a successful partnership pointed towards maintaining ongoing communication. Continuously communicating with the partner regarding progress, suggestions, issues, or even ideas, was identified as a crucial part of partnerships between brands and digital production companies. As noted, continuous, good quality communication should be established from the beginning of the collaboration.

The communication is really important. For us, that is crucial. Constantly checking in together, keeping in touch... When we start working on the projects, we constantly have updates with the clients, and then once we start doing the advertising too, we constantly optimize, and report and we are just in touch all the time.

A demonstrated example given by a Interviewee8 shows in a nutshell the importance of ongoing communication in different stages of partnership. The benefit of open and ongoing communication in problem solving was elaborated on by Interviewee5:

For example, we had some issues during facilitating campaigns, like overstepping the budget, and now what... so we were looking for ways and that is fine, but the dialogue is needed. It happened, it was being solved. It also happened we missed or forgot something

and the agency helped us out, it is really about the communication, honestly and problem solving on time.

Besides direct problem solving, ongoing communication was also recognized by many of the interviewees as one of the best ways to prevent numerous issues from emerging in the first place. Communicating during the process allows sharing and updates, which can lead to adjustments of other people's work or making informed, therefore efficient, decisions. Interviewee2 explained:

[...] Because here it's all about communication, [...] If like at the last minute, I'm giving like a messy presentation with like with nothing completed or done, and I spend my life or... What, sorry, not my life, my day reading it. I mean, like knowing that it's a mess. Like I would get mad. But if the agency would tell me, like, we really need more time, we need it because of this and this, you would get a better result if you just give us like two more days. I would do it.

As the significant importance of ongoing communication was described, some ways of maintaining it were disclosed as well. Looking closer at the ways to maintain ongoing communication, some practical solutions and tips were shared in the interviews. The most repeated ones concerned using various real-time communication platforms besides usual e-mails in order to be able to communicate spontaneously, in reaction to certain needs. Suggested tools included, for instance, mobile calls, WhatsApp, Skype and Skype for business, Zoom, Google Hangouts, Slack, and Microsoft Teams. In most cases, a mix of the communication tools and platforms is used for different purposes.

Regarding tools and platforms used for mutual communication, the research revealed an interesting trend that this, from the interviewees' answers and opinions, seems to be a kind of unwritten rule in these fields. A majority of the interviewees speaking for both sides of the partnership confirmed that when it comes to aligning communication tools and platforms, the production company is expected to adjust to the brand. The reasoning behind that has to do with several factors. Firstly, digital production companies were described as more agile and adaptable to different tools, thanks to their digital nature. Secondly, in some cases the process is natural because the production firm's alignment with the brand's communication tools closely relates to onboarding. Last, but not least, it was explained that it is not always possible for brands to switch their used tools because of privacy protection or corporation regulations, as explained by Interviewee1 who says:

“I'm part of a company that's also registered on the stock exchange, so we are not allowed to do everything. So if the company says you want to use, let's say Zoom, then our answer is we are not using Zoom. We use Teams.” However, she also continued by stating that: “in other instances, if it's beneficial for both, we are willing to change.” The production workers then expressed readiness and willingness to undergo these transitions.

Finally, while talking about ongoing communication and its importance for maintaining the partnership and leading it towards success, many of the interviewees emphasized the benefits of meeting in person. Communication face to face was repeatedly marked as a preferred way of not only carrying out brainstorming sessions, re-alignments, regular updates, evaluation, but also problem solving. It was repeatedly mentioned that: “being able to talk, being next to the person, gives an extra value” and “it really changes the way that you work.” That is confirmed by an example given by a digital marketing manager, who describes meeting up with the production partners even though he mostly works with production firms from different countries situated in almost opposite sides of Europe:

And sometimes I would physically go to the agency. And very often that's actually the case with a global corporation, it's sometimes a possibility for brand managers to travel (laughs). So we do that quite a bit. So just like physically go from time to time. Because it does help.

Furthermore, some of the interviewed experts went into more in detail and they revealed their preferences and attempts to not only communicate in person, but also to change the character of the face to face communication sometimes in order to lessen the formality and support a friendly atmosphere, which corresponds with the findings related to creating a relationship during partnership forming.

And what proven useful to me is, when it goes wrong, [...], then don't meet in boardrooms but go and solve it above breakfast, or have a lunch together, go for a coffee... [...] When you're sitting in the boardrooms, it is always just a boardroom in some office. It is cold and official. [...] On the other hand, when you meet up for a breakfast, brunch, lunch meal together, afternoon coffee, the tension falls down, you get into different environment, [...]. You start the general talks and then get to the issue and from my experience, the issue was always solved like this. (Interviewee5)

It is apparent from the last example that implementing less formal in-person communication can be useful for solving issues and nurturing an open and comfortable atmosphere. It still, however, stays within work-related boundaries. On the contrary, one of the digital producers takes personal communication to another level by advising: “socialize as well, like and socialize with everyone.”

One final note to socializing and “making friends with the client” follows from an extensive explanation given by a brand digital marketing manager, who, on the contrary, prefers to connect with his production partner and create a friendly relationship to a certain extent, as he claims there are many benefits for the working process in it, however, he otherwise prefers keeping the partnership rather professional and only within the lines of the collaboration. In conclusion, besides one, all the interviewees were in favour of establishing friendly relations and socializing beyond the project work necessities, but the important teaching is that such attempts should not be forced, and every attempt should align with both partners’ boundaries.

In conclusion, putting effort into establishing communicational habits, suitable ways and tools of communication and maintaining ongoing communication is seen as one of the crucial parts of partnerships and a key to its success, as previously proposed by existing literature (Austin, 2000; Mohr & Spekman, 1994; Toten & Urban, 2001).

4. 1. 3. 2 Openness

It is important to say in the beginning, that the topic of transparency and related concepts emerged in two main contexts. First, in a more general way of openness and honesty in the partnership. Second, in a more practical way related directly to co-creating ongoing advertising campaigns. In both cases, open and transparent behaviour was identified as required and it was given great importance in both parts. Therefore, we will discuss openness and honesty in the context of partnership maintenance and further we will also touch upon transparency in the value co-creation process. Although it may seem these themes are overlapping, it follows from the interviews they have different aspects and they are approached differently. Hence the name “openness” chosen for this sub-chapter; it was used multiple times in relation to transparency in partnership maintenance.

In reviewed literature, Lambert et al. (1996), Nordin et al. (2013) and other authors have drawn transparency and openness to be one of the bases of successful strategic partnership, those interviewed also identified being open and transparent as crucial for partnerships between brands

and production companies. Interviews presented several explanations of why and in which situations are the mentioned elements necessary for this particular type of partnerships and provided the study with examples of how it can be achieved. Some of the interviewees talked about transparent relationship in the sense of full disclosure of information relevant to the collaboration, such as sufficient insights into the company, company's capabilities and options and disclosing all the stakeholders or other partners, as described by Interviewee10:

I think you need you need an openness from them. A lot of them have their... Or all of them have their their internal biases and their relationships with their own, you know, agency and production partners. So you need to encourage an openness about them and you need to make sure that they're invested in this idea.

Openness and transparency were further elaborated on in relation to the work process. By some of the interviewees, transparency was stated as an expectation from the partner; that being mainly brands' spokespeople expecting their production partners to transparently share the scope of work and being open about their process and any possible obstacles. According to Interviewee2, such openness helps him to control the work and avoid potential issues:

Because here it's all about communication, it's all about transparency. Because sometimes it can be the case that the agency can't do it all for certain reasons. I don't know. It could be a Corona virus, could be something else. It could be that they don't have the capacity. But if I know it, I can plan accordingly.

With that being said, it was stressed by one of the interviewees that if such a transparent system is supposed to work, it needs to be set from the beginning of the partnership and then further nourished in order to create a transparent environment. In her words, "the transparency, it needs to start from the beginning. Otherwise if you sell yourself as something that you're not, then first of all, most of the times will not reach the results, [...]. And then you cannot be transparent because you always have to find excuses to cover up..." A similar point of view is shared by a digital marketing strategist:

So, what we do is we make sure every step of the partnership is as transparent as possible. From the contract negotiations through all the creation and work, we are open about all of it so everyone knows exactly what is going on.

To summarize, most of the interviewees touched upon honesty, transparency and being open with the partner. The workers put significant value on openness in the initial stages of partnership. They agree it helps to build trust, which is exactly what Hardy et al. (2003) found in their work. Openness also seems to create comfort and an environment suitable for open communication and value co-creation, which highly corresponds with previous findings about partnership preferences. When it comes to openness and honesty, collected data seem to agree with the existing literature that also recognizes them amongst high partnership maintenance priorities (Lambert et al., 1996; Hardy et al., 2003).

4. 1. 3. 3 Establishing mutual routines

While talking about partnership maintenance and keys to partnership success, a strong theme of creating mutual routines emerged. In some cases, mutual routines were primarily mentioned in relation to value co-creation and the specific steps of the campaign co-creation process, yet even in many of those scenarios, the importance of establishing mutual routines was mostly classified amongst the ways to maintain the partnership. Since structures, practices and usual routines of both partners vary a lot based on the different nature of their companies, mutual organization helps the partners to achieve a sufficient level of cooperation. In order to do so, establishing mutual routines was recognized as a good strategy.

Looking into the data from our research, establishing mutual routines might be seen as a tool or a way towards many of the identified key elements of the partnership process. Examples of the routines given by the interviewees are rather practical and closely relate to both, partnership and value co-creation. The most commonly mentioned were regular meetings, updates, scheduled follow-ups, reports in various forms or evaluation sessions. Described routines have many similarities and they seem to be a helpful tool for facilitating ongoing advertising campaigns within the partnerships, as described by Interviewee4:

I have, which is best ever routine with ehh... with a digital agency at the moment that we, they provide us with a weekly report for every campaign, they have a, they also have a report. And every two weeks we have a what we used to have face to face meeting, where we discuss through...

The routines seem coherent to a certain extent throughout the interviews. As our research has very specific criteria and all the interviewees were responding with partnerships formed to facilitate ongoing advertising campaigns in mind, their answers were aligned. They have shown that although the set routines need to be adjusted to the need of individual partnerships, the practise follows from similar established ways. Most of the experts talked about a regular status meeting scheduled mostly once in two weeks or once a month, where they go through the evaluation of the process and results, reports, and they discuss potential issues, suggestions or further plans. In a majority of cases it was, once again, emphasized that it is preferred to meet face-to-face, however, in cases of international collaborations, longer distances in general or time management issues, the same routines are carried out online via scheduled (video) calls.

Strategic partnership-oriented literature relevant to our research does not often cover the topic of establishing mutual routines. While some of the researchers talk about developing mutual strategies, creating time and space for sharing ideas and opinions and even about the importance of joint meetings (Lambert et al., 1996), the regularity and establishing some of the strategies to maintain partnerships as routines are barely stressed out. However, it follows from the interviews that the routine factor is important for maintaining the partnership and creating a value co-creation friendly environment.

An interesting pattern emerges from answers about establishing mutual routines. Described practices significantly relate to the value co-creation part of the partnership; they are based on the needs following from co-creating and facilitating ongoing advertising campaigns. They were mostly agreed upon by brands' spokespeople, and looking closely at the routines, they correspond with routines established in the client - ad agency relationships (Fam & Waller, 2008; Halinen, 2012). Connecting these findings with the concepts from the theoretical background implies that while brands turn to partnering with production firms for the produced digital value, they might want to keep some of the previously established habits, rather than create completely new ones. Therefore, it could be suggested they are not in need of a completely new type of partnership, but in need of substituting the partner. That confirms the theoretical findings about strategic partnerships being a suitable disintermediation mechanism for cutting the supply chain in the advertising world (Ireland et al., 2002; Nordin et al., 2013).

4. 2 Value co-creation

4. 2. 1 Environment for value co-creation

4. 2. 1. 1 Transparency

As briefly mentioned in the insights into the partnership maintenance, transparency emerged as a strong theme from dialogues about value co-creation as well. Compared to the concepts from the previous chapter, transparency was identified as a key element of the value co-creation environment for rather practical reasons.

But yeah, the most important thing's being transparent about what you're doing at all times, like cost wise, time wise, why you're taking certain decisions ... (Interviewee8)

The presented example summarizes the most often mentioned matters related to transparency, which other interviewees also elaborated on. Being transparent on the work process and progress was stressed multiple times. Being able to oversee the work, knowing where everyone stands and what stages the tasks are at, helps control the flow, but most importantly, it supports interaction. It follows from the interviews, that mutual transparency on the work process stimulates open dialogue, which corresponds with the statement from Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), who said that: „transparency facilitates collaborative dialogue“ (p. 30). Another repeated benefit of transparency is enabling potential troubleshooting. According to Interviewee7: „you cannot hide information if there is any chance they could make a difference. You can avoid lots of trouble by being transparent.“

Similar thoughts were shared by other interviewees regarding more specific topics, mostly time input and results. Lastly, often mentioned in the specifics of transparency in value co-creation are results. The clients expect the production firms to openly share data from the ongoing campaigns and for the potential reasoning behind the data. Moreover, it was affirmed by the production workers, who acknowledge the importance of openly sharing the data and all the results in order to build trust and satisfaction and to co-create successful value. Interviewee8 described their way of open communication and transparent sharing as follows:

And we also are really open with like, for example, all the statistics, for example, through Facebook, Facebook ads, we always give the insights to a client so they can continuously have a dashboard where they check everything.

The insights shared by the interviewees confirm that transparency plays the same role in value co-creation within partnerships between brands and digital production companies as it was proposed to play in scholarly literature. Both models of value co-creation elements; DART model from Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) and the model created by Tapscott & Williams (2008), further used in numerous value co-creation researches, identified transparency as crucial for value co-creation, which our interviewees agreed upon as well.

5. 2. 1. 2 Sharing and mutual learning

Conceptualization of co-creation models in the theoretical framework brought up the concepts of sharing, skills and know-how, and access. All of these concepts are complex and there are several elements behind them, explored by academic literature. Many of those elements were repeatedly mentioned during the interviews, mutually connected, and thus resulted in identifying sharing and mutual learning as being important for value co-creation between brands and production firms. The first recurring theme relates to sharing certain assets, specific knowledge and information. In their DART model, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) say that every business creates values and sharing these values with the partner builds a good base for collaboration. Providing access to needed resources, tools and information is supposed to enable both sides to put in their best work. That has been supported in statements given by our interviewees. Part of them agreed they like to share their companies' work frames for the partner to be able to keep track on updates and progress. Another common example relates to sharing specific company knowledge and insights gained from the area of expertise. From the production company side, it appears to be mostly technical knowledge, tips on channels, media and tech/digital trends. From the brand's side, it is usually insights from previous campaigns, insights into their consumer behaviour, but also product specifics relevant to advertising campaign design, as in following example by Interviewee4:

[...] there's a lot of things that are kind of like inside knowledge, especially for an electronics company like XY. [...] everybody would say, who doesn't work selling TVs: "oh, yeah, if there's the World Cup, everybody's buying TV. So we have to do an advertising campaign during the World Cup," but that's basically not true. People buy their TVs when their their holiday money is in, in May. Those kind of things are things that the agency cannot know, because they're not in that business.

Besides expertise-based insights, sharing and access to brand's server or folder with files, data or graphic elements, such as logos or colour schemes, and sharing guidelines on how to use

them have shown to be important. It is good to note that the sharing should be mutual, as pointed out by one of the interviews, who talked about different kinds of insights and “combining those and giving each other like tips”. Sharing sufficient guidelines and examples simplifies the design process for both sides, and it is likely to push the co-creation towards the desired target value.

As sharing and mutual learning were given high importance, ways to achieve good levels of those aspects were naturally mentioned as well. In a way, this part of establishing the value co-creation environment can be seen as an extension of onboarding, discussed in the stage of partnership forming. However, it was specifically emphasized that while sharing and learning begins with onboarding, it should continue throughout the whole process to nurture the value co-creation. Practically speaking, some of it is thus conducted during the onboarding meetings. Accesses and some assets are shared and explained in the initial stages of partnership and then constantly re-aligned throughout the value co-creation process via conversations, meetings, online tools etc. One particular strategy for mutual learning, however, stood out in the interviews, described as efficient, practical and used for various purposes; that being workshops. In most cases, workshops are hosted by the brands and are used for in-depth learning about the brand background, values, products or goals, like in the following example:

[...] in case of some big project, [...] challenge, or goal, that is so big it is not clear in the beginning what should be done first. So... in that case we had workshops, various brainstormings, evaluations of all different scenarios, before we got what to do from it in the best case. (Interviewee6)

Furthermore, workshops were mentioned by Interviewee8, whose firm hosts workshops for some of their clients to teach them some of the campaigns basics.

So yeah, we give them small trainings on how to-how they can like create some content, for example, to add on to the campaign. Be aware of how the ads work. And that kind of stuff.

That is a great example of advising; a key element of value co-creation proposed by Corsaro (2019), based on the analysis of business-to-business co-creation processes. According to her, advising covers the knowledge gap between the co-creating partners. It thus improves the co-creation environment and also establishes the provider as a consultant to some extent, which helps with the definition of roles and supports mutual respect in the relationship. This theory aligns with

the findings from the present research. It follows that workshops might be an advisable tool for brands and digital productions to be used when advising is needed. Finally, an interesting workshop concept was also mentioned in two interviews. Interviewees 7 and 10 talked about undertaking workshops hosted by third parties, which can help one side to develop skills beneficial for the co-creation or even training for both parties on how to co-create together. Interviewee2 described his own experience with such workshops:

The second is a workshop that is hosted by a third party. And it happens from time to time, not super often. And it can be hosted by Google or by Facebook, where you mention that we are doing, like, it's a general workshop on content creation in partnership. [...] Both creative agencies and like the agencies that are doing the campaigns and the targeting. So we would sit together and do the workshop. [...] It was mostly about partnership, like how we communicate and like coming up and like getting to know each other. Also try to understand what is needed from the other party.

All in all, findings from our research confirms the application of findings from scholarly literature, which in many cases stresses that mutual learning, sharing know-how, skills, information and much more is essential for value co-creation (Corsaro, 2019; Tapscott & Williams, 2008; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

5. 2. 1. 3 Co-working

The last concept worth to mentioning, regarding facilitating value co-creation, is co-working. Some of the interviewees suggested that working together in person in real time benefits the process of co-creation, as it is dynamic, personal and it helps to bring out many of the previously mentioned elements. According to Interviewee10, sharing the working space helps the companies to establish themselves as partners:

So when you're sitting particularly on site or you're very close to the client's geographical location, I think it's very important [...] you'll have some element of representation sitting on side with the clients. And that could just be account management or project management. It doesn't necessarily mean [...] your ops guys and your your animators and your guys doing coding or development or UX or whatever it is. But I think it's very important to, yeah, to kind of tap into the benefit of proximity..

Interviewee2 mentioned co-working while describing an intense, fast paced campaign preparation. He stated that sharing working space helped the brand manager to co-create with the production more efficiently towards the tight deadlines. It corresponds with a statement by Interviewee9, who pointed out that thanks to sharing working space with their clients, his firm is “able to check these micro goals and such during the process.” Interviewee1 then said she was “very much in favour of meeting quite often and even working in in in each other's places.” She shared her experience with establishing joint co-working space with a production partner within one of their offices, including logos or some other signs of both companies. In her opinion, such a setting brings co-creation in life and nourishes the relationship.

Putting the shared opinions and experiences in context with our previous findings, especially those about the importance of efficiently, direct access, direct and ongoing communication, and joint problem solving, it could be suggested that sharing co-working space at least occasionally or according to the partners’ preferences might be a good tool for reaching the desired level of these elements. Moreover, such a practice could naturally boost the included employees in the partnership and disclosing other stakeholders. Correspondence with this in academic literature can be also found. Although the exact option of co-working in a joint space was not discussed, it can be argued that this strategy is a practical aspect of some of the recognized co-creation elements. For example, dialogue, access and transparency, all are recognized by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) as building stones of value co-creation; all are enhanced while co-working, as it is seen from the views of the interviews. Furthermore, in their extension of the DART model, Hatch and Schultz (2010) discovered that combining dialogue and access in the co-creation process generates engagement, which is what the interviewees described as the main benefit of sharing a working space.

4. 3 Co-creating and facilitating ongoing advertising campaigns

4. 3. 1 Briefing is essential

A strong theme recurring during the interviews is briefing. At a certain point, all the interviewees agreed upon its importance and provided our research with many insights regarding the topic; “briefing is essential” are the exact words of Interviewee10. Once again, the theme was mentioned throughout the interviews, not necessarily only in the part concerning co-creating and facilitating ongoing advertising campaigns, but it can be deducted from the context that done at any point, a detailed briefing is a base for all steps of co-creation of the ongoing campaigns. Moreover, it

seems to play a significant role in all the stages of the co-creation. Apparently, it is the most common practice that in the established partnership, each campaign creation starts with brand presenting the brief, as described by Interviewee 6:

Mostly, like 98% I would say that comes from the side of the brand manager, when he has an idea, creates brief, what he wants to achieve, what his budget is approximately, and either how he sees it, what is his idea about how to achieve the goals, or he can only enter the goals and what the brand is about and then the agency comes up with a proposal of what would be suitable for the brand.

Like in the presented example, many elements of the briefings were suggested, from which the most outstanding ones are for instance clear definition of goals, campaign's objective, target audience, background information, gross budget, certain requirements, boundaries or limitations, and in some cases brand's guidelines. Most of these elements align with Blakeman's (2011) description of the initial briefing during advertising campaign preparation. Depending on the goals and complexity of the campaigns, briefings can be simple, presented online, or during a meeting, but also elaborate. Interviewee2, for example, mentioned his preference for briefing workshops, as they allow him to be thorough and share a sufficient amount of information. In many opinions, clarity of the goal and knowing exactly what is supposed to be achieved with the campaign is what makes the process efficient and it might be achieved by a good briefing. It also corresponds with the clear definition of goals and mutual understanding stressed by scholars within strategic partnerships (Mahlangu et al., 2019; Kaats & Opheij, 2014). An interesting note was made by production workers, emphasizing the importance of briefing in relation to the always-on aspect of ongoing campaigns. He stated that in comparison to seasonal campaigns, they: "need more briefings and guidelines because then obviously we need a bit more operating, a bit more structured way." (Interviewee8)

The opinion of the brands' employees is mostly identical. They agreed upon the high value of briefing and the importance of the production following it. It was pointed out that briefing is referred to in de-briefs and also in the evaluation stage, as adhering to the brief can significantly influence the whole co-creation process, its efficiency and the results. Furthermore, they added an interesting insight. Although following the brief is a necessity, most of the brand side's interviewees mentioned that they appreciate production insights on the briefs and expect the production to bring in an added creative value, which they try to support, such as expressed by Interviewee1:

Well, the boundaries you give. But I think you hire a specialist because they know better than you. So if you are too strict in your briefing, I think you limit their imagination, creativity.

Reflecting upon these statements, we can say that clear briefing supports defining roles in the co-creation and setting clear goals. It provides a tool for feedback and evaluation, therefore it helps to achieve the goals and it was established as a good base for the ongoing campaign development. All in all, our findings about briefings align with the academic literature and provide some of the concepts with practical solutions specific for the business-to-business strategic partnership in the digital advertising world.

4. 3. 2 Goals and planning

4. 3. 2. 1 Clear definition of goals

In the initial stage of planning ongoing advertising campaigns, a clear definition of the campaign goals emerged as one of the strongest topics. Before diving into anything else, partners should take the time to define campaign goals and assure both sides understand them well, as already mentioned in the last subchapter. It follows that defining goals is often based on briefings and sometimes also conducted jointly during strategic or brainstorming meetings. The importance of being thorough during this stage was emphasized multiple times, it appears to be crucial for the goals to be clear and specific, as explained by Interviewee8:

[...] go really deep until what they actually want, because a lot of people are just being like, yeah, no, I want growth in this area. But the in the reality, they mean they want concrete leads or revenue. So really getting the KPI's clear.

Like in the example, KPI's were mentioned in most of the interviews, which makes it safe to conclude that they are an important part of campaign goals. KPI's are subjective to different brands and types of campaigns. They can vary a lot, which is why their definition needs to be exact. For instance, Interviewee5 says: "for me, the key elements in performance campaign is the delivered turnover of the campaign," while according to Interviewee6: "ongoing campaigns are surely for building the awareness." Besides building awareness, improving engagement, sales and reach were mentioned amongst the goals of ongoing advertising campaigns. It was also noted that while defining goals, it is good to make sure they will be measurable

In conclusion, our findings agree with the existing literature. Every campaign needs to have clearly defined goals, which is essential for both; the creative process and the performance (Blakeman, 2011; Kotler & Armstrong, 2016; Kotler & Keller, 2009). As Blakeman (2011) says, one of the keys to a successful campaign is its ability to “strategically accomplish the communication objectives”, therefore it follows that their clear definition is indeed crucial.

4.3.2.2 Budgeting and timing

While talking about planning ongoing advertising campaigns, many practical aspects necessary to settle in the initial stage were identified. Most often mentioned were budgeting and timing. Besides one, all the interviewees mentioned budgeting and timing included in the key elements, as for example, Interviewee3: “budgeting, timelines, and deliverables are the crucial, crucial steps in the beginning.” It may seem that these elements belong to the previous topic of the briefing, however, it follows from the interviews that budgeting is also being dealt with at the beginning of the partnership and then is sometimes adjusted in the process. It clearly follows from the interviews, that within co-creating and facilitating ongoing advertising campaigns in direct partnerships, budgeting and timing have two levels.

With budgeting, first, a budget is made for the co-creation of the campaign, meaning production firms’ rates, production costs such as location rent, special equipment or resources, etc. In the second stage, budgeting needs to be done for the campaign itself, such as budget allocations for diverse media channels, paid advertising and so on. At this point, it is interesting to notice the shift regarding the direct partnership. As learned from the academic literature and even some of our interviews, in case of collaboration between brands and advertising agencies, the brand determines the overall budget, however, budget allocations are then mostly done by the advertising or media buying agency. Whilst in the direct partnership, there is no such mediator and the partners conduct the budget allocations together. That confirms they have more control and possibly they can achieve higher efficiency, which as established are considered big benefits of direct co-creation (Dahan et. al., 2010; Sanzo et al., 2015). It seems that budgeting is mostly done between the partners and at least to a certain extent open for discussion, however, it was also pointed out that the brands like to keep finances under their control. Such a practice was described by Interviewee2:

[...] we normally set originally in the budget on our side, not necessarily on the on the agency side, but of the client. We have the budget for extraordinary circumstances so we can come to our creative agency and say, okay, so this is how much we can allocate for the changes.

Sometimes even in the original budget and the original contract, there is a budget for certain changes. Sometimes it isn't. But we always have it on our side...

The last interesting insight into budgeting provided by several interviews points out that even though budgets are important, they should not always be the main decision-makers. In some opinions, prioritizing budgets can limit the quality and creativity of the work. In the words of Interviewee1: "costs are not the most important thing, yeah. In the end, cheapest is not going to be the best."

Furthermore, it appears that similar strategies apply for timing. Deadlines are set for production and deliveries as proposed by Interviewee7: "define the deadlines, that's very important. So you need to say, okay, these we can deliver by the end of Feb. The second part will be delivered...", and also for the campaigns. Campaigns' timelines seem to be proposed by the brands and heavily influenced by their commercial calendars. Commercial calendars are created by companies in advance, depending on the company's objectives and market situation, thus they create a base for the campaign's objectives and timelines. It emerged from the interviews that meeting the deadlines and clearly communicating any time-related issues is of great importance to the brands. As previously presented, some of the interviewees mentioned timelines while talking about transparency and they stressed the need for the partner to be transparent with deliveries and possible delays. In fact, time issues were identified between very few discussed risks:

There can be timing issues, sometimes the direct smaller digital production companies are not able to meet close deadlines or finish work as fast as the bigger, integrated companies with several teams would. These are big risks. (Interviewee5)

On that note, Interviewee2 shared his strategy to work with such a risk. He stated: "I made sure that I give very different deadlines to a smaller agency. So like, the deadlines I gave them was way, way, way prior to the deadlines that I had," which underlines how crucial following the schedule is for the brand side. To sum up, budgeting and timing are crucial elements of planning ongoing advertising campaigns. They need to be clearly set, understood, and further focused on during the co-creation process, which confirms Blakeman's (2001) description of the advertising campaign development.

4. 3. 3 Co-designing

4. 3. 3. 1 Creative space

Scholars agree that creativity is essential for advertising access in the digital era (Smith et al., 2007). That was confirmed by our brands' side's interviewees, who, as previously mentioned, marked creativity as one of the drivers towards direct partnership with digital productions based on the assumption that their level of creativity is higher than in the advertising agencies. It thus does not come as a surprise that creativity emerged as a strong theme within the campaign co-designing process. It was identified from the collected data, that due to the creativity, co-designing between brands and production companies has quite specific dynamics. As put by Interviewee6: "they can always come up with something I might not even think of, so I try not to limit them too much."

A sufficient base is established in the initial meetings, briefings, and planning as discussed, and when it comes to the design, it is rather one-sided. It follows from the majority of the interviews, that with creatives, the brand's role lies mostly within drawing boundaries and setting examples of the desired results and the creative ideation and execution is then in the hands of the digital production companies. Interviewee1 said that brand: "mostly give like the [...] general overview of what we would like our brand [...] to appear. So we have a brand card and those kinds of things. The rest of the design is mostly with the agency." Similar opinions carried throughout the interviews, whereas brands' spokespeople agree that they hire digital production firms for their expertise and therefore expect creative input and often creative lead, like in the example by Interviewee5:

I try to give the partner enough of freedom to show what they can do, otherwise if I would need to tell the company exactly what I need, I want this and this and that, then I do not need creative production company, then I am good with a good graphic designer.

Three of the brand workers stated that even though they want the production to meet the requirements from the brief, they also expect an of-brief solution with a lot of creative input. In majority of cases, the creative-related expectations from the productions seem pretty high, however, the dynamics are mutual. The digital producers expressed that they also see creative design as part of their expertise and they like to have creative space in order to provide the best possible work, as explained by Interviewee9:

We usually have pretty good idea after briefings and work on the previous project, [...]. And then ideally, the brand knows that too and we have lot of space for the creative work. So we

make some drafts on our own and from that point we are either done or we finalize them with the clients feedback.

The previous example shows what most of the interviews identify within the creative design process. The preference to leave creative space to the production brings out the need for assuring that the creatives will carry the brand values and meet overall requirements and guidelines. For that purpose, feedback and approval rounds were emphasized with no exception, which we will further elaborate on.

In a nutshell, creativity is a crucial element of ongoing advertising campaigns and the mentioned findings suggest that as direct partnership allows it, it is beneficial to leave creative space to the production company and regulate the process with predetermined conditions.

4. 3. 3. 2 Feedback rounds

Regarding co-designing, it is worth to briefly mention the element that seems to enable partners to have enough creative freedom, while still staying on the brief and co-creating satisfying results. That is, according to the interviewees, the purpose of approval and feedback rounds. The creative ideation on the production side results in a creative pitch, where the production presents the creative ideas often with prototypes. Mentioned were forms of presentations, mock-ups, or sketch boards. From that point, there might be several rounds of feedback, changes, more presentations and approvals until the point of final adjustments. This process was mostly agreed upon, as for example by Interviewee3:

[...] we definitely set some some check points and the process and like so we need to make sure that like everything fits and everything works. So like we have like several creative like rounds. First like from, just to see the mockups from from the agency side, like to see how everything plays together and how everything looks like. Then once it's implemented, actually on our backend, then we go like once again with the agency and doing like a proper QA and if something needs to be retouched or you know...

According to some, regular feedback also proved helpful for identifying potential problems. Regularity in that matter was pointed out multiple times, while some of the experts agreed that feedback rounds are good to do on weekly basis, once in two weeks or individually, based on the capacities. Finally, an interesting note was made by Interviewee5, who together with two other interviewees suggested the benefit of running approvals and collecting feedback from other members of the company, not only of those directly involved in co-creation. According to her:

“sometimes you are already really in that box, too much inside of it, so it is good to ask the people from retail, from product or even the ladies from accounting, it is good to know how they perceive the creatives.”

4. 3. 4 Performance

Talking about performance, many elements aligning with literature about digital advertising campaigns were mentioned: continuous data analysis and reporting (Blakeman, 2011), and several elemental characteristics for the ongoing campaigns, like optimization and utilization. These do not seem different from the already explored classic elements of online advertising performance; therefore, we will not elaborate on their specifics. Nonetheless, performance of the ongoing advertising campaigns became an interesting topic within our research as it resulted into indicating two main, very different performance options. Most of the production workers described the campaign as a joint process. They stated they have experience with performing campaigns for their clients and they have strategies to collaborate during that stage, such as shared online tools and dashboards. However, in the majority of cases, the performance was identified as the most separated part of the process. It follows, that brands hire the production company for consultancy/advising, creativity and the production itself, but performance is then often carried out on their end. The common reasoning behind is ownership of the channels and accounts, which brands do not share, coordination with the rest of the brand’s activities, or even the presence of a media buying agency. In the words of Interviewee3: „ that’s maybe more likely that we are tracking the performance on our end rather than the agencies involved in that kind.“ Campaigns are then performed by in-house analytics teams. That confirms the literature’s findings about disintermediation. As we discussed, one of the phenomena supporting the disintermediation of the advertising agencies is moving previously outsourced work in-house, while performance and data analysis were explicitly given as examples (Sharma, 2017; Stokes et al., 2013).

In this new, digital-focused, dynamics, digital production agencies truly are more in the role of partners. It follows that they are not completely excluded from the performance process, they just are not actively performing campaigns themselves. That was stated to differ for seasonal campaigns, but in our study of the ongoing ones, a role of the production companies within performance was established. Brands are aware of their expertise, thus they want their input and feedback on the performance. They also sometimes turn to the productions for help with understanding the data. Finally, some elements characteristic for ongoing campaigns were identified, such as AB testing in the beginning, iteration and use of re-marketing and re-targeting.

These are often based on continuous data analysis and therefore the materials can change during the process in order to improve the campaigns. At that point, the production participates in the creation of further materials and solutions. The process was described by Interviewee1:

But of course, and they also have a lot of experience, so any feedback is important. And also, I think it's, it's the, it's a next step for any adaptations that you make. So let's say that that the results are not good enough and the production company says 'okay, looking back, I think we should change this, now seeing the results'. Then yeah, you should work with that. I think again, you should jointly decide there what the next step then is.

Regarding the aforementioned, an interesting insight was provided by Interviewee8, who says that from his experience the participation in the performance varies based on the size of the brand:

[...] if it's a smaller brand, then we'll do it. If it's a bigger brand, obviously, sometimes we will have to like interact a bit more with their own marketing department or creative department or whatever. So really, for us, it really depends on the size of the company, whether we'll do it ourselves or a bit more in partnership with them.

4. 3. 5 Evaluation

4. 3. 5. 1 Two levels of evaluation

Like many other aspects of the discussed type of partnerships, it was stressed out that evaluation should be done on two levels; evaluation of the co-creation process and evaluation of the results. It was established that regarding results, evaluated are the goals and KPI's. In general, based on regular reports, it is being evaluated as how campaign performed towards the goals set in the briefing. That is where the character of ongoing campaigns seems to differ from traditional ones. Thanks to the possibility of "tweaking" the campaign in the process, it is useful to evaluate continuously as well as in the end, if applicable, as presented in example by Monika:

[...] based on the set goals, the agency should prepare evaluation on like, monthly base, that they have to send over. Of course, based on that they should not only send some gross numbers, but also their own evaluation and recommendations, [...] if we should continue going like this or if some adjustments should be done, so I expect some recommendations

It is important to keep in mind the context of the previous sub-chapter. As the performance is often held by the brand, evaluation of the results with the production company is only possible to a certain extent. Although the co-created value is of high importance, the interviewees acknowledged that the manipulation with the produced materials and in-house performance have a significant influence on the results. For instance, Interviewee2 explained that from his brand's point of view: "it's all about the sales. And as you can imagine when it comes to sales, it's a lot of different factors. Not just campaigns and not just like create creativity. It's also like placement, like pricing, many, many other things," which is why he does not hold the production company completely responsible for the results. However, it follows, that productions are often included in the evaluation of the results, for example, to provide insights or explanations. In a nutshell, when it comes to evaluation of the campaign results, brands primarily evaluate KPI's, which they usually do internally, and then they evaluate engagement and similar factors with the productions.

On the other hand, fully integrated is the evaluation of the process, which emerged from the interviews as a strong theme. Concepts stressed in previous sub-chapters, such as ongoing communication, interactivity, and clear definition of goals, budgets, and timelines are all evaluated in the final stage of the life cycle of the ongoing campaign. In other words, it is more about the collaboration and within the co-creation process, which results in the evaluation of the partner. As it follows, it is done mutually, but with slightly more control on the side of brands, as they set the evaluation criteria. The most often mention criteria is attending to deadlines, as it is important in the process and also easy to measure.

Such a way of evaluation is also welcomed by the production companies, who see them as a good tool used in the partnership and as feedback for their work. In some cases, they even initiate the process, as in following example by Interviewee8:

So, always halfway through the campaign and at the end we do a small interview with the several contact persons, to see how the process went, like what they... Where they think improvements can be found.

Practically speaking, the most common way of evaluation was based on reports. According to Interviewee7: „the report is fundamental to evaluate if the strategy was correct.“ Other interviewees pointed out report-based evaluation of production budgets or idea analysis. An interesting evaluation strategy was mentioned by Interviewee10:

I've seen the benefit of workshop sessions. [...] Um, after a campaign, if we keep doing sort of a small workshop session each time, it's [...] a good way to kind of make sure your partners are performing as well as they could be and that, you know, any any ill sentiments, uh, don't linger.

Considering the previous findings about clarity, importance of transparency, ongoing communication, and even human connections, such a workshop may seem like a good tool to efficiently evaluate the co-creation process and the campaign itself, while supporting the strategic partnership.

4. 3. 5. 2 Base for improvements

Finally, evaluation was, by most, recognized as a base for improvements. As already mentioned, data from the continuous evaluation can be used for iterations during the campaign performance, however, according to our research, that is not the only way to efficiently use the evaluation. The strongest theme is the use of the evaluation for changing or designing new creatives, in the words of Interviewee8: “going back to the drawing board always with the, with the data insights from what we collected.”

It follows that evaluation is used to choose better performing creatives, improve current ones, or design new innovations. A note was made, pointing out that in some cases big changes in creatives may not be possible regarding budgets. The second often mentioned way of implementation evaluation is using the prior teachings for future campaigns, to include: the creation of documented lessons, presentation of findings, or lists of improvement suggestions. An example of this strategy was given by Interviewee1:

Let's say we had a King's day campaign and we try to evaluate quite soon after that campaign and also then note down the learnings for next year. Like this was going well, this was not going so well, so that you also have that list.

Last, but not least, as can be deducted from the two levels of evaluation, another way of its use is for improving the co-creation process. Apparently, partners can use the evaluations for creating a certain retrospective into the collaboration and pinpointing possible issues, improvements, guidelines for the future, or as Interviewee3 says: “to improve some processes, if we found out that there are some inefficiencies.” As the ongoing aspect means long-term involvement and possibly continuous partnership, such implementations seem to be important to both sides.

5 Conclusion

Disintermediation was established amongst the most common responses to disruptive innovation within the creative industries. It enables certain parts to be cut out of the traditional value chains, that in some cases failed to adjust to the new environment or just are no longer the most efficient way. Extensive research was done which proved disintermediation to be a successful solution in many areas (Akbari, 2016; Clemons & Hitt, 2000; Küng, 2017; Tse, 2003 and others). Findings from similar fields imply that disintermediation might be an answer for the changes and new phenomena emerging in the world of digital advertising as well. Particularly it is the shift from traditional to digital platforms, from occasional to continuous communication and especially shift to the data driven marketing, that brings the need for change in production of the advertising campaigns (Albarran et al., 2018; Dodson, 2016; Dempster, 2015; Keller, 2019). Considering the examples of disintermediation in other fields and the development in advertising, it was identified from scholarly and industry literature, that disintermediating traditional advertising agencies from the value chain might benefit the remaining partners and enhance the end value (Ghorbani, 2014; Sharma, 2017). In order to do so, forming strategic partnerships between the advertisers and digital production companies was identified as a suitable disintermediation mechanism. It appears from the literature that such partnerships are a step towards successful bypassing the advertising agencies which seems to bring many benefits. Although there has been a broad research on strategic partnerships in many spheres (Chan-Olmsted, 2004; Nordin et al. 2013), forming and maintenance of business-to-business transactional alliances has not been widely explored yet. Similarly, sufficient background has not been drawn for value co-creation between similar partners either, which is crucial since the co-creation process leads to the target value, for us that being an ongoing advertising campaign. Numerous elements were identified as important for all the stages of business co-creation, yet they were not explored in the campaign production context (Corsaro, 2019; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Tapscott & Williams, 2008). In a nutshell; both, industry workers and academics recognize importance and benefits on abovementioned process, in some cases even in relation to digital advertising campaigns creation, making many suggestions. However, the research of implication of these elements into the field of our interest, its specifics and possible ways to do so, is missing. As a result of that finding, we attempted to fill the research gap and explore how can the ongoing advertising campaigns be co-created and facilitated while bypassing advertising agencies, particularly by answering following research question:

RQ: How do brands and digital production companies collaborate to facilitate always on advertising campaigns?

The most relevant outcomes of the study providing topic-relevant practical specifics to the theoretical concepts are thus presented in the following part.

5. 1 Findings

SQ1: How can brands and digital production companies form and maintain strategic partnerships to achieve successful collaboration?

First of all, while answering this sub-question, we identified several motivations towards strategic partnerships which are important as they form further expectations and create base for many characteristic elements. A truly practical motivation emerging from most of the interviews is cost efficiency, As there is no commission for a mediator, both sides expect the collaboration to be either cheaper or more efficient for the given budgets, The strongest motivation towards forming direct partnerships same for all the interviewed experts from both, brands' and production firms' side, is direct communication. Communicating directly gives both partners more control over the process and more space to voice their opinions, share skills and insights. It was pointed out that collaborating without a middleman dissolves overcomplicated working environment currently present in the advertising world. Direct communication also means direct feedback and more flexibility in its implementation, possible troubleshooting and solving issues, which seems to be much easier without the mediating party. That relates to another strong motivation concept; direct access. It was agreed upon that as the need for production firms' services is based on their creativity, valuable expertise, skills and know how, it is beneficial for the brands to access these directly with no limitations. Production workers then explained that having direct access to their clients gives them more possibilities regarding creative process and production itself, in order to provide their best work. In a nutshell, it seems that both sides see certain added value in the partner and they are concerned that while working through an advertising agency, some of the value might be misinterpreted or even "wasted", which is prevented by the combination of direct access and communication. It also follows from the data that accessing certain assets is especially important regarding the ongoing aspect of the advertising campaigns, as the direct access and communication support the ongoing flow. Finally, the combination was pointed out to be a good base for creating human-level connections and personal relationships, which happened to belong to the main

motivations as well. Recurring theme of personal relationships belongs to our most interesting findings, as it emerged as a strong factor amongst many parts of the partnership while its importance did not seem to be widely recognized by the scholarly literature. However, Le Ber and Branzei (2010) suggested benefits of creating personal relationships for problem solving and overall pleasant flow of the partnership, which was agreed upon in our interviews as well. All in all, many of the interviewed experts are motivated to start direct partnerships, because it gives them chance to get to know the partner and create a friendly environment, which was established to be highly beneficial for maintaining the partnership and co-creating values.

Identified motivations kept reappearing throughout the interviews as they apparently serve as a base for forming and maintaining the partnerships. Talking about the initial stage, it was emphasized that to provide the partnership with a good start, a thorough onboarding is needed, supposed provide initial learning, ensure mutual understanding, but also align the partners on the practicalities, such as involved stakeholders, various guidelines and communication tools. Besides the onboarding, it is necessary to clearly communicate and set expectations, which is preferably done face to face, as many other steps. Setting expectation is seen as a tool for navigating the partnerships, making it sustainable, efficient and mutually beneficial. It was also pointed out, that setting expectations together with onboarding and briefings helps to define roles and assign responsibilities. That is an interesting finding likely specific for the topic of our interest, as definition of roles and responsibilities stressed by the academics is usually referred to as a separate, orchestrated process, while in partnerships between brands and production firms formed to facilitate ongoing advertising campaigns it seems to follow quite naturally. That appears to be due to the specific transactional relationship between the parties and specifics of the ongoing campaigns that are quite uniquely defined.

Maintaining the partnership seems to be dependent on ongoing communication. Such communication was described as interactive and balanced, carried out in person if possible but also digitally, as correspondent with the digital nature of the co-created value that needs to be communicated. Both ways should be spontaneous and reactive to certain extent, but it was pointed out that creating mutual routines within the partnerships has many benefits for the work process, hence the routine aspect to some of the communication. Communication style should be set in a way that is comfortable for both partners and efficient within the co-creation process. That relates to the emphasized elements of openness and honesty which should be carried out by the ongoing communication. They contribute to maintaining a healthy partnership and they were identified as crucial for smooth planning, problem solving and building mutual trust.

SQ2: How can brands and digital production companies execute value co-creation process together to facilitate always on advertising campaign?

Value co-creation process was recognized as very complex in our interviews. At this point, it is good to mention that there is a possibility of value co-creation to be prior to the partnership (mostly during co-creating tender-based, time pressured campaigns), however this option was only mentioned marginally. In most cases, value co-creation was described to start in a formed partnership, hence the influence of the overall partnership on value co-creation process. Ideal value co-creation environment between the partners seems to be based on transparency, mutual learning and sharing, which highly corresponds with many of the presented academic value co-creation models (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Tapscott & Williams, 2008). All these elements together with good overviews and appropriate culture proposed by Tapscot and Williams (2008) seem to be between brands and production companies supported by co-working in person and sharing various dashboards and task lists.

Mutual learning and sharing seems to be especially important for value co-creation within the discussed partnerships. The expertise of the both sides vary a lot, yet their goal is co-creating a mutual value. Thus, it appears to be crucial to be able to recognize learning opportunities, be willing to learn and also share knowledge with the partner and engage in the advising process, as proposed by Corsaro (2019). Practically speaking, in this case workshops were identified the most preferred and efficient way to do so.

Co-creating ongoing advertising campaigns was stated to stand and fall on proper briefing. Briefing seems to be the essential step navigating rest of the co-creation process, from creating timeline and budgeting for the process to defining objectives, target audience and used channels for the campaigns. Similar to onboarding in the partnership forming, briefing ensures mutual understanding on the co-creation level, and well done it also provides practical guidelines and requirements for the campaign. Particularly emphasized was the importance of clear definition of goals, often KPI's, budgets and deadlines. These steps are usually initiated by the client, which production firm reacts to by pitching possible solutions. From this point, co-creation goes back and forward in forms of numerous feedback and approval rounds with the goal of producing the desired value. As that needs to meet the requirements of current market, special attention is paid to creativity. High creative input is expected from the digital production side. Together with the fact that creative ideation and production lies more within their expertise, these are reasons behind recognizing leaving creative space to the production as one of the most important elements for co-creation ongoing advertising campaigns between the partners.

Once the campaign is finalized, stages of performance and evaluation follow, which shown to be quite characteristic in our field of interest. Confirming theoretical findings about reasoning behind disintermediation in the advertising world, performance of the campaigns was stated to be carried out mostly on the clients' side, as most of them have their own digital, marketing and/or analytics departments. It follows that during performance the production firms recede into a consultant position and their main role is usually providing insight and adjusting if needed. That leads us to the evaluation, because performance and evaluation proven to be mutually strongly connected (sometimes together with design) when it comes to ongoing advertising campaigns. The analysis identified that due to the ongoing character of the campaigns, evaluations are often used for improving the performance. As the ongoing digital advertising campaigns are highly data oriented, based on continuous reports performance and design are often optimized and iterated, which confirms Blakeman's (2001) analysis of advertising campaign creation, It also appeared to be very common to adjust or change creatives based on the evaluation and then implement the changes with the ongoing campaign, which is where the production company comes back to the scene. This creates not only ongoing campaigns, but also ongoing work process.

RQ: How do brands and digital production companies collaborate to facilitate always on advertising campaigns?

Academic literature proposed that value co-creation is supported and nurtured in strategically formed partnerships (Dahan et al., 2010; Haspeslagh, 1999; Sanzo et al., 2015). That was confirmed in our research as it follows that forming and maintaining partnerships helps brands and production companies create environment suitable for value co-creation. It was mentioned multiple times that both sides appreciate good partnerships and it follows from the interviews that having them benefits the collaboration, thus the value co-creation. Particularly speaking, for instance ongoing direct communication was stressed throughout the interviews as one of the most important elements enhancing all the steps of the collaboration. Maintaining such communication would not be possible without connecting directly and forming partnership to establish the communication in the way described in previous sub-chapters. Similarly, could be described many other discussed elements of the partnerships, which establishes their importance. These findings support the scholarly literature pointing out strategic partnership as a suitable solution for disintermediation (Chan-Olmsted, 2004; Nordin et al., 2013; Stokes, et al., 2013) and it can be argued that our study confirms its implication for the advertising value chains. A crucial element overlapping to both, partnership maintenance and value co-creation is human factor. Regarding creating relationships, brand voiced they need to feel connected and comfortable with those whom

they communicate with within the co-creation. Both sides then agreed that somewhat friendly environment is important for the co-creation process. It supports previously discussed trust, transparency, but also not that obviously it follows that bonding together, therefore establishing comfortable environment, opens more possibilities for dialogue and it makes both sides to feel freer, which in seems to be supportive of the creative process. This finding seems to be a practical implementation of Nordin's (2013) proposal of influence of personal relationships on compatibility of the companies within strategic partnerships.

To achieve the ideal level of collaboration, the onboarding and overall gaining good mutual understanding seems to be crucial. To be able to facilitate ongoing advertising campaigns, the partners indicated they need to have very clearly set goals, expectations, roles and responsibilities, which in bigger picture mostly related to deep understanding of the partners company values and processes. At this point it is necessary to mention that the described understanding seems to be more important from the side of the digital production firm, which makes sense in the context of transactional character of the partnership (Austin, 2000).

Building upon the results about co-creation of the ongoing advertising campaigns, it is apparent that the campaigns need to be well briefed and planned, which is a very joint process full of interaction between the partners. After the planning is finalized, however, designing process is rather one-sided, in competent hands of the production firm. On the other hand, performance is then carried out mainly by brand. It can be observed from the interviews that attention needs to be paid to those processes, as they are seemingly separate, yet they require co-operation. Communication needs to be maintained at least on the same level as during all prior stages, both partners need to be well informed and provided with good overview of the process, as the ongoing character requires them to be continuously involved even in processes the do not necessarily actively facilitate together.

Finally, considering and contextualizing all the findings from our data collection, there are two more observations worth to mention. First, facilitating ongoing advertising campaigns is seen as the "practical part of the partnership". It is heavily focused on the campaign, performance and data and it is possible to say that it seems to be mainly analytical and more rational. However, it is clear from the interviews that it is crucial to keep focusing on the partnership itself and do not lose touch with the partner. It emerged strongly that many keys successful co-creation between digital production companies and brands are based or heavily influenced by the partnership elements, thus it might be harmful to neglect them, even though they are not the most obvious ones. Second, an interesting finding reveals two levelled character of facilitating ongoing campaigns between the partners. Most of the steps of the facilitating were described from two perspectives which seem to

be equally important, that being the actual campaign and the process. To maintain high level collaboration, continuous re-alignment, evaluation and providing and implementing feedback were recognized as necessary, and in all cases, they were always presented on two levels. For example, with evaluation, partners evaluate the campaign, its performance, results and practicalities, but they also evaluate the process of co-creation, meeting the brief and similar. Such practice seems to be a mechanism of disintermediation specific to brands and production companies while facilitation ongoing campaigns, as it apparently helps to distinguish several elements that the partners did not have to personally care for in previous relationship mediated by advertising agencies. In a nutshell, it means that to facilitate ongoing advertising campaigns together, the partners need to adopt strategies of efficient orchestration into their processes.

In conclusion, the collaborative process towards facilitating ongoing advertising campaigns between brands and production companies seems to be highly interactive. Considering the need for many kinds of high-level interaction, specifics of the ongoing campaigns and their creation and benefits the direct co-creation seems to bring to the both parties, it is possible to say that our study confirms many academic findings about disintermediation, strategic partnerships and value co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Chen-Olmsted, 2004). Moreover, with numerous practical examples provided by the interviewed experts, some practical implications and strategies based on theoretical findings specific to our case were discovered, such as briefings as a base for mutual understanding, workshops as a tool for learning and co-creation or improving ongoing campaigns with new creatives based on evaluation reports thanks to continuous partnerships.

5. 2 Limitations

Although the method was clearly explained and chosen considering all the specifics of the research, there are some limitations within. The main limitation was presented by circumstances emerging during the research, which made it impossible to lead the interviews face to face. It is thus possible that the online research, even though carefully carried out in the most efficient way possible, did not reveal all the possibilities for probes or other reactions. Another possible limitation lies within the selection of interviewed experts, especially from the side of digital production firms. As mentioned in the research and well-know within both, academic sphere and the professional industry, many of the firm in digital advertising and advertising in general do not define themselves specifically and their expertise is wide, therefore it can be tricky to divide the firms of our interest from other very similar institutions. Last, but not least, our research was rather exploratory, and the interviews were conducted with interviewees from more countries. The choice was made for practical reasons: to

provide the research with a wider variety and general overview. However, it might be argued that research focused on one particular country or area might bring more clarity.

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Appendix

Appendix I: List of experts

Anonymous interviewee	Current side	Brief introduction
Interviewee 1	Brand	Head of digital department of Dutch branch of an international FMCG wholesaler. Currently involved with starting up digital innovations and digital strategy development. Previous experiences as marketing manager for a e-commerce retailer or brand digital marketing manager for the EMEA region.
Interviewee 2	Brand	Digital analyst and strategist for an international FMCG retailer with over years of work experience in digital marketing across industries. He mostly worked for brands, but he also worked in digital agency. He is experienced in analytics, campaign development, creative and marketing management. He is focused on data driven marketing. His working experience is rather international; however, he is currently working for a European HQ in Denmark.
Interviewee 3	Brand	Content and marketing manager for a European headquarters of a global sport apparel brand. He has experience from various positions within brand's digital department. He is originally Czech, however, he works in the Netherlands.
Interviewee 4	Brand	Digital marketing manager for a Dutch branch of an international FMCG wholesaler with about 20 years of experience on various position within advertising agencies, marketing and digital departments of brands.
Interviewee 5	Brand	Digital marketing manager with year of experience on various positions within brand's marketing departments. She is currently in charge for marketing activities of an international technological company for Czech market.
Interviewee 6	Brand	A brand manager working for a pharmaceutical brand focused on food supplements. She has 7 years of experience as a brand or marketing

		manager for various FMCG brands. She works in the Czech Republic.
Interviewee 7	Production	Currently working as marketing and communication manager for an international digital advertising focused production agency in the Netherlands. She is highly interested in the advertising world and advertising trends, she has working experience from a digital production firm and also experience as a marketing speaker.
Interviewee 8	Production	A co-founder of all-round Dutch digital production company. As a co-founder, he takes part in most of the agency's processes, but he is mainly focused on new client's acquisition, strategy and production.
Interviewee 9	Production	He currently works as a Lead Digital Marketing. He has short experience from a digital marketing department of a brand and more extensive experience from Dutch digital production companies.
Interviewee 10	Production	Currently working as a senior producer in a Dutch branch of an international digital production company. His main domain is the production itself, however, he has wide experience with strategy within digital production, image strategy and content creation. He started working on the client side, however, for the last ten years he has been working for digital production and creative production firms.

Appendix II: Introduction letter

Dear Sir or Madam,

my name is Charlene Urychová, I am student of Media & Creative industries at Erasmus University Rotterdam, and I am currently working on my thesis research which I believe might interest you. Based on current changes in the advertising industry causing the shift towards always on digital presentation, I am trying to research how can brands and digital production companies collaborate to carry on ongoing advertising campaigns while bypassing the advertising agencies. There has been an ongoing debate about possible benefits of this new advertising model and examples are already known as well. However, sufficient scholastic coverage is lacking, which deserves to be changed.

In order to do so, I am examining forming and maintaining strategic partnerships and nurturing value co-creation between the two mentioned parties in the process of facilitating ongoing advertising campaigns. I have gathered academic resources related to the subject and I would like to broaden them with new knowledge about this particular, currently highly relevant matter. I believe the best way to achieve that is to gain deeper understanding of the practice and perspectives of the stakeholders. That is why I am reaching out to you.

I am convinced your company's insights would be useful for my research. If you have previous experience with direct collaboration between brand and digital production company or you are considering such step, I would highly appreciate if you decide to contribute by giving me approximately an hour of your time for an interview I could later use as data source for the research. I am going to interview several experts from both, digital production companies and brands. I believe that analysing the data altogether will provide interesting insights in both sides' points of views, possible obstacles, requirements and more. If you participate in my research, I will later provide you with the results of data coming from all the sources, the analysis results and a summary of the main and the most interesting findings. Possible implications should be also possible to draw from the data analysis. If so, I would be happy to make them accessible for you as well.

You can reach me on the e-mail urychova.charlene@gmail.com or phone number +420 732 725 636. I am more than happy to answer any further questions. I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

Charlene Urychová.

Appendix III: Informed consent form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Charlene Urychová

Ruigenhoek 67, 3085 EM, Rotterdam, NL

E-mail: urychova.charlene@gmail.com

Tel: +420 732 725 636

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about current shifts in digital advertising world and their practical solutions between two parties of interest. The purpose of the study is to understand how can brands and digital production companies collaborate to facilitate always on advertising campaigns. The research aims to do so by diving into topics of maintaining strategic partnerships and executing value co-creation process between brands and digital production companies. Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed.

In general terms, the questions of the interview will be related to collaboration between brands and digital production companies. Your participation in the experiment will be related to processes and experiences of the side of the company you are figuring as a spokesperson for, or your other professional experience relevant to the main objective of the research.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will use an audio recorder for the interview. The record will be transcribed for later use of the data and the transcription will be saved accordingly to current regulations.

You are always free not to answer any question, and/or stop participating at any point.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your name or other identifying information (such as your position within the company or further details about it) in my study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified, by only mentioning generalized identification such as gender, age group and similar.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take approximately 45 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— the thesis supervisor Mr. Matthijs Leendertse on the e-mail: leendertse@eshcc.eur.nl.

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

Name

Signature

Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name

Signature

Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.