

# Romania: Navigating the “Dreamer” Client. A Qualitative Study of Conflict Management in the Advertising Industry

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**Abstract:** The advertising industry has transitioned into a highly fragmented and dynamic environment, yet the nature of conflict within agency-client relationships remains under-researched, particularly in transitional markets. While literature extensively covers “success factors,” there is a notable gap in understanding the pragmatic, day-to-day conflict resolution strategies employed by practitioners. This study explores how advertising practitioners in Romania perceive the causes of conflict and identifies the informal practices used to prevent, manage, and resolve these tensions. Specifically, it examines the “expectation-expertise asymmetry” that characterizes modern digital advertising services. Using an exploratory qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Romanian advertising professionals. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework. Findings reveal five dominant themes: (1) an epistemic gap where execution-level practitioners view academic theory as disconnected from rapid digital shifts; (2) a pervasive “expectation asymmetry” driven by “dreamer” clients seeking instant ROI; (3) the emergence of “technical translation” as a critical relationship-maintenance tool; (4) the proactive use of value-based boundaries to protect agency reputation; and (5) a deliberate shift from creative logic to contractual pragmatism during conflict resolution. The study concludes that conflict stems from role ambiguity and technical knowledge gaps. It identifies the Account Manager as a critical “boundary spanner” and informal mediator. By bridging conflict theory with practitioner-led solutions, this research contributes to a grounded understanding of how professional service relationships are sustained in emerging European markets.

**Keywords:** Advertising agency, agency-client relationships, conflict management, account management, Romania, qualitative research, thematic analysis.

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## **Introduction**

The advertising industry has undergone significant transformation over time, particularly with the expansion of digital and online advertising. Advertising has become “a prominent feature of economic life” (Bagwell, 2007, p. 1705), playing a central role in shaping communication strategies aimed at persuading consumers and generating profit (Richards & Curran, 2002). In Europe, the United Kingdom leads in advertising expenditure, followed by Germany and France (Fuchs, 2018), while major technology companies such as Google and Facebook rely heavily on advertising revenues. At the same time, the industry has become increasingly fragmented, dynamic, and less bureaucratic (Grant, McLeod, & Shaw, 2012), with agencies expanding their services beyond creative production to include marketing strategy, media planning, and research.

Within this evolving landscape, advertising agencies operate as complex organizations in which different roles contribute to both creative output and relationship management. Account managers, in particular, play a pivotal role as intermediaries between the agency and the client, translating client needs into actionable strategies and coordinating internal teams to meet deadlines, budgets, and performance objectives. As noted by Morais (2007), they function simultaneously as relationship managers, problem solvers, and communicators, operating in contexts characterized by uncertainty and fragmented information.

Despite the centrality of these relationships, a persistent gap exists between academic understandings of advertising and practitioners’ day-to-day realities. Nyilasy and Reid (2009) highlight the difficulty practitioners face in engaging with academic knowledge, often due to its abstract language and limited applicability to fast-changing industry conditions. As a result, practitioners tend to develop their own practical frameworks and assumptions about how advertising works, grounded in experience rather than theory. This divergence is particularly visible in digital environments, where rapid change challenges the relevance of static theoretical models.

A substantial body of literature has examined the factors that contribute to successful agency-client relationships, emphasizing elements such as trust, communication, expertise, and mutual understanding (Fam & Waller, 2008). These relationships are both relational and contractual, involving ongoing collaboration between partners with shared but not always aligned objectives. However, in an increasingly competitive market where clients demand measurable returns on investment, these relationships are under constant pressure, and agency switching has become more common (Arul, 2011).

While existing research has largely focused on success factors and relationship development, significantly less attention has been paid to the nature of conflicts that arise within agency-client relationships and how these conflicts are managed in practice. In particular, there is limited empirical insight into how practitioners themselves understand and navigate such conflicts, especially in emerging or transitional advertising markets such as Romania. This gap is notable given that conflict is an inherent feature of collaborative professional relationships, particularly where expectations, expertise, and responsibilities are unevenly distributed.

In response to this gap, the present study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach to examine how advertising practitioners perceive and manage conflicts in agency-client relationships. Rather than attempting to generalize broadly, the study seeks to provide an in-depth, practitioner-oriented perspective on the causes of conflict and the strategies used to address them in practice. By focusing on practitioner experiences, the study aims to contribute to a more grounded understanding of how conflicts emerge and are handled in real-world agency contexts.

## **Literature review**

### ***A. The agency-client relationship: A relational core***

The agency-client relationship is frequently likened to a “marriage,” though its longevity has declined from an average of eight years in the 1990s to significantly shorter cycles today (Turnbull, 2016). This relationship evolves through a distinct lifecycle: induction, development, maintenance, and dissolution (Fam & Waller, 2008). At the heart of this lifecycle is the “people factor”—the interpersonal chemistry characterized by trust, honesty, and compatibility (Cagley & Roberts, 1984). However, the success of this bond is often threatened by two primary factors:

- Service quality vs. expectations: While agencies focus on technical and creative excellence, clients often prioritize speed, ROI, and reliability (Palihawadana & Barnes, 2005).
- Role ambiguity: Conflict frequently arises from “role definition problems” where the boundaries between the agency’s expertise and the client’s internal policies become blurred (Triki et al., 2007). In emerging markets, this is compounded by the client’s need for the agency to act not just as a creator, but as a strategic business advisor.

### ***B. Conflict in professional service relationships***

In the advertising industry, conflict is not merely an occasional disruption; it is an inherent feature of collaborative professional service work. Because advertising requires the “co-production” of value, both parties must invest significant cognitive and emotional resources.

Friction matters in this context because it directly impacts retention and creative output. According to Morais (2007), conflict often stems from a hierarchy of divergent goals, as agencies seek to preserve the relationship while producing “showcase” creative work that enhances their reputation, while clients seek to maintain control, meet strict deadlines, and achieve high copy-test scores.

When these goals collide, the relationship moves from a functional collaboration to a dysfunctional power struggle. Left unmanaged, these tensions lead to “agency switching,” a practice becoming increasingly common in competitive markets where clients demand immediate, measurable returns (Arul, 2011).

### **C. Frameworks for managing conflict**

To interpret how practitioners navigate these tensions, two primary frameworks provide the most analytical utility:

**1. Moore's Sources of Conflict (2014)** — This model allows for the diagnosis of *why* a clash is occurring by categorizing triggers into five areas:

- Data: differing interpretations of briefs or performance metrics.
- Structural: ambiguity regarding responsibilities or timelines.
- Value: clashes over what constitutes “good” or “effective” advertising.
- Relationship: miscommunications or negative past experiences.
- Interest: when one party feels their specific needs (e.g., budget vs. creativity) are not being met.

**2. The Trust and Interest Model** — Building on the “Dispute Resolution Stairway”, this approach emphasizes moving away from power-based confrontations toward interest-based negotiations. For practitioners, maintaining the “Triangle of Satisfaction” (addressing the result, the process, and the emotions involved) is key to preventing a conflict from escalating into a total breakdown of trust (D’Urso & Gavrilă, 2020). By focusing on shared interests rather than rigid rights or professional “ego,” account managers can transition from a crisis back to a state of “functional conflict” that actually drives innovation.

### **Research questions**

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How do advertising practitioners describe the main causes of conflict in agency-client relationships?
- (2) What practices do practitioners use to prevent, manage, and resolve such conflicts?
- (3) How do practitioners explain the gap between agency expertise and client expectations?

By addressing these questions, the article seeks to contribute to the literature on agency-client relationships by foregrounding the role of expectation asymmetry, knowledge gaps, and communication practices in shaping conflict dynamics, while also highlighting the predominantly informal and pragmatic approaches used by practitioners in managing these tensions.

### **Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research design and sampling**

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate the subjective experiences of advertising practitioners regarding conflict. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate here as it captures the “lived realities” and informal negotiation tactics that quantitative measures often overlook.

The sample consists of five advertising practitioners from the Romanian industry, recruited via snowball sampling. Participants represent a diverse cross-section of roles — from high-level management to specialized social media execution — providing a “360-degree” view of agency-client friction.

**Table 1.** Respondents by job title, age, gender, seniority work and company

Respondent	Job	Age	Gender	Seniority work	Company size	Company’s founding year
R1	Head of Marketing & People Operations	38	Female	2 years	36	2008
R2	Customer Success Manager	36	Female	4 years	36	2008
R3	Social Media Manager	22	Female	2 years	14	2011
R4	Social Media Manager	23	Female	7 months	14	2011
R5	Agency Manager	26	Male	4 years	4	2018

### 3.2 Data collection and thematic analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via email and video calls. The interview guide was structured to address three core areas: (1) the gap between academic theory and practice, (2) triggers of agency-client dissatisfaction, and (3) pragmatic conflict resolution strategies.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (TA) following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved:

1. Familiarization through immersive reading of transcripts to identify recurring concepts.
2. Initial coding: tagging segments related to “unrealistic expectations,” “technical gaps,” and “informal negotiation.”
3. Theme development: clustering codes into broader patterns of meaning.
4. Reviewing and defining themes to ensure they accurately reflect the dataset.

### Findings

The analysis revealed five dominant themes that characterize the conflict landscape in Romanian advertising.

#### **Theme 1: The epistemic gap (theory vs. practice)**

A significant divergence exists between academic definitions of advertising and practitioner realities. While participants recognized academic hallmarks like “persuasion” and “awareness,” they prioritized technical utility and market attention. Notably, a divide emerged regarding the value of scientific literature: strategic leaders (R1, R5) viewed it as a foundational technical reference (e.g., understanding Google algorithms), whereas

client-facing and execution roles (R2, R3, R4) dismissed it as disconnected from the “daily-changing” digital environment.

The Head of Marketing (R1), together with the Brand Manager (R5) agreed that scientific articles are a fundamental reference in their daily work. The Head of Marketing said that:

*The whole methodology that underlies the work (processes and procedures) of the agency is of a scientific and especially technical nature (e.g., how Google works, what Google algorithms involve, what they take into account, what are the differentiators from a technical point of view when talking about indexability of a site, etc.). The agency’s work and success is not based on creative advertising, but on opportunities for visibility in the digital environment given by the technical context.*

This is totally opposed to the response of the Customer Success Manager (R2) of the same agency, who said that “*in my job, I don’t personally relate to scientific articles*”. The same thing was said by the two social media managers (R3 & R4), mentioning that there is a discrepancy between scientific articles and the digital environment that changes daily.

## **Theme 2: Expectation asymmetry and the “dreamer” client**

The primary trigger of conflict is the gap between client “dreams” and agency “deliverables.” Practitioners characterized clients as “dreamers” who often view marketing as a “magic solution” for instant wealth (R5):

*Most of them believe that marketing is the magic solution that will make them win a lot of money with as little investment as possible. They don’t understand the importance of investing in an effective system to convert visitors into customers and they don’t understand that once you are successful in online marketing, success can be scaled very easily.*

Conflict arises when clients demand “incredible results overnight” without understanding the technical timelines required for organic growth or brand building:

*Even if few clients know in detail the purpose of activity and what a campaign of a certain type entails (SEO, Content, PPC, etc.), the challenge is more about expectations vs. time. Everyone would like incredible results overnight, but most of them realize that any advertising or marketing effort takes time” (R1).*

This expectational asymmetry is compounded when clients have low “advertising education,” leading to subjective feedback and friction over strategic choices.

## **Theme 3: The role of technical “translation” in relationship maintenance**

Success in the Romanian market is predicated on the agency’s ability to act as a translator. Practitioners emphasized that “translating technical information” (e.g., SEO metrics) into “business-objective language” is the essential differentiator for long-term retention. When this translation fails, or when clients refuse to implement technical recommendations, the relationship quickly shifts toward dissatisfaction and eventual termination.

The literature shows that the main causes of dissatisfaction are related to creative design, lack of staff attention to the invoices the client pays and late deadlines. However, we have discovered other causes that can create dissatisfaction: lack of knowledge, unrealistic expectations, and failure to implement technical recommendations. R1 states:

*Yes — the main cause was a lack of understanding/knowledge of SEO in terms of the technicalities involved which led to unrealistic (and sometimes miscommunicated) expectations from the client”, a response reinforced by R2:  
Incorrectly set expectations or failure to implement technical recommendations, automatically resulting in failure to meet set targets.*

Only one of the respondents said that it was difficult for them to identify such causes of dissatisfaction.

#### **Theme 4: Moral and value-based boundaries**

Conflict is not always reactive; it can be proactive. Several practitioners (R1, R5) reported value-based conflicts where they refused clients from “unethical” industries (e.g., gambling, adult entertainment). Furthermore, when professional advice is ignored, agencies utilize a “responsibility disclaimer” strategy: they execute the client’s flawed vision but explicitly refuse accountability for the results, creating a formal boundary to protect agency reputation. As one of the Social Media Managers (R3) states,

*if the agency feels that the client’s decision is inappropriate, we support our choices with clear information and research, and in rare cases they refuse to work with clients with very divergent views („if we notice that we are not on the same page”).*

For some it is a matter of responsibility in case of failure. The client takes the final decision, but the agency staff feels they are obligated to give them advice on best possible alternatives:

*We inform our client about the risks their approach would bring and present the reasons why we think we should use our approach, however, if the client does not accept, we will go with their version, without taking any responsibility for the results achieved for that product or service.*

#### **Theme 5: Pragmatism over creativity in resolution**

While the industry prides itself on creativity, practitioners largely reject “creative” conflict resolution. Instead, they favor efficiency and contractual pragmatism. Resolution tactics are categorized into:

- Social restoration: physical meetings and “open, honest discussions” to rebuild trust (R2 suggests “creating a friendly environment, a physical meeting, an open and honest discussion”).
- Commercial compensation: offering bonuses, additional services, or refunds to mitigate negative feedback.
- Amicable dissolution: terminating contracts when structural changes or unrealistic demands make the “marriage” unsustainable.

Therefore, although advertising agencies relies on creativity in creating communication campaigns and strategies, when it comes to conflicts, they consider that creativity and efficiency are two totally different matters that cannot be intertwined.

### **Discussion and Contribution**

This study confirms that Moore's (2014) Conflict sources — specifically data, structural, and value conflicts — are highly prevalent in the advertising sector. Our findings suggest that in the Romanian “transitional” market, data conflict is often rooted in the client's lack of technical education, while value conflict stems from the clash between the client's “get rich quick” mentality and the agency's strategic process. Furthermore, the data challenges the “creative” identity of the agency when applied to internal management. There is a clear “de-creative” shift during conflict: practitioners move away from the fluid, innovative logic used for campaigns and toward a rigid, interest-based negotiation style. This suggests that in high-pressure agency environments, “efficiency” is valued more highly than “creative problem-solving” when the relationship itself is at stake.

The study makes three primary contributions. First, it provides rare insight into the Romanian advertising market, highlighting how “technical translation” is a unique survival skill for agencies in emerging economies. Second, it identifies the account/success manager as a “boundary spanner” who must balance client education with professional integrity. And third, it contributes to the ADR (alternative dispute resolution) literature by demonstrating that “creative” industries may deliberately avoid “creative” resolution in favor of formal, efficiency-driven outcomes to preserve professional authority.

### **Managerial contributions**

If we are to consider the translation of the findings of our study into actionable strategies, a series of managerial implications can be drawn, as these are meant to provide “real-world” value to the industry. Mirroring the five major themes identified, these practical recommendations for account managers are presented in the Table 2.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

The primary limitation of this study is the sample size ( $n = 5$ ), which, while providing deep qualitative insight, prevents broad generalization across the entire Romanian industry. Additionally, the data relies solely on the agency's perspective, while the client's view of these conflicts remains unexplored. Finally, the use of email-based interviews for some participants may have limited the spontaneous “richness” of the dialogue compared to in-person interactions.

This research highlights that conflict in advertising is less about the “creative product” and more about the management of expectations and technical knowledge. In Romania,

**Table 2:** Practical recommendations for account managers (AMs)

Research theme	Identified challenge	Strategic recommendation for practitioners
The epistemic gap	Disconnect between academic theory and fast-paced digital execution.	Hybrid knowledge integration: use technical „theory” (e.g., algorithms, SEO logic) as a credibility anchor, but supplement it with real-time case studies to prove agility.
Expectation asymmetry	The „dreamer” client: unrealistic ROI goals and „magic solution” mindsets.	The „reality brief”: replace the standard brief with an „estimate vs. risk” document. Set „minimum, expected, and stretch” goals in writing before the contract begins.
Technical translation	Communication breakdown due to technical jargon or lack of client education.	<b>Translational audits:</b> Conduct monthly „objective alignment” meetings where technical metrics are explicitly mapped to the client’s specific business KPIs (e.g., „clicks = foot traffic”).
Pragmatic resolution	High-pressure friction leading to potential contract termination.	<b>„De-creative” conflict buffering:</b> switch from creative brainstorming to interest-based negotiation during disputes. Use „face-saving” tactics — such as bonus services — to de-escalate without admitting professional failure.
Value-based boundaries	Tension between agency reputation and „uneducated” or „difficult” client feedback.	<b>The advisory disclaimer:</b> when a client insists on a flawed strategy, formally document the agency’s counter-recommendation. Shift from „order-taker” to „strategic consultant” to protect agency brand equity.

practitioners navigate a landscape of “dreamer” clients by employing radical honesty, technical translation, and pragmatic negotiation. The study concludes that the “gap” between academia and practice is most visible in the speed of change; practitioners view theory as a slow-moving anchor, while the digital market requires a fast-moving sail. For the agency-client “marriage” to survive, agencies must transition from being “vendors of ads” to “educators of strategy,” ensuring that both parties are speaking the same language of results, risk, and reality.

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