Digital Media Transformation and Creative Agility: A Post-Pandemic Study of Design and Advertising Agencies

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed an unprecedented acceleration in digital media transformation across creative industries, yet the relationship between digital infrastructure adoption and creative agility in design and advertising agencies remains undertheorized. This study addresses the gap between technological adoption and creative process adaptation by examining how post-pandemic agencies reconfigure workflows, team structures, and client engagement models to sustain creative output under conditions of volatility. A mixed-methods design combining survey data from 247 agency professionals across 18 countries with 22 semi-structured interviews was employed. Quantitative analysis revealed that 89.4% of agencies reporting high creative agility attributed this capacity to three interconnected factors: asynchronous collaboration infrastructure, modular content production systems, and distributed decision-making authority. Qualitative findings illuminated how creative agility operates not as a function of technology alone but as an emergent property of organizational cultures that embrace iterative failure and cross-functional knowledge sharing. The study proposes a Creative Agility Framework that integrates digital media capabilities with organizational learning mechanisms, offering both a diagnostic tool for agency leaders and a

theoretical contribution to post-pandemic creative industry scholarship. Implications extend to talent development, client relationship management, and policy support for digital infrastructure investment in creative sectors.

Keywords: creative agility, digital transformation, advertising agencies, post-pandemic, organizational learning

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The creative industries entered 2020 with established operational rhythms: physical studios, synchronous collaboration, and hierarchical approval processes that had persisted for decades. The pandemic disrupted these arrangements with unusual force. Lockdowns mandated remote work overnight, client budgets contracted sharply, and production pipelines designed for in-person oversight required immediate reconfiguration . For design and advertising agencies, the shock was particularly acute: creative work has traditionally relied on the spontaneous energy of shared spaces, the informal exchange of ideas, and the tacit knowledge that circulates through face-to-face interaction .

Yet the disruption also revealed unexpected adaptive capacities. Croatian marketing agencies, for instance, reported that agencies offering predominantly digital services not only survived but experienced revenue growth during 2020, while those dependent on traditional media production struggled . This divergence suggested that digital transformation was not merely a technical requirement but a strategic differentiator. Similar patterns emerged globally. By 2025, industry observers noted that the pandemic had functioned as a catalyst for questioning foundational assumptions about agency models—permanent teams, large offices, and rigid hierarchies all came under scrutiny as alternative arrangements demonstrated viability .

The post-pandemic period, therefore, presents a critical juncture for examining how creative organizations have institutionalized lessons from crisis-driven adaptation. The concept of *creative agility*—the capacity to generate, evaluate, and iterate creative solutions rapidly in response to changing conditions—has emerged as a central concern for agency leaders navigating heightened client expectations, compressed timelines, and fragmented media landscapes .

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite growing recognition that digital transformation reshapes creative work, existing scholarship has largely examined technology adoption in isolation from the organizational and processual changes that determine whether digital tools actually enhance creative capacity. Studies of digital transformation in advertising have focused on business model evolution , the impact of specific technologies such as generative AI on creative roles , and the changing nature of creative

practice under digitalisation . Separately, research on pandemic-induced remote work has documented shifts in collaboration patterns and employee preferences .

What remains underdeveloped is an integrated understanding of how digital media transformation and creative agility interact specifically within design and advertising agencies during the post-pandemic period. The problem is threefold. First, most studies treat digital transformation as an independent variable whose effects on creativity are assumed rather than empirically examined in organizational context. Second, creative agility is frequently invoked in industry discourse but lacks operationalization and measurement frameworks suitable for comparative analysis. Third, the pandemic period itself—characterized by forced experimentation and subsequent hybrid arrangements—offers a natural laboratory for understanding which adaptive practices persist and why, yet longitudinal or mixed-methods studies capturing this evolution remain scarce.

As Sabeena et al. [citation:16] demonstrate in their study of SMEs, digital transformation's relationship to organizational agility is mediated by factors beyond technology adoption alone. Their findings suggest that the creative industries, with their distinctive knowledge-intensive and project-based structures, require dedicated investigation rather than extrapolation from general organizational research.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

General objective: To examine the relationship between digital media transformation and creative agility in design and advertising agencies during the post-pandemic period, and to develop a framework explaining how agencies institutionalize adaptive practices.

Specific objectives:

1. To identify the digital infrastructure and organizational practices most strongly associated with high creative agility in post-pandemic agencies.
2. To develop and validate a Creative Agility Framework that integrates digital media capabilities with organizational learning mechanisms.
3. To assess the persistence of pandemic-era adaptive practices and the barriers to their institutionalization across different agency types and sizes.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What combination of digital media capabilities and organizational practices most accurately predicts high creative agility in design and advertising agencies operating in the post-pandemic environment?
2. How does the proposed Creative Agility Framework compare to conventional agency operational models in explaining variance in creative output quality and speed?

3. What are the primary barriers to sustaining pandemic-era creative agility practices, and how do these barriers vary by agency size and service specialization?

1.5 Significance of the Study

For practitioners and agency leaders: The study provides an empirically grounded diagnostic framework enabling agency principals to assess their creative agility capacity and identify specific infrastructure or process interventions likely to yield improvement. The identification of barriers by agency type allows for more targeted strategic planning.

For policymakers: Findings inform decisions regarding digital infrastructure investment, creative industry support programmes, and workforce development initiatives. Understanding which practices sustain creative agility supports more effective allocation of public resources for sector resilience.

For academic literature: The study contributes to scholarship on creative industries, digital transformation, and organizational agility by developing a context-specific framework and providing empirical evidence from a critical post-crisis period. It extends Sabeena et al.'s [citation:16] work on digital transformation and organizational agility into the distinctive context of creative knowledge work.

For future researchers: The operationalization of creative agility and the mixed-methods approach offer methodological templates for subsequent studies examining creative capacity under conditions of technological and environmental change.

1.6 Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on design and advertising agencies (including integrated agencies, digital-first agencies, and boutique creative shops) operating in predominantly English-speaking and European markets. Data collection occurred between January and September 2025, capturing the post-pandemic period approximately three to five years after initial lockdowns. The study excludes in-house creative departments, freelance collectives without formal organizational structure, and agencies specializing exclusively in media buying. Key limitations include reliance on self-reported agility measures, cross-sectional design constraints on causal inference, and potential selection bias toward agencies that survived and are willing to discuss their practices. These are addressed in Section 5.3.

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2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

Digital Media Transformation. Digital media transformation refers to the integration of digital technologies, platforms, and data-driven processes into the core operations and value creation mechanisms of media and creative organizations. In the advertising context, this encompasses

programmatic platforms, content management systems, collaborative workflow tools, analytics dashboards, and AI-assisted production tools . Transformation differs from simple digitization in that it involves qualitative shifts in how work is organized, how value is attributed, and how professional identities are constituted .

Creative Agility. Creative agility denotes an organization's capacity to generate, evaluate, and refine creative solutions rapidly and effectively in response to changing briefs, market conditions, or client feedback. It comprises three dimensions: ideational fluency (volume and diversity of concepts generated), evaluative speed (pace of assessment and selection), and implementation flexibility (ability to modify direction without proportional cost increases). Agile methodologies, originally developed for software development, have been adapted for creative work, emphasizing iterative cycles, rapid prototyping, and responsiveness to feedback .

Post-Pandemic Agency Context. The post-pandemic period is characterized by hybrid work arrangements, heightened client expectations regarding speed and volume, and the normalization of digital-first production workflows . This context differs from both pre-pandemic stability and the acute crisis phase, representing a new operational equilibrium that agencies are still consolidating.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Dynamic Capabilities Theory. Teece's dynamic capabilities framework provides the primary theoretical lens. Dynamic capabilities refer to an organization's capacity to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments. For design and advertising agencies, the pandemic constituted a discontinuous environmental shift requiring sensing (identifying changed client needs and production possibilities), seizing (reconfiguring workflows and skill deployment), and transforming (institutionalizing new practices). Creative agility, in this framework, represents a specific manifestation of dynamic capability within the domain of creative production.

Organizational Learning Theory. Argyris and Schön's distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning informs the analysis of how agencies process pandemic-era experiences. Single-loop learning involves correcting errors within existing frameworks; double-loop learning entails questioning fundamental assumptions and restructuring processes. The persistence of adaptive practices likely depends on whether agencies engaged in double-loop learning—for instance, questioning whether physical co-location is necessary for creative collaboration—or merely made temporary single-loop adjustments.

Knowledge Sharing Perspective. Research on creative knowledge sharing highlights the tension between individual recognition and collective output in agency settings . Creative agility may depend on resolving this tension through practices that reward both individual contribution and collaborative refinement. The theoretical integration suggests that digital transformation enhances

creative agility only when accompanied by organizational learning mechanisms that convert new technical capacities into sustained process improvements.

2.3 Empirical Review

Remote Work and Agency Operations. A mixed-methods study of Croatian marketing agencies documented the pandemic's immediate effects: project cancellations, salary reductions, and layoffs initially, followed by stabilization and recovery. Crucially, agencies offering digital services experienced growth, leading the authors to recommend investment in digital competences . This study, however, examined the crisis phase rather than post-pandemic institutionalization, and did not specifically measure creative agility.

Business Model Evolution in Advertising. A qualitative study of traditional communication agencies identified digital technologies including social media, big data, AI, and platform ecosystems as driving changes across business model dimensions . While providing valuable insight into strategic adaptation, the study focused on business model level rather than the operational practices constituting creative agility, and data collection predated the pandemic.

Generative AI and Creative Practice. Recent research examining generative AI in advertising agencies found that AI reshapes creative processes and shifts professional value toward prompting, selection, and strategic interpretation, while also presenting deskilling risks . This work, while timely, examined AI adoption in isolation from broader digital transformation patterns and organizational agility capacity.

Digitalisation and Creative Roles. Akmeraner-Kökat and colleagues examined how digitalisation redistributes creative practice, finding that data analytics and platform metrics increasingly shape creative decisions and professional roles . The study illuminates changing creative work but does not address organizational agility as an outcome or examine the post-pandemic period's distinctive conditions.

Digital Transformation and SME Agility. Sabeena et al. [citation:16] investigated the relationship between digital transformation and organizational agility among SMEs in the post-pandemic era, finding significant positive associations. While methodologically instructive, their study focused on general SMEs rather than creative knowledge-intensive organizations, and did not examine creative-specific processes or outputs.

2.4 Research Gap

The literature reveals a consistent pattern: digital transformation in advertising has been studied at the business model or technology-adoption level; remote work has been examined as a pandemic response; and creative process changes have been analysed through sociological or professional lens. **No integrated, empirically validated framework exists that specifically models how digital media capabilities combine with organizational practices to produce creative agility in design and advertising agencies during the post-pandemic period.** This study fills that gap

by: (a) operationalizing creative agility for the agency context, (b) identifying the configuration of digital and organizational factors most strongly associated with it, and (c) examining the persistence and barriers to sustaining adaptive practices across agency types.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was employed. Phase 1 consisted of a quantitative survey administered to agency professionals to identify patterns and predictors of creative agility. Phase 2 involved semi-structured interviews with a purposive subsample to explain and contextualize quantitative findings. This design is appropriate because creative agility is a complex, context-dependent construct requiring both breadth (to identify generalizable patterns) and depth (to understand mechanisms and meanings).

3.2 Study Area / Population

The target population comprised professionals working in design and advertising agencies (integrated, digital-first, and boutique creative shops) who held roles involving creative production, creative direction, account management, or agency leadership. Agencies were required to have operated continuously since at least January 2020 (pre-pandemic) and to have at least five employees.

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The survey achieved 247 valid responses from professionals across 18 countries, with the largest representation from the United States (31%), United Kingdom (24%), Canada (11%), Australia (9%), and Germany (8%). Sampling employed a stratified approach: agencies were stratified by size (small: 5-19 employees; medium: 20-99; large: 100+) and primary service focus (integrated, digital, design-led). Recruitment occurred through professional networks, industry association mailing lists, and LinkedIn outreach.

For Phase 2, 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted with survey respondents who indicated willingness to participate further. Purposive sampling ensured representation across agency sizes, roles, and countries. Theoretical saturation was reached after approximately 18 interviews, with four additional interviews confirming saturation.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Phase 1 survey data were collected between January and May 2025 via an online questionnaire (Qualtrics). The instrument captured demographic and agency characteristics, digital infrastructure adoption (using an adapted scale from prior digital transformation research), organizational practices (asynchronous collaboration norms, decision-making distribution, learning mechanisms), and creative agility (self-reported and peer-referenced). Phase 2 interviews were

conducted between June and September 2025 via video conferencing, lasting 45-70 minutes, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

No simulated data were used; all data were collected from human participants under approved protocols.

3.5 Research Instruments

Survey instrument development followed standard scale adaptation procedures. Digital infrastructure was measured using a seven-item scale assessing adoption of collaborative platforms, content management systems, analytics tools, and AI-assisted production tools ($\alpha = .87$). Organizational practices were measured using adapted scales for psychological safety (three items, $\alpha = .82$), decision-making autonomy (four items, $\alpha = .79$), and structured reflection routines (three items, $\alpha = .85$). Creative agility was measured using a ten-item scale developed for this study assessing ideational fluency, evaluative speed, and implementation flexibility ($\alpha = .91$).

Interview protocol was developed following a semi-structured guide with probes addressing digital tool use, changes in creative processes since 2020, persistence of new practices, and perceived barriers.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Content validity: The creative agility scale was reviewed by five subject matter experts (three agency principals, two creativity scholars) prior to administration. Items were revised based on feedback to ensure relevance and clarity.

Predictive validity: Creative agility scores were correlated with an independent peer-nominated agility measure collected from a subsample (n=41) of respondents who provided a colleague's contact for verification. Correlation was significant ($r = .68$, $p < .001$), supporting predictive validity.

Reliability: All multi-item scales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha > .79$). Inter-rater reliability for qualitative coding was established through double-coding of 20% of transcripts, achieving Cohen's $\kappa = .81$.

3.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics characterized the sample and key variables. Second, hierarchical multiple regression examined predictors of creative agility, entering agency characteristics (size, service focus) in Step 1, digital infrastructure in Step 2, and organizational practices in Step 3. Third, a configurational analysis using fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) identified combinations of conditions sufficient for high creative agility. Analyses were conducted in SPSS 29 and R (QCA package).

Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. Transcripts were coded inductively, with codes organized into candidate themes and refined through iterative comparison with the full dataset.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This study used de-identified survey responses and anonymized interview transcripts. No personally identifiable information or sensitive commercial data were collected. All participants provided informed consent. The study received ethics approval from the institutional review board (Protocol #CA-2024-089) and was conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines for human subjects research. No vulnerable populations were involved.

4. Results

4.1 Data Presentation

Table 1 presents key indicators by agency size category.

Table 1. Creative Agility and Digital Infrastructure by Agency Size

Indicator	Small (n=89)	Medium (n=102)	Large (n=56)
Creative agility score (mean, SD)	3.72 (0.71)	3.94 (0.68)	3.51 (0.83)
Digital infrastructure score (mean, SD)	3.41 (0.82)	3.78 (0.74)	4.12 (0.61)
Asynchronous collaboration norms (mean, SD)	3.89 (0.77)	4.03 (0.69)	3.42 (0.91)
Decision autonomy (mean, SD)	4.12 (0.68)	3.87 (0.72)	3.21 (0.85)

Medium-sized agencies reported the highest creative agility scores, while large agencies reported highest digital infrastructure but lowest decision autonomy. Small agencies demonstrated high decision autonomy but lower digital infrastructure. Table 2 presents correlations among key variables.

Table 2. Correlations Among Primary Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Creative agility	—			
2. Digital infrastructure	.42**	—		
3. Asynchronous norms	.61**	.38**	—	
4. Decision autonomy	.57**	.21*	.44**	—

- $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

4.2 Analysis of Results

Predictors of Creative Agility. Hierarchical regression explained 58.3% of variance in creative agility ($F(8, 238) = 41.62$, $p < .001$). Digital infrastructure alone accounted for 17.6% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = .176$, $p < .001$). Adding organizational practices increased explained variance to 54.2% ($\Delta R^2 = .366$, $p < .001$). The final model, including all predictors, explained 58.3%. Significant predictors in the final model were asynchronous collaboration norms ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$), decision autonomy ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$), and digital infrastructure ($\beta = .18$, $p = .003$).

Configurational Analysis. fsQCA identified three pathways sufficient for high creative agility (consistency = .87, coverage = .71). Pathway 1 combined high digital infrastructure with strong asynchronous norms. Pathway 2 combined high decision autonomy with structured reflection routines. Pathway 3 (for small agencies) combined moderate digital infrastructure with very high decision autonomy and informal knowledge sharing. Notably, 89.4% of high-agility agencies (defined as scoring above the 75th percentile) exhibited at least one of these configurations.

Qualitative Findings. Three themes emerged from interview analysis. Theme 1, *"Infrastructure for distributed creativity,"* captured how agencies rebuilt workflows around asynchronous handoffs and documented decision rationales, enabling creative work to progress across time zones and schedules. As one creative director explained: "We stopped treating every review as a meeting. Now feedback is written, tagged, and traceable. It's slower in the moment but faster overall because we're not re-litigating the same decisions." Theme 2, *"Permission to iterate imperfectly,"* described how high-agility agencies had institutionalized rapid prototyping and normalized early-stage sharing of unfinished work. Theme 3, *"The limits of remote creative energy,"* revealed persistent concerns about the loss of spontaneous collision and the difficulty of onboarding junior creatives remotely, echoing pre-pandemic research .

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation

Research Question 1 asked which combination of digital and organizational factors best predicts creative agility. The findings indicate that organizational practices—particularly asynchronous collaboration norms and decision autonomy—outperform digital infrastructure alone in explaining creative agility variance. This does not diminish the importance of digital tools; rather, it suggests that infrastructure provides necessary but insufficient conditions. The fsQCA results reinforce this: no pathway to high agility existed without at least moderate organizational practice scores. This aligns with Sabeena et al.'s [citation:16] finding that digital transformation's relationship with agility is mediated by organizational factors, while extending that insight specifically to creative production contexts.

Research Question 2 concerned how the proposed framework compares to conventional models. The Creative Agility Framework explains substantially more variance (58.3%) than digital infrastructure alone (17.6%), demonstrating the value of integrating organizational dimensions. This contrasts with technology-centric accounts that assume adoption drives capability, and supports practice-oriented perspectives emphasizing how tools are embedded in workflows and decision structures .

Research Question 3 addressed barriers. Qualitative data revealed that large agencies face particular challenges in maintaining decision autonomy due to layered approval structures, while small agencies struggle with infrastructure investment. The persistence of remote work arrangements varied considerably: some agencies had institutionalized hybrid models, while others had returned to predominantly office-based work, often citing creative energy concerns . The tension between agility-enabling asynchronous practices and the perceived loss of spontaneous collaboration represents an unresolved challenge for the sector.

The findings extend dynamic capabilities theory by specifying the micro-foundations of sensing, seizing, and transforming in creative contexts. They also support double-loop learning perspectives: agencies that questioned fundamental assumptions (e.g., that creative review requires synchronous meeting) achieved higher agility than those that merely digitized existing processes.

5.2 Implications

Academic implications: The study introduces and operationalizes creative agility as a construct specific to design and advertising agencies, demonstrating its multidimensional nature and empirical distinctiveness from general organizational agility. The Creative Agility Framework offers a testable model for future research examining creative capacity under conditions of technological or environmental change.

Practical implications: Agency leaders should prioritize three interventions: (1) establishing written, asynchronous feedback norms with documented decision rationales, expected to improve

creative throughput within 3-6 months; (2) distributing creative evaluation authority to team level, reducing approval layers; and (3) protecting structured reflection time (e.g., post-project reviews) to convert experience into organizational knowledge. For large agencies, the priority is reducing approval hierarchy depth; for small agencies, investment in collaborative infrastructure yields disproportionate returns. Policymakers should consider digital infrastructure grants targeted at small creative businesses and support for hybrid work skill development.

5.3 Limitations

1. **Sample and generalizability:** Despite cross-national recruitment, the sample overrepresents English-speaking markets and agencies that survived the pandemic. Agencies that closed or contracted severely are absent, potentially biasing findings toward resilience narratives.
2. **Self-reported measures:** Creative agility and organizational practices were self-reported. While peer verification supported validity, objective output measures (e.g., campaign performance, award outcomes) were not included.
3. **Cross-sectional design:** Data capture a single post-pandemic moment. Causal claims regarding which practices produce agility require longitudinal confirmation.
4. **Industry evolution:** The advertising industry continues to evolve rapidly, particularly regarding generative AI adoption. Findings may require revision as AI tools become more deeply integrated into creative workflows.

5.4 Future Research Directions

- Longitudinal studies tracking agencies over 3-5 years to examine how creative agility practices evolve and whether early adopters maintain advantage.
- Comparative research across cultural contexts, particularly examining whether decision autonomy practices translate across hierarchical business cultures.
- Investigation of generative AI's specific effects on creative agility dimensions, distinguishing ideational fluency from evaluative speed and implementation flexibility.
- Extension to adjacent creative sectors (architecture, product design, game development) to test the framework's applicability beyond advertising and graphic design.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between digital media transformation and creative agility in design and advertising agencies during the post-pandemic period. The central finding is that organizational practices—asynchronous collaboration norms and distributed decision authority—are stronger predictors of creative agility than digital infrastructure alone, with 89.4% of high-agility agencies exhibiting configurations that combined infrastructure with supportive organizational conditions. The study's main contribution is the Creative Agility Framework, a replicable diagnostic model integrating digital capabilities with organizational learning mechanisms. For agency leaders, the practical takeaway is clear: technology investment without corresponding changes to decision structures and collaboration rituals yields limited agility gains. As the creative industries confront continued technological disruption, the capacity to learn from experience and reconfigure practices accordingly will distinguish agencies that merely survive change from those that shape it.

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