

Female creative managers as drivers for gender diversity in advertising creative departments: a critical mass approach

Female
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Abstract

Purpose – The scarcity of women in advertising creative departments has been reported globally, particularly in creative managerial roles. This study goes a step beyond this evidence since this paper aims to test whether having at least one token woman in creative managerial positions (token+) may be associated with a larger presence of females in low-level creative jobs compared to creative departments led only by male creative managers.

Design/methodology/approach – A content analysis of the credit forms of 839 Spanish campaigns released in 2019 was conducted to determine the gender composition of 116 creative departments with more than three professionals.

Findings – Generalized Poisson Regressions indicated that when at least a token woman is present in a creative management role within agency networks, the number of females in low-level positions doubles with respect to creative departments led only by male managers. This relation was not found for independent agencies, though. The results are discussed under the lens of critical mass theory, attraction paradigm and homophily theory.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, it is the first time in the literature that the relation among the number of token+ advertising female creative managers and the amount of females in lower-level creative positions is tested. This research is also original because the sample is from a non-Anglo-Saxon country. Moreover, the use of the Generalized Poisson Regressions technique is another novelty of this paper.

Keywords Advertising, Creativity, Critical mass, Gender diversity, Management, Tokenism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The environment within advertising creative departments has been largely described as unequal in gender (Grow and Deng, 2015; Thompson-Whiteside *et al.*, 2020; Windels, 2011),

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and this may be considered alarming since creatives are responsible for the creation of messages to consumers (Sasser *et al.*, 2013). The scarcity of female creatives has been reported as an enduring global issue (Mallia, 2008; Mallia and Windels, 2018). Female creatives only reach 23.5% (Deng and Grow, 2018) and just 16.1% in creative management positions (Deng and Grow, 2018).

Despite the percentages presented above, little is known concerning the relationship between the number of female creative managers and the manifold low-level female creatives. This research attempts to fill this gap. Inspired by an article that suggests that increasing the number of females in leadership positions is effective in attracting more women employees (trickle-down effects) in male-tilted industries (Ali *et al.*, 2021), we conducted an exploratory study to determine whether the gender composition of managerial creative positions is associated with a greater representation of women in low-level creative roles at a given point in time. Moreover, by exploring the relationship between *tokens+* (at least one female creative manager in a group of males) and workplace gender diversity, this paper contributes to theory development on how organizational [*token+* creative] leaders might influence organizational gender diversity practices (Ng and Sears, 2017) in advertising creative departments. In this regard, the size of the creative department, the type of agency (networks that undertake annual audits of equality and diversity versus free independent local agencies) and the location were also considered. These relationships, not yet explored from a statistics standpoint in the literature, are analyzed through the lens of critical mass theory. In this matter, we followed the calls for research in gender diversity (Biswas *et al.*, 2021), particularly for studies in non-Anglo-Saxon territories (Gould *et al.*, 2018), selecting Spain, a country that ranks in the middle in worldwide advertising creativity gender parity rankings (Deng and Grow, 2018).

Although we are unable to inform about the mechanisms that link the representation of managerial female creatives to workplace gender diversity, the results obtained in our research somehow challenge the traditional notion of the weak *token* women. *Tokenism* can be described as the symbolic (but not significant) inclusion of one woman in male-dominated areas assuming that equality exists only with this presence since their companionship endows normality and masks the female underrepresentation (Kanter, 1977a, 1977b). We suggest, though, that women might have a key role in improving the gender diversity of creative departments in agency network structures, thus becoming critical actors because they are more likely to advocate for gender diversity, promote gender equality and change organization culture around women's opportunities (Biswas *et al.*, 2021). Although this research focuses on the connection between tokenism and gender, other demographic factors such as ethnicity (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2023) and age (Brodmerkel and Barker, 2019) can also be related to tokenism.

Literature review

Female creatives in advertising

Qualitative research on female advertising creative managers has inquired into gender dynamics reporting gender unequal work practices and vertical barriers in several regards (Mensa and Grow, 2019). Authors have particularly highlighted the disadvantages of being a female leader in creative departments, for example, working under masculine styles of management (male norms, male sense of humor and stereotyped approval processes) (Cheow and Chaidaroon, 2016; Crewe and Wang, 2018; Mallia, 2008; Thompson-Whiteside *et al.*, 2020). These and other negative experiences (e.g. motherhood penalty, working only for pink ghetto accounts – e.g. household products – less access to senior peers and devaluation of ideas) framed into informal *boys club* networks (locker room culture and

homophilic practices) and sexist or paternalistic codes that make it difficult for women to progress (Crewe and Wang, 2018; Mensa and Grow, 2022; Windels and Lee, 2012; Windels and Mallia, 2015). While some women who stay in the industry may masculinize themselves and adopt *male* behaviors to keep leading while maintaining the status quo (Grow *et al.*, 2012; Stainback *et al.*, 2016), others may feel too weak and alone to start a change (Grow and Deng, 2020; Mallia, 2016). As a result, women who do not develop a leadership identity (lack of power and legitimacy); may abandon the industry due to psychological stress, tension and fatigue (Thompson-Whiteside *et al.*, 2020; Windels and Mallia, 2015). However, there is a third reality, women who adopt and keep a transformational style when leading creative departments (Montes Mojoneo and Roca, 2016). This study argues that female creative leaders can find their own leadership style that allows them to become good references and mentors for younger creatives (Habib and Patwardhan, 2020), thus giving value to female creatives and reducing gender bias in women's advancement (Grow and Deng, 2015; Mallia, 2016; Crewe and Wang, 2018; Grow and Deng, 2020). In this regard, the five conscious strategies used by female leaders – in-group preferences, out-group exclusion, networking, mentoring opportunities and the withering of gender-linked stereotypes – suggest that women in positions of organizational power may promote gender equality in the workplace (Stainback *et al.*, 2016, p. 114).

A critical mass approach

Although an extensive literature in gender management examines how gender diversity positively affects performance outcomes (Moreno-Gómez *et al.*, 2018), in the field of advertising creativity, the presence of female creative managers is so scarce that it is a priority to first study whether the presence of female creative managers can be associated with gender diversity in creative departments. In this regard, critical mass, as part of the organizational demography theory, explores the conditions under which minority leaders impact workplace composition and recruitment (Cook and Glass, 2015).

From a critical mass perspective, a higher presence of women at upper-level ranks would increase their representation at lower levels within the department (Cohen *et al.*, 1998; Gould *et al.*, 2018; Biswas, 2021). As female creatives reach managerial positions, they will have the power and status to modify the workforce structure (Grow and Deng, 2020). This possibility is linked to the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), which suggests that female creatives tend to attract similar people who want to be around them, thus acting as magnets for young female creatives outside the agency. Therefore, they may more easily interact with each other and select same-gender subordinates to promote a positive self-identity (vs only male outgroups), thus ensuring positive effects on group functioning and performance (Williams and O'Reilly, 1998). In this matter, gender surface-level similarity would also tend to predict affiliation and attraction (Mannix and Neale, 2005), which could result in more females being attracted to work in women-friendly environments (Chesterman and Ross-Smith, 2006; Ali *et al.*, 2021).

Along these lines, once females are working in one creative department, they can build networks (Ibarra, 1992), both inside and outside the advertising agency. In this regard, homophily theory “suggests that women's ability to successfully advance their leadership goals depends on the presence of other women leaders [upper-level female managers] in the organization” (Glass and Cook, 2018, p. 815); so female (creatives) in management positions would consciously advocate for gender diversity within the departments (Gould *et al.*, 2018).

To date, studies on the number of female creatives in advertising have mapped the prevalence of females in creative departments (Grow and Deng, 2015); that is, the number of women compared to the number of men. In this vein, a seven-year follow-up indicates

positive linkages between being a man and being an advertising creative director (Grow and Deng, 2020). However, these studies did not consider the relationship between the few women in creative management positions and the number of women in lower ranks. Only one study has been conducted in the field of advertising in this line of research (Cohen and Broschak, 2013, p. 509), which examined the relationship between the proportion of female managers and the number of new management jobs initially filled by women versus men over a 13-year period in New York City and discovered that the number of newly created jobs first occupied by women increases with an agency's proportion of female managers. However, no distinction with creative departments has been performed. The absence of advertising literature on this topic makes it necessary for this paper to consult management literature to provide some context on how other types of organizations operate in this matter.

Token women as critical actors

A sole woman in a creative managerial position must be considered as a *token* (Kramer et al., 2007). Tokens are associated with several problems (visibility – performance scrutiny by workmates – polarization – exaggeration of differences and overgeneralization – and assimilation – role entrapment –) (Kanter (1977a, 1977b)). In this regard, tokenism may be viewed as negative if it is purely responding to institutional pressure by having a minority group symbol instead of being a genuine gender diversity strategy (Bilimoria, 2006; Konrad et al., 2008). One of the negative consequences of token managers is the appearance of having achieved gender parity, as their visibility may prevent the advancement of other women (Kanter, 1977b). A token could promote gender diversity in creative departments, becoming a “significant influencer” (Elstad and Ladegard, 2012). A stream of research on critical mass theory has studied the threshold effects of having women in top-level positions. The proposed number of female executives suggested to influence gender diversity in lower-level positions varies across studies, ranging from one (Bilimoria, 2006; Cook and Glass, 2015) to two (Biswas et al., 2021) and even to three women, which some scholars consider the *magic number* for promoting gender diversity because females are no longer isolated or ignored (Joecks et al., 2013; Konrad et al., 2008; Kramer et al., 2007; Torchia et al., 2011) and because they increase their relative power (Stainback et al., 2016).

Some authors also suggest that the concept of critical mass (measured in numbers or percentages of women) should be replaced by “critical actors” (Childs and Krook, 2008) and “critical acts” (Dahlerup, 2006), that is, “gender conscious” people achieving feminist or women-friendly outcomes (Childs and Krook, 2008). In this regard, some scholars point to the positive effects of having at least one female in managerial positions. It has been found that having a sole female on the board increases the likelihood of additional female director appointments by 60% in the US firms (Guldiken et al., 2019), expands diversity policies by 74% in Fortune 500 firms (Cook and Glass, 2015) and increases the promotion of women to executive positions within the firm by 84% (Bilimoria, 2006). Furthermore, adding two female directors to the board instead of one generates a 90% increase in female executive representation (Gould et al., 2018). In the same direction, female top managers have been found to be influential in broadening the subsequent representation of women in the lower-level managerial ranks of Australian and the US firms (Ali et al., 2021; Biswas et al., 2021; Kurtulus and Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012; Stainback et al., 2016).

Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed to test the positive effects of *tokenism* on gender diversity in advertising creative departments beyond its negative symbolic role:

H1. The presence of at least one *token* female creative manager, who is considered a critical actor, will be associated with a larger presence of women in low-level positions within advertising creative departments compared to creative departments managed exclusively by males.

Methodology: content analysis for this research

The present research is grounded on three purposely generated databases from a content analysis using rough data from Spanish advertising campaign credits published in trade press in 2019 (before the COVID-19 pandemic). Spain was selected since it is the fourth European economy (Statista, 2022), and its creative quality has been recognized worldwide, being ranked seventh in the Cannes Festival of Creativity in 2021, with an average of 27 lions per year (2002–21) (Reason Why, 2021). Furthermore, the prevalence of female creatives in Spain has been reported at just 24.5% and as low as 13.2% in creative management roles, ranking 27 out of 50 countries, below the USA (14, 19.5%) but above the UK (31, 10.6%) (Deng and Grow, 2018), which makes it appropriate to study since it ranks in the middle. There is no free census of creatives available for Spanish agencies; thus, from a technical point of view, Spain was chosen since rough information on the composition of the departments was accessible through a paid subscription of the university library to the magazine [Anuncios.com](#), which publishes ad credit forms with the names and positions of the professionals involved in the creation of advertising campaigns. Moreover, the authors know this market in detail.

Ad credits sample selection

The sample is composed of all the 2019 advertising campaign credits published by [Anuncios.com](#) [*anuncios* means ads in Spanish], a specialized magazine that has the highest national readership in the industry in Spain (MarketingNews, 2019). Agencies inform this magazine about the practitioners working for each released campaign. A total of 839 campaign forms were manually retrieved from the Web.

Selection procedures and reliability

Three different databases were built for this study. An initial spreadsheet was compiled to include the names of all creatives mentioned on all ad campaign credits, with a total of 3,969 individuals. From there, a second worksheet called *census* was generated. Repetitions of observations, e.g. the same practitioner appearing in two or more credit forms, were deleted based on the following criteria:

- (1) the last title was considered in the case of practitioners who changed agencies (e.g. if a practitioner was found to have worked in two different agencies, only their participation in the last campaign was considered);
- (2) the last position in case of internal promotions (e.g. if a creative had the role of copywriter at the beginning of the year and creative director later in the year, only the most recent campaign as creative director was included); and
- (3) the highest positions in the case of different roles played in different campaigns (e.g. if the same person had the role of copywriter and creative director in one campaign, the higher position was selected).

This procedure resulted in a second database, which included a detailed Spanish *census* of 1,311 advertising creatives, a similar amount to previous studies using ad credits (Mallia and Windels, 2018, reported 1,070 individuals per year).

Besides the name, coding included four variables: gender, position, agency type and business location. After the coding was completed, a second trained person coded a random 10% sample of the campaigns to establish intercoder reliability. This was close to 100% in all cases: gender (98.49%), position (98.49%), agency type (100%) and location (99.50%). Disagreements were discussed and amended.

Coding procedures and preliminary measures

Working with the second database, the first step consisted in classifying gender and positions.

Gender was coded as male or female (gender is usually easy to recognize in Spanish names, e.g. Juan-male and Juana-female). In the case of gender recognition difficulties, internet searches or phone calls were made to the advertising agencies for clarification. Regarding positions, Creative Chief Officers, Executive Creative Directors and Creative Directors were coded as Creative Managers, while nonmanagerial creatives comprising creative supervisors, art directors and copywriters; creative supervision was included as a low-level position since it maintains gender status differences (Cohen and Broschak, 2013) by giving individuals more responsibilities but keeping them away from the status of creative management positions. In our census sample, women accounted for only 18% of managerial roles and 42.7% of low-level positions in respect to men (an initial balanced representation). Female representatives were absent in 25.1% of the agencies. Moreover, 65.1% of the organizations did not have any women in management positions (male uniform groups), 4% had *token* women (less than 15% of representation, male-skewed group) and 30.9% were part of a starting tilted group (more than 15% of female representation but less than 35%). In low-level positions, 33.7% of the agencies did not have any women, 26% reported one woman and 39.5% credited two or more women.

In the second stage of coding with the second database, the type of agency and business location were classified. Two types of agencies were defined by the researchers in a list, which could be easily consulted; networks, referred to foreign multinational agencies operating in several countries (28.4% in our sample, e.g. DDB), while independent agencies were defined as firms founded in Spain, not tied to agency networks (71.6%, e.g. DoubleYou), usually with smaller structures and that were established locally after a male creative leaves a network to benefit from his creative potential (McLeod *et al.*, 2011). As for business location, Madrid, the capital of Spain, was considered as the main business area (63.2% of the sample), since it concentrates most of the advertising business in Spain (Infoadex Report, 2019) and the peripheral cities closer to the coast were labeled as secondary business locations (Barcelona, 23.7% of the sample and other Spanish cities, 13.1%). To sum up, an example is Juana, a woman who worked as a creative manager for a network agency in Barcelona.

Being aware of the percentages above, the final database was generated. In this third database, creative departments in agencies were used as the unit of analysis; the number of professionals working in each of the creative departments was calculated and nested into each agency. Thus, creatives were assigned one by one to their creative department, split by gender and position, along with the type of agency and business location. This classification procedure resulted in 191 creative departments from 165 agencies. Finally, with the numbers of creatives in each agency, creative departments were recoded in three sizes in the third database: small (less than four people, 75 agencies and 39.3% of the sample), medium (four to seven practitioners, 67 agencies and 35.1%) and large (more than seven creatives, 49 agencies and 25.6%). In summary, a creative department could have one woman in a managerial position of four male managers and two women in nonmanagerial positions of

ten practitioners in a network agency with a large creative department in a secondary business location, such as Barcelona.

The low presence of females found (33.6%), their absence in one out of every four agencies and the positive skewness of the data from the final database, influenced the way authors dealt with the data. In these circumstances, due to the low variability of small departments (excess of zeros), it is advised to identify and eliminate structural zeroes from the data set (Coxe *et al.*, 2009, p. 134). Since only 17% of the small agencies had female managers (83% of zeroes), all agencies with less than four people were excluded from the analysis and those which could potentially produce nonzero counts were retained (medium-size had 34.3% of female managers and large-size 49%). Furthermore, many of the small creative departments just reported the name of one creative or did not show an organizational chart with power relationships (e.g. reported two creative directors, which are at the same level). Thus, the 75 small creative departments (including less than four creatives) were discarded, resulting in a final sample of 116 departments (95.5% with the presence of females – 85.5% with at least one woman in low-level positions and 40.5% with at least a woman in creative management roles, 37.9% in networks, 57.8% medium-size and 64.7% from Madrid).

Finally, to test the hypothesis, the departments were dichotomized into two categories: departments with all-male managers versus *token+* departments – which included departments with at least one female manager. The outcome variable was the count of women in low-level positions; that is, “a variable that takes on discrete values (0, 1, 2, ...) reflecting the number of occurrences of an event in a fixed period of time” (Coxe *et al.*, 2009, p. 121). Proportions (percentage of women in respect to men) were discarded as a measure due to the few women found in creative management roles (18%).

Organization size in management research (Hillman *et al.*, 2007; Geiger and Marlin, 2012) and location (Topić, 2020) have been reported as important variables to predict both the existence of women in organizations and the impact on the dynamics in advertising agencies. In this regard, the type of agency (network vs independent), the size of the creative department (medium, 4–6 members vs large, 7+ members) and the location (Madrid as the main business area and the other cities as secondary) were also included in the models presented in the following section.

Statistical analysis and results

The hypothesis of the study asserted that having at least one *token* female creative manager (*token+*) would be associated with a larger presence of women in low-level positions, with respect to creative departments led only by male creative managers. Due to the highly skewed nature of the count data (Green, 2021), Generalized Poisson Regressions, which are used when the response variable is a count, were run through the GAMLj module in the free statistical software Jamovi 2.0 (www.jamovi.org). Of the six models presented (see Table 1), and according to log-likelihood ratio tests, which assess the goodness of fit of two competing statistical models based on the ratio of their likelihoods, the fifth was considered the most parsimonious since it explains 48% of the variance with three variables ($R^2 = 0.48$, AIC = 455.808).

In the fifth model, after controlling for agency type (network-independent) and department size (four to six members – seven or more members), an interaction effect between having at least one female creative manager (*token+*) and the type of agency was found [$\chi^2(1, 111) = 11.03, p < 0.001$] (see Figure 1).

Due to the interaction found, post hoc comparisons were conducted to show the difference in the means of the number of women in low-level positions between creative

Table 1.
Log-likelihood ratio tests of *gender diversity* in low-level positions when at least one female is a creative manager (Poisson models)

	Predictor variables	X ²	df	p	R ²	AIC	Residual DF	Deviance
Model 1	Token+ ^a	29.7	1	<0.001	0.09	577.560	114	296.24
Model 2	Agency type ^b	55.1	1	<0.001	0.16	552.174	114	270.861
Model 3	Department size ^c	119.0	1	<0.001	0.36	448.016	114	206.702
Model 4	Business location ^d	10.7	1	0.001	0.03	596.577	114	315.264
Model 5 ^e	Token+ ^a	7.79	1	0.005	0.48	455.808	111	168.495
	Agency type	10.76	1	0.001				
	Department size	64.54	1	<0.001				
	Ag. Type × Token+ ^a	11.03	1	<0.001				
Model 6 ^e	Token+ ^a	7.50	1	0.006	0.49	453.551	110	164.238
	Agency type	12.04	1	<0.001				
	Department size	53.07	1	<0.001				
	Business location	4.26	1	0.039				
	Ag. Type × Token+ ^a	13.19	1	<0.001				

Notes: ^aToken+ = at least one female creative manager in the creative department; ^bAgency type = network-independent; ^cDepartment size = 4-6 – 7+ members; ^dBusiness location = main (Madrid) – secondary (Barcelona and other cities); ^eOnly significant *p*-values are shown

Source: Authors own creation

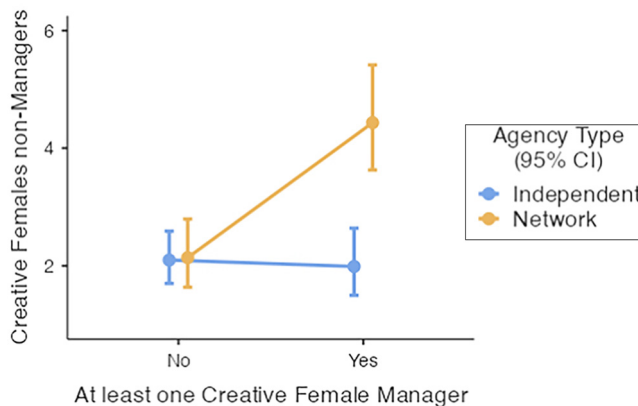


Figure 1.

Source: Authors own creation

departments with at least a token woman in management roles and all-male manager departments (see Table 2).

In network agencies, having at least one *token* female manager doubles the number of females in low-level positions compared to creative departments with only male managers [women at low-level_{Network Female Manager} = 4.43 – women at low-level_{Network Male Manager} = 2.14, exp(B) = 2.07, *p* < 0.001]. In the same way, having at least one *token woman* also doubles the number of women in low-level positions in network agencies compared to independent agencies with creative female managers [women at low-level_{Network Female Manager} = 4.43 – women at low-level_{Indep. Female Manager} = 1.99, exp(B) = 2.23, *p* < 0.001]. However, having at least one *token* female manager is not related to the number of females at low-level positions in independent agencies if compared with departments with only male creative managers, both in independent agencies (women at low-level_{Indep. Female Manager} = 1.99 – women at low-level_{Indep. Male Manager} = 2.10, *p* = 1)

Table 2.

Marginal means of women in low-level positions (Model 5)

Token+ ^a	Agency type	Mean count	SE	95% confidence interval	
				Lower	Upper
No	–	2.12	0.185	1.78	2.51
Yes	–	2.97	0.266	2.49	3.54
–	Independent	2.04	0.184	1.71	2.44
–	Network	3.08	0.278	2.58	3.68
No	Independent	2.10	0.225	1.70	2.59
No	Network	2.14	0.292	1.64	2.79
Yes	Independent	1.99	0.287	1.50	2.64
Yes	Network	4.43	0.453	3.63	5.42
Dep. Size	Members: 4–6	1.50	0.163	1.21	1.85
Size	Members: 7+	4.20	0.308	3.64	4.85
Location	Main	3.16	0.205	2.78	3.59
	Secondary	2.12	0.227	1.72	2.62

Notes: ^aAt least one female creative manager; The marginal means of one variable are the means for that variable averaged across every level of the other variable; SE = Standard error

Source: Authors own creation

Table 3.

Post hoc comparisons: at least one token*agency type

Token+ ^a	Agency type	Comparison		exp (B)	SE	z	p holm
		Token+ ^a	Agency type				
No	Independent	–	No	0.981	0.1699	–0.110	1.000
No	Independent	–	Yes	1.055	0.1898	0.299	1.000
No	Independent	–	Yes	2.114 ^b	0.0695	–5.094	<0.001
No	Network	–	Yes	2.074 ^c	0.0770	–4.567	<0.001
Yes	Independent	–	No	0.930	0.1838	–0.368	1.000
Yes	Independent	–	Yes	2.232 ^d	0.0784	–4.590	<0.001

Notes: ^aAt least one token woman; ^bInverted exp(B), $1/0.473 = 2.114$; ^cInverted exp(B), $1/0.482 = 2.074$; ^dInverted exp(B), $1/0.448 = 2.232$; SE = Standard error

Source: Authors own creation

and in network agencies (women at low-level $\text{Indep. Female Manager} = 1.99$ – women at low-level $\text{Network Male Manager} = 2.14, p = 1$) (see Table 3).

As the numbers above indicate, our hypothesis was partially confirmed since, in creative departments of network agencies, the presence of *token+* female managers is related to the number of women in low-level positions. However, this association was not found in creative departments within independent agencies.

Discussion and implications

The main purpose of this exploratory study was to unveil the positive gender dynamics within advertising creative departments and, from a critical mass perspective, to check if the presence of at least one token creative woman in managerial roles was associated with more women in creative low-level positions in a one-year period. The presence of women in Spanish creative departments, particularly in management positions (18% of females), is higher in respect to previous studies (Deng and Grow, 2018, informed 13.2%), but it is still low. Furthermore, using each creative department in agencies as a unit of analysis, this

article has been a first attempt in the literature to inform about the relation between at least one token female creative in managerial roles and women working in low-level creative positions. This questioning was based on previous positive results obtained from management literature (Bilimoria, 2006; Biswas, 2021; Gould *et al.*, 2018; Kirsch, 2018; Delgado-Piña *et al.*, 2020; Ali *et al.*, 2021) and from a study that considered all departments within advertising agencies together, which claimed the effect of having more women in teams when there was a higher presence of women as leaders (Cohen and Broschak, 2013). Since Spain ranks in the middle for creative advertising gender parity in this area worldwide (Deng and Grow, 2018), and creative departments have been documented to be largely gender unequal around the globe and results could be used as a first step to developing similar research on creative departments in other countries.

After controlling for agency type, department size and location, teams with at least one *token* woman as creative manager in network agencies doubles the number of women in low-level positions if compared to agencies with only male creative managers and if compared to independent agencies with at least one *token* woman. These results are consistent with those reported in management literature (e.g. 84% in Bilimoria, 2006, 74% in Cook and Glass, 2015 and 60% in Guldiken *et al.*, 2019). The interaction effect between gender and type of agency may suggest that homophily (Ibarra, 1992; McPherson *et al.*, 2001) and the similarity-attraction (Byrne, 1971) among female practitioners in network agencies, might work positively for gender equality, as previously suggested in management studies (Matsa and Miller, 2011), since at least one *token* woman in management seems to be related to more women in low-level positions. Results can be considered to challenge the traditional notion of the weak *token* women (Kanter, 1977a) and appear to support the notion of “critical actors” (Childs and Krook, 2008) and female creative directors as “significant influencers” (Elstad and Ladegard, 2012), labeled here as token+. Although the findings seem to align with network agency initiatives such as Omnifem, which “serves as a catalyst for increasing the influence and number of women leaders throughout the Omnicom network” (Omnicomgroup, 2023), the interaction found seems to suggest internal policies only partially work for creative departments; gender diversity is greater when women are leading this type of organization, which could be seen as a failure of the policies regarding creative departments led by men and a confirmation of the figure of the female as a critical actor. In this regard, the balance found in low-level creative roles, 42.7% in our sample, could be related to some extent to critical female actors since male-led creative departments in network agencies have half as many women in low-level positions than female-led departments.

On the other hand, having at least one *token* female creative manager was not associated with a larger number of women in low-level positions in independent agencies. These agencies are usually born after a male creative leaves a network to establish his own agency, which involves processes of “dis-identification” due to his managerial responsibilities to build an agency’s creative reputation (McLeod *et al.*, 2011) and this, along with smaller structures, might lead to a more gender unequal creative culture. So, these organizations seem to exaggerate the gendered dynamics compared to network creative departments led by women since having at least one *token* woman in management is not related to gender diversity in low-level positions. More research is needed on this matter to understand how agency types may affect gender inequality management behaviors.

In sum, our study has two main academic implications. This research allowed us to speculate quantitatively about the idea of female creative managers as key players and to determine that weak tokens become critical actors advocating for other women in network agencies. The study also enabled us to show the positive relation between token+ women and the number of nonmanagerial female creatives in network agencies. In this regard,

mentoring would be a way to reduce workplace gender segregation (Habbit, 2020), providing more opportunities to women in the advertising industry.

Limitations and future research

This research has several limitations. First, although credits in ads are a way of sharing visibility of creative work in the advertising sector, data are self-reported by creative teams and creatives less interested in visibility or working as freelancers could be absent from the sample. A second limitation is the fact that only one year was analyzed (2019), and a single year only describes who was there, but it is not enough to explain who hired the creatives, who was promoted and if female managers attract more females to management roles. Third, the sample of this study was only from one country (Spain); thus, building similar models with data from other countries and different durations could confirm women in network agencies as key actors in increasing the number of female creatives in the industry. Furthermore, surveys with creatives could allow more variables to be included in the models (e.g. age, gender-friendly perceptions, personal traits of creatives, etc.), to compare the characteristics of creative teams containing more female creative managers with departments that lack female creatives and to gain knowledge of the recruitment and promotion processes. This would also provide a deeper understanding of the value of women in network creative departments, which seems to be the best framework for women to develop and progress according to our data since today, only some female creative managers endure the locker room mentality with success (Montes Mojonero and Roca, 2016). All these perspectives would contribute to understanding gender inequality dynamics beyond numbers obtained only through ad credits.

Managerial implications for the advertising industry

This study reports the lack of gender diversity in creative management within advertising agencies and an initial balanced representation of female creatives in low-level positions (at least 40% of women), an indispensable step for placing more women in managerial roles. Moreover, it has been discovered that *token* female creative managers may “make a difference” (Dahlerup, 2006). Despite a widespread academic vindication of the need for more women in creative management to challenge this persistent gender diversity problem (Mallia, 2016), the issue remains as to how can a larger female representation be accelerated. An idea for advertising agencies to promote gender diversity in their creative departments would be the creation of a quality seal. In respect to creative clubs, women have presided over the Spanish Creative Club since 2017 and having women as leaders of similar organizations worldwide (e.g. IPA in the UK or One Club in the USA) could create such a seal to advocate for gender diversity in creative teams. Some encouraging initiatives have been launched in this regard for Latin American agencies (publicitarios.org, 2020), for UK firms (creativeequals.org) and for the USA (3percentmovement.com). But the success of this seal of quality relies on the support of clients concerned with gender diversity (e.g. unstereotypealliance.org), who could demand this seal to accept agencies to pitch their accounts as part of their corporate social responsibility strategy. Furthermore, gender diversity should be ranked since rankings are the way the industry works, and the Cannes Festival of Creativity could be responsible for this ranking, making gender discrimination visible through an organized system. This might be an indirect strategy to pressure agencies to introduce *voluntary* gender quotas (Dahlerup, 2006) since other previous initiatives based on agency willingness seem to have failed (e.g. the diversity agreement, Boulton, 2013). In this particular aspect, as described in other industries (Reguera-Alvarado and Bravo-Urquiza, 2020), academics may also play an important role, studying and publishing more quantitative research about the benefits of having more women in creative

management: do diverse creative teams win more awards?, do they generate higher billings? and do they report higher client satisfaction?, among other related topics. Having and communicating this data could indirectly pressure advertising agencies to promote more women to creative management positions.

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