Investigating the Cost of Unpaid Internships for the UK Advertising Industry

Thomas Rickhuss

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Existing literature pertaining to unpaid internship focuses largely upon the resultant implications for students. As a result, implications for the additional parties involved - educators and employers - have seldom received research attention. Within the advertising industry, despite championing this there appears to be no detailed research. In this paper I asK, 'why?'. Why do advertising agencies over-index in the practice of a phenomenon identified as problematic and what does this mean for them specifically? Case study research of a diverse range of practitioners at a leading UK agency investigates this question through novel perspectives on the phenomenon. Three central themes emerge as a result, including: Comparative - whereby practitioners indicated an expectation of 'anticipatory justice' in light of comparing the difficulties they faced 'breaking in' with those 'breaking in' today, That's The Way It Is - whereby practitioners referred to the practice of the phenomenon as concrete, refuting any responsibility of instigating change, and Filter – whereby practitioners alluded to a deliberate sociocultural filtering mechanism, of which the phenomenon serves an integral role. The latter theme, combined with the institutionalised ideologies of the former two, establishes a force that engineers a sense of 'specialness' surrounding the case agency and its practitioners; a sense of specialness entitled The Club. It is The Club that concludes this paper, alluding to why the phenomenon perpetuates and the implications that are likely to emerge as a result. In addition, this paper confirms the inadequacy of leveraging social capital and experiential learning theses, often used as a rationale for unpaid work, to justify perpetuation of the phenomenon.

Keywords: Unpaid Internships, Advertising Agencies, Implications, Advertising Industry, Social Capital, Experiential Learning.

INTRODUCTION

It is understood by students, educators and employers alike that internship programs can be mutually beneficial to all parties involved (Mansfield 2005). For students, internships can serve as a way of 'bridging the gap' between education and the working world (Kennedy 2013). For educators, internships can increase the employability of their graduates and bolster program credibility (Pologeorgis 2012). For employers, internships can offer the opportunity to 'try out' potential employees without incurring formal employment expenses and legal obligations (Fink 2013). However, it is important that these three parties also understand that internship programs can have a particularly adverse effect for *all* if the benefits resulting from the internship are not equally distributed.

In recent times, one particular benefit has overtly shifted and caused an imbalance in this distribution – pay. According to Durack (2013), the proliferation of the unpaid internship phenomenon has resulted from the seismic employment shifts that have affected the UK since the start of the Great Recession in 2007. Today, the phenomenon exists and self-perpetuates because: a) it's become a last resort for *students* facing an economy offering fewer paid entry-level jobs, b) there is continual pressure from *educators* to secure mandatory experience in order to successfully graduate from academic programs, and c) *employers* are making strategic decisions to save on costs, utilising it as a cost-effective recruitment tool (Durack 2013; Fink 2013).

As a result of its increasing prevalence, the phenomenon has attracted plentiful government and media attention; querying its implications and igniting nation-wide debate (Schnitman 2014). Pertinent questions to have surfaced include: 'Are they legal?', 'Are they ethical and moral?', 'Are they a good opportunity or exploitative?', 'Do they exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities?' (Pologeorgis 2012). Indeed, these questions have frequently been directed at employers in the creative industries who have been at the forefront of such attention due to phenomenologically 'over-indexing' in comparison with other UK industries (Siebert and Wilson 2013). Unfortunately, such questions have only ever inspired discussion surrounding concerns, or lack thereof, for *students*:

> "Kids that whinge about working for free in an internship context
> should suck it up and quit being such pathetic little bitches. That's
> my word" (B&T MAGAZINE 2013).

Whilst it is important that the phenomenon's implications for this party are discussed, it is equally important that the implications for *educators* and, indeed, participating *employers* are discussed as well. Disappointingly, it is this often-disregarded discussion that could provide an angle that may otherwise encourage such employers to think twice about the practice.

Siebert and Wilson (2013) pointed to the issue being largely ignored within an ad-agency context, yet given this practice is rooted in notions of social capital and social mobility, (Schnitman 2014; Dudson 2015), it should be of huge concern for any advertising agency built upon the premise of creativity – something of which involves bringing unalike things together (people included) in an effort to produce something fresh.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internships as positive opportunities for students

Often, the literature attempting to justify the phenomenon is discussed using the rhetoric of 'experiential learning' - the notion that ideal learning occurs through experience

(Burke and Carton 2013; Schnitman 2014). This idea transcends Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) which draws on work(s) that give such experience a central role in human learning and development (Kolb and Kolb 2005). Although not explicitly surfacing at all times, the propositions that ground ELT typically underpin the aforementioned arguments.

For example, Mansfield (2005, p.35) argues that students can gain "invaluable work experience" during unpaid internships. Here, the author appears to offer a positive implication reasoned by experiential learning; more specifically, proposition five of Kolb and Kolb's (2005, p.194) ELT - "Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment". However, it is evident that Mansfield (2005) is alluding to an *intangible* synergetic transaction between person (student) and environment (place of which "invaluable" work experience is offered). Such transaction is mutually beneficial in that, whilst students 'get a taste' of the industry, employers 'get a taste' of the candidate (Siebert and Wilson 2013). However, Mansfield (2005) neglects to discuss the *tangible* transactions between student and employer. Critically speaking, if a student is producing work for an employer during an unpaid internship, then what tangible item is an employer exchanging in order to maintain the synergetic transaction mandating experiential learning? This notion questions the use of ELT to justify the phenomenon's practice. Burke and Carton (2013, p.125) support this by arguing,

> "If there is no remuneration or reciprocal benefit for the rendering
> of services for which there is no monetary compensation, then the
> relationship is exploitative and unethical."

Such reciprocity underpins another prevalent theme to emerge from literature attempting to justify the phenomenon - social capital.

According to Ghoshal and Nahapiet (1998), Social Capital Theory's (SCT) focus concerns strong, cross-cutting personal relationships that develop over time and create a basis for trust, cooperation, and collective action among community members. This is underpinned by SCT's three constructs: *networks*, *reciprocity* and *value* (Putnam 1996). Authors who present the arguments for the positive implications of the phenomenon frequently make reference to such constructs, whether explicitly or not, often presenting the case that it allows students to "expand networking opportunities" and thus develop strong, cross-cutting personal relationships (Schnitman 2014, p.1). As such, these networks are frequently positioned as *reciprocal* in nature and of *value* (Putnam 1996; Ghoshal and Nahapiet 1998).

However, Siebert and Wilson (2013, p.711) conducted research into the benefits and pitfalls of unpaid work as an entry route into employment and contend that,

> "Social capital theory, often used as a rationale for unpaid work,
> inadequately explains the practice of unpaid work experience,
> primarily because it does not take cognisance of the consequences
> of this practice for other people working in the sector."

Therefore, like experiential learning, it can be argued that leveraging SCT to justify the phenomenon is inadequate because such argument neglects to consider the duality of the process; specifically, the *reciprocity* of the other party required to enhance such capital - employers.

Internships as problematic for students

Generating social capital often depends on pre-existing social capital, thus Fink (2013, p.435), for example, suggests it is equally compelling to problematise the phenomenon. Unpaid internships are proposed to help provide opportunities for enhancing social capital, yet they are able to perpetuate inequality by excluding those whom lack even the

social capital to gain the internship in the first place. This notion is supported by Siebert and Wilson (2013, p.716),

>"It was not only the lack of economic capital that prevented people from undertaking work experience, but also their lack of social networks… As much as getting a job in [industry] depended on having the right connections, securing relevant work experience depended on having these connections as well."

Evidently, ELT and SCT are central to the debate surrounding the implications of the phenomenon for the student. Both theses have been leveraged in academia to argue for both the positive *and* negative implications of the practice for students. What must be acknowledged however is that, as impressive as the extensive use of the theory is, focus has remained almost entirely upon the *student*. Literature has detailed the implications of the phenomenon for students through the application of such theory but there is a gap in understanding the subsequent implications for the *employer*.

Internships as a positive facet of educational experience

Like the employer, literature surrounding the implications of the phenomenon from a pedagogical standpoint fails to reflect the equality of such relationship. Educators do however play an equally important role in the phenomenon's surrounding issues because they facilitate the closing of the education-industry gap; often mandating the application of classroom knowledge to the world of work through its practice (Lancaster et al. 1990; Hurst and Good 2010).

Again, 'experiential learning' surfaces in the arguments outlining the implications of the phenomenon for the *educator*. Paulins (2008 cited by Hurst and Good 2010, p.178) reasons that,

>"It is in an educator's best interest to assist students with their internship(s) so that the experiential learning contributes positively to the student's career and academic development."

Ultimately, this interest exists because positive student experiences "increase the likelihood of sustained relationships between academia and business" (Paulins 2008 cited by Hurst and Good 2010, p.178). Additionally, 'experiential learning' helps validate the curriculum by connecting faculty to current trends, resulting in more employable graduates, increased program credibility and thus attraction to prospective students (Hurst and Good 2010; Pologeorgis 2012). Immediate financial benefits emerge from such learning also, in that higher education (HE) institutions can transfer capital overhead costs to employers (Burke and Carton 2013).

Of course, "experiential learning can be used to justify the theoretical purpose of internships from a pedagogical standpoint" (Schnitman 2014, p.6). The aforementioned benefits are not only irrefutable for educators; they're increasingly relied upon. Evidently, this has meant the phenomenon has evolved into a 'must have' part of contemporary HE culture, affirming the commitment educators must exercise in managing the benefits for all parties in the tri-fold internship relationship. Many academics might debate that such commitment exists.

Internships as problematic for modern HE degree programs

Keleher (2013, p.626) nods to such benefits in order to dispute them:

>"While unpaid internships provide substantial benefits, money is not one of them…Interns are ultimately volunteers who agree to

work for free. Worse, students paying tuition for internship credits
pay for the privilege of working."

Perlin (2011) supports this in saying, "students are often required to pay to receive college credit for internships", thus participating in "pay-to-work scenarios" (Perlin 2011 cited by Burstein 2013, p.317). This identifies a recurring theme in the existing literature - 'pay-for-work'; a key argument against the phenomenon from a pedagogical standpoint. Indeed, this argument aligns with the previous criticism made of experiential learning and the notion of asymmetric rather than synergetic *tangible* transactions.

More importantly, this theme invites a series of problematic implications for HE institutions. Primarily,

"If an educational institution sponsors an internship program, for
example, by approving internship sites, requiring internships for a
degree program, collecting tuition and awarding credit…then,
arguably, internships are educational programs" (Burke and Carton
2013, p.119).

Such institutions must therefore accept all legal and ethical accountability of their students, as their lack of financial reward from employers negates any liability (Burke and Carton 2013). Consequently, the phenomenon imposes a greater level of responsibility upon educators.

Internships as relief for contemporary industry

The most conspicuous factors regarding the positives of the practice are only ever identified. These factors are curtly stated by authors such as Mansfield (2005, p.34), "Businesses can benefit from assistance with its marketing efforts without the expense of a full-time marketing staff person." However, some authors allude to less transparent matters. Crumbley and Sumners (1998, p.54), for example, identify that students returning from internships with favourable impressions become "on-campus advertisements" for employing companies. Further comments hint at the aforementioned themes to have emerged from the broader literature. Once again, social capital surfaces in comments such as:

"The cost of recruiting permanent employees is reduced as
[interns] become familiar with the opportunities the organization
has to offer" (Crumbley and Sumners 1998, p.54).

Evidenced in their choice of language, Crumbley and Sumners (1998) suggest that the heightened social capital of existing employees can be economically advantageous for organisations as said employees fulfil ("become familiar with") their own job openings ("opportunities"). This is arguably more prevalent in society today, 17 years on, where increased demand has enabled employers to utilise the phenomenon as a cost-effective, flexible solution to recruitment needs (Siebert and Wilson 2013).

Although ostensibly advantageous for employers, this structurally propagates the social exclusion of those whom lack expendable social capital. Thus, in reality, this practice introduces *negative* implications for the employer, such as reduced workforce diversity and homogenised output (Siebert and Wilson 2013; Schnitman 2014).

Internships as problematic for the UK advertising industry

Negative implications for employers have seldom been explored in academia, resulting in extremely limited literature in the area. If one introduces the context of the advertising industry, no prior studies exist. This is surprising given the prevalence of the

phenomenon in this particular industry, as discussed previously. Siebert and Wilson (2013) have come closest to researching this area, with recent exploratory fieldwork on unpaid work in the creative industries - *minus* advertising. In addition, their research into the phenomenon neglects the perspectives of those currently working in such industries (Siebert and Wilson 2013). As a result, they explicitly express a need to reach practitioners directly in order to inform further enquiry (Siebert and Wilson 2013).

Seminal research that *has* reached practitioners stays clear of the phenomenon. Alvesson (1994), for example, studied identity and discourse within advertising agencies and observed a deficiency in the diversity of their workforces which were typically 'young', 'physically fit' and 'well dressed'; workforces rich in social capital. Despite constructing a seemingly 'utopian' office culture, this introduces problematic conditions in which social relations could enable practitioners to advance their interests and reproduce inequality (Bourdieu 1984). Such problematic conditions result from an imbalance in intra-community relationships, 'bonding', and inter-community relationships, 'bridging', in which 'bonds' are enhanced and 'bridges' supressed by practitioners (Putnam 1996). Alvesson's (1994) observation can perhaps be elucidated by Siebert and Wilson (2013) who explain that the 'social mechanism' of sourcing employment in the creative industries may advantage some individuals, those with pre-existing 'bonds', and exclude others, those with non-existent 'bridges'.

These studies, therefore, raise an important question: What implications does it introduce to advertising agencies as a result?

Summary

Underpinned by theories of experiential learning and social capital, this literature review has established the phenomenological implications currently outlined in academia for all parties involved in the trifold internship relationship. In doing so, it has identified the literature's overwhelming focus upon the *student* and the limited knowledge that the academic sphere contains regarding the implications for the additional parties involved. This is especially true for employers and, in particular, advertising agencies that should be concerned about the implications. In an attempt to contribute knowledge to this absent field of study, I ask a series of questions as follows in Figure 1.:
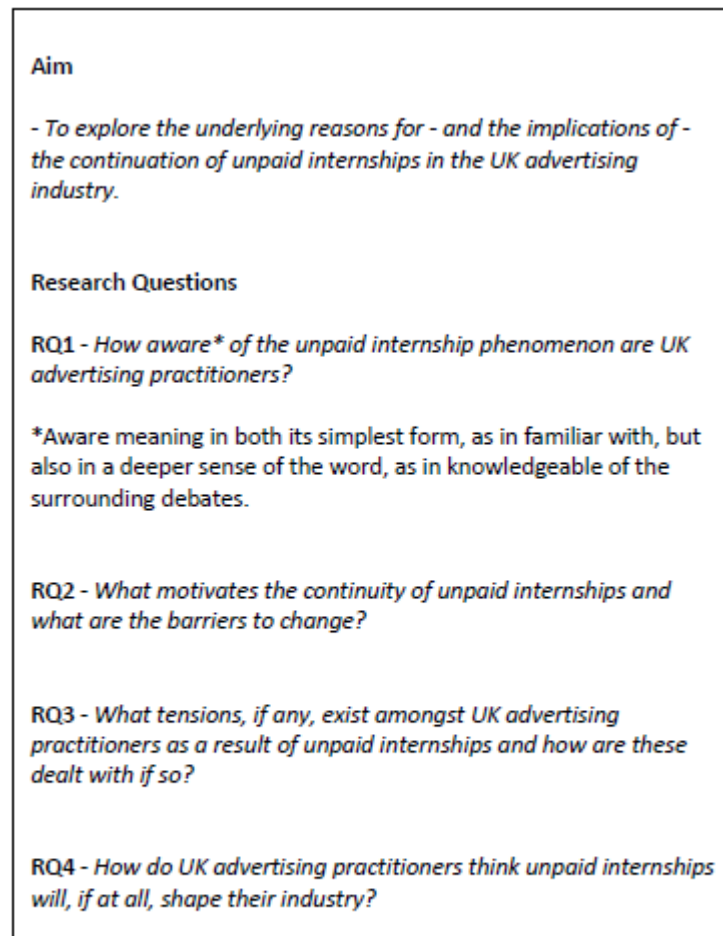
Aim

- To explore the underlying reasons for - and the implications of - the continuation of unpaid internships in the UK advertising industry.

Research Questions

RQ1 - How aware* of the unpaid internship phenomenon are UK advertising practitioners?

*Aware meaning in both its simplest form, as in familiar with, but also in a deeper sense of the word, as in knowledgeable of the surrounding debates.

RQ2 - What motivates the continuity of unpaid internships and what are the barriers to change?

RQ3 - What tensions, if any, exist amongst UK advertising practitioners as a result of unpaid internships and how are these dealt with if so?

RQ4 - How do UK advertising practitioners think unpaid internships will, if at all, shape their industry?

Figure 1: Research Aim and Questions (Personal Collection)

METHODS

It was evident from the conception of the research aim (Figure 1) that I wanted to explore the phenomenon through the frame of critical realism which recognises "the reality of the natural order and the events and discourses of the social world" (Bryman 2012, p.29). It also acknowledges that we can understand, and thus change, the social world if we identify the structures at work through the practical and theoretical work of the social sciences (Bryman 2012). This was true of this research as through practical work, I myself wanted to question the phenomenon's practice and encourage UK advertising practitioners to do the same; potentially instigating change in the 'reality of the natural order'.

I then considered research design in order to begin such practical work. Easton's (2010) literature generated interest in case research for me in suggesting that, "A critical realist approach to case research involves developing a research question that identifies a research phenomenon of interest…and asks what causes [it] to happen" (Easton 2010, p.118). I learnt that such research involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon, informed by multiple subjective perspectives which are explored and subsequently presented (Robson 2002). This was the exact purpose of this paper and indeed the gap evident in the literature – a UK advertising industry perspective on the phenomenon. Thus, a case study of a leading UK advertising agency was undertaken.

Constructing such case required a qualitative methodology; a way of exploring and reflecting the social world through the eyes of the different people being studied (Bryman 2012). It is worth noting, however, that my interest lay in using these 'different people' to make sense of the phenomenon rather than the 'different people' themselves. I selected qualitative interviews to satisfy this interest, personally engaging with practitioners to better understand the phenomenon. These interviews were semi-structured because discussion needed to be guided around the phenomenon as it was unlikely to dominate a freely-employed conversation, and an element of freedom was required for the participants in order to naturally elicit their perspectives on the phenomenon (Bryman 2012).

An interview guide struck such balance; despite flexibility with the guide, it was constructed in a particular way proposed by Robson (2002). The initial topics of *Early Advertising* and *Breaking In* aided in relieving any participatory tension, but were predominantly designed as a way of gleaning the ways in which the interviewees 'viewed their social world', helping to contextualise and align discussion for the following topic (Robson 2002; Bryman 2012). *Placements/Internships* informed the main body of the interview with direct questions such as, 'What do you think of this way of breaking in?', eliciting discussion around the research questions, and probing questions ensuring they were fully satisfied (Robson 2002). The final topic, *Future Advertising*, was used to defuse any interview-induced tension and help elicit final responses alluding to any of the research questions (Robson 2002).

Sample

The universe consisted of UK advertising agencies currently or recently 'employing' unpaid interns. This was because I needed to speak to practitioners with first-hand experience of the phenomenon. Advertising agencies are notoriously 'inward-focused' organisations in that 'getting in', let alone conducting case research into them, is extremely difficult. Easton (2010, p.118) confirms this in saying,

> "The case study's main units of analysis typically [are] organisations and relationships which are difficult to access and complex in structure."

Thankfully, a leading UK advertising agency - referred to as 'Agency X' throughout the rest of this paper to maintain anonymity - helped facilitate the work in accepting the role of 'case'. Such investigation was permitted by a 'gatekeeper' at Agency X who aided in contact with colleagues. As such, participants were predominantly recruited via email through both opportunistic and snowball sampling methods, fortifying the breadth of perspective on the phenomenon. It is worth noting here that each participant was given a participant information sheet outlining the nature of the research *and* a consent form to sign, prior to being interviewed. In total, six UK advertising practitioners, ranging in both expertise *and* experience to ensure as diverse 'angles' on the phenomenon as possible, informed the case (see Figure 2).

Name*	Title	Industry Years	Direct Intern Contact
Mike	Marketing and New Business Consultant	40	Y
Milly	Board Art Director	25	Y
Hannah	Head of Talent Acquisition	17	Y
Maximilian	Digital Project Director	7	Y
Bernie	Account Director	5	Y
Lou	Marketing and New Business Manager	2	Y

*pseudonyms given to ensure anonymity of participants and confidentiality in their responses

Figure 2: Advertising Practitioners Interviewed (Personal Collection)

Due to both financial and access limitations, the research conducted spanned the course of two days, with three face-to-face interviews held on each day. The majority of interviews were conducted in private meeting rooms at Agency X, lasting for 49 minutes on average.

The analysis process involved listening back to such responses and annotating them using *Audio Notetaker 2.5* software. This software allowed me to organise the data into manageable 'chunks' through manually colour coding sections pertaining to the topics outlined in the discussion guide. I then identified and compared the data through the application of codes - 'tags' for particular segments of interest (Daymon and Holloway 2002). It should be noted that this was an iterative process; a new code identified in interview 4, for example, would inspire cross-referencing with the additional interviews and so on. I then collated the coded material by organising it into categories, identifying patterns and connections in the data, and deducing broader, central themes (Daymon and Holloway 2002).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I discuss my interpretation of approximately six hours' worth of data; interrogated against both the existing, yet limited literature and the research aim and questions. Three of the most prevalent themes - those addressing the research aim and questions - have been selected for presentation in this paper, whilst the least prevalent - those least relevant to the research aim and questions - have been omitted. The three central themes are: *Comparative*, *That's The Way It Is* and *Filter*.

Comparative

Although unique themes emerged from each interview, one theme transcended *all*. This theme - entitled *Comparative* - involved practitioners referring back to their own personal difficulties of 'breaking in' to the UK advertising industry (Adland), irrespective

of being asked to comment on the difficulties that others face 'breaking in' today. Interestingly, this theme was not unique to a particular demographic of practitioner; whether they had two years or 40+ years of industry experience, or were an 'Art Director' or 'Head of Talent Acquisition', it didn't matter. However, Lou - Marketing and New Business Manager with 2 years' experience - was the clearest of all the practitioners in expressing her perspective on the phenomenon through the lens of this theme. For example, when discussing the implications of the phenomenon for students, Lou said,

> "I do think people that can't afford to apply because they can't support themselves and work for free; there are other ways to do it. I moved to London and had to support myself. Had to work somewhere, regardless of what it was, and was willing to arguably spend a couple of years proving myself" (Lou, Marketing and New Business Manager, 2 Industry Years).

In general, Lou's comments were extremely passionate, more so than those of her colleagues, evidenced by not only her choice of the above words but by the tone of her delivery. Perhaps this can be reasoned by the fact that Lou is indeed *the* closest practitioner to the phenomenon due to her recent experience. However, as mentioned, this tool was leveraged by *all* practitioners; using their personal stories as justification for the difficulties of 'breaking in'. For example, Hannah - Head of Talent Acquisition with 17 years' experience – describes what she believes to be 'fair',

> "...proper [internships] for people who are trying to break into the business should, at the very least, have their travel and a nod to some expenses paid. When I did my [internship] at [agency], I used to have to put my train tickets and sandwich receipts through to get a bit of cash." (Hannah, Head of Talent Acquisition, 17 Industry Years).

Here, Hannah expresses her beliefs towards the phenomenon which, in similar fashion to Lou, are evidently informed by her own personal experiences.

These comments exemplify a potential facet motivating the phenomenon's continuity - a sense of 'anticipatory justice' for practitioners in light of comparing their own experiences with those of others. Anticipatory justice is an "expectation regarding whether one will (or will not) experience justice in the context of some future event" (Rodell and Colquitt 2009, p. 989). In this instance: "one" being practitioners, "justice" being unpaid work as an entry route in Adland, and "some future event" being the next generation of practitioners. In other words, 'I had to, so it's only fair that they have to too!'.

Such notion elucidates how this theme answers RQ2 in particular (Figure 1). By adopting *comparative* thinking in this way, the practitioners introduce, perhaps inadvertently, a barrier to change - comparison maintaining anticipatory justice and anticipatory justice maintaining a barrier. In turn, the phenomenon's continuity is motivated; change never coming to fruition because 'fairness', a key element of justice, only withholds if circumstances remain *exactly* the same for those involved in the phenomenon - past, present and future. Indeed, it appears that justice, and therefore equality, for current practitioners seems to take precedence over justice and equality for the next generation of practitioners.

Unfortunately, practitioners predisposed to anticipatory justice contribute to the perpetuation of social inequality. In ensuring such 'justice' by maintaining a system that they themselves had to pass through, they are indeed failing to recognise 'the bigger picture'; the fact that the struggles that they once faced can eliminate opportunity altogether for those who cannot afford to face the struggle in the first place. Justice may

well be served for the fortunate that can accept unpaid work, but such gentrified system also naturally repels the less fortunate that cannot, thus perpetuating social-economic class divides (Burke and Carton 2013). This confirms the inadequacy of leveraging SCT to justify the phenomenon, as identified in the literature review. Imposing an expectation of work that does not always offer economic and social benefits in return erodes reciprocity – a key construct of social capital (Siebert and Wilson 2013).

This notion also confirms the extent to which practitioners were aware of the phenomenon – RQ1 (Figure 1). Generally, awareness suffced a basic level; apparent through their conspicuous *comparative* stories and anticipatory justice ideology. However, surrounding debates, such as the aforementioned social exclusion of less fortunate individuals and perpetuation of inequality, were evidently less considered. As such, practitioners were encouraged to reflect with, 'what about those who can't afford to apply?', type questions which served as an opportunity to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Unfortunately, responses appeared to lack such understanding as Milly adequately demonstrates,

"I don't know really because I think people who wanna get in will do it; [they'll] find a way, yeah. Because that's, you know, that's always been the case." (Milly, Board Art Director, 25+ Industry Years).

This comment draws attention to a 'blind spot' that multiple practitioners exhibited with regard to social capital. In accordance with the *Comparative* theme, "they'll find a way" indicates an assumption that, because they themselves had the social capital to fund their 'break', others will have so too. Furthermore, Milly's, "that's always been the case", comment alludes to the next theme to be discussed – *That's The Way It Is*.

That's the way it is

The *That's The Way It Is* theme pertains to routines of organisational practice or 'institutionalisation', in which actions establish themselves as convention and become part of 'taken-for-granted' patterns in an organisation (Chadwick and Raver 2015). In the context of this research, it involved practitioners referring to the current phenomenological practice as being concrete and unchangeable. For example, "The fact of the matter is, things are the way they are; they're probably not gonna change anytime too soon" (Maximilian, Digital Project Director, 7 Industry Years). Siebert and Wilson (2013) identified a similar trend in their research; in which practitioners agreed that unpaid work was exploitative but still believed that 'this is how things are'.

What was particularly surprising, however, was the discovery of practitioners actually leveraging this notion as a tool to refute any responsibility that they personally hold in instigating change, despite expressing negative attitudes towards the phenomenon. Although surfacing in multiple interviews, comments made by Maximilian were the most explicit for evidencing this,

"Well, I think they should be paying minimum wage for [internships] at least because it's tough you know. Most of these agencies are in London. Living in London's expensive; if you're not from London it's even worse...But, you know, I don't sign all the cheques at the top of the business so" (Maximilian, Digital Project Director, 7 Industry Years).

A rigid dichotomy surfaces here - Maximilian's evidently negative attitude toward the phenomenon expressed and his refutation of responsibility to instigate change declared. His, "I don't sign all the cheques", comment clearly makes reference to his physical inability to transform unpaid internships into paid opportunities. However,

considering the previous remarks, this comment appears to have deeper meaning - a conveniently 'legitimate excuse' to diffuse any responsibility. Such is distinguishable in further comments made by Maximilian,

> "They should probably look at doing things like that as well but who am I to tell them where to start on these things..." (Maximilian, Digital Project Director, 7 Industry Years).

This introduces the socio-psychological notion of 'diffusion of responsibility', in which individuals assume that others are either responsible for taking action - or have already done so - when responsibility is not explicitly assigned (Darley and Latan 1968). Indeed, the idea of diffusing responsibility helps us to understand how this theme answers RQ2 and 3, in particular (Figure 1). Firstly, such refutation of responsibility to instigate change is an obvious and immediate barrier and one explanation as to how the phenomenon's continuity is motivated – RQ2. If practitioners continue to accept the idea that the phenomenon will be (or is being) addressed by somebody else then, ironically, nobody will address it, nothing with change and thus perpetuation will occur. Unfortunately, accepting such social mechanisms as 'the natural order of things' only serves to promote inequality and hinder social mobility (Siebert and Wilson 2013). Secondly, such refutation may well be a method of alleviating any tension surrounding the phenomenon – RQ3. Indeed, by denying responsibility the potential blame - and any tension accompanying such blame - for not taking action is diffused for practitioners.

The notion of '*That's The Way It Is*' being utilised to diffuse tension is supported in the below comment made by Hannah. It is worth noting that the tension surrounding the phenomenon was most pervasive in her stutters and pauses whilst making this comment, rather than the actual words constructing it. As such, these words better illustrate Hannah's way of dealing with such tension, rather than the tension itself. When pressured to answer for those who perhaps cannot afford to 'break in' to the industry, Hannah said,

> "I would hate to think that something like not paying someone their train fair or finding them a spare room to kip in for 6 weeks would get in the way of that. But, I don't know. I don't know what you do with them. I think it's a bit fact of life, isn't it? I know it sounds awful but..." (Hannah, Head of Talent Acquisition, 17 Industry Years).

In similar fashion to Maximilian, Hannah appears to diffuse her tension surrounding the phenomenon through the refutation of responsibility. This is particularly evident in Hannah's, "I think it's a bit fact of life, isn't it?" comment which ultimately redirects responsibility for those who cannot afford to 'break in' onto wider society. Without this responsibility, Hannah cannot be blamed for the resultant implications, and thus, any tension accompanying such blame is alleviated.

Furthermore, Hannah's response confirms the limited awareness practitioners have with regard to the phenomenon's surrounding debates, as alluded to previously - RQ1 (Figure 1). This is evidenced explicitly when Hannah says, "But, I don't know. I don't know what you do with them", in which she clearly demonstrates a lack of previous consideration for the social exclusion of the less fortunate - or 'them'. *That's The Way It Is* offers an explanation for this in that such lack of consideration may well be due to institutionalised ideology resulting from routinised practice - the underpinnings of this theme. Furthermore, the connotations invoked from Hannah's choice of the word 'them' leads neatly onto the third and final theme, *Filter*.

Filter

The notion of *Filter* is that there are particular forces in play that 'gatekeep' Agency X, and therefore the advertising industry, ensuring that those looking to join - unpaid interns alike - pass through a deep-rooted sociocultural *filter* mechanism. This *filter* is in constant play and constructed from smaller, unique components (referred to as 'codes' throughout the discussion of this theme) which must *all* be met in order to pass through the *filter*. Ultimately, these codes all pertain to the same thing - structural devices employed to ensure and maintain a certain agency, and indeed, industry 'calibre'.

Obsession

One such code is *Obsession* - the requirement for 'outsiders' to not only demonstrate their obsessive hunger to 'break in' to Adland but their obsessive love for Adland also. Hannah alludes to such hunger in the form of applicant persistence, and love in the form of workplace infatuation, below,

> "...by the time you've got to that stage, you've whittled down to your final 12, 15, 20 people. You know they're smart; you can see they've got great grades or perspective grades and where they've been to, you know. It's about going 'are you gonna love it here?" (Hannah, Head of Talent Acquisition, 17 Industry Years).

Such *obsession* can be indicated in a multitude of different ways. However, the most pertinent is through an unpaid internship. In fact, unpaid internships have been integral to this code throughout the course of its lifetime. Milly, one of the more experienced practitioners, suggests why,

> "Way back, erm, [agencies] did it because it made people hungry. But then when they did it, they, they would be rewarded eventually. But I think now, I do think people are taken advantage of" (Milly, Board Art Director, 25+ Industry Years).

It therefore appears that agencies once deliberately fabricated this code through the conception of the phenomenon. Ultimately, they still serve the same role today, however, agencies' intentions appear to have somewhat shifted over time. Nowadays, they are not only implemented to seek the most *obsessive* but leveraged to flaunt their level of demand - realised through those who are not only willing to work for free but willing to pay for the privilege of working in the industry (Keleher 2013). This notion is substantiated by the practitioners of Agency X and is eloquently presented in the below comment from Bernie,

> "So, you know, there is, there is a huge amount of competition and I guess it's testament to [Agency X] that, and I guess all the sort of big agencies, that they can be really fussy about who they want." (Bernie, Account Director, 5 Industry Years).

The ostensible 'positive' implication that this tactic promotes for agencies, juxtaposed with the negative implication naturally occurring for students, 'pay-for-work', confirms the inadequacy of leveraging ELT to justify the phenomenon identified in the literature review (Burstein 2013). This is because the 'transactions' introduced by the phenomenon are seemingly asymmetric in design, favouring advertising agencies over interns. Indeed, it may be argued that the *work* of unpaid interns may not benefit agencies directly (and thus not warrant pay) but one could argue otherwise for the *showcase* of unpaid interns. Agencies emphasising how 'in-demand' they are in this way could mean new recruits, new clients and, ultimately, new business. It is worth noting however that agencies' 'fussiness' resulting from such demand, as exemplified by Bernie, *isn't* exclusive to unpaid interns. Accepted practitioners alike have to continue to prove their *obsession* in a similar fashion, "It's not a given that you would get that opportunity;

it's a real, kind of, proving process" (Lou, Marketing and New Business Manager, 2 Industry Years). Lou's comment describes progressing at Agency X, affirming the notion of the *filter* being in constant play to not only attract the most *obsessive* but maintain the most *obsessive* also.

Network

The *Network* code refers to the importance of having 'contacts' in Adland. In similar fashion to *Obsession*, it was made clear that this was a necessity for both aspiring *and* current practitioners - further evidence for the constant use of the *filter*. From a practitioner perspective, Hannah implicitly referenced this by 'name-dropping' senior industry heads that she was personally acquainted with on numerous occasions. From an unpaid intern perspective, Mike explicitly describes their necessity below, "But, life's hard and, you know, obviously contacts and things. Networks are key" (Mike, Marketing and New Business Consultant, 40 Industry Years).

It is clear to see that one's success in the industry is largely indicative of one's *network*: the greater the *network* the greater the chances of success. This notion is supported rigorously by the work of Siebert and Wilson (2013), as documented in the literature review, who found that not only did getting a job in the creative industries depend on having the right connections, but securing unpaid work depended on having such connections as well. Ultimately, this evidences the industry's pre-requisite of social capital - in which networks are a key construct (Putnam 1996).

If *Network* is considered in addition to the previous code, the difficulty of navigating Adland is unmistakably elevated. You could be the most *obsessive* aspiring practitioner but if you don't have a *network*, you don't pass through the *filter* and you don't secure, or maintain, the work. Maximilian supports the fact each code needs to be addressed in order to satisfy passing through the *filter*, "People who get in who've just got connections but haven't got anything about them won't last long" (Maximilian, Digital Project Director, 7 Industry Years). In this comment, Maximillian identifies both the *Network* code, when describing people who've "just got connections", and the following *Persona* code, when describing people who "haven't got anything about them". It can be deduced from his, "won't last long", comment that both codes are a necessity. This aligns discussion for the final, equally mandatory code - *Persona*.

Persona

The final code constructing *Filter* is *Persona* - a code referring to the necessity of being a personality, and further, the right cultural 'fit' in order to succeed in 'breaking in' and remaining in Adland. Indeed, it is the phenomenon that is frequently leveraged by agencies to test this 'fit'; a try before you buy approach (Siebert and Wilson 2013). Milly overtly references this when describing what exactly unpaid interns need to do to, not only survive, but thrive in Adland,

> "You wanna stand out, you wanna get yourself noticed...It's about personality as well, you know, creating a, kind of a persona as well"
> (Milly, Board Art Director, 25+ Industry Years).

However, such *persona* has to align with the host agency. Bernie reinforces this notion in describing different intra-agency personalities,

> "I went and did an IPA course, where lots of the grads from other agencies came along, and you quickly realise that there is a, kind of, type of personality or culture that goes on with an agency" (Bernie, Account Director, 5 Industry Years).

This notion is similarly reported by Alvesson (1994) who describes that the habitus of practitioners, internal dispositions applied according to organisational conditions, is important in order to 'fit in' with regard to the specific cultural conventions of the agency environment. In other words, the requisite for both practitioner and agency personas to align for successful action (Alvesson 1994). Unfortunately, personas that don't align materialise repercussions,

> "Yeah, everyone [does] feel like they're a [Agency X] kinda person.
> And what is good is when you get people who aren't a [Agency X]
> person or are, kind of, a bit toxic to that culture; they very quickly
> get weeded out" (Bernie, Account Director, 5 Industry Years).

Here, Bernie tells of the implications for practitioners with 'misaligned' personas, or 'culturally toxic people', at Agency X. Again, it is clear to see how the phenomenon, and its 'try before you buy' feature in particular, helps to facilitate such action but, equally, how vulnerable established practitioners are also. Thus, this final comment from Bernie inadvertently provides a perfect example of *Filter* in operation; unfolding that those with an incompatible *persona* are quickly "weeded out", or *filtered,* from Agency X.

The notion of advertising agencies 'filtering' their workforce may not be a new concept given the predominantly white, male and middle-class workforces that construct the industry (McLeod et al. 2009). However, what *is* new is the documented evidence of such, insight into its 'inner-workings' and, indeed, the discovery of the integral role that the phenomenon serves in such mechanism. This has transpired through codes: *Obsession, Network and Persona,* which help provide an understanding of how the central theme, *Filter,* answers RQ4 in particular (Figure 1). As frequently exemplified, these codes are *all* required in order to satisfy passing through. It appears that the practitioners believe this mechanism, of which the phenomenon has proven a fundamental component, to be a positive force for maintaining the 'calibre' of the agency and indeed the industry - RQ4.

CONCLUSIONS

Undeniably, *Filter* serves the role of shaping the sociocultural structure of Agency X; structure that the organisation's identity is founded upon. It is evident that the protection, preservation and perpetuation of Agency X's *filter* stems from the routinised, autonomic practice of its practitioners - the *Comparative* and *That's The Way It Is* ideologies discussed previously. Thus, it appears the three central themes to have emerged from this research combine to inform a 'bigger picture'; a force that does more than separate 'the wheat from the chaff'; a force that continually ensures a sense of 'specialness' surrounding Agency X and indeed those embodying it – *The Club*.

The Club concludes this paper, consolidating the complexities of the research findings into a unified theorem that clarifies how the aim of this research has been achieved (Figure 1). For Agency X, *The Club* is, analogically speaking, a game of social capital Jenga - of which, unpaid internships are the forlorn, bottom block of wood. With this block, *The Club* withholds. Without it, *The Club* collapses. Thus, the phenomenon's existence is imperative to *The Club*'s survival - an underlying reason for its continuation. Unfortunately, survival of *The Club* promotes implications less 'utopian' than that of itself; its life host to a parasitic filter mechanism that gentrifies workforces and homogenises output - resultant implications.

The themes constructing *The Club* provide specific answers for the research questions (Figure 1). RQ1 was answered through both *Comparative* and *That's The Way It Is*, whereby practitioners demonstrated a *basic* level of phenomenological awareness, failing to demonstrate a deeper level of understanding because of their assumptions surrounding others' social capital in light of their own *and* their lack of previous consideration due to institutionalised ideology. RQ2 was also answered through these themes in that the barriers to change - and thus the motivation of the phenomenon - included practitioners' judicial desire to maintain experiences similar to those of their own *and* their refutation of responsibility to instigate change, stemming again from institutionalised ideology. RQ3 was answered explicitly by *That's The Way It Is* in that such refutation also appeared to diffuse any tension surrounding the phenomenon by redirecting responsibility, thus negating blame and accompanying tension arising from resultant implications. Finally, RQ4 was answered by *Filter* in that practitioners believed their deliberate sociocultural filtering mechanism - of which the phenomenon serves an integral role, as identified through *Obsession*, *Network* and *Persona* codes - to be a positive force for maintaining the 'calibre' of the agency and thus the industry. Henceforth, these themes inform the first documented insight into the reasons for - and the implications of – the continuation of unpaid internships in the UK advertising industry; knowledge that previous research has not deduced. Furthermore, in interrogating each of these themes against the existing literature also, the inadequacy of leveraging both SCT and ELT to justify unpaid work has also been confirmed, supporting the work of Siebert and Wilson (2013) in particular.

However, it is important to clarify the most conspicuous limitation of this particular piece of research. As discussed, the findings relate to a particular group of UK advertising practitioners at a particular point in time. Thus, the practitioners of Agency X are *not* generalisable to the wider universe. Nevertheless, their perspectives have informed themes pertaining to the phenomenon that *are* cross-applicable to similar UK, phenomenon-practicing agencies. Accordingly, it would be useful for further research to explore whether comparable findings may be discerned in such agencies: The ubiquity of the themes across the diverse range of practitioners constructing this case indicates that this is likely (McLeod et al. 2009).

Finally, it is also worth noting that my role as researcher, despite integral to this investigation, introduces a small compromise to the authenticity of these findings. The research topic was selected due to personal experience of the phenomenon and a desire to challenge the practice. Regardless of how careful I have been in interpreting and presenting the data, readers should consider the influences phenomenological familiarity may have had upon this work (Bryman 2012).

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