

Creative Briefs in Advertising: A blessing and a curse

How creative briefs are used as facilitatory tools in the Dutch advertising industry

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Abstract

The skill to harness creativity and put it to commercial use is what makes the media and creative industries so different from many different sectors. To further understand the creative process and the tools involved to making this generally ‘messy endeavour’ as efficient as possible, this thesis is an explorative study on the use of one such tools; the creative brief in the context of the Dutch advertising and branding industry. Following a literature review on the themes of *defining the creative brief*, *recognizing the needs of creative producers* and *teamwork in innovation* the author conducts interviews with a varied sample to represent the varied landscape of the Dutch advertising industry. Through a series of in-depth interviews and analysed documents, the following research question is answered: *How are creative briefs used as facilitatory tools in the Dutch advertising industry amongst different stakeholders throughout the steps of advertisement and branding material production?* Additionally, a further understanding of the development of a creative brief throughout the creative process is created.

The research is based on the framework of *the needs of creative producers* by Perry-Smith & Mannucci (2017) and concludes that briefs complement the identified needs by *ensuring validity*, *ensuring feasibility*, *offering guidance* and *providing inspiration*.

Additionally, while finding that every brief is uniquely tailored to the individuals involved their preferences, the author finds four overarching themes which can be found in every brief. These conclude that all briefs contribute to defining; *the goal*, *the deliverables*, *the constraints* and *‘good to know’ additional information*. However, also conclude that dependent on the phase in which the brief is currently used, the specificity of this information is increasingly converged as based on the design principle of di- and convergence (Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998).

It is concluded that while not all creatives opt to make use of a creative brief (like) tool, there is no harm in doing so and in many cases the communicative qualities of the device can positively impact the creative process by mitigating the risk of the *not invented here (NIH) syndrome* (Baer, 2012). This however, is in large part because the often-considered negative influence of a brief: *close proximity priming* where closely related artifacts which need to inspire creatives are included in the brief (Brown, Bhadury, Bansal, & Bloxsome, 2020) is hardly done in the cases of the interviewed respondents and their analyzed briefs.

Multiple future avenues around the ways in which creative briefs and the environment of creatives can be optimized for ‘better work’ are proposed as further research on the basis of these conclusions.

KEYWORDS: Creative Briefs, Advertising, Branding, Netherlands, Creative Process

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1. Introduction

Design; it's not art, design is art with function. It has a purpose. (Respondent 6a (2021))
(paraphrased quote from Jonathan Ive)

Composing the majority of the name, the *creative industry* of advertising and branding relies heavily on its producers' ability to create *creative*, meaningful pieces for its clients in an attempt to retain or gain competitive advantage (Johar, Holbrook, & Stern, 2001). Yet, creativity is not the sole characteristic of products created by advertising agencies and producers. Feasibility, viability and desirability (based on the Trifecta for innovation (Orton, 2017)) are the core for any successful sellable product, therefore, also creative products such as advertising or a rebranding strategy. On top of this, promoting authenticity and personal relation becomes of ever-growing importance as consumers desire relatability to brands they want to associate themselves with (Magids, Zorfas & Leemon, 2015; Riivits-Arkonsuo, Kaljund & Leppiman, 2014). Balancing this act of *creativity* and *function* is what makes making 'good advertising' such a challenge.

An advertisement concept has limited use to clients if the proposed concept is over budget, does not suggest a positive return on investment (ROI) or is *inappropriate* for the client's branding (Brown, Bhadury, Bansal, & Blossome, 2020). As in many other commercial media industries, the mitigating of risk is often desired by those who finance the operations (Havens & Lotz, 2012), which in the case of advertising is the client whose product is being advertised. However, also for those producing the advertising, this reduction of risk is important for their business' success as a strong portfolio and reputation is crucial for the acquisition of new clients.

Nonetheless, the understanding of how those in advertising, and in many other creative organizations, remains a relatively little understood concept on top of the uncertainty of success known as the *nobody knows anything* principle (Küng, 2017). Not only is the creative process highly personal, but it is also one that is complex to grasp due to the high level of intrinsic decisions and associations (Brown et al., 2020). To harness and understand the power of creativity is crucial in a companies' or individuals' success, yet understanding it remains an ongoing challenge (Griffin, 2008). It is amongst these reasons that those with a working strategy consider it a trade secret to their success (Griffin, 2008; Woodman, Sawyer & Griffin, 1993).

As marketing budgets drop and demands grow, research and methods to further understand and improve the efficiencies to creating 'good' creative work has become increasingly important (van Boeijen, Daalhuizen, Zijlstra, & van der Schoor, 2013). Amongst the efforts to make creative work more efficient, multiple documents are construed for the involved parties. This to support in inter-team *communication*, *scoping* of the assignment and *creative facilitation* in the process (Turnbull & Wheeler, 2017), all under the umbrella-term: *creative briefs* (Morrison, Haley, Sheehan, & Taylor, 2011). Yet, given the individualistic nature of creative individuals and organizations, there is little understanding of how these briefs are developed and in what manner they are used by the actors who work with them.

To further understand how these creative briefs aid those in the industry, the following research

question aims to be answered through in-depth interviews: *How are creative briefs used as facilitatory tools in the Dutch advertising industry amongst different stakeholders throughout the steps of advertisement and branding material production?*

While research has been conducted on the creative process, the role of tools such as the creative brief are often neglected in this journey. To offer a starting point, Perry-Smith & Mannucci's (2017) research on the effect of a creative producer's network throughout the creative process, highlights the different needs these creatives have. With Perry-Smith & Mannucci's (2017) research specifically focused on the role a creative's network can add, this thesis aims to extend their framework to incorporate the tool of the creative brief.

Understanding that creative processes are a messy endeavor and that hence the needs of actors change throughout the course of the journey this thesis also looks into how the creative briefs act dynamically. This to answer the second research question: *How do creative briefs develop during the creative journey?*

The advertising and branding landscape of the Netherlands is highly varied between independents, collectives and agencies of varying sizes (Centraal Bureau van Statistiek, 2021). Additionally, actors within the industry conduct varying roles, ranging from creatives (concept designers, creative directors, strategics, etc.) to executive producers (filmmakers, copywriters, photographers, etc.) and those whose roles cannot be clearly defined by one category. Therefore, this research has gathered data from a wide scope of actors in different roles to represent this varied landscape.

While this thesis specifies the Dutch advertising industry as the target of the research, the literature recognizes that models of the creative journey are greatly uniform (Baer, 2012; Griffin, 2008; Hill & Johnson 2004; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). While intricacies may vary and further research may need to test this, the applicability of conclusions drawn from the Dutch advertising industry will likely be transferable internationally.

The scientific value of this thesis lies in the filling of a gap in the academic literature as it will offer a further understanding of the creative process (used in advertising) and the ways in which creative briefs can aid the actors involved. While research on the creative brief's individual components has been done, the functions of these components have not been compared to the creative producers' needs (Morrison, Haley, Sheehan, & Taylor, 2011). Similarly, the role ambiguity in the client-agency relationship as identified in his research may influence the creatives-ad agency relationship (Beard, 1996). This concept adds to the value of a creative brief as a communicative device. The societal relevance largely applies for those in the industry, as these insights can be beneficial in evaluating the potential use of creative briefs to aid in making the creative process more efficient. Yet in the wider sense of understanding creativity and the processes involved, understanding the needs of creative producers can provide valuable insight on creativity as a concept. By analyzing the tools used by said producers, the underlying needs for use can be further understood.

The second element of the research will be to gain a qualitative understanding of how creative briefs are both a blessing and a curse in the creative development process as identified by Brown et.al.

(2020). Creative briefs offer guidelines and restrictions in the form of target audience descriptions, legal requirements/limitations, style guides and budgeting requirements which can result in either a negative or positive atmosphere for creatives to work in (Johar, Holbrook, & Stern, 2001). There is still very limited research on how the creative brief (as a whole) contributes to this, and this thesis aims to further this understanding.

2. Theoretical Framework

Successful entrepreneurs do not wait until “the Muse kisses them” and gives them a “bright idea”: they go to work. - Peter Drucker (Berkun(a), 2010, p. 14)

The term *creative industry* stands for a paradox. While actors in the industry strive for creativity in their products, the industrial rate at which it must be produced require a methodological approach which cannot rely on serendipity (Havens & Lotz, 2012; Woodman et al., 1993). Specifically, in the industry of creative advertising, high pace and reliability are key to remaining relevant for clients. Much research has been done to further understand the methodological approach to creativity within organizations and the tools which can aid in making this more efficient. Throughout this chapter of the theoretical framework, a basis is laid out to understanding the creative brief, the phases of creative work and the associated needs of creative producers as well as collaborative working environments. Based on this knowledge the research in answering the question has been conducted and conclusions were drawn.

2.1 Defining the Creative Brief

While literature agrees that creative briefs are used as tools in the advertising industry, the way in which these tools are used are dependent on the actors and their preferences (Morrison, Haley, Sheehan, & Taylor, 2011). Hence, the creative brief has no defined structure on an industry wide level, and briefs may vary between agencies, projects and clients. Morrison et al. (2011) do conclude that creative briefs all share the commonality of being a communicative device in the dialogue on *strategy* and *expression*. Many also note that creative briefs enable working towards a common goal, yet should also enable the freedom to employ expert talent down the pipeline of the production process (Griffin, 2008; Harrison & Rouse, 2015; Morrison et al., 2011). Creative briefs therefor contain varied information depending on the phase they are currently used in, from practical notes such as *budget*, *deadlines*, and *deliverables*, to strategic information such as *target audience*, *tone of voice* and *objectives* (Morrison et al., 2011; Griffin, 2008).

The consensus of the literature is that creative briefs influence the final outcome of creative products (Brown, Bhadury, Bansal & Bloxsome, 2020; Morrison et al., 2011). However, in his study amongst American copywriters, Kover (1995) concludes that copywriters did not find the creative brief to be a significant contribution to the creative process. Kover does nuance this as he identifies “this, of course, can be attributed to selective perception as much as reality.” (Kover, 1995: 600). Given that this was not the main focus of his research (which was on the creative process of copywriters in the wider sense), there is only limited attention which is given, to the creative brief. Similarly, Griffin’s (2008) study on the development from students in advertising to experienced copywriters concluded that those with more experience are more reluctant in their use of the creative brief. This was grounded in briefs as limits for their creativity and the desire to come up with the ideas themselves. Many attribute this due to uninspiring briefs which are “simply unhelpful” (Griffin, 2008, p. 98) and note the importance of being able to let go of a creative brief and explore concepts which have remained unexplored by the creative brief.

Nonetheless, creative briefs are still widely present in research on creativity in the advertising industry as well as discourse on the matter. Many note its importance in *communication* and *sharing a vision* (Brown et al., 2020; Stempfle & Badke-Schaub, 2002).

While the literature agrees that creatives' needs are dynamic during the *creative journey*, examples of this are still greatly anecdotal as described by Kover (1995). Due to the qualitative nature required for the understanding of creatives' needs, larger insights can only be created by multiple studies in different groups. This to further the knowledge on how creative briefs are used and how they can aid actors in the advertising industry.

2.2 The needs of creative producers

As suggested by Perry-Smith & Mannucci (2017), the needs and the phases in which these occur are the same for all creative producers, albeit the writing of a Broadway musical, creating a film, or in the production of creative advertising. Proposing a four-phase framework consisting of *idea generation*, *idea elaboration*, *idea championing* and *idea implementation*, the phases are separated by the needs of the creative producers' needs for ideal working environments. Each phase results in a specific outcome where the next phase's product requires a different need from the creative producer (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017).

Phase	<i>Generation</i>	<i>Elaboration</i>	<i>Championing</i>	<i>Implementation</i>
Need	Cognitive Flexibility	Support	Influence & Legitimacy	Shared vision & understanding
Outcome	Core concept (e.g., core idea for ad)	More detailed elaboration of core concept (e.g., developed tone of voice for ad)	Greenlight to produce final concept (e.g., client pitch of ad concept)	Detailed blueprint and/or final product (e.g., production of final ad)

Table 1: Established four-phase framework of the Idea Journey and Needs

Other studies have concluded similar four phase frameworks though not necessarily based around the needs of creative producers (Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998; van Boeijen, Daalhuizen, Zijlstra & van der Schoor, 2013). While these other frameworks describe the creative process' steps in a similar manner (howbeit highlighting its iterative nature), the added value of identifying the needs of creative producers within these four steps is that this is applicable to how tools such as the creative brief contribute to supporting these needs. It is therefore opted to use this additional aspect of the journey in finding the contribution of the creative brief in the creative process. To further define the creative process in advertising, other models such as the thirteen-phase *advertising problem delineation, communication and response* (APDCR) process (Hill & Johnson, 2004) or the seven phased model of the advertising creative process as presented by Turnbull & Wheeler (2017) have been created. These models, however, are simply expansions of the four phase models. Given the exploratory nature of this thesis, it has been opted to choose a broader model which is more open to the potentially varied work culture of the Dutch advertising industry.

Perry-Smith & Mannucci (2017) expand on the role which a creative's network can play in this creative process and how other actors can help support these creatives in their *idea journey*. While the role of a creative's *social network* in the facilitation of idea production stands in the center of the Perry-Smith & Mannucci's (2017) study, this thesis aims to expand on this framework beyond the creative's *network*, to include the role tools such as the creative briefs can aid creatives in specifically the advertising industry (but possibly beyond this as well).

2.2.1 Idea Generation

As inspiration can be derived from anything in a creative's social context and individual background, this phase is scattered with randomness and uncertainty (Mueller & Kamdar, 2011; Woodman, Sawyer & Griffin, 1993). In the opening phase of a creative journey, many possibilities are still open, and creatives are free to roam. As suggested by Roozenburg & Eekels (1998) and van Boeijen et al. (2013), this step of *idea divergence* requires a high level of open-mindedness and a *flat associative hierarchy* (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017) where creatives can link distant concepts for new ideas. Perry-Smith & Mannucci's framework identifies this open-mindedness as a need for *cognitive flexibility* which is required until a core concept or idea is chosen by the creative.

During the *idea generation* process, new and insightful knowledge can enable the making of new cognitive links by the creative producer resulting in previously unexplored concepts as supported by Granovetter's (1983) *strength of weak ties* theory. In a further study on the effect of *priming* during this stage (a tool where inspiration is gained through associative cognition) in the advertising industry, Brown et al. (2020) conclude that creative briefs can aid in ideation for advertising purposes. While suggesting that *originality* may suffer when designing with the use of primes, the *appropriateness* was significantly higher (Brown et al., 2020). This is supported by the thought that additional knowledge can rigidify cognitive pathways, debilitating the required *cognitive flexibility* required for new associations and resulting in a strong conformity effect (Moreau & Dahl, 2005; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017; Kilgour & Koslow, 2009).

Perry-Smith & Mannucci (2017) state that the *idea generation* phase concludes with a single concept that has been chosen, upon which *the* or *a* creative will elaborate further. This follows the design process of *idea convergence* (Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998) where an idea is chosen due to its superiority in *feasibility*, *viability* and *desirability* traits as defined by the trifecta of innovation (Orton, 2017) following which the designer can elaborate and finalize. The methods used to choose this idea or *core concept* are highly individual for a creative producer and based on experience, education and personal preference (Griffin, 2008; Kover, 1995; Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998; van Boeijen et al, 2013).

2.2.2 Idea Elaboration

Following the decision for a *core concept*, a creative again diverges to explore and elaborate the possibilities within the scope of the concept (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017; Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998). The concretizing of the initial idea involves exploring options and numerous decision-making

moments which can make or break a fragile concept. The consensus is therefore that creative producers require support during this phase (Koslow, 2015; Kover, 1995; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017).

This support is provided in the form of both expertise as well as by providing a supportive environment (Berkun(b), 2010; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). Expertise can be provided in the form of further inspiration provided by priming in an attempt to increase relevancy and potential success (Brown et al., 2020) or by involving expert knowledge whom's constructive feedback can aid in the solidifying of the core concept (Harrison & Rouse, 2015; Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998). Similarly to the idea generation phase, newly gained knowledge can inspire new cognitive pathways to answer arising questions and new concepts (Moreau & Dahl, 2005; van Boeijen et al., 2013).

It is during this stage of conceptual design that a creative needs to remain wary of *design fixation*, a state where a creative remains fixated on a particular (part of a) solution and loses an open mind to other possibilities (Brown et al., 2020; Jansson & Smith, 1991). Feedback and collaboration between actors in a creative's network can aid in reducing or preventing this phenomenon (Youmans, 2011). However, a fine balance between constructive feedback and creative freedom is to be kept for creatives to maintain a feeling of support (Berkun(b), 2010; Harrison & Rouse, 2015).

Many successful creators identify the importance of ensuring a nurturing environment for frail ideas and their creators during these stages (Berkun(b), 2010). While Edison's staff is often accredited for inventing the electric light, Edison's role as *technology broker* allowed for his staff to work in a safe environment, without critique and pushback from the press and general public (Hargadon, 2003). This criticism and scrutiny can cause a potentially fruitful idea to be prematurely abandoned by the creative producer in fear of (social) failure (Berkun(b), 2010). Dependent on the structure of the organization, this nurturing environment is often provided for a creative team by a superior or manager of the creative producer (Berkun(b), 2010; Harrison & Rouse, 2015). As explained by Tom Kelley in *The Art of Innovation* (2016. P 121):

Innovation flourishes in greenhouses. What do I mean by a greenhouse? A place where the elements are just right to foster the growth of good ideas. Where there's heat, light, moisture, and plenty of nurturing. The greenhouse we're talking about, of course, is the workplace, the way spaces take shape in offices and teams work together.

The greenhouse created in this analogy is a combination of support from a creative producer's network, environment and superiors (Berkun(b), 2010; Harrison & Rouse, 2015). Through the support a creative producer receives during this stage, the strength of a concept is increased, making it ready for critique and validity testing (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017; Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998).

2.2.3 Idea Championing

Following the creation of an elaborated creative concept, Perry-Smith & Mannucci (2017) identify the *idea championing* stage as the approval moment by gatekeepers. In the context of

advertisement and brand content production this often takes form in an approval pitch towards the client (Hill & Johnson, 2004; Turnbull & Wheeler, 2017). However, these gatekeepers can also be present at earlier and later stages in the form of experts to ensure the feasibility of a product within the confines of the production (Havens & Lotz, 2012; Orton, 2017; Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998).

To ensure the *greenlighting* of a concept, the attainment of *influence* and *legitimacy* are critical in order to receive approval from a commissioning party (Havens & Lotz, 2012, Howell & Higgins, 1990; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). This influence and legitimacy, however, is not necessarily derived from the sole creator of the *core concept*. Research has given examples of how these traits can be *borrowed* from associated members of the project who advocate for it (Mishina, Block, & Mannor, 2012). Beyond the *social support* that a creative's network can provide in influencing a gatekeeper (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017), these gatekeepers can also expect or demand *proof of concept* in the form of tests or prior examples (Kilgour & Koslow, 2009; Moore, 1985). This proof and expertise which can be provided by further connections in the creative producer's network.

2.2.4 Idea Implementation

The final identified phase during the *idea journey* is defined as the *idea implementation* where the final (creative) product is the outcome (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017; Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998). With respect to the advertising industry, this is the final advertisement (campaign) which a consumer will see or hear. *Idea implementation* is defined by two sub-phases; *production* and *impact* which both require a need for a *shared vision* and *understanding* (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017; Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998). In their guidelines for product design, Roozenburg & Eekels (1998) identify *realization* (the equivalent of Perry-Smith & Mannucci's model) as the only phase without a di- and convergent step process. Instead, it is a block phase where actors carry out their role in production.

During the *idea implementation* the approved and elaborated core concept is translated into a producible *blueprint* (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017; Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998; Turnbull & Wheeler, 2017) and the necessary associates are informed on their role in the production of the final product. In the case of advertisement production this can differ between directors, copywriters, musicians, and all creators, assistants or managers who take a role in the production of what a consumer will see, hear or read. To aid in the process of collaborative work, clear communication in *vision for mutual understanding* are critical to ensure that all actors in the production benefit the final product (Mueller & Kamdar, 2011; Stempfle & Badke-Schaub, 2002).

2.2.5 Iteration in the innovation process

The consensus in literature on the creative process is that while frameworks of the *idea journey* (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017) or *innovation process* (Rosing, et al., 2018; Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998) are phase models, these phases are executed in an iterative manner. Given the highly individual and serendipitous manner of creative idea generation, many authors acknowledge the oversimplification of such models (Baer, 2012; Griffin, 2008; Rosing, et al., 2018), but accept that no theoretical model "will

be completely reflective of the phenomenon it is attempting to represent” (Hirschman, 1989, p. 44).

In their research in defining the APDCR process, which focuses on the way that creative advertising is produced in the Australian industry, Hill & Johnson (2004) developed a thirteen-phase production flowchart identified from in-depth interviews, for the steps involved between client acquisition, and the start of production. Within this phased framework, multiple moments have been identified at which actors can reiterate steps within the process. The research however is limited to client and agency interaction and states that “the production task itself was beyond the scope of th[e] study” (Hill & Johnson, 2004: 300). Additionally, the research does not answer how a tool such as the creative brief can aid in streamlining this process. This thesis aims to expand beyond that scope to include production.

2.3 Working in teams

The creative advertising industry is highly varied in the compositions of actors involved in the productions for their clients. From individual (freelance) artists who stand in direct contact with a company’s founder, to advertising agencies whose only connection is the marketing office of a firm. Regardless of the composition of those involved, the advertising industry always works in a collaborative manner between actors (Hirschman, 1989; Turnbull & Wheeler, 2017).

The mix of creative influence from the involved actors can lead to *incoherence in design* (Rosing et al., 2018; Stempfle & Badke-Schaub, 2002) and clashes in opinions on creative choices known as the *not invented here (NIH) syndrome* (Antons, Declerck, Diener, Koch, & Piller, 2017). NIH is an innovation associated concept where actors who need to work with a novel concept which has not been developed by, with or under their involvement have a prepossessed negative bias towards the concept (Antons et al., 2017). This negative bias can be detrimental to a successful collaboration and should therefore be avoided. NIH can be caused by actors feeling threatened in their role within the organization or team (Griffin, 2008), actors feeling as if the full potential is not being reached (Kilgour & Koslow, 2009) or a misunderstanding of the concept (Stempfle & Badke-Schaub, 2002).

At an individual level, NIH syndrome clashes greatly with conclusions of many other researchers that collaboration can lead to successful innovation (Baer, 2012). From their analysis on inter-team communication, Stempfle & Badke-Schaub (2002) highlight the importance of ensuring understanding and a feeling of cohesion between actors during the innovation process. This cohesion can be achieved through flat hierarchies where all actors are free to contribute and express ideas (Kilgour & Koslow, 2009; Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998).

However, teams need to remain cautious of the chance of *design by committee*, a term given to a design where no choices have been made, and all parties have been able to contribute to the incoherent design of a product (Macomber, 2016). Good management aims to balance this need for creative freedom and contribution with decisions and direction (Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). However, this skill of finding balance requires a high degree of experience and empathy, and mishaps still occur in even the greatest innovation projects where collaboration is involved (Antons et al., 2017).

2.4 Research Objective

Building on the model presented by Perry-Smith & Manucci's (2017) on the needs of actors and the gratifications offered by their *social network*, this thesis aims to extend the model on how *creative briefs* contribute to fulfilling these needs. This to further the limited understanding of the creative process and how tools such as the creative brief can support actors in the *creative facilitation* as well as in *communication* during the production of creative (advertising) products. Conclusions will be drawn how creative briefs can aid in surpassing identified complications in collaborative work. Through insights gained in actor's uses and interpretations of creative briefs, conclusions can be drawn as to how briefings aid actors in the various needs identified by Perry-Smith & Manucci (2017); *cognitive flexibility*, *support*, *influence & legitimacy* and *shared vision & understanding*. Amongst this, an understanding for the development of briefs during the iterative steps of creative production will be created.

Additionally, an attempt will be made in furthering the understanding of how briefs are structured and what they contain to optimally fulfill the needs of their users. Gaining this knowledge is relevant in not only filling a gap in the literature but also offering those in the industry an insight on potential improvements in facilitating creativity in their organizations. Not solely in the way briefs may add to this, but also in the overall creating of a *greenhouse environment* for creativity (Berkun(b), 2010).

3. Methodology

“Since all cultural objects convey meaning, and all cultural practices depend on meaning, they must make use of signs [...] and be amenable to an analysis which basically makes use of Saussure’s linguistic concepts (e.g., signifier/signified)” (Hall, Evans & Nixon, 2013 p21) on Saussure’s model of linguistics which allows all language and practices to be understood and analyzed.

3.1 Qualitative research

While the literature on the creative process constitutes of many variations and interpretations, one thing all theory agrees on, is that the creative process is a complex one. To further understand the intricacies of creative producers’ needs during the stages of their *idea journey* a qualitative understanding is required. Due to the interpretive manner of qualitative research, both the implicit as well as the explicit meaning of the gathered data can be analyzed (Brennen, 2017). Through the language and the context in which it is used, the meaning of qualitative data can be interpreted to understand the *how* of a phenomenon (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2012).

This explorative research adopts the approach of *grounded theory* where theoretical and empirical understanding is developed based on the acquired and analyzed data (Brennen, 2017). With a framework based on existing theory regarding the needs of creative producers (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017), a variety of data sources were used to expand this theory on how creative briefs are supplementary in providing for these established needs. Grounded theory allows for various data sources to be combined in whichever necessary form to create the necessary knowledge to further the theoretical framework (Creswell, 2012). This allowed for a combination of semi-structured interviews as well as the analysis of previously used briefs and their templates to offer an insight in how these are formed.

The required levels of intricacy to understand a complex and abstract phenomenon such as creativity are not feasible in quantitative research. This as the methods of data gathering do not enable the ‘prying’ for more information nor does quantitative research recognize implicit meanings (Boeije, 2014). The theory highlights the highly individualistic nature of creative producers’ working methodologies and hence a feasible survey or other quantitative data collection method cannot be made, which is relevant for all creative producers in the industry. Instead, a qualitative approach which can be tailored to participants is far more relevant in understanding the personal needs of these actors.

3.2 Semi-structured interviews

To successfully answer the research question as to how creative briefs are used in the Dutch advertising industry, a range of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with different industry professionals were conducted. The strength of interviews lies in the ability to ask for additional clarification which can provide the necessary context to understand the implicit meaning of what participants say (Brennen, 2017). This is especially relevant given the scope of this research regarding the *interpretation* and *experience* with creative briefs and how this impacts actors’ work. Offering a setting where participants can freely and exploratively express their experiences offers valuable insights which a questionnaire could not in the same manner. In-depth interviews rely on building a trust relationship between interviewer and

interviewee so that interviewees can fully and openly express themselves.

While interviews can be conducted as structured, semi-structured or unstructured, it has been opted to use a semi-structured approach. This is where the interview is conducted based on a topic list instead of a rigid question list, as would be the case in a structured approach. This allows for an organic interaction between interviewer and interviewee where topics which have already arisen can be skipped or extra clarification can be asked for (Brennen, 2017). Given the highly individualistic nature of the creative process, the needs of creative producers and the compositions of teams, a research method which can be molded to be appropriate for each participant is very valuable.

The conducting of semi-structured interviews requires a high level of preparation and understanding as the researcher is required to be able to understand beyond the scope of the research. Hence, not only is theoretical knowledge of the industry and its processes needed, also a practical understanding of developments is required to be able to prod for clarifications on a deeper level (Boeije, 2014). This has been achieved through trade press articles as well as pre-researching the companies in question.

3.3 Document Analysis

While the core of the research is based on the data gathered through in-depth interviews, the review and analysis of used briefs will support these findings. In this thesis, the focus is on the usage and structure of the brief, but not the contents within. This is because the content is outside the scope of this empirical research, as well as to respect the sensitive data enclosed in these briefs.

The briefs are to be sampled as supportive material of the interviews and hence all participants who indicated they used creative briefs were asked whether they are willing to share some of these documents for the purpose of this research. From this, eight briefs have been sampled and analyzed as well as two templates for creative briefs.

Other documents and briefing methods have been shown during the interviews, but were not provided by their owners for further study. They have, regardless of formal analysis, aided in the authors understanding and answering of the research question.

3.4 Sampling

For this research 9 interviews with 11 respondents were conducted with an average length of 59 minutes (shortest 34 minutes, longest 83). Through purposive sampling, a variety of respondents were compiled to achieve a representative sample of different functions within the creative process as well as scale of their business (independent, collectives and agencies), as shown in table 2. This breadth in function and organizational structure is important in this explorative study to gain a broader understanding of the usage of creative briefs amongst various parties in the advertising industry. While no set requirements were defined as to the number of representatives of particular functions or organizational structures, a spread of participants was aimed for. As it was assumed that those who work in larger teams (agencies and collectives) would be able to provide more information with regards to the creative briefs, the sampling was skewed to involve more of this group.

The use of purposive sampling in an explorative study is common as it allows the research to be conducted within the confines of a relevant scope. It allows the researcher to predict which types of respondents would be able to contribute valuable insight, unlike with convenience or snowball sampling where the researcher is to some extent left to serendipity whether the respondents can be valuable or not.

Pseudonym	Function	Organizational structure	Experience
Respondent 1	Developer	Independent	21 years
Respondent 2	RTV Producer	Agency	18 years
Respondent 3	Photographer	Independent	43 years
Respondent 4	Creative Director	Collective	13 years
Respondent 5	Strategic Producer	Agency	6 years
Respondent 6a	Producer	Collective	11 years
Respondent 6b	Creative	Collective	13 years
Respondent 7a	Creative	Agency	6 years
Respondent 7b	Creative	Agency	11 years
Respondent 8	Creative Director	Agency	33 years
Respondent 9	Account Manager	Agency	14 years

Table 2: respondents to the interview with relevant details

Due to the involvement of the author within this industry as a commercial photographer, his own network was consulted as well as cold calling of agencies and individuals with the request for participation.

Respondents 1, 3, 4 and 8 were contacted with prior connections of the author, whereas the remaining respondents were cold called or contacted through LinkedIn. All participants were informed that the goal of the research was to better understand the creative process of those involved in the advertising and branding industry, but the mention of creative briefs or tools which actors use was left unmentioned prior to the interviews as not to steer respondents in their answers.

As with any qualitative research, more respondents aid in furthering the validity of the research. However, at a minimum, saturation should be achieved, a state where no new insights on a deeper level are created. These eleven respondents were sufficient in achieving that level of data saturation.

As creative briefs can often contain sensitive information regarding clients' undisclosed strategies and/or resources, it has been opted to ask all participants who have partaken in interviews at the closure of each interview whether they would be willing to share these for the scope of this research. This to have built up an understanding of trust between author and respondents which would allow for this sensitive data to be shared. This has led to two respondents sharing briefs which due to confidentiality are not disclosed in this thesis or other publications. Additionally, a client brief provided by a client of the author in his professional work as photographer was consulted. Due to this brief being unaltered by the author himself, it is deemed usable as additional source. The analyzed briefs are as

shown in table 3.

Type of Brief	For ... as final product	Truly used or Template	Provided by
Client Brief	Digital Campaign	Truly used	Respondent 5
Agency de-brief	Digital Campaign	Truly used	Respondent 5
Creative brief	Digital Campaign	Truly used	Respondent 5
Creative brief		Template	Respondent 5
Sub-brief	Animation	Truly used	Respondent 7b
Sub-brief	Music	Truly used	Respondent 7b
Creative brief		Template	Referenced by respondent 5
(Client Brief)	(Press Kit)	(Truly used)	(Author's Client)

Table 3: analyzed briefs and the relevant details

3.5 Operationalization

Carrying out semi-structured interviews is generally done with the use of an interview guide. The used guide can be found in appendix A. Each interview was conducted in two sections, with the first covering the respondents' role in the creative process as a whole and their preferred methodology. Prior to this first section, the interviewer has not yet made any mention of the focus of the research being the creative brief or any such tools. Following this first section, the interviewer summarily explains the objective definition of a creative brief as; *a series of documents used by the different people during the production of creative work in which different forms of information can be presented with the aim to help those in the production of 'good' work.* The interviewer tries to make sure that it is clear that creative briefs are not defined to be one thing and that they do not necessarily have a positive or negative influence on the creative outcomes, this as not to steer respondents' answers. Following this introduction of the creative briefs, the second section of the interview takes place to gain an understanding of how respondents interpret briefs and experience working with them. In interviews where respondents note the use of creative briefs during the first section, the defined line between the sections can be blurred. This however does not negatively influence the data collected during this first section.

Given the rather explorative nature of the research as well as the perception of creative processes varying greatly between individuals, the interview guide was written in an open manner where the phrasing of questions could be formed to respondents' prior answers. This would allow the conversation to grow organically while still offering a form of direction.

3.6 Data collection

In light of the COVID-19 crisis at the time of research and writing, not all interviews could be conducted in an in-person manner and hence respondents 1 and 4 were interviewed through video calling. While not ideal for reading nuances conveyed in body language and allowing for less of a personal connection (Brennen, 2017), the value of the respondents outweigh these constraints. All other

interviews were conducted at the offices of the respondents. All interviews took place between the 6th of April 2021 and the 16th of April 2021.

Researchers have varying opinions on the impact of conducting interviews in an environment where the interviewee is in control. However, for considerations of practicality as well as the sense of ease, it was opted to conduct interviews in the manner which was most convenient for interviewees. This made the interviews less demanding for respondents which is beneficial in the creating of a positive interviewer – interviewee relationship (Jonhson, 2011).

Following informal chitchat and an explanation of the research, conform to in-depth interviewing practices, the interviews were initiated with a simple introduction of the respondents and the roles they have. From this a natural course could be taken into the first section of the interview regarding the creative process at large.

The first section of the interview covers the respondent's role in the creative process and forms a base for shaping the way questions are asked during the second section of the interview. This entails understanding where the respondent is involved in the creative pipeline and the work methodology they employ. Questions regarding the process of generating ideas and optimal conditions for employing their talent are posed during this first phase. To conclude, respondents were asked which tools they use to help enable them to carry out their tasks as a bridge to creative briefs.

The second section of the interview digs further into the respondents' experiences and uses of creative briefs in their functions. During this phase three different bases were touched upon for all respondents; the *use* the respondent has for creative briefs, how respondents *experience* using the briefs and finally how the briefs *change dynamically* throughout their process of using them. Subcategories such as describing the ideal brief and when the contents of briefs are ignored or let go allow for further understanding on how briefs play a role in respondents' creative journey. Interviews were finished by asking whether respondents had any further contributions to the topics of the creative brief or the creative process as a whole. It was also at this point that respondents were asked whether they were willing to share used creative briefs, if necessary in redacted forms.

While all topics were covered for all respondents, the phrasing and order of the questions were changed to allow for an organic flow of the conversations. Additionally, supplementary follow-up questions which were not prepared in the interview guide were naturally posed during the interviews. The possibility to do so is the strength of semi-structured interviews.

3.7 Data analysis

Following the interviews, all recordings were transcribed in their original language so that as much detail as possible was left intact. Subsequently, these transcripts were coded and analyzed using Boeije's (2014) three-step qualitative content analysis. These three steps involve the process of open, axial and selective coding, where the steps iteratively find relevant data and synthesize patterns and conclusions. The first two steps were carried out using Atlas TI.

To do so, open coding involved the analysis and reanalysis of all data to highlight quotes and define the core what is being said both implicitly as well as explicitly within each quote. As new codes are

created or redefined, analyzed data is reanalyzed to ensure validity. This time-consuming process allows researchers to deeply embed themselves in the data to recognize patterns and similarities (Boeije, 2014). This *data immersion* is one of the values of this form of data analysis.

To bring structure to the amassed quotes and codes, axial coding finds connections between the individual codes found in the previous step. These new *axes* on which the open codes can be placed were created using color coordination in Atlas TI. This allows for a structured overview of both the individual codes and the axes under which they fall. Axes included practical matters such as *production team size* and *phase of production* as well as more complex issues such as *experience of the brief* and *function of the brief*.

The final step is selective coding which has been done manually. Here, core concepts and inferences are developed. It is these core concepts which have aided in answering the research question in the conclusion.

3.8 Validity & Reliability

While notoriously personal and unique, qualitative research through in-depth interviews can still be conducted in a valid and reliable manner. Validity indicates the relevance of the method in answering the research question whereas reliability implies the repeatability of a study (Silverman, 2011).

Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, validated and tested questions were not an option as is the case with questionnaires. However, the consistent interview guide paired with a repeated (and hence repeatable) structure to the interviews ensures the reliability and validity this study. Additionally, the recording and transcribing of the data allows for both data immersion as well as ensured sound recollection of what was said during the interviews. While the interviews and transcripts will remain unpublished to maintain confidentiality, the usage of quotes taken from the interviews provide an understandable process as to how the author came to said conclusions. This open dialogue is important in ensuring credibility (Silverman, 2011). It must be mentioned that all interviews were conducted in Dutch and translated upon writing this thesis. It was opted to do so to ensure analysis would be done in the original language. This way, as little information and interpretation would be *lost in translation*. While reporting all relevant quotes in the results section, translation was done trying to convey the same meaning as the original quotes.

Due to the individual nature of the creative process and those involved in the research, it is difficult to judge the repeatability of the results. However, due to the clear explanation of the methodology and the included interview guide in Appendix A, the research can be repeated and scaled up to involve more respondents or those in different branches of advertising. This repeatability is crucial in the scientific validity of the research (Silverman, 2011).

4. Results

This explorative research on the usage of creative briefs in the advertising industry has managed to offer many insights on the usage and experience of creative briefs by different actors and in different stages of the creative journey. The advertising industry varies greatly in team compositions and the different roles actors can have, therefore this results section will be prompted by the differences and similarities experienced by actors in this regard. Following this the role of the creative brief within the proposed framework of the needs of actors in creative production will be presented. Finally, conclusions as to the structuring and generic contents of briefs is presented. Most of these results are based on the conducted interviews and additional support for these results are provided by the supplementary creative briefs.

4.1 Briefings: as unique as the individuals who work with them

As suggested by the theory, there is no defined right or wrong industry wide way of writing or using a creative brief (Kilgour & Koslow, 2009; Morrison et al., 2011). Not only did respondents note production size, personal working style and the creative phase to be determining for if and how a brief is used, the documents showed this too.

4.1.1 *Production Size*

The most notable difference in whether actors used a creative brief at all was in the size of the production crew involved in the creative process. The smaller the team, the less need there was for the tool as communicative device. Additionally to this, independent creatives mentioned: “It [not setting up of a creative brief] is largely a lack of time to do so”, (Respondent 1, independent developer) identifying that a separate record in which ideas, budgets and concepts are documented is unnecessary. Instead a great deal is discussed orally and noted down in the quotation. This quotation is then signed off by a client before starting a project. Similarly the other independent respondent noted that client relation is sufficient when working in small teams saying:

Yes, well mostly I work in small teams, and that’s the thing. And then, when we get started from this intimate relationship between me and the client that I mentioned earlier, then the trust that we have is sufficient. Then we always get the results that we discussed. (Respondent 3, independent photographer)

Due to the short lines of communication between the creative producers and clients, verbal communication and close client relationships are greatly preferred over documents. This becomes apparent when these two independent creative producers become part of a larger team.

I also work for two copywriters who maintain their own clients through me. And from them I receive very good briefings! They always make me think; wow, awesome! Everything’s there, the

text is done, this needs to go there and that needs to go there. That's just fantastic, all I need to do is actually go and develop that, but when I work on my own, then no, I don't do that.

(Respondent 1, independent developer when in part of a team with copywriters)

No, well sure it's good to do, but when you're just a team of one or two people, it's not such a big deal. But sometimes I'll work on projects with six or seven people, and yes, then you need some sort of tools to make sure it's not just one big chaos. Otherwise people just start doing their own thing, and you simply miss out on valuable time, simply because you lose sight on what you wanted to achieve. Someone has to pay for that then. (Respondent 3, independent photographer)

The logic that larger teams require more efficient means of communication is not only shared by the literature (Stempfle & Badke-Schaub, 2002) but also by actors who work in teams exceeding 10 individuals or extending between multiple (creative) organizations. It is here that a managing role is required in steering all individuals in the right direction.

But eventually, it is us [creators] who are the guardians of the concept, of the idea, because of course a production company or a director wants to give their swing at the idea. Maybe somebody who's doing the color grading has the idea 'shouldn't we be doing it like this?', and we are the ones who need to go past all these individuals and of course we need to ensure they can release their creativity, but we need to ensure it strengthens the original concept, and that along the way, it doesn't slacken. (Respondent 7a, creative at a production agency (team of 2))

While this is specifically about one of the roles of a creative within a production agency, the respondents later mentioned how briefings can be set up to either set these strict confines or offer creative freedom to ideally utilize others' talents.

What I'll sometimes do is really concretely brief someone where I say exactly what I want. And then I'll add, 'but please, also give me something that's completely your own idea next to what I've briefed you'. And then you can be really surprised by what you get, like, wow, that's really cool! (Respondent 7b, creative at a production agency (team of 2))

Dependent on the size of a production crew, various functions and uses have been identified and generally it has been found that the larger a crew, the more briefs are used as a communicative device. To fully ground this conclusion however, a quantitative approach could have been applied with a larger sample size to conclude whether this conclusion has a statistically sound backing.

4.1.2 Individual Style of briefing

To ensure efficiency and consistency, two of the agencies explicitly mentioned the creating of fixed templates for briefings in which they work. Respondent 5 mentioned the template of *the Sacred Six* by strategic producer Julian Cole (2020) as the basis for the creative briefs he makes for the creatives he works with down the pipeline. This template strives to define the goal, the target audience and provide critical information which needs to be included in the final product within the size of one A4. However, the template by Cole (2020) does not however offer any concrete ideas whereas the template that Respondent 5 has created does. He explains this as:

So the challenge is; fitting it all on one clear A4 paper, it doesn't always fit, but it should. And if you have any additional information which may help but might not be the core of the project. Well then I make a distinction between; this is the core, and this is additional information which may help on the next page. Things like thought starters. (Respondent 5, strategic producer at a production agency)

However, most briefings are based on individual style. This can be due to the particular skills of the creative producer or personal preference in briefing technique to enable the employing of creative talent of those being briefed.

When I need to brief a musician, I'll do that in very non-technical terms, but as long as you're working with talented people, they know exactly what you mean. (Respondent 7b, creative at a production agency (team of 2))

So we have a workshop, and it's based around these questions that we've developed over the years. (Respondent 6a, producer at a branding studio)

It's not like a client comes to us and we immediately have a briefing ready to discuss at the table. That would mean that a few steps have been skipped. But it's not like there's an instruction manual where the same steps are followed the moment that we have a new client. (Respondent 4, creative director at a content creation collective)

Each individual and organization has identified trying different strategies to creating and using creative briefs. Each has recognized how this has influenced their preferences up to where the respondents from interview 6 mentioning that it was more effective for them and their clients to get the information and inspiration otherwise achieved through a brief through a workshop instead of a document. Furthermore, the respondents who worked closer to clients were more apt to choose verbal communication with clients over written briefs.

This goes to show the highly personal preferences of creatives in work methods as well as the

tools they use. This goes in line with the theory of individual working styles developing over time (Griffin, 2008).

4.1.3 Phase of the creative journey

As identified by Perry-Smith & Mannucci (2017), each phase of the creative journey results in different needs of the creative producers involved in them. This is reflected in the briefs provided and used by the different parties. Table 4 shows the different briefs in chronological order throughout the creative process.

Brief	Goal	Involved parties	Phase
<i>Client brief</i>	For the client to put on paper what they want from the agency or creative party	From client, to agency or creative producer	Acquisition
<i>Agency de-brief</i>	For the creative party to give a response to the original brief (make decisions/ensure feasibility)	From creative party to client	Strategy
<i>Creative brief</i>	A stepping stone to create a creative solution for the client	From strategist to creative	Strategy/creation
<i>Sub-briefs</i>	To ensure that a team or individual for an element of the final product has the right stepping stone to optimally function (e.g. musician who needs to compose a piece for an advertisement)	From creative to executive producer	Production
<i>Treatment</i>	For executive producer to communicate to creative how they interpret a (sub)brief and would go about the production of this	From executive producer to creative	Production

Table 4: Identified briefs and the way in which they are used

While the exact definitions and functions vary amongst organizations, for the scope of this thesis these definitions will be maintained as the consensus of the interviewees and analyzed documents. These will be elaborated in further detail throughout.

4.1.4 Summary of briefs being unique

In line with the theory stating that the creative process is a highly individualistic concept (Baer, 2012; Griffin, 2008; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017), this research has further supported this consensus. The way in which briefs are used in varying formats to aid actors within the industry reflect these traits. Elements such as the actors who work with them and the context of the situation within which they are used are all factors which shape the form and functions of each brief. This is greatly in line with Griffin's

(2008) research on copywriters developing a personal 'working style' which can vary greatly from what is taught in traditional educational institutions.

The insight that creative briefs are unique, support the statement that phenomenon cannot be completely captured by a single theoretical model (Hirschman, 1989). It also supports the belief that there is no one perfect template which works for all situations (Morrison, Haley, Sheehan, & Taylor, 2011). Nonetheless, the following two sections will shed light on the similarities found in briefs in terms of how they can aid creative producers' in their works as well as commonalities found in the elements making up a brief.

4.2 Briefings as aids of creative producers' needs

As suggested by multiple researchers, for optimal performance in the highly competitive world of creative commercial media its actors need different forms of support during different phases of the creative process (Baer, 2012; Griffin, 2008; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). While Perry-Smith & Mannucci (2017) identify these needs around the four phases of the idea journey as described in the theoretical framework, this section will explain how briefs can support in these four identified needs. It has been chosen to structure this framework around the needs of creative producers instead of the phase of the idea journey as these needs are more concretely defined than the phases of creative production. Where the phases are in fact iterative and with often overlapping processes (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017; Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998), the four phase framework does not fairly represent this. While the needs of individuals are a complex topic in itself, for this thesis it offers a simpler reference point.

From this standpoint and the data analysis, the following framework (Table 5) has been developed which will be elaborated on in the further sections of this chapter to support these with first-order observations.

Second-order categories	Theoretical abstraction	Producers' Needs
Briefs force those earlier in the creative pipeline into a making decisions	Briefs as tool to ensure validity of the final product	<i>Support</i>
Briefs as a form of approval		
Briefs enable collaboration between client & creatives		
Briefs as a form of expectation management	Briefs as a tool to ensure the feasibility of the final product	<i>Influence & Legitimacy</i>
Briefs to concretize practical details		
Briefs to ensure the synergizing of all elements	Briefs as guidance	<i>Shared vision & Understanding</i>
Briefs aid in the maintaining of standards		
Briefs provide reference and understanding		
Briefs remove the information overload	Briefs as inspiration	<i>Cognitive Flexibility</i>
Briefs allow understanding the 'why' behind an assignment		
Briefs offer interesting insights		

Table 5: Abstraction of the results against the needs of creative producers

4.2.1 Briefs to ensure validity

As concluded by Brown et al. (2020), creators of advertising need to balance between *originality* and *appropriateness* to ensure that a creative piece of advertising is desirable from a clients perspective. This mix of appropriateness and desirability can be categorized as the *validity* of an advertisement for its intended purpose (Orton, 2017). Respondents mentioned how the briefs used during the creative process aid in ensuring this validity by *forcing decisions*, *ensuring approval* and *as a collaborative tool*.

In relation to the theoretical framework presented by Perry-Smith & Mannucci (2017) the ensuring of validity is similar in many ways to the *need for support*. Building a concept which has potential in the real world requires influence from this world, yet at the same time creating a *greenhouse* environment in which the concept can optimally be developed. Perry-Smith & Mannucci (2017) recognize this support provided through an actor's network, yet this thesis has found creative briefs to do so in a similar fashion.

4.2.1.1 Forcing decisions

As indicated by nearly all participants, the key to a successful campaign, advertisement or branding plan is one where decisions have been made (1, 4, 5, 6a, 6b, 7a, 7b, 8, 9). It allows for a focused message as well as clear restrictions within which a creative can create.

Even with restrictions like in budgets, that doesn't change how creative we are, sure it might change what you end up getting. So if we're told to create a BMW one-series and not a seven-series, it'll be the best one-series we can possibly create. [...] Creativity isn't budget dependent, the final production is, so you better know that upfront. (Respondent 8, creative director at a creative concept agency)

It's the restrictions that offer you direction in which you can go really deep, where you can create something relevant and in-depth (Respondent 6b, creative at branding studio)

This requirement of finding a direction and going deep within this identified direction is in line with the design principle of *divergence*. Without a decision moment, creatives cannot efficiently *go deep* within a particular idea. Especially respondents 7a and 7b indicated how not making concrete decisions are not made prior to them receiving a creative brief, it will result in a failed pitch towards a client. This is because critical information can be skipped, or decisions are made by the creatives instead of by the strategic or client. This may lead to disappointment in the final outcome of the creative product:

That one A4 briefing should be enough, if it doesn't fit on one A4, you know not enough has been filtered [...] then you know the first presentation is going to be a flop. (Respondent 7a, creative at a production agency (team of 2))

That means that we'll start making decisions, and we'll chose the things that look like most fun

to us. (Respondent 7b, creative at a production agency (team of 2))

The consensus that restrictions offer a better final product is shared amongst the respondents, and those deeply involved in the writing of creative briefs emphasize the role the writing of both the debrief as well as the creative brief have in making these decisions.

So in the de-brief phase, account and strategy, we try to get to the core of what's being asked. And to try and get this down on paper what they want from us, but also to make decisions. Because often in a client briefing you'll notice how everything is important, everything is as important as everything else. So we need to find a hierarchy in this importance, make decisions. [...] that's the first step in the process. (Respondent 9, account manager at a production agency)

Without decisions, creative products will be made which try to be *jacks of all trades* and therefore result in incoherent design (Stempfle & Badke-Schaub, 2002). Creative briefs offer a moment for these decisions to be made.

4.2.1.2 Approval moment

While creative products remain *fragile* and *fuzzy* at the beginning, having concrete definitions in a creative brief allows clients to gain an understanding of what they will receive, and to sign off on a decided direction. While not being a replacement for terms and conditions or contracts, the creative brief is a mutual understanding between client and creative about the intended final outcome of the idea journey.

If they [client] crawl back from an idea later on in the process, you have something to fall back on, something with their signature under it. Something you can both fall back on and say 'Look, this is what we agreed on. (Respondent 9, account manager at production agency)

If you neatly and perfectly follow a briefing, a client will and can never hold it against you. (Respondent 4, creative director at a content creation collective)

Similarly, at the stage of production, a director can write a treatment based on a briefing they receive from the creative team. This treatment serves as a guide for how the film or other creative product will finally be produced. It is a document which can be signed off on as the closest representation of a final product.

That [look of the final deliverables] is all brought together in the treatment, and is signed off by the client before we actually go and shoot. (Respondent 2, RTV producer at production agency)

It is these documents which clarify to clients what they can expect to be receiving.

Simultaneously, they let the creative producers know that they are on the right track before delivering a final production.

4.2.1.3 Collaborative tool

The importance of authenticity of a brand's message or tone of voice is noted by many respondents. Additionally, all respondents note the importance of a close collaboration with the client to ensure the final product reflects the clients' nature. Respondents mention various ways of achieving a collaborative tool.

You really develop this together. So if my client says, 'hey, I've got this idea and want to show you', I'll tell her, how about we make a Pinterest page together, and we'll go from there. Add some ideas you like and I will and you create these really interesting things together.

(Respondent 3, independent photographer)

We're no experts in for example those cars, or candy or the financial sector, we might know some things here or there, dependent on who's put on the assignment, but we're no expert.

We're communication experts, and so we need their input, we need to do it together.

(Respondent 5, strategic at a production agency)

In the end, they need to believe in it, they need to feel it, they'll need to wear that brand for the coming 10, 15 years, knocking down doors wearing that brand. (Respondent 6b, creative at a branding studio)

While this process is not solely reliant on the use of creative briefs, its conclusions and decisions and described earlier are often elements which are relayed into ensuing briefs. These elements can entail the target audience, particular insights, or thought starters as described in the analyzed template brief.

One of the struggles respondents have had is a *language barrier* between collaborating parties. This is especially true between client and agency interaction and the majority of respondents note the importance of a sound client-creative relationship where talks and discussions can provide the required nuances in understanding what the collaboration should result in. Therefore all transfers of briefs were met with verbal interaction. This goes to show the limitations of written briefs in providing nuance and ensuring understanding.

4.2.2 Briefs ensure feasibility

Beyond the creating of strong concepts, these concepts need to be developed into feasible and producible creative products; be it a brand or advertisement. Respondents noted how briefs can aid in this ensuring of feasibility through *expectation management* and *concretizing practical details*. Based on the needs of creative producers framework, similarities can be drawn between the *need for influence and legitimacy* (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017) and *ensuring feasibility*. However, Perry-Smith & Mannucci (2017)

conclude that a network can greatly aid in this need by providing a convincing partnership built on trust during pitches or approval moments. The respondents noted how in the case of briefs, the factor of feasible design is managed at an earlier phase prior to client approval.

4.2.2.1 Expectation management

Many respondents noted the use of a creative brief as a tool for expectation management between the parties involved. This can be both between client and agency, as well as agency and executive producers. Creative briefs provide a mutual understanding between parties to prevent disappointment upon delivery of the final product.

Just remember, the moment that you receive and accept a briefing, the responsibility to live up to that briefing is up to you, as content creator. If you don't live up to it, because maybe the briefing wasn't realistic to start with, but if I can just put the question out there, you don't need to answer it, but who's responsibility is it then? [...] whenever we receive a client briefing, we always respond to it saying 'hey this might need to be different' or 'I see an issue here and there'. Maybe we can even get more out of the shoot in that way. (Respondent 4, creative director at a content creation collective)

Similar to the approval moment as described earlier, clear communication throughout the process is crucial. Especially considering long-term collaborations between parties, an element which most respondents note as the goal in the scene of Dutch advertising.

Sure, you might not be liable [based off a brief] in a lawfully manner, but we put everything on long-term relationships with our clients. You can't say 'we didn't achieve the briefing, but not our fault, see you next week!' That's simply not realistic. (Respondent 4)

This expectation management also sets responsibilities for those down the pipeline. As mentioned by respondents, for these responsibilities each individual can be held accountable, but only for those things which are clearly communicated. Therefore clarity and expectations is noted by many as a defining element of a good brief.

If you receive a brief that's carte blanche, that only says: 'we want to achieve this [in example percentage higher revenues]'. Great we'll get started right away! But then we can only be held accountable for whether or not we achieve that higher revenue whichever way we want. (Respondent 6a, producer at a branding studio)

It is this communication which enables sustainable client relations as well as fruitful partnerships as indicated in earlier studies (Stempfle & Badke-Schaub, 2002). As noted by numerous respondents, disappointment of clients should at all times be avoided in the highly competitive industry. Clearly

setting of expectations allows for a timely adjustment of plans to avoid said disappointment. This is in part carried out by the explicit mentions of practical information as found in many briefs.

4.2.2.2 Concretizing practical details

To ensure the feasibility of the final production those involved need to test and delineate certain practical information such as deadlines and budgets. This is not only to set the scope within which a production concept can be conceived, but also to test whether a proposed concept is worth bringing to the table.

I'm closely involved from the start of developing a concept, as we'll always receive an indication in the brief for a certain production, and then it's my role to see if we can make it work. Is it achievable in the budget, the time we have. [...] If we have this super awesome idea, we might need more money and let the client know up front. (Respondent 2, RTV producer at production agency)

What's the budget? What's the timings? Want that greatly steers us in how big or crazy we can think. (Respondent 7b, Creative at production agency (team of 2))

Without these details, the process of developing feasible concepts can become very inefficient with more iteration steps than necessary. Yet clients remain notoriously hesitant in concretizing these details, especially in relation to budgets.

Often it seems as if clients want us to play the game 'guess the budget' [...] Either because they're afraid that if they say 'I have one hundred thousand euros' that we'll spend all of it, or because they don't want to reign in the creativity [...] but then in practice we might go all out, just to find out the client only has ten thousand euros. Then we have a problem. (Respondent 9, account manager at a production agency)

Respondents note that briefs are in part feared by clients due to misunderstanding their purpose as a creative tool instead of its function as a contract. This distinction is critical as a creative brief should be interpreted as guidance towards an ideal product; one which achieves the goals within the confines of what is possible in the most efficient manner. Without clear communication of what these confines are, this process loses efficiency. This lack of common language is one of the reasons for frustrations with the use of briefs between clients and creatives.

Respondent 6a: When we work with marketing teams sure, but from small companies you can't expect them to understand...for example 'what's the budget for this campaign?', 'what kind of growth do you expect?'

Respondent 6b: Giving a solid briefing and feedback. Those 2 things are amongst the most

difficult things to do, especially if you don't really know what you're talking about. (Respondents 6a & 6b, partners at a branding studio)

Common language and understanding are achieved through both communicative parties (sender and receiver) (Stempfle & Badke-Schaub, 2002) and is crucial in clear communication. It is hence that the respondents from interview 6 have opted to find this common language in a workshop form instead of letting clients fill in a brief alone. Nonetheless, the practical information which is accumulated through such a process still needs to be documented for future reference.

4.2.3 Briefs as guidance

As indicated by many respondents as well as the theory, one of the dangers of collaborative work is the phenomenon of *design by committee*. Additionally, brands and advertisements strive for a clear and consistent message throughout their expressive media.

In the end it's all about brand messaging, your logo is a message, but also anything you publish, even the clothing of your staff. [...] in everywhere, you [need to] bring back the same tone of voice (Respondent 6b, creative at a branding studio)

Respondents have noted how briefs can aid in providing guidance so that all work created and done is done efficiently and works in the same direction. This guidance can be supported by the following second order categories of *synergizing effect*, *maintaining of standards* and *providing reference and understanding*. Similar to the study of Perry-Smith & Mannucci (2017), the role of briefs with regards to guidance are mostly in the phase of idea implementation (production) and share overlaps with their identified *need for shared vision and understanding*.

4.2.3.1 The synergizing effect

Respondents mention the importance of all effort conducted on work being aimed in the same direction to further strengthen brands throughout their distinctive communication channels or within an advertising campaign. During this process, all individual elements should build upon each other in an effort to create a synergy as a result of all separate components.

By building on the same story time and time again, your investments can also be added up together. I mean if you need to tell a new story every single time instead of building on what you already have. That would be a waste of money now wouldn't it? (Respondent 9, account manager at a production agency)

To ensure that all parties are pointed in the same direction, communication is key from the beginning so all parties can efficiently work towards the same objective. Especially when this entails working with multiple creatives who might have a different take on ideas.

When we have a branding concept, we'll show the client; this is what a website can look like, maybe a social media post like that. And you'll see it's all family, and it all corresponds to each other. So that at a later moment, if the client wants a film made, they can look and understand what it should look like. That's what a brand guide is for. (Respondent 6b, creative at a branding studio)

Similarly, another agency mentioned how this needs to be defined from the beginning to ensure efficient collaborative work. This was especially the case when this collaboration is extended beyond a single organization but can be applied between multiple inter-organizational teams just the same.

I truly believe that when we work with multiple agencies, it's critical we get together as quickly as possible to create an integrated story together. [...] So that we don't create this amazing concept, and then when we get together with the social media agency they say 'no we have this totally different idea' and the two don't mix and match. I'd much rather we decide upfront together and then develop what we're both good at from there. (Respondent 5, strategic producer at a production agency)

The briefing of our photographers, that's our responsibility too. It's easier for our client, and we're in a position where we can clearly communicate and delegate tasks: 'You do this, this is your responsibility and that's how we can all work on one final project together. (Respondent 4, creative director at a content creation collective)

While this synergy is enabled by elements such as *expectation management* and *good communication* it is recognized by many respondents as a separate goal which can be facilitated by using creative briefs. It is hence identified as a separate part of the framework.

4.2.3.2 *Maintaining of Standards*

Beyond providing a synergetic force between different organizations or elements of a larger campaign, briefs also aid in ensuring that all individuals within the production process of **one** product are aimed in the same direction. Especially respondents 7a and 7b note their responsibility in ensuring that their concept's vision is meticulously carried out in the *tone of voice* and fashion which they designed a concept with.

You thought of the concept, so you know exactly how you meant what and every element. You need to have the confidence that that concept and reasoning is strongly rooted in your mind, so that every time a new person has an idea or opinion about your idea, you can objectively step back and say 'OK, but does it strengthen my original idea or not?' (Respondent 7b, creative at production agency)

While this benefits the singular tone of voice, the maintaining of standards has the potential threat of stifling creative freedom of actors' talents further down the pipeline. Some respondents were actively aware of this threat.

The interesting thing [about working collaboratively] is the that a developer is not just a developer, before that, a developer is just a person. A person with a vision, with insights, insights which are just as important as those of our designers. [...] So in general, we try to let everybody provide contributions regardless of their assigned role. (Respondent 8, creative director at a creative concept agency)

It does occasionally happen that when I receive a brief from copywriters, that they've forgotten to include a homepage [something she has described as being a table of contents, important for SEO and UI design] (Respondent 1, independent developer)

What I don't want to have happen is where I'm expected to do these boring and simple assignments where I can't be creative. Where you're being controlled by an art-director [...] then I'd be some sellout whose controlled by somebody else. I was put on this earth for more than that. (Respondent 3, independent photographer)

This balance between enabling talent and creative freedom while maintaining a goal-oriented approach is something which nearly all respondents mentioned as a great challenge in the art of branding and advertising. The optimization of this balance is greatly dependent on the work culture of the involved organizations and individuals. However, this balance goes beyond the sole role of a creative brief and is far more complex than the theoretical framework manages to cover. It was therefore not further studied in the scope of this thesis.

4.2.3.3 *Providing reference and understanding*

As suggested by respondent 9, actors in the creative sector do not like being told what to do and references the *not invented here* syndrome as cause for this. While not explicitly mentioning NIH by name, respondents 7a and 7b did stress the importance of ensuring that those whom they brief understand the reasoning behind certain decisions. This is in line with conclusions reached by multiple studies as a method of preventing NIH syndrome (Antons et al., 2017; Stempfle & Badke-Schaub, 2002).

You've got to provide the perfect setup, but not try to knock the ball in yourself. You've got to leave it open, but make sure that it's clear where you want to go. (Respondent 7a, creative at production agency)

I always make sure I take the time to sit down with them [executive producers] and take them

through the creative brief we received. What was the original question, what did we come up with, how did we get to that idea? And then we start talking about ‘so we now have this idea, and we need this [from the executive producer]. Instead of just saying; ‘ok so picture one there, and this there’. Because then they have no idea what they’re actually making. (Respondent 7b, creative at production agency)

Another aim of offering guidance and reference is in the ensuring of *validity* of the final creative product. Most respondents mention the writing of a brief as the *filtering out of irrelevant information* to ensure that the actor(s) who need to work with the next step can focus on the task at hand. Nonetheless, this ‘irrelevant information’ may provide the necessary insight to understand the required following steps. As described by respondent 2, this may be provided by open access to all information and briefs which were used in preceding steps of the creative pipeline.

In this internal assignment [digital records of all relevant documents] with which we always work, we can find all relevant information; what’s the briefing? What deliverables are required? Timings, budgets, those kind of things, so I’m always informed on what the client wants. That way, when I get started I’ll know ‘OK, this is the script’ but also everything that preceded that, simply so I know the background information. (Respondent 2, RTV Producer at production agency)

This transparency of information is mentioned by multiple respondents, yet individuals and organizations have personal preferences as to the degrees of openness. This ranges from offering access and insight in all documents to providing a verbal insight in the necessary background information.

4.2.4 Briefs as inspiration

Finally, briefs are conceived as a method of efficient inspiration. While the respondents remained largely against the use of *near priming* (where close resemblances of possible solutions are presented as *inspiration*) as was recognized in Brown et al.’s (2020) research. Stating the fear for NIH syndrome and that a creative could feel that their “role would be redundant” (Respondent 4) briefs act towards enabling *cognitive flexibility* (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017) through other forms of inspiration. This inspiration is provided by removing the information overload, allowing an understanding of the ‘why’ and by providing interesting insight.

4.2.4.1 Removing the information overload

Based on the design principle of di- and convergence (Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998), the making of choices are an inevitability during any creative process. To streamline this process and prevent the *reinventing of the wheel*, choices made earlier in the process are noted so alternative options need not be ‘rediscovered’. To aid in the communication of which information and decisions are of importance, the brief which is handed down the creative pipeline describes within which confines the creative process

can be continued.

The difference between advertising and art, is that in art you have a canvas, and you can do whatever you want on that. What we do, is offer our creatives a square centimeter of that canvas and say 'here's within which you can break loose'. (Respondent 9, loosely quoting a colleague)

Most respondents note the setting of restrictions as a starting place for the scope of a project noting "that's the most difficult about making things; having a blank canvas." (respondent 6b) and that imposed restrictions can give sense of "how big and crazy we [designers] can think" (respondent 7b). Removing the clutter of irrelevant information also ensures the relevancy of produced creative work as cognitive associations will be made with elements which have been defined as 'relevant'.

But if I relay all that [referring to many documents and discussions earlier in the pipeline] to a creative, I'll drive them crazy. So what I end up giving a creative is ... this ... the challenge is to put it all on one A4 (Respondent 5, strategic producer at a production agency)

The restriction of a single A4 was mentioned by this particular agency and was also reflected in the analyzed documents and templates. By limiting the permitted length of a brief, decisions must be made earlier in the pipeline and creatives can feel comfortable to roam freely in the confines of these restrictions and "go deep" (respondent 6b) in this small scope. This creates an environment for *cognitive flexibility* as defined by the literature as an essential element of enabling creativity (Granovetter, 1983; Kilgour & Koslow, 2009; Moreau & Dahl, 2005).

In a more practical example, respondent 4 mentioned the creative freedom a well-defined brief can offer their executive producers by offering assurance that they've carried out their task. This reduces anxiety as to whether a job is done or not which offers the flexibility to explore creatively, and therefore achieve a better creative outcome.

In that sense, I think a good briefing can also offer a lot of peace of mind which in turn promotes creativity. [...] it offers overview and hence peace for our creatives to take the space and go 'alright, I have what I need to have, now I can creatively explore and dabble within and just outside of the brief to create really cool work.' (Respondent 4, creative director at content creation collective)

While this example is in respect to the event content marketing scene, the concept of creating overview to enable *brain space* for creativity remains and is mentioned by others too. This relates to creating the perfect *greenhouse* environment in which creative freedom can be nurtured as highlighted by managerial theory on creativity in organizations (Berkun (b), 2010; Griffin, 2008; Youmans, 2011).

So I always say, my biggest task, is creating freedom within the job (Respondent 8, Creative director at a creative concept agency)

Providing this nurturing environment is seen as the role of actors earlier in the pipeline and the creative brief is recognized as one of the tools used to enable the creating of this environment.

4.2.4.2 Understanding the 'why'

While understanding the preceding creative process has been highlighted as a method of counteracting the NIH-syndrome, it is also a method of inspiring and exploiting of talent. During the early stages of the creative process, understanding the 'why' behind the need for a creative product allows creatives to explore multiple possibilities beyond a client's realm of possibilities.

While a client understands their industry, they know their own company, they don't know all the possibilities [of creative solutions]. They can only see what those around them [competition] have done, and it is our task to open that up and explain what other options there really are. Say 'but if we approach it like this, then we can really achieve what you want.' (Respondent 8, creative director at a creative concept agency)

Therefore, to some extent that all briefs to some extent aim to shed light on the reason for undertaking the creative endeavor (based the example briefs, templates and interviews). Respondent 4 went so far as to answer the question of what an ideal client brief was "only the sentence; this is our goal, for example 15 percent more revenue [...] that's sufficient.". While not all respondents agree that this works in their creative method, many agree that understanding the underlying goal is crucial as inspiration. The understanding of *underlying reasoning* is also present at a more practical level to enable creative talent. Respondent 7b gave an example of providing feedback in a manner which stimulates creative talent versus ordering the execution of a single task.

So music is a good example. I could ask [the creative]; 'could you please remove that intense piano piece in the second section right over there', and that person might think; 'OK, I can'. Or you can phrase it as; 'so we think the second part is a bit too heavy and it's clashing with the voiceover. So we were thinking, maybe it'd be a good idea to remove the piano, but if you have any other ideas we're totally open for that.' And that person will understand 'ah so the voiceover clashes, check, I can solve that' and it's a totally different collaboration now. (Respondent 7b, creative at a production agency (team of 2))

This method of feedback is in line with Stempfle & Badke-Schaub's (2002) conclusions of communication in evaluative processes during the creative journey. Yet also in Youmans' (2011) study, he recognizes this *enabling of (creative) talent* as an effective approach to counteracting the notion of NIH.

4.2.4.3 Offering interesting insight

As described, many of the steps involving the creative brief include the filtering of information to only that which is deemed necessary in subsequent steps. Respondents 1, 5, 7a and 7b explicitly mentioned the benefit of a “creative hook” being included in a briefing. Described as a “small fun fact” (Respondent 7b) or “just something interesting” (Respondent 5) which may inspire an *angle of attack* or *theme*.

It’s nice when there’s this creative hook. Not yet an idea, but just a thought starter. Something like, hey, this might be interesting. (Respondent 7b, creative at a production agency (team of 2))

Something we’ve added recently is the fun fact [...] it’s just a small thing. It might not end up proving useful or to be used, but yeah, it might help. (Respondent 5, strategic producer at a production agency)

The line here is thin between what can define a thought starter from concepts to a single phrase which can enable associative thought processes. As described earlier and by literature (Antons et al., 2017; Griffin, 2008), those in an earlier phase of the creative process must remain cautious to leave sufficient room for interpretation and creative freedom.

4.2.5 Summary of aids for creatives’ needs

All in all, the analyses above have shed light on the functionality of creative briefs as a tool to support creative producers in different phases of their creative endeavors. These four principles have been compared to the four identified needs of creative producers from Perry-Smith & Mannucci’s framework. To enable efficient and meaningful creative work, creative briefs are used as a tool in enabling the trifecta of innovation: *validity*, *feasibility* and *desirability* (Orton, 2017). In these elements, the creative brief is greatly a communicative device to ensure that all collaborating parties are working in the same direction as well as on a producible final product within the confines of possibility. Additionally, briefs have shown to be used as creative facilitation in the form of guidance and inspiration. While all respondents agree upon the limited contribution of direct primes (Brown et al., 2020), briefs have recognized as forms of inspiration by providing confines and useful insights.

The insight that briefs are in fact highly beneficial in different stages of the creative process has a twofold value. Firstly, it provides further justification for Perry-Smith & Mannucci’s framework on the needs of creative producers. This research has shown the way in which their framework can be extended beyond their research on the creative’s network. This is valuable in further research on tools used in creative industries. Additionally, this research aids in understanding the needs of creative producers and how briefs can optimally be created to aid those further down the creative pipeline. This insight can be beneficial for both those researching the topic as well as actors in the industry attempting to improve efficiency of their creative process.

4.3 The contents of a brief

While it is agreed upon that all briefs are as diverse and unique as the creative endeavors they support are, there are certain elements which recur for all respondents and (template) briefs. These elements have been categorized to four categories. Due to diction and individual preferences, the explicit names found in the data may vary, yet the functions have been found to be communicate *the goal, the required deliverables, the imposed constraints* and *'good to know' information*.

4.3.1 The Goal

While not all respondents were convinced that only a well-defined goal is “sufficient” as indicated by respondent 4, all respondents did agree on the importance of understanding the goal behind the project they are working on. From an early stage this can and/or should be formulated by a client.

So you want to sell 1000 [redacted] through this campaign, alright, but then what is the goal of this campaign? [...] Do we deliver clients at your doorstep? Do we need clients to leave their contact details online with you? Or does this campaign make them sign the contract that they've bought your product? (Respondent 5, strategic producer at a production agency)

[after receiving a client briefing] alright, I understand what you guys mean, but let's just take a look at what you want to achieve, that's what this is about, the rest we can put to the side for a bit. (Respondent 8, creative director at a creative concept agency)

However, the goal remains just as important throughout further steps in the entire process of production.

Sure, briefs tend to differ per assignment, but the main thing that should really be there is the goal: what does the client want to achieve at the end? (Respondent 7b, creative at production agency)

While client goals are often developed in collaboration between the client and creatives it is still included in the subsequent brief to ensure this goal is not lost out of sight during the idea development. Additionally, understanding the goal of an assignment is noted as a crucial element in enabling useful and efficient creativity. To ensure clarity, all briefs analyzed explicitly mention the term “goal” in this component.

4.3.2 The Deliverables

While it is not always the case, often clients already have a perception of the form of deliverables they expect from the collaboration with a creative party. As described by respondent 9, airtime (radio or television) may have already been purchased prior to having developed a commercial

concept. Especially during phases where external parties such as production houses and directors are involved, the setting of expectations and hence also the deliverables is key to a successful collaboration.

What are the deliverables that we need to make? [...] If we have a script for tv, but we also need to make all these other dynamic videos; GIFs, Facebook posts, Instagram posts and those kind of things, I need to know. Otherwise I'll spend all the budget on just the TV commercial, but if you want more, I need to know about that upfront. (Respondent 2, RTV Producer at production agency)

Without practical information as such, easily avoidable errors can be mitigated through clear communication. Important is to note that the definitions of these deliverables become more in-depth as the creative process progresses and choices have been made. Amongst the analyzed briefs, the sub-briefs added defining elements as *emotions* and *styles* to further ensure consistency in decision making later down the pipeline whereas client briefs. This convergence of decisions being made and communicated is carried forth in the writing of the treatment. Here decisions to make a production producible are proposed to be either accepted or rejected.

He'll [director] say, I would use for example this cinematographer with this type of lighting and of course this type of music. And he really makes the translation step from how would he film the proposed script from an art-directors' perspective. And that is all written down by him in his treatment. (Respondent 2, RTV Producer at a production agency)

Hence, while the definitions of the deliverables are ever dynamic and being further defined, choices which have been finalized are always included to ensure that these decisions are carried forth in further development.

4.3.3 *The Constraints*

As described earlier, the setting of constraints ensures that creatives can create products which are also feasible within the realm of possibility. During the first three briefs in the production process; *client brief*, *debrief* and *creative brief* these constraints are critical in defining the trajectory of the creative products. In the analyzed briefs this is mostly outed in the defining of target audiences (hence restricting creative choices which are not aimed at said target audience) and practical information such as budget and deadlines. During sub-briefs and treatments these have shown to be a less prevalent aspect but could be included during the oral briefings with which they are often paired. The constraints follow the shape of becoming more well-defined during the phases of the creative process. A concrete example of this can be the defining of the target audience.

So I do my work properly when I can define better what we're actually trying to do, for example

when [redacted client name] comes to us and says, our target audience for [redacted product] is 25 to 65 years old, men and women, low education [...] that in no way inspires, who are these people? What do they like? [...] and these details we'll put in the debrief. (Respondent 5, strategic producer at a production agency)

However, certain elements may be less dynamic such as budgets and deadlines which are often set by a client. While these are often thought to set in stone, respondents have given examples where certain ideas may require a higher budget, and that a client can be so convinced on the value, that they are willing to offer this excess. Respondent 8 therefor notes the importance of seeing constraints as guidelines and that “bravery is needed to make things happen in this world.” This followed an example of him losing a pitch to another agency who proposed a concept exceeding the budget seven-fold. In less extreme examples, both respondents 2 and 9 indicate how constraints can be bent to make certain ideas possible. It is therefore important to recognize constraints as flexible guidelines which can inspire in which realm creatives can think. Being able to test this flexibility is however something which comes with *experience* and *talent* as recognized by respondents 1, 2, 7a, 7b, 8 and 9.

4.3.4 The ‘Good to know’

The *good to know* category is a collection of miscellaneous elements which can help those for whom the brief is written conduct their task. As described, these can vary depending on the organization, individuals and the current phase of the creative process. Amongst client briefs this can involve supplementary information on new “to be released products which we [creative agency] need to consider” (respondent 5, strategic producer at a creative agency) as to make sure clashing statements are not made or general background information to provide creatives with a solid background. This is reflected by the client brief in analyzed this research. In it the company sketches a future direction in which they are headed and where said product fits in this future vision. This to ensure that the final creative product will not clash with these future plans.

At a later stage ‘good to know’ information can include *creative books* as described by multiple respondents which aid as an inspirational tool or background information to ensure a better understanding of the topic at hand.

If they [creatives] don't understand the material, then I first need to ensure that they do. So for example we do a lot for [redacted complex and niche product]. And I had underestimated that. I'd go and brief a team who had no idea how that worked and what it entails, and I remember thinking; ‘shit, if I'd known that, I would have written my brief totally differently.’ (Respondent 5, strategic producer at a creative agency)

This supplementary information varies greatly per project and team, yet, can be crucial in differentiating a successful project from an unsuccessful one. This is reflected in the analyzed briefs which show a

further in-depth explanation for a difficult financial product versus a shorter brief for a simpler consumer product.

This chapter of this research has provided an additional understanding of the overlapping similarities in briefs. It has concluded that while all briefs are unique as described in chapter 4.1, there are four core elements which make up the briefs used in the creative process as justified by the interviews and further supported through the analyzed briefs.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Creative briefs: blessing or curse?

Having recognized that briefings are different depending on their usage, many overlapping similarities have been found with regards to implicit meanings and the ways in which they can help their users in their creative endeavours. This makes the question whether creative briefs are a blessing or a curse a difficult one to answer due to the many different forms these briefs can take. Nonetheless, the consensus seems to be that in fact creative briefs are greatly a blessing for those in the advertising and branding industry thanks to its ability to be shaped around these individual needs. This is greatly in line with the literature stating that each creative endeavour is unique dependent on factors such as the involved individuals, the goal of the final creative product and the phase of production (Baer, 2012; Griffin, 2008).

However, beyond the fact that all briefs are unique, many similarities have been found in the way that they aid actors during their stages of creative production. This is mainly in the form of acting as a communicative device, especially as production teams grow in size. In line with theory on the importance of 'good communication' in the setting of teamwork and collaboration, the need for clear communication increases as team sizes grow (Stempfle & Badke-Schaub, 2002). This communication is critical in the communicating of decisions to ensure that all work done acts towards pushing the creative concept uni-directionally, which was as mentioned a critical aspect by many respondents in the competitive industry. Additionally, 'good communication' aids in providing understanding by actors who are involved at a later stage of the creative pipeline (for example during production). This understanding can prove critical in preventing the NIH syndrome and incoherent design (Antons et al., 2017; Griffin, 2008; Rosing et al., 2018). This allows for multiple actors and/or organizations to work on separate (parts of) productions and maintain a synergizing effect. Furthermore, 'good communication' is recognized as a technique for preventing disappointment of those involved. Properly communicating expectations and requirements helps ensuring feasibility and reduces wasted work by ensuring that all parties are *on the same page*. While extensive briefs are not always feasible due to time constraints, respondents still recognized the importance communicating these expectations between parties. It is hence concluded that as a communicative device, the creative brief is mostly beneficial. Yet due to the inability to construe nuance and ensured understanding, the brief should be recognized as a supplementary communicative tool to verbal and other written communication between parties.

Additionally, the research has found the function creative briefs have in creative facilitation. While Brown et al.'s (2017) research noted the use of priming as a common element in creative briefs, no respondents noted the positive influence of being offered near primes as stimulus of cognitive associations. Instead, respondents mention how briefs offer inspiration by filtering out unnecessary information to enable creatives to 'go deep' in a certain idea. Respondents noted the importance of decisions to be made prior to trying to efficiently create creative concepts. Specifically, the element of *budget* was considered a critical point which clients found difficult to construe, yet is recognized as defining guideline for the possibilities of the final product. While recognizing a different form of

inspiration as indicated by Brown et al.'s (2017) research, the creative brief is still recognized as valuable in providing inspiration. However, greatly due to its leading to a *moment of deciding* for possible propositions, not so much in the form of priming. As recognized by both design principles of convergence and the impact of constraints on creativity, making these decisions is critical in creating a successful creative product. One aspect which has been mentioned by numerous respondents as being the 'holy grail' of creativity is the concept of *going off brief*. This implies that creative briefs do hinder creativity in a particular manner, yet no respondent could explain what the added benefit of *going off brief* is for the final product.

Additionally, the conclusion that briefs don't necessarily include near primes as inspiration is an indication of variance between briefs on an international scale. Where research conducted in the UK (Turnbull & Wheeler, 2017) and Australia (Brown, et al. 2020, Hill & Johnson, 2004) found near priming as a common use, the results of this research has found otherwise. Through quantitative research, the commonalities and differences between creative briefs at an international level could be further developed. Especially, in respect to collaborative work between international parties, this could provide valuable insight to the further developing a *common language* between parties.

The use of Perry-Smith & Mannucci's (2017) framework has proven valuable in analysing the way in which tools can aid creative producers in their various needs. While a focus was put on the four identified needs instead of the four phases of production, the framework holds and provides a clear reference to understanding the ways in which tools can be used during production of any creative endeavour. Additionally, the respondents have further supported the four needs of creatives identified by Perry-Smith & Mannucci's 2017 study. This further supports their conclusions reached.

Furthermore, this study aimed to shed light on the dynamic capabilities of the used briefs throughout the creative process. Based on the design principles of di- and convergence (Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998), the briefs reflect the choices made and the possibilities these choices enable. While setting ever growing and definite restrictions and guides as the process goes from client brief to sub-briefs, these restrictions allow for actors to enable their talent and creative freedom within these new confines. While briefs themselves generally do not change once they are written, the succeeding briefs will reflect these new decisions. This has shown the brief to be a more significant contribution to the creative process as the conclusions reached by Kover (1995) and Janssen & Smith (1991) which is more in line with recent studies such as that of Turnbull & Wheeler (2017) and Kilgour & Koslow (2009). This suggests a shift in the usage and acceptance of briefs as a part of the creative process. As suggest by anecdotal experience of respondent 7a, this could be due to the higher (time)pressure in the industry to create creative work compared to the 1990's. This however would require a further historical analysis which was beyond the scope of this research.

Finally, the goal of this study was to explore the two-faced coin of the creative brief; a blessing and a curse. While respondents have noted that the writing of a brief is something which not all have time or a need for, all respondents agree that the use of a creative brief "*will never work against you.*" (respondent 4). However, this does not mean, that creative briefs do not come without hiccups, as

respondents 6a and 6b highlighted that proper use of a creative brief is crucial in determining its value. While many respondents have noted that not all clients are sufficiently equipped in knowing how to use a brief, this can over time be trained to close the language gap between parties. Whether all creatives are willing to help in this, is a personal preference, especially as many have found successful alternative strategies.

5.2 Implications of the study

Not only has this study offered a further understanding of the creative process at large as well as the needs of creative producers from a theoretical standpoint, it also offers practical insights for practitioners. This research further supports the claim of all creative forms of production following a similar four-phase model. While all processes are unique, the general lines can still be applied as found in the theory (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017; Roozenburg & Eekels, 1998) to represent the (Dutch) advertising industry. Additionally, this study has found that the model suggested by Perry-Smith & Mannucci (2017) on the needs of creative producers can be further expanded to include and research the tools which these producers use. This can be greatly valuable for practical application to both those in the industry as well as for education. This applicability of the model to practitioners also applies to the conclusions of this research on creative briefs. Better understanding the value and use of creative briefs can aid those in the industry in streamlining communication and offering perspective on the value of using such tools. Not only for those in advertising, but in the creative industries in general.

5.3 Limitations of the study

Given the explorative nature of this research, it naturally comes with numerous limitations in providing in depth conclusions. Firstly, the limited sample size of respondents due to the constraints detailed in section 3 would ideally be expanded. While the current sample provided a wide representation of the industry's landscape, more participants could have provided a further grounding of the conclusions reached. Especially inclusion of even larger agencies (100+ employees) could have offered a valuable extension of the research. While an attempt was made, no agencies of this scale were found wishing to participate.

Similarly, a larger sample of briefs which could have been analysed would have offered a firmer base on which conclusions could be based. Since this was not the core of the research, and the confidential nature in which briefs are shared, this unfortunately was not possible in the given timeframe of the research. However, a discourse analysis of a large sample of briefs could prove valuable.

Additionally, the circumstances of conducting this research during the COVID-19 crisis must be noted. This has not only made the finding of respondents difficult; it may have also hindered an accurate representation of 'normal circumstances'. Firstly, forcing two of the interviews to be conducted through an online intermediary (ZOOM video calls) which may have tampered understanding from both the interviewer as well as the interviewee. However, the second element was only revealed upon concluding how much the brief is used for communicative purposes. This while the year prior to the research, communications have been conducted through anything but 'normal means'. Hence, the way in which

creative briefs have been used in the past year may not have been representative for ‘normal circumstances’. Nonetheless, many of the examples given by respondents nor the analysed briefs were solely situated during the corona crisis. Therefore, it must be noted that while some discrepancies may be present, the global conclusions found are believed to be accurate as of the author’s interpretation.

Beyond this, interview bias should be kept in mind as a potential risk of conducting any form of interview, but especially a semi-structured one as was the case. While conducting an interview with follow-up questions requires knowledge and understanding on the subject, this may sub-consciously lead to *steering* interviewees into answering in a certain manner. Therefore creating fully objective (qualitative) research is extremely difficult. While attempts have been made reduce said bias to a minimum (not mentioning creative briefs from the start, posing questions in a neutral manner, stressing that there is no false or correct answer to any question), one can never fully negate such biases.

5.4 Further proposed research

Beyond the proposed improvements of the current research, the author has identified the topic of going off-brief as an interesting extension of understanding the creative process. Nearly all respondents mention the excitement and ‘better results’ of elements or entire projects which have gone off-brief as a near *holy grail* within the industry. This highly contrasting and conflicting notion of wanting to go off-brief would make for an exciting insight on balancing this *ultimate creative freedom* with the responsibilities of creativity within an organization. While off-brief results are in line with the *nobody knows anything principle* prevalent in many media industries (Havens & Lotz, 2012) further research can shed light on the irony of briefs which stimulate going off-brief, or achieving the same results of going off-brief yet in a controlled manner.

Secondly, the author suggests a further study on the conflicting conclusion of *immersion vs information overload* in relation to enabling creativity. While *weak and strong ties theory* considers immersion in data as a positive factor in enabling creative connotations (Granovetter, 1983), many of the respondents note the importance of filtering out irrelevant information to be able to create relevant associations and hence relevant creative products. A further understanding of this contradiction can be valuable in mapping and streamlining of the creative process at both a theoretical understanding as well as for practical implications.

Additionally, a further grasp on the differences in the creative process between independent, collectives and agencies can provide valuable insight. Concluding that production crew sizes was a key factor in changing the ways in which individuals worked (with a brief), a further research between the creative process of those involved throughout the entire pipeline in all aspects versus the creative steps of those who only partake in a particular aspect (jack of all traits vs. teams of experts) could be insightful with respect to understanding the effect of team compositions on the creative process. This as those who take part in the entire process cannot ‘ignore’ knowledge acquired in earlier steps an element which some creatives noted as, “knowing more doesn’t always help” (respondent 7a).

Finally, a further understanding of the *client-creative language gap* could offer practical guidance in optimizing the process with which clients write a client brief. While respondents have noted how

experience or alternative methods can result in valuable client briefs, this is not always the case or can be time consuming. Understanding why many clients fail at writing a successful first brief can be a first step in improving this process. Additionally, better understanding of the gap between client and creative can provide a better well-rounded communication throughout the remainder of the creative process also.

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Appendix A

Based on the following interview guide, the semi-structured interviews were conducted. Note that all interviews were conducted in Dutch and hence the original interview guide was Dutch. For coherence in the thesis, the translated version has been written below:

Introduction:

- Thank for participation
- Reminder that participation is completely voluntary, and that any question may be skipped if this is wished or participation can be stopped at any moment. All results will be anonymous, so speaking freely is encouraged.
- Can you tell me something about your function?
 - Title
 - Responsibilities
 - For freelancers: represented by an agent?
- How did you start what you do now?
 - How long have you done this?
 - Education?
 - Prior functions

Creative Process in General:

- Where do you position yourself in the creative pipeline? Where in this pipeline are you mostly involved?
 - What has already been done when a new assignment arrives at you?
 - What is it that you do exactly?
 - When and how do you pass on an assignment? What is done?
- Do you have a 'standard' work methodology?
 - What does this look like?
 - How did you develop this? Education, developed over time, taught by someone else?
 - Is this specifically for you or your function?
 - How do you develop new ideas?
 - Iterations?
 - Specific steps?
 - Where do you find inspiration?
- What type of tools do you use to aid you in your function?
 - Colleagues?
 - Competition?
 - Specific design processes?
 - Briefs?

The creative brief: (brief explanation that this is what the research is really about, no formal definition of the creative brief)

- Are briefs something you commonly use in your role?
 - What does it look like?
 - What do you use it for?
- What do briefs look like for you? (what do and don't they include?)
 - What's it like when you receive a new brief? What is mostly important for you?
 - What's it like while you're working with it? Dynamic? Do you reference it often?
 - What's it like when you're done with it and pass it on? Who does your brief go to? How do you adapt the brief for the next party?

- How do you experience the use of creative briefs?
 - What feelings do new briefs lead to? Describe these feelings?
 - What do you use the brief for?
 - What don't you use the brief for?
 - Describe the 'ideal' brief that you like receiving
 - Which things can be frustrating about briefs/ when they're involved in a brief?
- How do you use briefs?
 - When do you let it go?
 - When do you mostly refer to it?

End:

- Are there any specific things about your way of working that you'd like to share?
- Do you potentially have an old briefing which I'd be able to take a look at? (explain that details can be redacted out of it, if need be only I will look at it, maybe templates which are used?)
- Has this interview gotten you to think about things differently about your creative process?
- Thank again, give them chocolate 😊