What Is So Special About Media Branding? Peculiarities and Commonalities of a Growing Research Area

Gabriele Siegert, Kati Förster, Sylvia M. Chan-Olmsted, and Mart Ots

1 Media Brands as an Area of Inquiry

The view of media products as brands, a genuine economic construct driven by commercial interests, has gained relevance in media economic research. It is demonstrated by a rising number of publications in this field. Therein the efforts to define the term *media brand* seem to be an ongoing debate in the literature between scholars in the areas of communication, marketing and public relations (McDowell, 2006). From an audience's perspective we may understand a media brand as a construct carrying all the connotations of the audience in terms of the emotional, stylistic, cognitive, unconscious or conscious significations. These significations can refer to different levels in a media brand's architecture, which typically consists of the corporate or channel brand as well as its sub-brands with genre, format, and persona brands. The task of media brand management, in turn, is to evoke intended and valuable associations in the audience in order to generate competitive advantages further on (Fournier, 1998; Gardner & Levy, 1955).

G. Siegert (✉)
University of Zurich, IPMZ Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research,
Zurich, Switzerland
e-mail: g.siegert@ipmz.uzh.ch

K. Förster
University of Vienna, Department of Communication, Vienna, Austria
e-mail: kati.foerster@univie.ac.at

S.M. Chan-Olmsted
University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA
e-mail: chanolmsted@jou.ufl.edu

M. Ots
Jönköping International Business School, Transformation Center, MMTC-Media Management,
Jönköping, Sweden
e-mail: mart.ots@hlk.hj.se

Hence, per definition, media brands are not random or "one-hit wonders", but are the consequence of an institutionalization and systematization of branding activities. Nevertheless, there is an ongoing debate on whether an active brand management is a necessary condition to call a media outlet, a channel, a format or a media company a *media brand*, or whether there is such a thing as a "hidden brand identity" (Gerth, 2010), where a media outlet works as a brand, the audience classifies it as brand, the internal decision making refers to brand dimensions, but the management does not name it a brand or talk about brand management. To give a generally accepted answer to this question is even harder in times of co-creation.

The media industries are full of strong brands. *Google, Facebook, Disney, Discovery, Thomson Reuters*, and *MTV* are all ranked among the 100 most valuable brands globally (Interbrand, 2014). Publications like *National Geographic, Time magazine,* the *BBC, The New York Times, The Financial Times, El Pais, The Wall Street Journal*, and *Die Zeit*, are all regarded as iconic brands, with high brand recognition and a credibility that has stood the test of time (Tungate, 2004).

Though not always making the largest financial profits, media brands have always benefitted from their strong natural social exposure. Despite limited use of traditional marketing campaigns media brands create emotional engagement among their audiences like few others do. One central aspect of this observation is that media consumption helps people to express social belonging and identity or, to paraphrase Bourdieu (1986), to build and enact their "cultural capital". Media brands are in this sense deeply intertwined with people's lives.

This idea of media brands being both product brands *as well as* creators of the popular culture that consumer brands feed from, is an important feature of this research field. It gives additional complexity to the media as being important platforms which fuel social life, debate, and consumer engagement. The rise of social media is further accentuating this aspect of media branding. Audiences are now visibly taking part in the creation of media brands, and media branding is concerned with managing this challenging process.

In this context, the question arises of how media branding as a research area can be characterized. In fact, media branding is an interdisciplinary research area. Drawing from (media) economics, (media) management, media studies, (media) psychology and social psychology, some of the main aspirations of media branding research relate to the successful management of media brands and brand portfolios. This interest is however not unique to the media and one might assume that media branding research is only applying the theoretical considerations of brand research to a new area. But in fact, the media—and thus media brands—have some unique peculiarities.

Throughout the literature in media economics and management (e.g. Doyle, 2012; Picard, 2005; Siegert & von Rimscha, 2013) the unique characteristics of media products are discussed because they have a major influence on the application of management strategies. Berkler (2008) for example distinguishes between a normative, an economic-theoretical and a product-specific level, and mentions the high extent of experience and credence-good character, the lack of objective selection criteria, the lack of marketability, and the lack of visual and content consistency. Media as merit goods, for example, constitute regulation whereas

Table 1 Unique characteristics of media products

Level	Specific characteristics
Normative level	• Importance of media for society • Normative conflicting goals: individualism vs. collectivism, welfare vs. diversity
Market level	• Positive and negative externalities of media consumption • Media as merit goods • Media as public goods & lack of marketability • Lack of market pricing • Low-cost-situation • Economies of scale • Economies of scope • Multi-sided markets
Product level	• Immateriality • Experience and credence-good characteristic • Information asymmetry between media supplier and consumer • Lack of objective selection criteria • Problems in establishing copyright (imitability) • Lack of visual and content consistency

media as public goods make the exclusion of potential users either impractical, impossible and/or inefficient. Both characteristics might lead to inefficiency of resource allocation and consequently market failure (Siegert & von Rimscha, 2013). The following list of unique characteristics of media products (Table 1) expressly underlines the need for adapted or even independent approaches specifically for *media* branding or at least illustrates the specific requirements for media brands. Although not all characteristics might match all kinds of media products, they give reasons not only for the importance of strong and well-positioned media brands but equally for the importance of adapted theoretical approaches.

2   Media Branding and Its Related Branding Areas

When discussing media branding the question arises to what extent media branding is comparable to other branding disciplines and can thus learn from these areas. In other words: what peculiarities (and commonalities) do media brands have as an object of interest in comparison to other branding disciplines?

When approaching this question we can follow two views. *Firstly*, we can look at the media as economic goods with a more or less existing marketability. Media products are marketable to different extents, e.g. depending on the demand and willingness to pay from both the recipients' and the advertisers' market. *Secondly*, we can look at the media as cultural goods fulfilling societal functions, such as creating a public sphere or providing transparency, validation and integration for the public (e.g. Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2010; McQuail, 1992; Picard, 2004; Vlašić, 2012). These two views are intertwined. So on the one end of the continuum we have media products with a high societal importance but a low marketability.

This applies specifically to news media (quality newspapers), educational programs, books and the theater, basically the "highbrow" media. Examples of similar and thus comparable areas of branding research are health care marketing, higher education marketing (e.g. university branding, at least in most parts of the world), political/politician branding and the marketing of public transport. On the other end of the continuum we find more or less meaningful but fully marketable media products. This is especially the case for the entertainment media (e.g. games, blockbuster movies, magazines), but also applies to information. The latter is true in those cases when information serves as investment product for the recipients, e.g. special interest news (e.g. economic news) or news agencies. Similar non-media branding areas are service branding, because of its immaterial nature, and the branding of private goods.

As a consequence we can treat media brands as solely economic goods, neglecting their societal relevance and thereby cutting out the normative level. This might be sufficient—as the previous remarks show—for some kinds of media products. Here media branding strongly benefits from non-media brand research, specifically concerning private goods. We can also treat media (brands) as members of a democratic logic which fulfill essential societal functions. In this case, research would profit by considering and connecting to other emerging areas of brand research, namely those dealing with healthcare, education, public services and politics. This might be a possibility to further establish the field.

3   Scope of This Handbook

The *Handbook of Media Branding* unifies scholars from seven countries, Austria, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the US, and thus provides a unique international discussion on the peculiarities of the research field. Moreover, we especially emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of media branding research by focusing on the links and commonalities with other research disciplines such as management, communication science, economics and journalism. For this reason we have identified and defined specific perspectives media branding research can take i.e. (1) the management perspective, (2) the product perspective, (3) the communication perspective, (4) the consumer perspective, and (5) the value perspective. These different perspectives provide the structure for the book and reflect interfaces between different research disciplines and traditions. This results in distinct discourses which are taken up by representatives of the various disciplines involved. We thereby aim at a balanced but also critical view of media brands as an emerging research field. Furthermore, to complete the picture we have included research notes in each perspective to illustrate applied empirical research. In the following the individual chapters are described in more detail.

The book starts with an introduction into the field of media branding research. *Sylvia Chan-Olmsted* and *Ronen Shay* examine recent changes and emerging trends in the media industry and discuss their implications for future media branding strategies and potential research topics to address new media branding

environments. *Isabelle Krebs* and *Gabriele Siegert* investigate the research on media brands and media branding of the last two decades. In a meta-analysis they identify theoretical approaches that have been applied as well as methods and analyses applied in publications in German and English.

The *management perspective* section looks at media brands as a management task. The organizational and management-centered perspective is—probably—the most studied field in media branding. To look at media brands as an economic construct raises the question of strategies, key success factors and efficiency. In short: How can a media brand be steered, managed and monitored in an ever-changing environment? Undoubtedly these aspects are typical questions of (media) management and economics. But what does the media branding perspective add to established theories or validated knowledge? Moreover, how can media branding research contribute to media management and economics, both theoretically and methodologically? The section is preluded by *Gillian Doyle*, who argues that multi-platform expansion is a key for media brands and branding to effectively engage audiences. In her discussion she highlights the key economic, management and socio-cultural issues in international and multi-platform media branding strategies. *Sabine Baumann* then explores the specifics of media brand management and organization compared to settings proposed in branding literature. As internationalization and thus international branding is becoming increasingly important for media companies, *Ulrike Rohn* discusses the benefits of standardization and localization strategies in a media context and—furthermore—strategic options for foreign market entry. *Christoph Sommer* focuses on the relationship between media brands and the advertising market by exploring the potential of branding in media organizations' B2B relationships. In his essay on the aestheticization of media brands, *Christian Blümelhuber* takes up the discussion about the re-entry of magic into brand management and shows how glamor helps media brands to break free from the classical brand engineering concept and might also add value. The research note of the management perspective is provided by *Ronen Shay*, whose study examines the adopters and non-adopters of pure-play distribution across print, audio, video and gaming platforms through the lens of the consumer-based brand equity model's seven dimensions of perceived quality.

The *product perspective* looks at media brands as branded content. The "heart" of mass communication, the content, specific formats or texts, has been an important topic of communication scientists ever since the beginning, especially with regard to their role in identity formation. Although content and programing is one of the major tasks for media companies, content-centered research from a media branding perspective is very rare. *Walter McDowell* approaches this perspective by discussing emerging trends and issues in the media industry and reflects upon their effects on the branding of media content. A critical view on branding media content is taken by *M. Bjørn von Rimscha*. He poses the question of who will be responsible for branding in the value chain of media productions. *Stéphane Matteo* and *Cinzia Dal Zotto* consecrate their chapter to native advertising in the light of branded content and brand culture strategies. The authors problematize the concept and discuss the potential implications. *Sukhpreet Singh* and *John Oliver* discuss

how television format makers use brand management practices, in the absence of any legal solutions, to protect, innovate and trade in their products. In her research note, *Kathrin Natterer* shows how personal and historical nostalgia in entertainment media brands have significant effects on attitudes towards the media brand, buying intentions, affective response and mood.

In the *communication perspective* we look at media brands as marketing communication and—in a more participative view—as co-creation. Media brand communication uses different modes and various instruments such as advertising, events and public relations. All instruments of the media brand communication mix are aimed at changing what is known about the brand and/or at changing or stabilizing the emotional relation to it. Questions that arise in this context include: How do media brands manage to address the audience? How do media brands use their area of competence to gain attention? *Mart Ots* and *Benjamin J. Hartmann* start from the premise that the branding process is an interplay between brand owners, consumers, popular culture, and other stakeholders. They offer an introduction to researching and theorizing how consumers engage in the social construction of media brands and thereby discuss media brand cultures. *Stefan Weinacht* gives a literature overview on publications on media brand communication focusing on communication goals, media messages, media platforms and instruments. In their research note *Verena Friedl* and *Kati Förster* examine how news magazines use social media communication and which types of content and communication styles actually drive user engagement.

Moreover, in the *consumer perspective* media brands are considered as an audience construct. If we consider media brands as a construct integrating the audiences' perceptions, such as cognitive associations or emotions and the thereby related behavior, we are in the tradition of media reception and media effects research. Though working with different constructs, e.g. brand personality, questions of interest focus on the same area, namely: how are media (brands) perceived by the audience and why do recipients use certain media (content) while avoiding another? Is it thus possible to connect more strongly these fields of research in future, and if so, what are the questions most relevant for further research? *Helmut Scherer* grasps this issue by considering the audience as both a part and signal of media brands, thus a target group evaluates a media brand (also) based on its respective users. Furthermore, *Kati Förster* reviews and structures audience-centered research on media brands and uncovers "white spaces" of research in this field by applying a multi-level approach to the study of audiences. In their chapter on media brands in children's everyday lives, *Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink* and *Uwe Hasebrink* shed light on the central aspects of marketing strategies which target children on the one hand, and on the functions media brands have for children on the other. *Juliane A. Lischka* discusses the question of whether audience members become loyal towards a media brand when sharing, liking or commenting on online media content, or whether loyal readers are more inclined to write comments, to like and share online articles. In the research note of the consumer perspective, *Lisa-Charlotte Wolter* examines in her study how media brand strategists can use social network sites to generate positive online and offline word-of-mouth.

Finally, the *value perspective* thematizes the tensions of media brands between societal expectations, quality and profit. The normative, societal perspective has always been an integral part of communication science. With the increasing reception of the genuine economic construct—brands—the discourses center on questions such as: Does the branding perspective within media "damage" or "support" journalistic and ethical values? Is media branding an institutional arrangement to counterbalance market weaknesses? What consequences does a "market-driven" view have for the public sphere? Will we increasingly talk about consumers instead of audiences or the public sphere in future? The section begins with a contribution by *Stephan Russ-Mohl* and *Rukhshona Nazhdiminova*, who focus on the question of how the branding perspective within the media can support professional and ethical journalistic values, and—moreover—whether some marketing efforts cause conflicts. *Gabriele Siegert* discusses whether market driven media brands support journalistic quality or whether media brands only give the appearance of quality journalism and thus "fake" it to the audience and the public sphere. In his chapter, *Frank Lobigs* presents a basic economic theory of media brands building on the theory of reputation and institutional economics. Above that he provides insights into the economics of media product bundling, as well as into the special economics of journalism. The section concludes with a research note by *Isabelle Krebs,* who focuses on news media brands, investigating the perception of the fulfillment of societal functions and journalistic quality.

References

Berkler, S. (2008). *Medien als Marken? Wirkungen von Medienmarken aus medienökonomischer Perspektive*. Konstanz: UVK.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Doyle, G. (2012). *Understanding media economics* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Fournier, S. (1998). Consumers and their brands: Developing relationship theory in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research, 24*(4), 343–353.

Gardner, B. B., & Levy, S. J. (March–April, 1955). The product and the brand. *Harvard Business Review, 33*, 33–40.

Gerth, M. A. (2010). *Brand management of small regional media companies*. Paper presented at the EMMA annual conference in London.

Interbrand. (2014). *Rankings*. Retrieved May 26, 2015, from http://www.bestglobalbrands.com/2014/ranking/

Kleinen-von Königslöw, K. (2010). *Die Arenen-Integration nationaler Öffentlichkeiten. Der Fall der wiedervereinten deutschen Öffentlichkeit*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

McDowell, W. (2006). Issues in marketing and branding. In A. Albarran, S. M. Chan-Olmsted, & M.-O. Wirth (Eds.), *Handbook of media management and economics* (pp. 229–249). New York: Routledge.

McQuail, D. (1992). *Media performance: Mass communication and the public interest*. London: Sage.

Picard, R. G. (2004). Commercialism and newspaper quality. *Newspaper Research Journal, 25*(1), 54–65.

Picard, R. G. (2005). Unique characteristics and business dynamics of media products. *Journal of Media Business Studies, 2*(2), 61–69.

Siegert, G., & von Rimscha, M. B. (2013). Economic bases of communication. In P. J. Schulz, & P. Cobley (Ed.), *Handbooks of communication science*: *Vol. 1: Theories and models of communication* (pp. 123–146). Berlin: De Gruyter.

Tungate, M. (2004). *Media monoliths. How great media brands thrive and survive*. London, Sterling: Kogan Page.

Vlašić, A. (2012). Medien und Integration: Ein Vorschlag zur theoretischen Konzeption und empirischen Erfassung integrationsrelevanter Medieninhalte. *Publizistik, 57*(4), 419–444.