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# How Pro-Social Purpose Agencies Define Themselves and Their Value: An Emerging Business Model in the Advertising-Agency World

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**ABSTRACT**

Organizations across sectors are collaborating on social initiatives, taking political action, and using media platforms to speak out on a range of social issues. This study deals with the emerging phenomena of purpose-driven and social-impact communications from an agency standpoint. This study employs inductive analysis to understand how such agencies define themselves, their value, and how agency process reflects their definitions. Twelve advertising professionals holding senior leadership positions within agencies specializing in purpose-driven and social-impact communications were interviewed to gain insights. These professionals feel they are a part of an emerging "fourth sector" within the advertising/communications agency landscape. The study's key insights hold prominent theoretical and practical implications for advertising literature, illustrating how changes external to advertising necessitate new paradigms in advertising agencies related to such things as communication goals and content, agency structure, and staffing.

The spirit of "purpose" and "social impact" is widespread within the marketing and advertising industry. The Association of National Advertisers (ANA) voted "brand purpose" the marketing word of the year (Duggan 2018), touting that purpose-driven marketing could increase consumer trust and brand advocacy while making the world a better place. A plethora of consumer reports mirror the call for organizations to actively help solve social problems (Edelman 2020, 2018; Dentsu Aegis Network 2017; Barton et al. 2016). Edelman's (2019) Trust Barometer report finds that belief-driven buying is now the "new normal" with 81% of respondents saying that they "must be able to trust the brand to do what is right." A company's societal impact (69%) influenced trust more than the product (62%) and customer experience (55%).

The cultural expectations for a for-profit company's "purpose," or reason for existence, are shifting from economic and transactional (i.e., providing goods and services) notions to pro-social ones that require organizations to also work toward the bettering of society, a social aim, or to solve current social problems. The emergence of purpose-led and social-impact communications reflects the larger phenomena of sectoral convergence and the emerging "fourth sector." Trends driving the emergence of this fourth sector include: the growing importance of corporate social responsibility, cause-related marketing, social auditing, cross-sector collaboration, social return on investment, venture philanthropy, social enterprises, and nonprofits adopting earned-income strategies (Sabeti 2009; Austin et al. 2007). The fourth sector is described as a "new organizational landscape" of hybrid organizations that use strategies from all sectors (private, social, public)—unified through pro-social intentions (Sabeti 2009; Rubio-Mozos, García-Muiña, and

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Fuentes-Moraleda 2019). These organizations can be in most any business sector, including advertising.

This study aims to understand how pro-social agencies, agencies that embody the purpose-driven, prosocial intentions described above, define themselves, and how agency processes reflect those definitions. The study's findings advance the current agency literature by providing a window into a novel, emerging sector of business within the advertising agency landscape, one that is attempting to differentiate itself from traditional agencies and define its unique space in business.

First, the study finds that professionals working in pro-social purpose agencies feel they are part of an emerging type of advertising agency that perceives itself differently than traditional agencies. The operational and functional differences these professionals perceive between pro-social purpose and traditional agencies reflect what they see as the converse ideological foundations of the pro-social (e.g., social enterprises) and for-profit business landscapes. Second, the study shows, from the perspectives of the leaders of these new agencies, how the convergence of sectors is influencing advertising agency practice and how advertising agencies in turn are influencing the emergence of the fourth sector. Finally, since there is no scholarship on purpose-driven and social-impact communications in advertising, the study provides a baseline for future research on the topic.

## Conceptual development

### *The evolving business-society relationship*

An organization's societal purpose is influencing, and influenced by, the ever-changing organizational landscape compromised of the private, public, and social sectors. The questioning of an organization's purpose engages the core and often taken-for-granted foundations of corporate existence, such as why society grants the license and freedoms for an organizations' operations, and the necessary conditions for those freedoms (Hollensbe et al. 2014). When the United States began, states would charter corporations on a discretionary basis to perform public purposes—their legitimacy came from their delegated public mission (Levy 2016). The passing of general state incorporating laws gave corporations a free right of charter without any public purpose, only private profit maximization—creating the distinct roles and societal responsibilities of the for-profit and nonprofit corporations (Levy 2016). In the 1950s and 1960s scholarly literature questioning the social responsibilities that for-profit organizations owe to society gained momentum—creating the foundation for modern concepts of corporate social responsibility (CSR: Carroll 1999). Carroll's (1991) CSR framework that outlined the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary (e.g., philanthropic) expectations is perhaps the most well-known (Dahlsrud 2008). More recently, several divergent business-society frameworks have formed and many fall under the umbrella term of social enterprises (SE), also known as hybrid organizations.

There are several international typologies of a social enterprise—prominent models include entrepreneurial nonprofits, social cooperatives, social businesses (e.g., benefit corporations), and public-sector social enterprises (Defourny and Nyssens 2017). Regardless of what they are called, the distinctive commonality among the alternative frameworks is that economic, profit-driven responsibilities come secondary to, or equivalent with, an organization's social aims and responsibility. The "for-benefit" corporation (e.g., certified B corporations and/or legal-benefit corporations) is the most commonly known archetype in the United States (Chen and Kelly 2015; Sabeti 2009). Some of the better-known B Corporations in the United States are Patagonia, Ben and Jerrys, King Arthur Baking Company, Bombas, and Eileen Fisher (https://bcorporation.net/).

Any company can become a certified B Corporation (B Corp) by going through B Lab's third-party assessment to prove that social, environmental, accountability, and transparency standards are met, and are required to amend their legal governing documents to balance profit with a social purpose (over 50,000 companies have taken the B Corp assessment globally; B

Lab 2020). A legal-benefit corporation is a for-profit incorporating structure available in 37 U.S. states (plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) that requires a "general public benefit" and legally permits the consideration of nonfinancial interests (e.g., community, environment, employees, and customers) and shareholders (Buerkle, Chang, and Storto 2018). Today, there are approximately 1,360 certified B Corps in United States (3,500 in over 70 countries), and over 4,750 legal-benefit corporations in the United States (b-lab 2021; Buerkle, Chang, and Storto 2018).

Social enterprises are said to be the "future of business," represented by "new organizational structures" that ingrain a social purpose into business processes with the aim of creating positive social value for individuals, communities, and societies (Buerkle, Chang, and Storto 2018; Vilá and Bharadwaj 2017; Hollensbe et al. 2014; Sabeti 2009). Across the various business-society frameworks, communicating an organization's societal responsibilities and aims has become an essential aspect of business practices (Brest 2016; Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010) and cross-sector collaboration (Austin 2003), and is of interest across academic disciplines (Crane and Glozer 2016).

In relation to advertising and marketing, academic research is often focused on the philanthropic aspects of CSR, which often take the form of cause-related marketing (Austin 2010, 2003; Brønn and Vrioni 2001; Varadarajan and Menon 1988). Cause-related marketing (CRM) is a communication tool used by for-profit organizations to advertise their CSR efforts in an aim to improve financial performance and benefit a particular cause—commonly through partnerships with nonprofits (Brønn and Vrioni 2001).

Popular advertising industry publications (e.g., *Adweek* and *Ad Age*) position purpose-driven and social-impact communications as either (a) a distinct from of communication that inherently differs from cause-related communication (Neff 2019) or (b) an evolved form of cause-related marketing (Sternberg 2019). Traditional cause-related marketing is generally described as a campaign or marketing activity that is focused on a social aim that often "starts and stays in marketing" (Neff 2019; Sternberg 2019), whereas purpose-driven marketing requires brands to actively embody a larger social purpose (Scales 2019). In other words, the company itself has to be purpose-driven for authentic purpose-driven communications to occur, as opposed to the discretionary philanthropic action that companies pursue in cause-related marketing.

### Advertising agencies

In light of the pro-social shift in business environments and the blurring of sectoral boundaries, this exploratory study seeks to understand how professionals in pro-social, purpose-driven communications agencies see their role in business and communications. The two overarching research questions are: "How do professionals in pro-social, purpose-driven communications agencies define the vision and role of their agencies?" and "How do they structure agency processes to reflect that vision and role?" Understanding the phenomena from a practitioner's point of view allows for a practical understanding of pro-social (in the form of purpose-driven and social impact) communications happening across business sectors. Additionally, the study gives insight into the changes within the agency environment happening with the growing importance of social purpose and impact.

The present study advances the academic advertising-agency literature. Agency studies have explored practitioner theories of how advertising works (e.g., Nyilasy and Reid 2009a, 2009b), agency-client relationships (e.g., Beverland, Farrelly, and Woodhatch 2007; Turnbull and Wheeler 2016; Gould, Grein, and Lerman 1999; Henke 1995; Wackman, Salmon, and Salmon 1987), specific roles within an agency such as account planners (e.g., Hackney 2003; Morrison and Haley 2003), creatives (e.g., Mallia, Windels, and Broyles 2013; Taylor, Hoy, and Haley 1996; Haley, Taylor, and Morrison 2014), and intra-agency relationships between agency departments (e.g., Blakeman, Haley, and Taylor 2020; Round and Styhre 2017). All of these studies have been conducted within the context of traditional advertising agencies.

Additionally, agency studies dating back to the 1970s have shown how environmental factors (e.g., economic, legal, societal, and technological changes) influence trends in agency structures and services (Miracle 1977). Traditional, "full-service" agencies are under multiple pressure points to keep up with economic, technological, legal, and societal changes. While these changes are inherently intertwined, the majority of the recent academic literature explores aspects of technologically driven influences on advertising agencies, such as interactive media (Wagler 2013), digital media and digital integration (Childers, Haley, and McMillian 2018; Windels and Stuhlfaut 2018; Truong, McColl, and Kitchen 2010), and influencer marketing (Childers, Lemon, and Hoy 2018), to name a few. Research has shown that external changes in the agency environment have blurred the role, responsibilities, processes, and structures of advertising agencies (Stuhlfaut and Windels 2019; Windels and Stuhlfaut 2018; Wagler 2013). Notable changes include the emergence of new roles (Windels and Stuhlfaut 2018) and changes in creative processes (Stuhlfaut and Windels 2019). Also, Gangadharbatla (2021) has suggested that major world-wide events such as Covid-19 require us to consider new paradigms of society and their impacts on business and advertising practice and research.

In light of the emerging business structures such as the B corp, a new type of communication agency is evolving. These new agencies, such as Oberland (www.thisisoberland.com/) and SalterBaxter (www.salterbaxter.com/) are attempting to differentiate themselves from traditional advertising agencies. Thus, the present study seeks to explore this emerging type of advertising organization by allowing those who are active in the creation and operation of such organization to articulate their view of the definition, mission, and scope of this emerging agency type. Their views of their work in social-impact and purpose-driven communications can help close the advertising academic-practitioner gap by gaining insight into practitioner knowledge forms (Nyilasy and Reid 2009a, 2009b) and help us understand how advertising agencies may be responding to the increased emphasis on purpose within society and business.

## Method

### *Research paradigm*

The central research questions, "How do professionals in pro-social, purpose-driven communications agencies define the vision and role of their agencies?" and "How do they structure agency processes to reflect that vision and role?" advance theoretically from a phenomenological philosophy of research which aims to understand phenomena through the lived experiences of participants. A phenomenology paradigm posits that humans are active meaning-makers of their reality and that reality is best understood through human interpretation. In phenomenology, humans create meaning through sociohistorical knowledge (i.e., "teachings" from cultural institutions) and biographical knowledge (i.e., individual knowledge gained through direct experience that may contradict, confirm, or modify sociohistorical knowledge), which assumes a relativistic reality (Gurwitsch 1974). In short, there are varying realities of a phenomena based on an individual's sociohistorical and biographical knowledge systems. For a phenomenon like the emergence and function of pro-social advertising agencies, research methods must grant access to these knowledge systems in order to fully understand the range of human-created realities.

Additionally, a phenomenological approach does not employ a priori theoretical propositions because the aim is to understand participants' experienced realities. A priori theory would impose a foreign explanation of the phenomena and mask the realities and explanations of participants (Gurwitsch 1974). By understanding the active meaning-making processes of the participants, theoretical insights can emerge from data that are grounded in the participants' logic. Once insights indigenous to the data are generated, researchers then compare prior literature and theoretical positions to understand the contributions of findings generated from a phenomenological approach.

In keeping with the phenomenological philosophy of the study, a method that allows practitioners to openly express the "realities" of their agencies' work and process is required. Therefore, the researchers use the qualitative method of in-depth interviews—a powerful inquiry method that gives researchers an "opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do" (McCracken 1988, 9). In-depth interviews have been used in a variety of advertising studies that seek to understand practitioner perspectives (e.g., Nyilasy and Reid 2009a, 2009b; Taylor, Hoy, and Haley 1996; Childers, Haley and McMillan 2018).

### *Participants and data collection*

The study identified agencies specializing in purpose-driven and social-impact communications through industry publications, societal-oriented collaboratives (e.g., certified B corporations), and specified search-engine results. The researchers analyzed the identified agencies' web sites and previous work to qualify potential participating agencies. The agencies that qualified only worked on projects with a clear social aim or purpose. The researchers identified approximately 16 boutique agencies specializing in pro-social communication (i.e., purpose driven or social impact) and several large agencies with a "social impact" unit. Large, traditional agencies with a social-impact or purpose division or unit (with a mix of traditional and purpose led projects) were excluded from the study given the study's aim to understand the pro-social, purpose-driven agency model as a stand-alone organization. Upon identifying agencies, the researchers recruited participants via email or phone calls that briefly explained the study's aim and procedures. Interviews were arranged at the time and location of the participant's choice (e.g., in-person or teleconference). The researchers used redundancy criterion to determine the number of interviews to conduct. Morrison et al. (2002) state that redundancy, also known as "saturation," happens when researchers are hearing the same variety of perspectives over and over. In other words, a consensus on key concepts determined the number of interviews required to provide theoretical understanding. The researchers met the redundancy criterion by the eighth interview and interviewed past the point of redundancy to ensure that analysis could support the nuanced aspects of the phenomena. In total, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted. The participants included 12 individuals holding senior-level positions from six pro-social, stand-alone boutique agencies across the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and West Coast regions of the United States (see Table 1).

All participants had previously worked at either traditional ad agencies, client side, or nonprofits before moving to a purpose-agency. This prior experience allowed participants to articulate how their present work might be differentiated from work done at other types of marketing organizations. The interviews began with rapport-building questions and used a semi-structured guide—employing open-ended questions about the participants' experiences

**Table 1.** Summary of participants.

| Job title(s) | Gender | Years in advertising | Agency size (Affiliation) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Founder, CEO, and Creative Director | Male | 20 | Small (Network) |
| Cofounder, Chief Creative Director | Male | 12 | Small (Independent) |
| Cofounder | Female | 13 | Small (Independent) |
| Creative Director | Male | 4 | Small (Network) |
| CEO and Founder | Female | 18 | Small (Independent) |
| Director of Public Relations and Accounts | Female | 10 | Small (Independent) |
| Chief Strategy Officer | Male | 13 | Small (Independent) |
| Creative Director | Male | 5 | Small (Network) |
| Strategy Director | Female | 20 | Small (Independent) |
| Managing Director | Female | 15 | Small (Independent) |
| Principal and Creative Director | Male | 19 | Small (Independent) |
| Director of Strategy and Accounts | Female | 8 | Small (Independent) |

in the industry, definitions of social-impact and/or purpose-driven communications, relational aspects of the agency's role, societal responsibilities of the agency and implications for agency functions. To adequately gain an understanding of the participants' meaning-making processes, conversations were predominately participant led, with the researchers probing when clarification was needed. The process allowed the researchers to "follow hunches" and explore emic terms that assisted in reaching saturation (Childers, Haley, and McMillan 2018; Taylor, Hoy, Haley 1996).

The interviews lasted approximately an hour each (totaling 733 minutes) and were audio-recorded upon participant agreement and signed informed consent. The researchers informed participants that their comments would not be linked to their agency or individual name or client names in order to protect confidentiality. When conceptual clarification was needed, the researchers asked participants to use examples. The researchers restated the salient concepts and emic terms to check for accurate understanding. After concluding the interview, the researchers informed the participants of the next steps involving data transcription and participant checks.

### *Analysis*

Upon the completion of each interview, the researchers transcribed and conducted line-by-line analysis to foster awareness of emerging data (Haley, Taylor, and Morrison 2014). In vivo codes and subcategories were identified during the initial coding process to create interview summaries. Next, the researchers sent protected interview summary statements via email to participants to check and identify any misinterpretations. Participant checks provide additional interaction for procedural knowledge, an analytic basis for comparison with subsequent interviews, and assurance that analysis reflects the participants' experiences and knowledge of the phenomena (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Once a participant check(s) was completed, the researchers met to discuss categorical codes and conceptual memos to create foundational working schemas for answering the general research questions. The researchers iteratively conducted inductive analyses from subsequent interviews that were compared with the working schema, creating refined conceptual categories that expanded or restricted the original schema. Upon completion of the coding scheme, the researchers reexamined the data to ensure an adequate fit. This type of inductive analysis emphasizes category construction rather than enumeration (Goetz and LeCompt 1984).

## Findings

The findings emphasize participant quotations to illustrate the participants' lived experiences; however, due to article space limits, the study utilizes quotations that most succinctly illustrate the emergent themes. The study's concepts did not emerge chronologically (Goulding 2017) and therefore are discussed interactively throughout the themes explored. In discussing the agency practitioners' definitions of their agency's purpose, their value, and their processes reflecting those definitions, the study examines the participants' constructions using the following themes: agency domains and desired outcomes, selecting clients, integrating action, collaborating with clients and community, agency staffing and culture, and avoiding good-washing.

### *Agency domains of purpose and social impact: Definitions of vision and roles*

When addressing the question of "How do professionals in pro-social, purpose-driven communications agencies define the vision and role of their agencies?" the participants voice that there is no "hard and fast" practitioner definition, which is logical to expect in an emerging sector. The emerging nature of the phenomena means the agencies are "trying to sort through a common language because it has really moved a lot in a very short period of time."

The participants voice that concepts of purpose and social impact and agency practices "exist on a spectrum" due to the relational influences of their clients and the social aim of a particular project. The agencies work across sectors but differentiate themselves by exclusively working on projects with a clear social aim or benefit. The participants varied on whether they used the terms *purpose driven* and *social impact* interchangeably or in a relationally dependent manner. When participants discuss purpose-driven and social-impact communications work, their descriptions were in relation to the purpose-driven and social-impact domain at large.

### *Agency domains*

Agency clientele and the client's respective sector were often used as reference points to describe the emerging domain of purpose and social impact that agencies work within. For agencies that identified themselves as social-impact agencies, they voiced working with a range of clientele that goes beyond the nonprofit world. The general sentiment is illustrated in the following statement from a chief creative officer:

> *Interviewer:* Can you speak to the type of clients the agency is partnering with?
>
> *Participant:* Yeah, so it's a whole spectrum. We have, on the world stage, worked with intergovernmental agencies. We work with a lot of national-level organizations and we also work with local city agencies or local organizations. We define social impact very broadly. So, it can be a nonprofit, it can be a company that maybe has a mission-aligned initiative. It can be a governmental organization; it can be an NGO. It can be lots of things… that we really tried to use the words *social impact* because we are not just with nonprofits.

Broadly speaking, agencies focusing on purpose-driven projects describe their work as "elevating brands that are interested in leaving a positive social or environmental impact on the world, or who are trying to solve real-world problems through business." A managing director describes their agency domain as the "purpose-led economy," referring to the larger business shift happening that the agencies are positioned within. Participants voice that this space as distinct from traditional CSR agency work. The general sentiment is shown in the following quotations:

> I think what you're seeing now is young companies being born in the last 5 years don't think about corporate social responsibility. They just think about the DNA of their brand and that they are a brand that was to do the right thing by people and the planet. And, so they build that into the DNA, rather than treat as short of a separate silo that is doing good….we're excited about this because it means that it's changing the way people build businesses and changing the way they think about the vision of what they're building. (Managing Director)

> I think that there's [*sic*]agencies out there that are not benefit corporations or B corps that have a purpose division or a purpose silo, or say that they'll help market a company's corporate social-responsibility initiative. Whereas we're much more interested in seeing how a company integrates purpose into their DNA of everything. So rather than just having a purpose be like an app, it's like the whole operating system. (Director of Public Relations and Accounts)

The professionals express their vision of changing the world through their work. The quotation below from a managing director show how that director envisions helping both social (nonprofit) and private (for-profit) sector organizations have social impact:

> When it comes to nonprofits and foundations in that world, there's always amazing grassroots work being done, but often they had marketing, storytelling, narrative building as a bit of an afterthought. The fact is when you're trying to build coalitions—when you're trying to build an army of the willing, and you're trying to change behaviors, or change attitudes, what we do in the creative world of storytelling is really important and vital and can actually lead to tangible outcomes. So, we bring that to that world. And then equally when it comes to the private sector, you're looking at a very powerful collection of brands and businesses who—if they started to align in a more purpose-driven way and started to transform their businesses—they'd have an incredible footprint on the causes that they chose to champion. So, we are built to help C-suite teams in brands do this right. Think about the impact that business is having on the world. And, also see this as a white-space opportunity for growth because you have conscious

> consumers who are going to demand that businesses lead with their values. So actually, it makes smart business sense as well as being the right thing to do.

Moreover, the participants describe an increased opportunity for social-impact work happening across sectors led by the development of social enterprises, which "blend the best of both worlds." An agency executive said that *social enterprise* is a "relatively new term that people are still becoming used to. I define a social enterprise typically as for-profit, social-impact organizations." The participants voice that the legal ability to reject the nonprofit/for-profit dichotomy reveals two ideological implications for traditional organizations and clients. For-profit organizations are enabled to use "the power of their business to impact or accelerate the resolution to social problems, social purpose, social issues in that particular culture." Meanwhile, nonprofit organizations are able to overcome financial and political limitations. A director of public relations and accounts mentions that:

> Having worked for some fairly large nonprofits, I do think there are limitations to that model…a great way of framing it is no margin, no mission. So, you can make more change in the world if you have more money to play with, if you will…I think they're also limited in the ways that they can affect policy or political change. Whereas you see a brand like Patagonia that can take a stand on national monuments, that's really game-changing for the whole conversation.

Participants voice that at the zenith of a social enterprise, the separation between an organization's business and social-impact aim is indistinguishable, described as being completely purpose-driven. However, traces of competing ideological value-orientations of for-profit and nonprofit organizations are subtly apparent in the social enterprise sector. A social enterprise can be created with a business-impact orientation—using business to fill a consumer need while having a positive social impact. The business orientation is pulled toward business motives while creating shared value, which participants voice as "changing the way people build businesses." Participants often cited Patagonia as a good example of a successful social enterprise with a business orientation. That is, Patagonia was founded to sell consumer products but has shifted to incorporate social impact more fully throughout its business practices. Or, a social enterprise can have an impact-business orientation that looks to solve a social issue through integrating for-profit models into an organization's theory of change—creating a "sustainable business model" that can overcome the limits of traditional models. An impact-business orientation positions the focus toward solving a social issue or serving a social need and is described as "mission-focused."

### *Desired outcomes*

For participants that founded their own agencies, a big question was "how we could take the professional tools of the trade and apply them to social-impact problems." Another agency executive discusses a major formative point when "we started to think that the power of marketing and advertising can be for good." All participants voiced that a desired outcome of their work is to help solve social problems, contribute to a social aim, and "grease a social conversation" around related issues. The sentiment is illustrated in the following quotations:

> In order to push change through, whether it's policy or whether it's just socializing an idea… Ideas need to get socialized. The more people that are aware of them and understand them and can get behind them, the easier it is for an organization to successfully push that idea through. For example, we do a lot of work in the criminal justice space and there's a lot of momentum right now to enact policies that move towards ending the systematic oppression and mass incarceration that has happened over the last 40 years. And, a lot of that stuff has been happening for a long time, but people just don't pay attention to it. And so, there's a lot of educating about the disparities between the number of black prisoners and white prisoners that needs to happen…it's just like education really. (Principal and Creative Director)

> The impact doesn't happen until the ad is over, you know what I mean? You're always trying to inspire somebody afterwards not to buy, but to do something that you're not exactly telling them to do. It's

> awareness. Trying to get people to just fight apathy [about an issue]…you can accomplish something else for a real, live, living human being down the road. That's where it's at. (Creative Director)

How agencies defined their work, domains, and desired outcomes has clear implications for agency processes. Next, the article explores the second research question of how the agency professionals see the definition of their work, agency domain, and desired outcomes impact agency processes to reflect their vision and role.

## Agency-consultancy philosophy: How agency purpose impacts how agencies do business

The agencies voiced themselves as functioning as a mixture of a consultancy and a creative shop, or "agency-consultancy." The agencies had specific operational strategies for (a) selecting clients, (b) integrating action, (c) collaborating with clients and community, and (d) agency staffing and culture that help lead to the desired outcomes of purpose-driven or social-impact communications. The participants discussed the societal responsibility that pro-social agencies have as a vital aspect of embodying the change they are helping to cultivate. Therefore, responsibility was a key driver influencing the agencies approaches.

### Selecting and working with clients

The participants voice that it's "half who we're doing business with, and then it's also half how we're doing business." Client and project selection play a vital role in agency responsibility. None of the agencies pitch for clients and voice typically being "self-reflective," in the sense that organizations approaching the agencies "get a feel for the tone and the values behind" the agency's work. Additionally, the "agency-consultancy" role means that the agencies often work with "the highest levels of our clients' decision-making apparatus," rather than brand or marketing teams within a company. The participants voice the agencies as "thought partners" to their clients, helping identify and solve business-oriented problems using an impact-oriented lens while providing relevant creative solutions. While the agencies had varying points of view within the world of social impact, all of the agencies held open internal discussions to reach consensus on the value alignment of clients and project specifics.

The agencies working with for-profit clients looking to "pivot to purpose" mention that, ultimately, they have no control over the purpose-driven internal transformation of a company. Therefore, client selection often serves as the first line of defense against "good-washing." An agency executive states that "if we get a phone call from anyone outside of the C-suite or VP level, I know the company isn't serious about what they're trying to do there. They're more likely good-washing." The agencies are "excited and drawn to the work where we know there is appetite and a real drive to make those longer-term commitments," and occasionally have to turn down projects due to good-washing concerns. A chief strategy officer's comment summarizes the sentiment of agency responsibility and likens trends of good-washing to the negligence of agencies involved in green-washing:

> *Interviewer:* Can you talk about green-washing?
>
> *Participant:* A long, well-documented dark side of marketing and advertising companies putting up bullshit window dressing just to make themselves look good. And, having no impact, really no interest in making a difference—just throwing their chips on the table because they feel like they have to. We just had one we turned down, but without naming names, is one of the biggest companies in the country…They wanted to do this and this, and give $100,000 to a cause organization, and I was like, you've got to be kidding me. They wanted to put it on that point-of-purchase display; they thought they were really doing good, and a nonprofit can always take $100,000, but that's nothing other than green-washing in my opinion.
>
> *Interviewer:* So, you turn the companies down that aren't serious about the journey to purpose?
>
> *Participant:* I do. Green-washing campaigns don't do anything for me, and they don't do anything for anybody else.

For social enterprises and nonprofits, which are thought to innately have a positive social impact, the agencies still conduct a "case by case evaluation" to decide if the work aligns with the agency's view of social impact. The participants state that:

> A lot of them are sort of fuzzy and require a lot of discussion…Some projects have great intentions, but they have a big blind spot. Some have agendas that we need to reconcile whether the benefit of the projects surpasses the sort of agenda, the hidden agenda of the projects. It's complicated. There's no clear-cut this one is good, that one is bad. It's sort of like, well it's going to do good in this way, but it could potentially like have this other effect—do we want to do it? Do we want to make that judgment call? (Principal and Creative Director)

> We're also very thoughtful about the clients we bring on. We're really careful to work with clients who we feel like are properly working within communities versus just coming in being white saviors. I mean we're very careful about trying to find organizations that besides just working on basic human need are doing so in ways that are sustainable beyond just philanthropic, pure philanthropy. (Cofounder)

Participants acknowledge the delicate nature of working with underserved communities and issues of structural power in social inequalities nationally and abroad. A managing director explains that the agency would "like to say we're 100% able to only partner with locally led organizations. But, the state of global development, unfortunately, means that there are a lot of Western-led organizations." The agencies voice evaluating an organizations' social-impact model (i.e., theory of change), organization infrastructure, and power transference (i.e., opportunities to "transfer" power rather than create dependencies)—alongside a project's intentions, potential unintended consequences, and opportunities for positive impact to enable the agencies to maximize positive social impact. The use of an agency "lens" to determine if the agency considers the work as social impact is discussed in the quotation below:

> Generally, we define social-impact projects as improving people's lives in a substantive way that is not bullshit. So a lot of things can be interpreted as improving people's lives, but we try to look at everything through an equity lens. So is it going to create opportunity for people who have traditionally not had it? Is it going to bring more justice to people's lives? Is it going to allow for more people to participate in the conversation, or have knowledge about issues that affect them? Those are kind of some of the general tenets. (Principal and Creative Director)

Beyond selecting the right clients and projects to work on, the participants discussed the importance of strategy and the integration of action.

### *Integrating action*

Regardless of an agency's point of view and clientele, prominent aspects of the agency operations included a focus on strategy and the integration of action. Participants stress that a "significant strategy component is just necessary to every project" in purpose-driven and social-impact work to "get it right." A creative director voices that "the difference between what a traditional advertising agency would do versus what we do is we focus a lot more on the strategy piece than we do on the creative execution." A focus on strategy creates a "stronger theory of change" that includes why communication plays "a critical part of the equation to creating positive social change." A strategy director explains that for nonprofits and social enterprises,

> I think the first thing is that by doing some robust strategy upfront; we can do a better job of integrating our work into their theory of change. But I think secondly, and maybe more importantly, is that the world of social impact is like a very consensus-driven world, people are risk-averse. Their reputation is on the line. They have to answer to exactly where all their money is going…They need to go back to their people and say, this is why we spent the money the way that we did. And, I think that is the case that strategy lays out… We provide this report that people can take back to their funders and say, one, two, three, four, five, these are all the reasons that we are moving forward the way we are.

Participants voice that story-showing, having brand actions at the center of their work, is a key aspect of what differentiates purpose-driven and social-impact communications:

> What are the top core aspects that an agency with our expertise would bring to companies looking to do [purpose] versus your traditional agency? Strategically speaking, it's architecting a framework that has action built into it and understanding—having a deeper understanding of the issue at hand…rather than just developing communications, developing the action roadmap that can lead to the communications that it looks like a long-term journey. (Managing Director)

Organizational actions expand the opportunities to involve audiences and stakeholders, which can be used to engage audiences through participation and provide communications content. A Strategy Director describes action-based strategy as "story-showing," stating that action creates,

> a really cool opportunity for people to do things, and then you can show that through all these different digital channels. It's one thing for a company to sort of put on their website passively, "hey, we're doing all these great things," …to actually show how you're making an impact and involve people in that process and things like that—that is so much more impactful than just telling it.

Additionally, participants voice that action-based strategy includes integrating "impact metrics" alongside traditional brand metrics to analyze "the reality of the steps that we're taking [toward a social aim] and then how did that lead to breakthrough storytelling," which can also allow greater audience interaction. The importance of measuring your impact is voiced in the following quotations:

> Purpose marketing, at least the way we do it, is founded in honesty, ability to measure your impact and to tell authentic stories on behalf of the brands that are really trying to make a difference in the world. (Director of Public Relations and Accounts)

> What we advocate is [to] make sure you do both [impact and brand metrics]. And, also have a bit of patience with it because the long-term outcomes are really why you're in the game. Both qualitative and quantitative outcomes in the long term can tell a really amazing story.…You can also use those moments to talk to your consumers, talk to your audiences, and celebrate success, or talk about failure, but it would involve them in what you're doing. And, that makes it more of a two-way street and worth conversation. (Managing Director)

### *Client and community collaboration*

Participants voiced that robust strategy requires significant collaboration with their clients and community stakeholders related to the social aim of the project. Strategic processes often include collaboration with client leadership through "a series of collaborative workshops" that act as a "collective problem-solving experience." A cofounder and chief creative director mentions that,

> Every agency has some degree of strategic and creative process. The bones of it are probably very similar. I will say one thing that we do, particularly on the brand positioning and strategic positioning that works exceptionally well is having a series of collaborative workshops, where we really walk through all of our research insights, interviews, the surveys that we've done on landscape, and case studies, with the full leadership team, which works pretty well. Most of the organizations we work with are not that large… Everyone throws all their ideas out and gets their voice heard. It has been really helpful for us, and we often find that it flows over into business strategy and into management, and all of a range of other components of the business because a lot of the communications and brand decisions are directly related to the operational, programmatic work that they do as well.

Beyond collaboration with client leadership, the agencies discuss the core aspects of collaboration community stakeholders to create action frameworks. A cofounder and creative director voices that,

> More organizations doing advocacy work who needs to build a community of people who are interested in an issue. Who will be there to support either financially or in, in terms of like other types of activism, whether it's digital activism, supporting like a petition or, calling a senator or actually showing up somewhere and like participating in events…A lot of nonprofits and institutions come from being like these smart people in an ivory tower who don't really talk to the people that they are trying to affect systematic change on, or at least don't talk to them directly… It needs to get a little bit more of direct dialect—direct communication with the human beings they are trying to have an effect on, and that has all kinds of repercussions for the way that these organizations not just communicate, but the way their cultures are inside their organizations. The way their leadership is structured, the way they collaborate together, the way they listen to their stakeholders.

Community collaboration is important for authenticity, adequate contextual knowledge, and ensuring desired outcomes. An agency cofounder stresses the importance of contextual knowledge when working to solve social issues—particularly in developing contexts because if not, it can perpetuate a "new colonialism." Instead of the "we're going to come in and save you" mentality, social enterprises and nonprofit organizations should be asking, "How do we have resources that can help strengthen communities, and transfer leadership and power into the hands of the communities in which we're working?" The participant expands that if there's no contextual knowledge of the social issue when companies deploy any type of resources, the societal implications can potentially be dangerous.

> You can actually be harmful. So again, in the development space, that might be white medical missionaries coming in doing some surgeries with crazy complications, leaving, and then not having the capacity to manage it afterward. Or economic development organizations coming in and starting social enterprises in developing context, and in doing so, weakening or undermining the local market and the local price, the commodity price for things. (Cofounder)

The participants voice that even if intentions are 100% pure, the solutions to the social problems can end up being harmful rather than helpful, and for underprivileged or underserved communities it can create dependencies rather than community empowerment. The participant voices the social issue-relevance of pro-bono work from creative agencies within the social sector that provide services without contextual knowledge,

> For the pro-bono sector from within these agencies are coming in and saying, "okay, here's the website, see-ya bye." As creative professionals, and as marketing professionals, we also have to be really careful of assuming that our work and inserting ourselves into these situations is always going to be helpful and instead acknowledge that there may be times where helping can hurt, and pro bono can actually be detrimental because we have to be really thoughtful about how we deploy pro-bono resources in the social sector. (Cofounder)

The agencies voice that without awareness of power differences and contextual knowledge, social-impact work can have unintended consequences. Another key area that ensures agencies achieve desired outcomes is "how they do business," for which agency staffing and culture is vital.

### *Agency staffing and culture*

All agencies mentioned have a "flex" or "stretch" model that allowed them to ensure adequate expertise to work on social-impact projects. Additionally, having a diverse staff with various lived experiences and points of view helps the agencies ensure that they are able to have critical conversations about the projects they are working on.

> We operate on a sort of stretch model where we take very seriously trying to get in the right type of expertise, diversity of opinion, and experience to make these solutions work. So, rather than just have a room full of people who are good at doing a certain thing creatively, if we're working on something that is around environmental sustainability, we will be sure that we have a sustainability specialist as part of the strategy team. We're doing more of an outside-in approach, and we're making sure we're holding ourselves responsible for having solutions that are grounded in reality. And we're also going to lead to real impact—not just make a news-cycle splash. (Managing Director)

> We've got a lot of work over the last number of years to try to do our own learning and to build our own, inclusive culture so that we can have these discussions. Because if you don't have representation on your team of different points of views and different people who are going to be affected by things differently you; it's like really hard to see the tensions. So, for us it's important to have those, especially because it allows us to explore those tensions together to understand each other better, to build that empathy that we're trying to get our end users to build. That's part of work that has happened internally as well. And that happens every time there's, like, a difficult discussion. (Principal and Creative Director)

The participants mention the importance of responsibility in "the daily decisions you make working with your team or working with your clients." Responsible agency-client relationships include having to navigate tricky conversations that "in a traditional business that might be off limits" (e.g., diversity of staff, paid leave, environmental impact, etc.). Additionally, the agencies are themselves social enterprises, embodying the kind of organization they hope to cultivate through having a larger social purpose or mission, and/or partaking in third-party evaluations (e.g., certified B corporations). A director of public relations and accounts states that "when we're working with a client that is a B corp, then it totally makes sense for them to choose an agency that's also a B corp." The operational approach agencies take helps to ensure that their work isn't good-washing—a phenomena that participants voice is happening within the for-profit sector at large.

### *Avoiding good-washing*

The agencies voice that the "the commercial world of late has been trending toward the purpose side of the spectrum" and that purpose is "just the new era of marketing." The general sentiment is summarized in the following:

> I think what we're seeing is a lot of brands are jumping on the purpose bandwagon, which is fantastic. But a lot of the efforts feel shallow in that they might want to use their media buy, or they're marketing to speak out on a certain issue, but they're not always aligning their own actions and operations and setting tangible ambitions to compliment that. So, what you get is a lot of telling, which is positive if they're sitting there trying to break through stereotypes, or they're communicating a values-driven message, that's all good. But what they really need to be looking at is themselves and how their actions are actually actioning that purpose, and how they're being responsible in bringing it to life. (Managing Director)

The rise in purpose and values-driven messaging leads to corporate good-washing, which is often rooted in organizational inaction and incongruent business decisions. The overall sentiment is summarized in the following quotations from creative and strategy directors:

> I don't think the problem is with intention. I think the problem is with action. (Founder, CEO, and Creative Director)

> I'm sure you've heard about the Gillette ad making the rounds about cautioning young boys and men about toxic masculinity, and that's a great ad, and I'm super glad that they did it. But at the end of the day, they're still Gillette, and they charge way more for razors marketed to women then they do to men… Social purpose is a whole fundamental company DNA sort of thing. And, I think that it's shortsighted for big brands like Gillette, or Pepsi, or whoever to think that they can just, like, do an ad and, like, check the box. To me that's good-washing; even if it wasn't awful and maybe spread some interesting conversations, I don't think it's enough. (Director of Public Relations and Accounts)

> When you're good-washing, you're doing a shallow and somewhat meaningless job as trying to jump in on a cultural issue or take advantage of the news cycle or do something in that vein. I think it's done unintentionally, there is a good intention, but it doesn't always play out in a way that creates meaningful change, and sometimes it's done because people are lazy about it. Looking at certain outcomes but not thinking about taking the actions which are honestly never going to be easy or convenient, the transformation is really difficult and requires long-term commitments. (Managing Director)

> [Good-washing] is like catching everything in Halo. I think that a particular initiative or issue that the company is talking about may be valuable and worth discussing, but most likely the rest of their actions remain the same. So, the net impact of this one conversation they're starting is minimal. They're just doing it to increase their brand image…On the other end of the spectrum, all of these startups that are coming up and claiming that they're doing something to improve the world, I think that 'I'm changing the world' has also become such an expansive statement…I just find it to be a misappropriation of human values being co-opted by companies ultimately just for the sake of profit and not anything else. (Strategy Director)

Although brands have to be willing to take the heat, participants voice that "the backlash to a bad ad is nowhere near as bad as the backlash to a bad purpose ad, because you're dealing with much more emotional levels." Beyond collaborative action and organizational embodiment of a social purpose, organization-alignment and audience relevance are crucial in avoiding good-washing. "You don't want to pull a Pepsi and just jump in somewhere not so relevant for you"; the participants give the example of Pepsi's advertisement with Kendall Jenner as a grievous example of good-washing.

## Discussion

Theoretically, Carey (1989) posits that institutions are interdependent on one another. Changes in one lead to changes in others. When there are changes in the marketplace, then it is to be expected that advertising changes, both in content and the structure of the advertising industry. More recently, Gangadharbatla (2021), using systems theory, posited that environmental factors which include changes that are external to the industry or practice of advertising that potentially influence and change our understanding of how advertising works. Therefore, he suggests that fundamental marketplace changes require us to look at new paradigms of advertising. This study helps to fulfill that call.

The present study illustrates such a change. Changes in business models, specifically the emergence of purpose-driven and social-impact business models, have been matched with the emergence of prosocial marketing communications agencies.

In the ad industry, new agencies emerge to meet new specialized market demands. For example, with the emergence of digital media platforms, agencies emerged that specialized in digital platforms. Sometimes these digital agencies were developed or acquired by traditional agencies or their holding companies to become part of an agency group. Eventually, the specialization became integrated into the full-service agency, often through mergers or restructuring of agency groups. For example, WPP recently merged VML, its specialized digital agency, with Y&R, one of its most reputable traditional creative agencies, to form VMLY&R. This merger represents that digital has moved from being a specialty to being an integral part of day-to-day business strategy. Already, large communications agencies are developing social-impact units (for

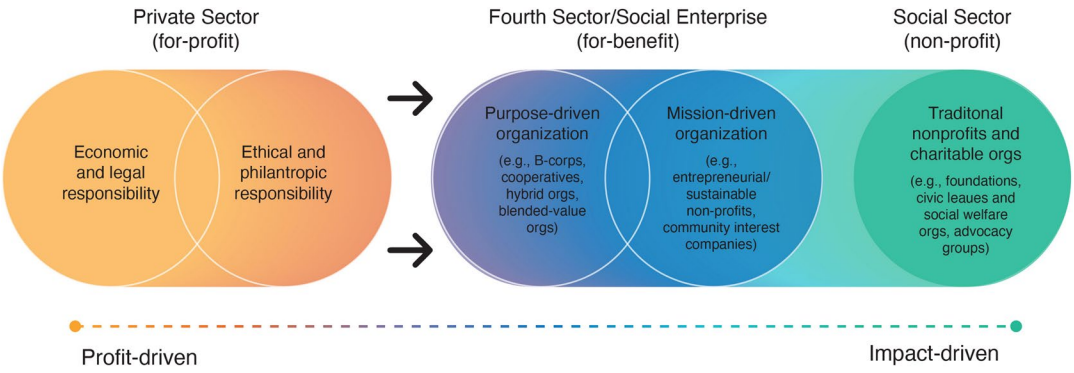



**Figure 1.** A continuum of prosocial agency domain.

example, Edelman's social-impact team), and the industry is talking about how purpose might impact traditional agencies (Zanger 2020). Insights from this study of agencies that focus solely on purpose can help other agencies develop capabilities that new business models are requiring.

The advertising industry has a long history of using its talents to impact social change. The Ad Council is one such example where advertising and media industries donate efforts to assist nonprofits or government in advancing social causes. Also, ad agencies have assisted for-profit companies in social-responsibility initiatives. But according to our participants, there is a new model that moves advertising beyond these two functions.

To help explain how our participants see the business environment that gave rise to their new agencies, it may be useful to look at business social responsibility on a continuum (see Figure 1).

The ends of the figure represent the traditional division between for-profit and nonprofit organizations. Each type of organization along the figure views social responsibility differently. Traditional nonprofits are created to support a myriad of social causes. These organizations are funded through donations, grants, etc., instead of their own business-generated profits. On the left side of our continuum concept are those businesses that may be described as "the business of business is business." That is, a business is socially responsible when it is profitable, provides employment, pays taxes, operates legally, and provides a useful product or service. These businesses may be described by what Carroll (1991, 1999) calls economic and legal social responsibility.

Moving from left to right on our figure, the next space represents businesses that embrace what Carrol would call ethical and philanthropic social responsibility, in addition to economic and legal. These companies may donate to disease research, speak out on social issues, give to arts organizations, etc. But these activities are in addition to their core business function. That is, they are a for-profit company that uses some of its profits for social good.

Between these first two for-profit businesses and the traditional nonprofit organizations at the right side of our continuum are purpose-driven businesses (e.g., social enterprises). These are for-profit businesses for which social impact is core to their business mission. These businesses strive to incorporate social impact in all business practices

Participants in the present study view the mission of their purpose-driven agencies as serving these purpose-driven businesses, or helping companies "pivot to purpose" and move toward the right end of the continuum. They see the work of traditional ad agencies as helping clients in the first or second areas of the continuum. In their view, traditional ad agencies can work with clients on CSR communication and activities. But to move clients to the later end of the continuum, professionals at purpose agencies feel they must work with clients beyond traditional marketing communication efforts that are historically handled by traditional ad agencies on a brand-management level to working with client leadership on how to structure the whole company's business practice to have social impact. In this way, the company doesn't just talk social responsibility via marketing communication, it lives it. Additionally, for social enterprise (SE) and nonprofit clients, these specialized agencies voice bringing value by being social enterprises themselves and having nontraditional, value-driven approaches to communications work.

As traditional advertising agencies attempt to develop social impact and purpose capabilities, the views of the purpose-agency professionals interviewed for this study may provide insights as how to adapt agency practices to advance the goals of social-impact and purpose-driven projects. Insights from the study include:

- Acting as an agency-consultancy: working with c-suite management in addition to brand manager–level marketing decisions. Delivering high-level thinking about the impact of business practices, operations, and creating action roadmaps that embody an organization's social aim.
- Focusing beyond traditional marketing goals: incorporating impact metrics that focus on longer-term social outcomes in addition to traditional brand metrics.

- Focusing beyond the targeted audience: understanding how to impact those who you wish to help—understanding social structure and inequalities, how to address inequities, and/or having specific social aims in addition to understanding your targeted audience.
- Expanding the type of people employed by the agency: employing diverse people who understand social structure, social change, structural inequities, and how to address them with action.
- Learning how to story-show, not just story-tell: involving community and "developing the action roadmap that leads to the communications."

## Conclusions and future research

According to our participants, purpose-driven and social-impact agencies illustrate a new type of advertising agency that reflects environmental shifts (i.e., the emergence of social-impact and purpose-driven business models). The agencies are reimaging core functions of advertising. Participants say that their work functions to help empower social solutions, a social purpose, or help solve a social issue, rather than for monetary gains. This change is aligned to the primary function of social enterprises, which is focused on public benefit rather than private wealth creation (Rubio-Mozos, García-Muiña, and Fuentes-Moraleda 2019). This move does not totally forsake the need for an organization to be profitable, but profit becomes necessary to be able to have the resources needed to impact change. While this position may seem odd to those who have worked in environments where advertising's role is to drive sales and profits, it is important to see that the leaders of these prosocial agency-consultancies feel they embody a different paradigm. The participants voiced that monetary gains clients see from purpose-driven work was an effect of pro-social actions and subsequent communication (but not the ultimate goal or motivation).

Academically, this study helps to define the aims of communication within this emerging sector of agency. Based on the views of our participants, the study proposes a working concept of prosocial (purpose-driven and social-impact) communications that can be broadly defined as:

> An emerging form of values-based strategic communications that cocreates social value for individuals, society, and organizations. Communication often aims to express an organization's social purpose, mission, or social-impact story that is legitimized through organizational transparency, bilateral communications and actions, collaborative relationships, and action-based societal impact.

The study also helps us conceptualize how social enterprise relates to other, more familiar, business models. This continuum can help us think situationally about the ability of an organization to engage in prosocial communications as defined above. For example, a business that is incorporated as a social enterprise from the start may have immediate authenticity in engaging in prosocial communications, given that social action is at its core mission. But, can a business-oriented company that is pivoting toward purpose communicate in the same way? At what point in its transition to purpose does it have the authenticity to engage in prosocial communication as described above? When does a pivoting company have enough authentic action to be able to story-show rather than story-tell? Future research should look at what communication and action strategies are best for organizations at different stages in the proposed continuum.

The study also illustrates that if we want to study a new paradigm of advertising/prosocial communication, we need to broaden our paradigms of advertising research. At minimum, we need to consider outcomes beyond traditional consumer measures of brand attitude, attitude toward the ad, and purchase intention, to add action intention and ways to assess social impact. Drawing from thinkers within the nonprofit sector and academic fields such as sociology, cultural anthropology, environmental studies, etc. can help inform how social-impact and purpose-driven communications

can best contribute to social aims. As do the agency professionals, researchers need to clearly understand the issues and audiences we are attempting to impact beyond just our own consumers.

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