

THE ROLE OF MENTORING AT THE BEGINNING OF A PROFESSIONAL CAREER IN ADVERTISING

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Abstract: This paper explores the role of mentoring at the onset of a professional career in advertising, focusing on college students and recent graduates. Following a theoretical overview of key concepts and theories related to mentoring and career development, the study presents statistical data describing the organizational climate of the advertising industry and its openness toward young professionals, both internationally and in Romania. The empirical section includes a qualitative analysis based on in-depth interviews with two categories of participants: graduates of mentoring programs and their organizers—mentors and employers within the Romanian advertising field. Findings highlight that young participants benefit from mentoring through opportunities that foster professional growth, guidance from senior professionals, and effective knowledge transfer. Mentoring programs yield mutual advantages: for mentees, a valuable career foundation; for mentors, personal satisfaction and professional recognition; and for employers and the industry, improved performance and talent development.

Keywords: mentoring, advertising agencies, professional career, mentoring program, students, university graduates.

1 Introduction

In the advertising industry, the topic concerning the importance of mentoring programs at the beginning of one's professional career is highly relevant due to the dynamics and competitiveness that characterize the field. The labor market is in continuous and rapid development from a technological perspective, which inherently requires increased efficiency and the constant adaptation of young professionals to industry demands. The integration of young talent through these type of programs provides a secure starting point within a framework tailored to the needs of both the young professionals and the industry, thereby creating a link between the academic environment and the requirements of hiring companies.

Companies require a diverse and well-educated workforce in order to successfully adapt to rapidly changing technology-based practices. The extremely rapid pace of technological advancement increases the need for employees to possess diverse specializations and to be well-prepared professionally. To remain competitive, organizations must invest in human capital, in the education and training of their own employees, investments that yield long-term benefits for companies. This is a shared responsibility: students must actively participate in acquiring new skills; universities must provide well-structured academic programs; and employers must engage in the practical training of future employees (Schambach & Dirks, 2002, pp. 1-2).

2 Literature Review

The term originates in Greek mythology, deriving from the figure of Mentor, a wise and trusted friend of Odysseus. When Odysseus departed for the Trojan War, he entrusted Mentor with the care of his son, Telemachus. Mentor assumed responsibility for shaping Telemachus's character, overseeing his education, and instilling virtuous values. The attributes and duties associated with Mentor constitute the defining traits of the contemporary mentor: wisdom, experience, trustworthiness, and full dedication to guiding a novice (Barondes, 1997, p. 347). The concept of mentoring has evolved over time to facilitate the achievement of objectives arising within one's professional career. Collaboration with a mentor inherently fosters the development of competencies in a specific field. Regardless of the stage of the professional career in which the protégé finds themselves,

mentoring must play an equally significant role in ensuring their proper development (Pender Greene, 2015, pp. 1-3).

Mentoring is defined as “a one-to-one learning relationship between two individuals, one of whom is more mature (the mentor), though not necessarily older than the other. It is a relationship based on role modeling and engagement in extended dialogue between them” (Crașovan, 2005, p. 64). The one-to-one relationship enables direct and tailored interaction in each case between the mentor and the protégé. The mentor must be a person with greater experience and more advanced competencies. It is not necessary for the mentor to be older; rather, their professional position is of primary importance. The mentor thus becomes a role model for the mentee (Barbaroș, Bocoș, 2023, p. 316). Other authors (Trieu et al., 2025, pp. 4-7) also emphasizes the role of peer mentoring and collaboration in shaping professional branding, in the early career stages. Successful mentoring is based on establishing open communication between the two parties involved. A safe environment is created for the mentee, in which transparent discussions take place regarding emerging situations (Boldea, Sigmirean, Buda, 2018, pp. 145-146).

Mentoring programs bring numerous visible benefits to the mentee. The early stages of a professional career can be stressful; the guidance of a mentor alleviates professional stress. The mentor's presence and intervention contribute to shaping the intern's professional identity (Pop, 2018, p. 145). One such benefit is the exposure gained within a diversified professional network, which contributes to increased visibility in the industry through networking opportunities. Additionally, the mentee gains access to practical knowledge and strategic insights, enabling the acceleration of their professional growth. Moreover, the mentor introduces the mentee to organizational norms, values, and culture, thereby facilitating their integration and adaptation to the work environment. Repeated interactions with the mentor help the mentee develop empathy and interpersonal communication skills, which in turn support the effective management of complex situations and foster the mentee's maturation. The open communication relationship and safe framework established between them contribute to the protégé's increased self-esteem. Owing to their relevant professional position, the mentor supports the mentee's career development through involvement in projects, conferences, training programs, and by identifying employment opportunities for the mentee. On the other side, for the mentor, a primary benefit is the satisfaction derived from fostering growth and assisting individuals in their professional advancement. The mentor can delegate certain tasks to the mentee, thereby freeing up time for themselves when they work collaboratively. Moreover, due to the open relationship between the two, there is a reciprocal exchange of ideas and perspectives, which may even be novel for the mentor, creating a relationship of mutual support. This dynamic can lead to improvements in the mentor's profession and contributions to advancing their field of interest (Pender Greene, 2015, pp. 3-4).

The benefits of the mentor-mentee relationship are often perceived as being solely for the mentee; however, in reality, the mentor also derives numerous advantages from the relationship, representing an opportunity to refine their professional knowledge and experience (Stănculescu, 2015, p. 31). Mentoring also provides long-term benefits for the organization: these programs cultivate future valuable employees for the company. Additionally, they enhance employee performance, reduce turnover among valuable staff, and increase productivity at the organizational level (Randstad, 2020).

The advertising industry underwent numerous changes during the pandemic, and the Romanian Union of Advertising Agencies (UAPR) conducted a study aimed at understanding how employees adapted to the pandemic situation and identifying their specific needs. One difficulty encountered by employees while working from home was separating professional and personal life, with 62.6% of respondents affirming this challenge. Despite the difficulties, there were also benefits: 53.7% of respondents indicated that flexibility was the greatest advantage offered by remote work (UAPR, 2021).

The organizational climate in small, Romanian-owned advertising agencies is primarily based on interpersonal and friendly relationships, whereas in large multinational agencies, employee interactions are more competitive, with the organizational atmosphere focused on task completion and achieving corporate objectives (Leovaridis, Cismaru, 2016, p. 45). Communication within small advertising agencies is predominantly informal, while in multinational companies in the advertising industry, communication tends to be mainly formal (Leovaridis, 2013, p. 195).

According to a recent study, measuring job satisfaction among employees in the industry, conducted by Romanian Union of Advertising Agencies (UAPR), employees in the communications sector are generally satisfied with the field in which they work. 80% of participants take pride in their work and wish to pursue a long-term career in this domain. 60% intend to continue working in this field for at least the next five years. Over three-quarters of respondents (77%) would recommend the industry as a sector where one can have a very good

job, and 90% consider their current employment to be secure and very secure. The social aspects of the workplace are highly valued by employees and are considered essential for overall job satisfaction. Friendships among colleagues, both formal and informal, play a significant role in creating a pleasant and motivating work environment. Young professionals aged 18-24 exhibit particularly high enthusiasm, but as they gain experience, their perspective becomes more nuanced: individuals with longer tenure in the industry tend to adopt a more realistic view of the social aspects of their job, recognizing both the benefits and challenges that come with accumulated experience (UAPR, D&D Research, 2024, p. 5). Other authors also show that cooperation, along with other individual career adaptability traits (concern, control, curiosity), influence the retention of talented employees in the advertising sector (Ferreira, Mujajati, 2017, pp. 405-411).

A significant percentage of respondents express satisfaction and contentment with the agencies in which they work. They generally value the social aspects of their workplace, feel appreciated by both colleagues and employers, consider their job attractive and authentic, and are passionate about their work. The study also identifies a weakness in the industry: only 61.1% of participants believe that all their professional training and development needs are met (UAPR, D&D Research, 2024, p. 24).

Work performance is influenced by the employee's emotional state and stress level, which has led organizations to adapt to employees' needs (Leovaridis & Păun, 2022, p. 26). The work schedule is flexible, with hybrid arrangements in place: 7% of respondents work full-time from home, while 10% work full-time from the office and 68% come to the office at least two days per week. Respondents indicate that the hybrid work schedule helps them maintain a balance between professional and personal life, with 69% agreeing with this statement. The greatest benefit of the hybrid system is the elimination of commuting to the office, with 80% of respondents endorsing this view (UAPR, D&D Research, 2024, pp. 27, 29, 30).

Regarding a highly relevant contemporary dimension in organizations—namely, sustainability, expressed through diversity, equity, and inclusion—studies conducted in the marketing and advertising sector at the European level indicate that (EACA, 2021, pp. 1-2) the marketing industry surpasses other sectors in terms of inclusion; however, significant challenges remain. The marketing industry scored 64% on the inclusion index, higher than the health sector, which scored 60%. The EACA study surveyed a sample of 10,000 respondents from the marketing sector across 27 countries, identifying significant differences in employees' experiences. According to the study, 69% of men feel more included in the workplace than women. Differences also exist among ethnic minorities, who report feeling less integrated than the majority of employees; in the United States, 17% of marketing employees experienced discrimination based on their ethnic background.

In Romania, recent research (UAPR, D&D Research, 2024, pp. 7, 33) indicates that gender distribution within agencies is becoming increasingly balanced, according to more than half of the respondents (56%). Regardless of their level of experience, respondents assert that the communications industry plays a crucial role in promoting diversity in Romanian society, a view strongly supported primarily by respondents in leadership/director positions (85% of them share this opinion). "Skills Training" initiatives are considered beneficial to the industry by 80% of participants: those at the Junior Management level (86%) and Starter level (84%) most frequently recognize advantages in this type of program. Promoting the industry among students is viewed positively by 82% of respondents, with the greatest acknowledgment coming from Junior Management (86%) and Starter level participants (84%) (UAPR, D&D Research, 2024, pp. 42, 43). The employment of creative graduates who show interest in working in the advertising industry, and who often represent a cheaper workforce, contributes to improving the economic performance of agencies, especially in the current context of economic recession, in which advertising agencies' clients usually reduce their investments in advertising, which negatively affects the financial situation of the agencies (Sobotková, Švarcová, 2013, pp. 707-717).

"Some authors (Sanchez-Sanchez et al., 2017, pp. 53-75) observe that in the current context, marked by the emergence of new technologies, the constant updating of advertising sector employees' knowledge in this field has become an entirely personal responsibility; in view of this situation, mentoring becomes all the more necessary in order to prepare future professionals to navigate a complex and predominantly digital environment. Professional mentoring programs create safe learning and practice environments, operating under the guidance of mentors, who are professionals in the field. Interpersonal relationships, communication, cooperation, knowledge enhancement, motivation, and employee performance are all improved through these programs within the communications industry (Loşii, 2014, p. 3).

The IAA School, *Pepiniera de Talente* IAA (IAA Talent Nursery) and MentorIAA are initiatives of the International Advertising Association (IAA) Romania. Their primary objective is to contribute to the development of the marketing and communications industry. The programs are complementary, with the main distinction among them being the age group of young participants they target.

The IAA School is an educational program recognized across the MarComm industry in Romania. The program includes several specializations: Fundamentals of Marketing and Communication, Digital, Strategic, Media, and Leadership, tailored according to the participants' level of experience. Its purpose is to enable participants to acquire essential knowledge and apply it in real-world contexts through case studies and with the support of instructors, who are industry professionals. This program targets both individuals with 1-3 years of experience, who are building their foundation in the field through the Fundamentals Module, as well as specialists seeking to deepen their expertise through the other modules (IAA, 2023).

Pepiniera de Talente IAA is a program aimed at university students in marketing, communication, advertising, or related fields, as well as recent graduates starting their careers in these domains. Its objective is to help them enter the marketing and advertising industry. Through this program, participants establish connections with industry professionals and gain direct exposure to current trends and working practices in the field (IAA, 2022).

Another IAA initiative was MentorIAA, a mentoring program that connected students, as mentees, with senior industry professionals, who served as their mentors, thereby forming mentor-mentee partnerships. The program consisted of six one-on-one sessions between the mentor and the mentee. The mentor helped the participant understand the industry and acquire new knowledge in the specific area of advertising that the student chose to explore, assigning a senior advertising professional specialized in that particular field as a mentor (IAA, 2022). MentorIAA was organized by IAA Romania within the framework of the first partnership in Romania between the business sector (IAA member advertising agencies) and the academic sector (specialized faculties in Bucharest) in marketing and communication, called AcademIAA. The mission of AcademIAA is to increase the employability of graduates from marketing and communication programs.

The School of Big Ideas (SOBI) is an educational program initiated by Publicis Groupe Romania, specifically designed to nurture and develop young talent. SOBI targets final-year students from relevant faculties and recent graduates who aspire to a career in the advertising and communication industry. Participation in SOBI cultivates practical experience and provides feedback sessions from senior advertising professionals within the Group. The program offers benefits such as valuable hands-on experience, networking opportunities, constructive feedback from industry experts, and potential career opportunities within Publicis Groupe. SOBI supports mentoring, through which young participants receive guidance and advice from professionals, serving as the primary learning mechanism (Publicis Groupe, 2024).

Scoala ADC (The ADC School) is an initiative of the Art Directors Club Romania (ADC*RO), an educational program created for young aspiring professionals in advertising and communication. The program aims to discover and cultivate new talent through a practical and industry-relevant approach. The ADC School program is a mentoring-based program that combines theoretical courses with practical sessions led by active industry professionals. Beyond the courses and practical mentoring, the program also includes visits to some of the largest advertising agencies in Romania (IQads.ro, 2023).

The Alternative School is a program founded in 2005, it is a non-formal and unconventional school of creativity that offers participants experiences designed to stimulate creativity and innovation, with a focus on the creative industries as a whole. The program targets young professionals in marketing, communication, advertising, and other related fields, as well as talented students with creative skills. The program features short, intensive modules focused on specific topics. The uniqueness of this mentoring program lies in the presence of internationally renowned trainers alongside local experts from the creative industries, who share their extensive experience and provide valuable perspectives on their respective fields. A distinctive feature of The Alternative School is its connection with the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity (The Alternative School, 2025).

3 Research Methodology

Based on the overarching objective of “identifying the role of mentoring at the onset of a career in advertising”, this study aims to examine both the perceptions and experiences of individuals involved in mentoring programs, including graduates, mentors, organizers, and employers. A qualitative research approach was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews as the primary technique. The data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide, which enabled the collection of detailed and nuanced information from respondents belonging to groups relevant to the study.

To obtain a comprehensive perspective on the topic, two groups of participants were selected. The first group comprised eight graduates of at least one of the mentoring programs previously presented: School of Big Ideas, Mentor IAA, Pepiniera de Talente IAA, ADC School and The Alternative School. These participants had

direct experience with both the benefits and challenges of these programs, providing valuable insights into the role mentoring plays in the early stages of their professional development. These respondents were aged between 21 and 28, with the majority being students or graduates of university programs such as Communication and Public Relations or Advertising. Some of them are also employed in advertising agencies, both in creative and media departments, holding junior positions such as Copywriter, Digital Media Trainee, Account Executive and Social Media Expert. All respondents had participated in at least one of the following mentoring programs: IAA School, MentorIAA, School of Big Ideas etc. Most completed these programs recently, in 2024, with only one respondent having participated in 2020. The most common ways they learned about these mentoring programs were through the academic environment (from certain professors), recommendations from friends and colleagues who had completed the programs, and online through advertisements seen on Instagram and LinkedIn.

The second group consisted of organizers, mentors and employers involved in mentoring programs, totaling seven participants: R1, a mentor in the School of Big Ideas program; R2, Program Director and organizer of IAA School; R3, coordinator of educational programs organized by Publicis Groupe Romania, School of Big Ideas; R4, mentor in the School of Big Ideas program; R5, Senior Account Manager and part of the teams where young graduates undertake internships; R6, mentor and instructor at IAA School; and R7, teacher in the Școala ADC program. These respondents are active in the advertising industry, working in various agencies and holding positions in client service, strategy, creative, human resources, or educational management departments. In addition to their active involvement in agency life, they participate in mentoring programs either as organizers, employers, or mentors; they are specialists in the advertising industry with over 15-20 years of experience. The professional trajectories of most respondents have been progressive, starting from junior positions and advancing to leadership roles: “I have over 15 years of experience in the advertising industry, starting as a Project Manager and evolving to my current position as Strategy & Branding Director, passing through intermediate roles such as Brand Planner and Senior Brand Planner in various agencies” (R1); “I am a teacher at ADC School, specifically teaching a copywriting course” (R7); “I am part of the Talent department, which is responsible for developing and managing initiatives aimed at attracting, training, and integrating new talents into the organization. The activities include coordinating educational and mentoring programs, such as the School of Big Ideas” (R3).

These two groups (graduates of mentoring programs and the program organizers, mentors, and employers) facilitate a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Separate interview guides were developed for each group. Interviews were conducted between March 10 and April 4, 2025. Each interview with graduates lasted approximately 40 minutes on average, while interviews with mentors, organizers, and employers averaged 50 minutes.

For the first group, the following research questions were formulated: 1. How did the mentoring program they attended support their development?; 2. What recommendations or suggestions do they have to enhance the effectiveness of mentoring programs?; 3. How does their actual experience in the mentoring program compare with their initial expectations?. For the second group, the research questions were: 1. What objectives do they pursue through the mentoring programs they organize or promote? (Why are these programs implemented?); 2. What benefits do mentors and employing organizations derive from these programs?; 3. How do they evaluate the development of young professionals who have participated in mentoring programs?.

4 Research Results

4.1 Analysis and interpretation of data obtained from interviews with graduates of mentoring programs

Motivation and benefits of participating in mentoring programs

The young respondents' main motivations were the desire to apply the theory learned at university, curiosity about the field, and the aspiration to achieve their dream of working in the advertising industry. They perceived these mentoring programs as opportunities to enter the industry: “For both programs, the motivation was that I really wanted to work in this field, and these programs were opportunities to deepen my knowledge and later to launch my career” (Respondent A). Many young students or graduates faced difficulties entering the industry before completing the mentoring programs: “I didn't know how to get into the industry; I was at an impasse in this regard. I was sending my CV to many agencies, but no one contacted me. So, the desire to enter the industry motivated me to participate in these mentoring programs” (Respondent B).

The mentoring programs in which the respondents participated provided multiple and diverse benefits for both their professional and personal development, with mentors playing a crucial role in their journey: “Before this program, I had a general idea of what advertising is, but not in detail. I can say that this program laid the foundation of my advertising knowledge. From how to conduct a brainstorming session, what it means to be a

copywriter, art director, or strategist, understanding a brief, finding insights around you, to the complete analysis of all communication media” (Respondent C).

Depending on individual performance, some respondents received job offers after completing the mentoring programs. Most participants obtained an internship first, followed by a job after completing the programs, while only one respondent did not receive any internship offers. The mentoring programs increased the visibility of our young respondents for advertising agencies: “Yes, following my participation in this mentoring program, I received a job at the agency where I did my internship, in the position I currently hold” (Respondent D), “I got a job as a junior copywriter at an advertising agency” (Respondent E), “After the three-month internship I completed through the ADC School, I received multiple offers from different agencies, including the one where I started my internship and where I ultimately decided to stay. I progressed from being just an intern, probably the only one at the time, to junior and then mid-level copywriter” (Respondent C).

From the relationship with their mentors to interactions with other participants, interpersonal communication is a significant benefit of mentoring programs. The relationships that young participants have with their mentors are described as open, based on trust, respect, and transparent communication. Participants received support from their mentors and found it easy to actively engage in discussions with them: “I had two important mentors throughout my career. One was my mentor during ADC School, who offered me the internship position, and the other took me under their wing and helped me grow. (...) I know that without their trust in me, I wouldn’t be where I am today. Maybe I would have never had these opportunities. And with the mentor who shaped me as a copywriter, I stay in daily contact. This is the person I turn to when I’m stuck, because I know that a simple conversation with them will help more than a week of overanalyzing the problem. This is one of the reasons I’m still anchored in this agency” (Respondent C). Most respondents also stated that they formed friendships with other participants, emphasizing that interacting with young people passionate about the same industry is a positive and valuable experience: “I can say yes, both professional connections with mentors and friendships with other participants. Many of us have remained friends and we meet at industry events. With a few from IAA School, I also met again at SOBI” (Respondent A).

Recommendations and suggestions for improving mentoring programs

Respondents expressed overall satisfaction with the mentoring programs, but they also identified areas for improvement related to both the program schedule and course structure: “I think the program is a bit long, eight hours a day. In the last few hours, I could no longer focus on the information” (Respondent F), “I would suggest that student groups or meetings be smaller so that more time can be dedicated to each individual. I think this would always help, especially at the beginning” (Respondent E). Regarding the organizers, participants encouraged the continuation of these programs, highlighting their value and importance for young professionals: “I think the program was very well structured, but it would have been more effective if the daily duration had been shorter. Eight hours per day was quite demanding, and a more condensed format would have helped maintain focus and energy. Also, better-distributed breaks would have made the experience more relaxed and productive” (Respondent G), “They should definitely continue this; these programs are very important for young people like me who want to enter the industry. There are still some minor organizational issues, but nothing too disruptive” (Respondent E). One respondent, who participated in the program in 2020, noted: “Many things have already changed in this mentoring program since I attended. I still think a bit more practical work would be helpful. Yes, the assignments help you practice in the advertising world, but I believe that a brainstorming session with a creative team on a real idea would add extra value” (Respondent C).

Mentors play a fundamental role in the learning process and beyond, acting as guides for young professionals by offering support and practical advice that aids their career development: “From my point of view, mentors have the most important role; they provide support and guide young people. Without them, the process of learning and integrating young professionals into the industry could not be so natural” (Respondent B), “I believe mentors should act as guides and provide support by offering project guidance. They should not give direct answers but help the mentee discover solutions, clarify their goals, and build confidence in their own potential” (Respondent F). Advice for future participants is simple and precise: respondents encourage them to actively engage, gather as much information as possible, and participate in all activities proposed by the mentors. They also emphasize the importance of being open and asking questions whenever there is uncertainty: “I advise future participants to pay close attention to what their mentor and employer suggest, without stubbornness, because they have a lot to learn from them. It is important to observe everything around them and learn as much as possible” (Respondent H).

Young participants’ expectations vs. experiences in mentoring programs

Comparing the expectations that graduates had with their real experiences highlights the degree of satisfaction with the mentoring programs. Participants generally perceive the programs as well adapted to the needs of young professionals; however, some areas could benefit from further improvement. For instance, participants suggested placing greater emphasis on brainstorming activities, considered central to agency work: “More focus should be placed on brainstorming, as it is the core of every company” (Respondent C); others recommended practical training on portfolio presentations, which was lacking in some programs: “In my year at ADC, portfolios were sent electronically rather than presented. Therefore, we didn’t have the opportunity to learn ‘tips & tricks’ on how to present effectively to clients” (Respondent E). Among the most appreciated activities in programs for juniors are those that are practical and interactive. Several young participants emphasized that greater attention should be given to interpersonal communication and presentation skills, which are essential when pitching ideas: “Although it may not be the first thing that comes to mind, aspects like communication nuances should be more thoroughly addressed and practiced within mentoring programs. In the rush to acquire new concepts, we sometimes forget that we are all human and must learn to understand each other, especially when we haven’t yet developed these skills” (Respondent D); “I would have benefited from more presentation skills courses, but this is purely my subjective opinion” (Respondent B). These insights suggest that while these programs largely meet the expectations of young professionals, incorporating more structured practical exercises focused on communication and presentation could further enhance their effectiveness.

A positive assessment of a mentoring program by respondents is reflected in their willingness to recommend the experience to friends and acquaintances. Participants unanimously described the program as a significant support during the early stages of their professional careers, while also contributing positively to their professional development. Graduates of these programs perceived them as valuable opportunities to enter the industry and advance professionally. For a substantial portion of respondents, the mentoring programs exceeded their initial expectations. They highlighted the welcoming and collaborative environment, the practical applicability of the content, and the constructive interaction with mentors as key factors: “I was pleasantly surprised by the interactive teaching methods and the freedom to think creatively; we were not constrained by any limitations” (Respondent B); “I believe these programs had the greatest impact on my professional development; they enhanced all the knowledge I gained during university and facilitated my entry into the industry I aspire to work in” (Respondent A). All respondents reported that they would recommend the program to friends or colleagues, reflecting their overall satisfaction with the mentoring experience. They perceive the program as a professional launching pad, providing a simulation of real agency work: “Yes, especially for those who are passionate or curious about the field, because they interact directly with agency professionals. It never felt like a traditional classroom experience; there was nothing purely theoretical. It is a kind of simulation of working in advertising” (Respondent E); “Yes, I recommended it to others; some enrolled and participated. I recommended these programs because participation brings only benefits and provides direct exposure to an industry populated by highly competent professionals” (Respondent A). Participants also emphasize the importance of active engagement for future mentees, they encourage prospective participants to remain open to learning, to seize all opportunities, and to manage their time and energy effectively, as mentoring programs can be intense yet highly valuable: “Engage actively both in the courses and in additional activities and opportunities” (Respondent E); “I would advise prospective mentees to be receptive to learning and to take full advantage of every opportunity offered. It is essential to be prepared to manage one’s time and energy, as these programs can be intensive but extremely valuable. Most importantly, maintain patience and appreciate the process of continuous learning” (Respondent G).

4.2 Analysis and interpretation of data obtained from interviews with mentoring program organizers, mentors, advertising employers

Objectives of mentoring programs

Mentoring programs are well integrated into the industry, and most respondents stated that they have engaged with mentoring programs either directly or informally, often when supporting younger colleagues. Only one respondent mentioned that this is their first official experience as a mentor: “I have been involved in several mentoring programs, which are initiatives of the IAA. Beyond these programs, in so many years of industry experience, I have often found myself in situations where I guided people, offered advice, and provided my support” (R6). Respondents identified various reasons for participating in mentoring programs. Some stated that their involvement stems from professional responsibility, as well as a desire to share knowledge gained over years of experience and to support the development of younger generations. Some respondents emphasized the pleasure of interacting with younger generations and the new ideas they bring: “I got involved in this program

through my workplace and because of my desire to help young people integrate into agency life” (R5); “I believe that as we get older, we feel the need to pass on accumulated knowledge; it is said to be humans’ way of achieving a form of immortality. Additionally, as I mentioned, I enjoy working with ‘new’ people in this field because they bring a fresh perspective” (R7); “The industry needed and still needs people who know more than just theory. There was a need for programs organized at the industry level, as individual agencies’ programs were not as well developed” (R6).

The success of mentoring programs can be measured in different ways, according to the respondents, such as by evaluating the quality of projects completed by graduates at the end of the courses, through general feedback from all participants involved in the mentoring program, and by tracking the graduates’ career paths after completing the program: “I believe success depends on the context or on a case-by-case basis. But, in general, I define it as follows: mentees want to continue in creative work, they manage to carry a project from start to finish, they succeed in getting employed, and they manage to produce quality creative work that is recognized and appreciated accordingly” (R7); “As mentees, the program should expose students to possible careers in marketing and communications, so that would be a qualitative criterion for measuring success. (...) The entire mentoring program was somehow monitored in terms of feedback from both students and mentors; evaluation forms were used” (R2). During the organization of mentoring programs, challenges inevitably arise. Respondents noted that the main challenges included creating relevant content, maintaining participants’ attention throughout the program, and the limited time availability of mentors: “There were challenges, which is normal. I think the mentors’ time was a challenge; they are industry professionals holding important positions in agencies, and it is clear that their free time is quite limited. There were other challenges, but I believe that when you are aware of the value a project brings, you can find solutions for any challenge because you know it’s worth it” (R6); “We faced challenges in developing the courses and tests, as well as in maintaining and adapting the online platform to make it as efficient as possible and to meet both the participants’ needs and our requirements. We overcame them through continuous improvements, content optimization, and platform adjustments to create a smoother and more interactive learning experience” (R3).

According to the respondents, mentors are selected based on their professional experience, but they must also have a willingness to volunteer in these programs as well as strong communication skills: “Mentors are industry professionals. They are people from mid- and top-management positions. They choose to participate out of their own desire. Mentors add value to this program, are dedicated, and happy to share what they know with young people” (R2). Participant selection varies depending on the specifics of each program, but the most important and frequently used criteria are motivation, curiosity, willingness to learn, and good results during the selection process: “There is a registration period for courses that combine theory and practice, and afterwards, the selected participants come to the agency for a week to solve a brief. After that week, a selection is made, and those chosen receive an internship within the agency. From the last stage, when the graduates come to the agency, I am involved in guiding and supporting them” (R5). Logistical resources are limited in all mentoring programs included in our research, so the focus is on optimizing existing resources to maximize the programs’ impact on young graduates, as well as on the development of the industry.

Benefits for mentors and employers from mentoring programs

Mentoring programs are primarily participant-centered; however, the benefits are reciprocal for all parties involved. Even though mentoring programs often focus on the participants, mentors also gain advantages: they can develop both professionally and personally through their involvement in these programs. Some of the mentors who responded to these questions indicated that the main benefit they receive is the development of the people they have encouraged and supported throughout the process: “I was not materially rewarded, but I felt rewarded when a participant came to tell me that they had received an internship on my team, so we would be colleagues, that was the most important reward” (R4); “Mentors volunteer in these programs, but we try to acknowledge them by showing how much good they do for a person, as well as for the industry. We appreciate the values they bring, which are evident in their willingness to dedicate their free time to something that has a significant impact” (R6). Employer organizations are direct beneficiaries of mentoring programs, according to the respondents. Through these programs, organizations have direct access to young professionals who have received quality training and are motivated to enter the industry: “Both the organization and the industry gain many benefits from these mentoring programs. They are the direct beneficiaries of young professionals with a fresh perspective” (R7); “The program contributes to developing future talents in the industry, supports the Employer Branding strategy, and facilitates the recruitment process by ensuring better-prepared candidates for integration into the organization” (R3). By organizing mentoring programs, organizational culture is strengthened through the promotion of education, intergenerational collaboration, and professional development: “The

program promotes collaboration across teams and generations, encouraging the exchange of ideas and continuous development. It also facilitates a learning and innovation environment, aligned with the organization's values" (R3). Mentors have the opportunity to develop their interpersonal communication, guidance, and leadership skills. Through interactions with young participants, they gain new perspectives and can enhance their empathy, patience, and cognitive flexibility: "Even though mentors are already experienced professionals, participating in the program helps them understand new perspectives and engage in continuous learning due to the way the program is structured" (R2).

Employers play an important role in supporting the program by facilitating young graduates' entry into the industry, through internships or even direct employment: "Employers are involved in all stages of the program, providing mentoring, guidance, and professional development opportunities for participants. They play a crucial role in integrating young people into the industry and easing their transition into the labor market" (R3). To gain an overall understanding of the mentoring programs' implementation, organizers collect feedback from all parties involved, according to respondents: "Yes, we always ask for and pay close attention to feedback from mentors, participants, and employers. Their opinions are very important; understanding their experiences after the program helps improve the structure and make the necessary adjustments" (R6).

The effects of mentoring on the development of young professionals

A comparison between the performance of graduates of mentoring programs and those who have not benefited from such guidance reveals the clear advantages that mentoring initiatives bring to the lives of young people aspiring to enter the advertising industry. Respondents view the experiences gained through these programs with optimism, stating that young participants gain numerous long-term benefits due to the solid foundation of knowledge and skills developed during the program, representing a valuable starting point: "The program offers participants a clear perspective on the industry and helps them better shape their professional direction. Although one week is not enough for a complete transformation, the experience gained can serve as a valuable starting point in their development" (R3); "After completing the program, young people have more self-confidence, feel more certain about what they want to do, and, to be honest, they seem more enthusiastic yet also more realistic at the same time" (R6).

Respondents do not possess information regarding research studies that demonstrate the differences between young people who have access to mentoring programs and those who have not participated in such initiatives; however, they refer to real-life situations in which the differences between these two categories of young people are evident. The respondents unanimously consider that graduates of these type of programs integrate into the field more easily, learn faster, understand the industry better, and are more open to learning: "There is a significant difference between young people who do not participate in this type of program and those who are involved in it, ranging from knowledge to skills, and even to behavioral differences" (R1); "Mentoring programs contribute significantly to enhancing the professional competencies of young professionals. These programs help young people connect theoretical knowledge with practical skills, with the mentor guiding this process. Every meeting between mentors and students is a gain for both parties" (R2).

Following these programs, young participants may receive the opportunity to undertake an internship within an advertising agency; however, this depends on their individual performance, according to the respondents: "Such a program generally helps with employment. Whether this happens or not also depends on each participant's results" (R7). Mentoring programs undoubtedly add value to graduates' résumés, potentially leading to future employment, while the relationships built during these programs serve as long-term benefits for graduates: "Those selected for internships benefit from a structured onboarding process, with a dedicated mentor to facilitate their integration. Additionally, for those who do not continue within the organization, we provide recommendations for other relevant opportunities in the industry" (R3). Respondents recommend the mentoring experience to young people at the start of their careers and encourage them to be proactive, participate actively in the program's activities, ask questions whenever they have doubts, and maintain their curiosity: "Be open, give your best, and take it as an opportunity, because that's what it is. But most importantly, do not believe that if you are not selected further, you are not good enough and should give up. Remember that you decide what you want to do next" (R7).

5 Conclusions and discussions

The responses received to the interviews conducted with the first group highlight the importance and impact that mentoring programs have on the professional initiation of young people: these programs have contributed to the professional development of recent graduates, facilitating the transition from the theoretical knowledge acquired in universities to the practical requirements of the advertising industry. Professional

mentoring provides a solid foundation of knowledge, ranging from practical skills to specialized information, significantly increasing the value of graduates in the labor market while also fostering personal development through enhanced self-confidence. Therefore, the results obtained from the analysis of the interview responses confirm the information presented in the theoretical section of the study.

Overall, respondents are satisfied with these programs but suggest specific adjustments, such as shorter sessions, improved scheduling of breaks, smaller participant groups, and, in some cases, placing greater emphasis on practical skills. Nevertheless, young people recognize the value and positive impact that mentoring programs have on their professional development. These programs help students secure employment in the industry, increase their visibility in the labor market, and serve as a launchpad for entering the field. The benefits perceived by program graduates are both professional and personal. From a professional standpoint, these programs provide them with a solid foundation of information, such as the industry-specific language and knowledge related to creating successful advertising campaigns.

Graduates consider the mentoring programs they attended to be well tailored to their needs, meeting their initial expectations and, in many cases, exceeding them. The subjective responses provided by the participants helped to identify both the strengths and weaknesses of mentoring programs from the perspective of recent graduates, who are the primary beneficiaries of such initiatives. As a result of participating in mentoring initiatives, young people achieved many valuable outcomes, such as gaining access to the industry: all respondents, except for one who did not have this opportunity, gained internships in major agencies within the field and subsequently obtained junior-level positions. Moreover, the specialized literature also confirms that internships are considered a very useful practical stage for students and graduates, a necessary step before future employment (Leovaridis, Ciochină, Tănasă, 2019, pp.10858-10859). The professional development of young people who have completed at least one mentoring program has followed a natural progression, with the opportunities available to them being directly influenced by their involvement and performance. In addition to professional advancements, graduates of mentoring initiatives also report significant personal growth, with increased self-confidence and a strengthened belief in their ability to develop their professional careers.

Regarding the second group of respondents, there is a combination of factors motivating professionals engaged in mentoring initiatives, whether as mentors, organizers, or employers: they express a sense of professional responsibility toward the industry, a commitment to contributing to the career development of young people, and the satisfaction derived from interacting with younger generations. They unanimously believe that graduates of these programs integrate naturally, more easily, and more quickly into the work environment, better assimilating industry-specific knowledge and being better prepared to manage challenges compared to those who have not had this experience. Professionals in the advertising industry involved in structured mentoring programs – whether as mentors, organizers, or employers – pursue a complex set of objectives, with a central aim being the assumption of professional responsibility for the sustainable development of the industry through the training of new generations of specialists.

The benefits of mentoring are shown to be reciprocal, with all parties engaged in the process (mentors, young participants, organizers, and employers) deriving value from it. Mentors themselves can grow professionally, but especially personally, as a result of their involvement in these programs, with the most rewarding aspect being the personal fulfillment they feel when witnessing the development of the individuals they have encouraged and supported. Organizations, on the other hand, gain direct access to young professionals who have received high-quality training and are motivated to enter the industry, thus creating a bridge between academia and the advertising sector. Furthermore, their organizational culture is strengthened through the promotion of education, intergenerational collaboration, and professional development.

Mentoring programs have significant effects on both the professional and personal development of young people. Graduates have also developed social skills through interactions with mentors and other participants. The relationships formed between young professionals and mentors are described as being based on support, trust, and mutual respect, and they can be long-lasting, with mentors continuing to provide guidance even after the conclusion of the programs. Additionally, through communication with fellow participants, young people form both friendships and valuable professional connections, which represent long-term benefits.

The research results showed that the mentoring programs under consideration (MentorIAA, IAA School, School of Big Ideas, The Alternative School etc.) serve as true launchpads for young people beginning their careers in Romania's advertising industry. These programs do not merely provide theoretical information; they aim to help young professionals bridge the gap between the knowledge acquired in academic settings and the concrete requirements of advertising agencies, linking theory with practice. Mentoring initiatives have a significantly positive impact, and it is essential to continue and expand such initiatives to create tangible benefits

for young professionals, as well as for industry professionals, employing organizations, and the advertising industry as a whole.

In conclusion, through the qualitative research conducted and the interpretation of responses from interviewees in both the first and second groups, the overall objective of the study (identifying the role of mentoring at the beginning of a career in advertising) has been achieved. A comprehensive picture has emerged regarding the role and effects of mentoring programs on the professional trajectory of young individuals starting their careers in the advertising sector.

A limitation of the research is the exclusion of young respondents who have not participated in mentoring initiatives; analyzing their perspective on the role of mentoring at the beginning of a professional career in advertising would have been beneficial. Another limitation observed is the reduced focus on the long-term effects of mentoring programs on early advertising careers. Most respondents are recent graduates of these programs, from the past one or two years. It would have been important to also interview former participants from the earliest editions of these programs. Consequently, we faced difficulties in locating and convincing graduates from six to seven years ago to participate; even when contact was made, their responsiveness was low. Challenges were also encountered in obtaining interviews with organizers of certain mentoring programs, which narrowed the perspective provided by program organizers.

A new direction for research on the topic “The Role of Mentoring at the Beginning of a Career in Advertising” could examine the effects of mentoring programs across different industries. This line of inquiry could analyze how mentoring initiatives are structured in other sectors, identify sector-specific differences, and assess their impact on the development of young professionals at the start of their careers.

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