ADAPTING TO THE NEW MEDIA REALITY: THE NEED FOR A MULTIPLATFORM APPROACH IN BRANDING STRATEGIES OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Digitalisation has fundamentally transformed the ways in which media content is produced, distributed, and consumed, reshaping the traditional media landscape. In this environment, local and regional media face increasing pressures related to visibility, audience engagement, and long-term sustainability, particularly if they fail to adapt to new digital and platform-driven conditions. This paper analyses branding strategies adopted by local and regional media organisations in the digital era, with a specific focus on the effects of a multiplatform approach. The central hypothesis is that media outlets that systematically use multiple platforms and diverse content formats achieve greater brand visibility and higher levels of audience engagement compared to those relying on a single platform. The study is based on a quantitative analysis of survey data collected from local and regional media in North Macedonia and examines their presence across websites, social media platforms, and mobile applications. Particular attention is given to three key components of a multiplatform strategy: the use of multimedia content, interactive formats, and user-generated content (UGC). The findings indicate that media organisations implementing a multiplatform approach are associated with significantly higher visibility and more intensive audience engagement. Video content emerges as the most effective format, while interactive formats and UGC demonstrate strong potential for strengthening trust, credibility, and the relationship between media outlets and their audiences. In contrast, media organisations that do not adopt multiplatform strategies tend to have limited reach and lower brand recognition. In conclusion, the study suggests that multiplatform branding strategies represent a crucial factor for the sustainability and competitiveness of local and regional media within the contemporary media ecosystem.

Keywords: media branding, multiplatform approach, local media, multimedia content, audience engagement

1. Introduction

Media and journalism are undergoing continuous transformation, driven primarily by technological development. While the core principles of professional journalism, fairness, balance, ethical conduct, and objectivity, remain relatively stable, profound changes are taking place in the modes of content distribution and in approaches to building and sustaining media brands within an environment characterised by an increasing number of available platforms.

Media organisations that were once clearly defined as print, radio, or television outlets can no longer be confined to a single category. In addition to textual content, they now produce video, audio, multimedia, and interactive formats distributed through websites, mobile applications, and various social media platforms. As a result, particularly among younger audiences, media outlets are increasingly recognised not by their traditional format but as content creators operating across multiple platforms. This transformation has been widely documented in existing research, which suggests that the demand for news has not declined; rather, the ways in which information is financed, distributed, and consumed have fundamentally changed (Picard, 2014).

The emergence and expansion of the internet initiated deep structural transformations within the media sector, significantly reshaping financial models, audience habits, and patterns of news consumption. Subsequently, mobile technologies and social media further accelerated this process, enabling continuous access to information regardless of time or location. Consequently, audiences have become more mobile, fragmented, and increasingly oriented towards platform-based and on-demand content. In such a distributed media environment, the role of media brands has become more complex and strategically significant (Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, & Nielsen, 2019).

Trends in content consumption, particularly those driven by younger audiences, have become critical factors within the media industry. Media organisations increasingly recognise younger users as a key market segment, both in the present and in the near future, while their consumption habits serve as indicators of broader shifts in media use across generations (Saulīte & Ščeulovs, 2023).

Local and regional media play a specific role within the media ecosystem by providing information of immediate public interest to local communities and contributing to media pluralism. At the same time, they are among the most vulnerable actors in the process of digital transformation, due to limited financial and human resources and increasing competition from national and global media platforms.

In conditions of audience fragmentation and platform-oriented content distribution, brand visibility and the maintenance of relationships with audiences become key challenges for the survival of these media outlets. Consequently, the analysis of their branding strategies, particularly in the context of a multiplatform approach, offers important insights into how local and regional media seek to preserve their relevance and public function.

These transformations have had a particularly strong impact on local and regional media. Many outlets failed to adapt in a timely manner to the new media reality, resulting in declining revenues, audience loss, and, in numerous cases, complete closure. This process has contributed to the emergence of so-called media or information deserts, areas characterised by the absence of reliable and diverse local information, thereby directly undermining democratic processes and citizens' right to be informed.

Such developments are not limited to the global media context but are also clearly evident within the media landscape of North Macedonia. A significant number of national,

local, and regional media outlets have ceased operations, while many of the remaining organisations still lack clearly defined multiplatform strategies. Conversely, media outlets that have successfully adopted a multiplatform approach demonstrate greater potential for survival, visibility, and brand sustainability within a distributed, platform-driven media environment.

For these reasons, this study focuses on the need for a multiplatform approach in the development of branding strategies for local and regional media. It examines how the use of different platforms and content formats influences media brand visibility and audience engagement in contemporary media ecosystems.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Research Scope and Objectives

This study examines the effects of a multiplatform approach on the development of branding strategies among local and regional media in North Macedonia, within the context of technological change and the transformation of audience media consumption habits. The analysis focuses on how media organisations adapt their branding strategies in order to enhance brand visibility, improve audience engagement, and strengthen long-term sustainability.

The primary objective of the research is to determine whether, and to what extent, the adoption of a multiplatform approach contributes to more effective media brand building. In addition, the study aims to identify the key challenges, opportunities, and innovative practices employed by local and regional media in response to the contemporary media environment.

2.2. Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- Do local and regional media in North Macedonia have branding strategies adapted for different platforms?
- Which strategies and content formats do media organisations use to increase brand visibility and audience engagement?
- What key challenges do media organisations face when adapting to a multiplatform environment?
- How do audience fragmentation and competition from national and global media affect the sustainability of local and regional media?
- What opportunities do emerging technologies and media trends offer for the further development of media branding strategies?
- How do media organisations adapt their strategies to target specific audience segments?
- What are the potential long-term effects of adopting a multiplatform approach on the sustainability and overall success of media organisations?

2.3. Methods and Instruments

The study adopts a predominantly quantitative research design, complemented by qualitative content analysis in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of media branding strategies within a multiplatform environment.

The quantitative component is based on a survey conducted among local and regional media organisations in North Macedonia. The questionnaire was designed to collect data on media presence across different platforms, the types of content formats used (textual, multimedia, interactive, and user-generated content), as well as perceptions related to brand visibility and audience engagement.

The survey method was selected as an appropriate research instrument because it enables the systematic collection of data from a larger number of media organisations and provides comparable quantitative indicators related to media presence across different platforms, the content formats used, and perceptions of brand visibility and audience engagement. Given that the aim of the study is not to analyse individual media cases, but rather to identify broader trends and patterns in the adoption of multiplatform strategies, a survey represents the most suitable method for covering a diverse media sample.

In addition, the survey approach allows data to be collected directly from key decision-makers within media organisations, primarily managers and editors-in-chief, whose perspectives are particularly relevant for analysing the strategic dimensions of media branding. In this way, the study combines objective indicators (platform presence, content formats, and publishing frequency) with subjective assessments of the effects of the multiplatform approach, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of how media organisations perceive and manage their brand strategies. The collected data were grouped and analysed using basic statistical methods, and the results are presented through tables and graphical representations to facilitate clearer interpretation. In parallel, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify key elements related to brand identity, message consistency, and patterns of audience interaction across different platforms.

By integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, the study enables a more nuanced and consistent understanding of the effects of a multiplatform approach on media brand building, brand visibility, and audience engagement among local and regional media.

3. Results

3.1. Sample and Scope

The survey was conducted between June and August 2024 and covered all eight planning regions in North Macedonia. A total of 43 responses were collected, representing 46 local and regional media outlets, as some respondents manage more than one media organisation. More than half of the sample consists of online media, while the remainder includes radio, television, and print outlets, as well as a small number of podcast and blog-based media.

The majority of survey responses were provided by managers/directors and editors-in-chief (over 85%), indicating that the data largely reflect the strategic perspectives of media organisations.

3.2. Branding Strategies and the Multiplatform Approach

The results indicate that the multiplatform approach is a dominant practice among local and regional media, although it varies significantly in terms of strategic maturity. More than one-third of media organisations (37.2%) apply a multiplatform presence without a coordinated strategy across different platforms. Approximately one-quarter of respondents (23.2%) report having an integrated and coordinated multiplatform strategy, while an equal proportion of media outlets (23.2%) remain primarily focused on a single platform.

In addition, a smaller share of media organisations report basing their branding strategies primarily on multimedia content (11.6%) or on user-generated content (4.7%). These findings suggest that, although multiplatform presence is widespread, an integrated and deliberately planned branding approach has yet to become dominant among local and regional media.

3.3. Platforms and Publishing Practices

The most widely used platforms are Facebook (90.7%) and media websites (86%), followed by YouTube (67.4%) and Instagram (62.8%). Platforms such as TikTok (27.9%), X (23.3%), and LinkedIn (18.6%) are considerably less represented, typically with limited levels of activity.

Most media organisations (81.4%) publish content multiple times per day, indicating a high intensity of production. However, audience interaction practices remain largely basic: 44.2% of media outlets engage with audiences primarily by responding to comments and messages, while more advanced forms of interaction, such as polls, quizzes, or live events, are used by fewer than one-fifth of respondents.

3.4. Brand Elements and the Importance of Branding

Respondents most frequently identify content quality (90.7%), a consistent brand identity (60.5%), and trust and credibility (60.5%) as the most important elements of a media brand. Active involvement of the local community is cited as a key element by 55.8% of respondents, while regular interaction with audiences is emphasised by 48.8%.

Branding is perceived as critically important for future sustainability: 65.1% of respondents rate it as extremely important, while an additional 30.2% consider it very important. No respondents regard branding as unimportant, indicating a high level of awareness of its role within contemporary media competition.

3.5. Performance Measurement and Visibility

Most media organisations rely on multiple indicators to assess the outcomes of their branding strategies. Audience reach is measured by 83.7% of respondents, engagement metrics (likes, comments, and shares) by 76.7%, follower growth by 65.1%, and website traffic by 55.8%.

Notably, 83.6% of media organisations report some degree of positive effect on brand visibility following the adoption of a multiplatform approach, including sig-

nificant (34.9%), moderate (30.2%), and minor increases (18.6%). This suggests that, although not always strategically integrated, the multiplatform approach nevertheless has a positive impact on brand visibility.

3.6. User-Generated Content (UGC)

User-generated content (UGC) is used by 72% of media organisations, with varying levels of frequency. Media outlets that regularly publish UGC report higher levels of trust and credibility (51.2%), increased audience reach (48.8%), and greater audience engagement (32.6%).

Comparative analysis indicates that the effects of UGC are particularly pronounced on visual platforms. On Instagram, media organisations that use UGC have, on average, nearly twice as many followers as those that do not, while on Facebook the difference amounts to approximately 19% in favour of media outlets that incorporate UGC. These findings suggest that UGC represents a significant factor in organic growth and in strengthening relationships with audiences, particularly on visual platforms such as Instagram.

3.7. Multimedia and Interactive Content

Photographs (86%) and videos (79.1%) are the most commonly used multimedia formats. More than two-thirds of media organisations that use video content report increased audience engagement (72.1%) and follower growth (65.1%), while 62.8% also report increased traffic to their websites. These results indicate that video content plays a key role in enhancing brand visibility and recognition.

Interactive content, such as quizzes, polls, and interactive graphics, is significantly less widespread: 55.8% of media organisations do not use it at all. However, among those that do, 37.2% report increased engagement and 27.9% improved brand visibility. Although interactive formats demonstrate positive effects for the media organisations that implement them, more than half of the media outlets still do not use these tools, most often due to limited resources and capacities. This points to a substantial but underutilised potential of interactive formats.

3.8. Challenges and Future Directions

The most frequently reported barriers to the development of multiplatform branding strategies include limited budgets (72.1%), shortages of human resources (67.4%), and insufficient technical expertise (27.9%). Some media organisations attempt to address these challenges through training, automation, and performance analysis; however, 27.9% report having no systematic approach to overcoming these constraints.

Regarding future plans, 67.4% of media organisations intend to expand their presence across additional platforms, while 55.8% plan to increase investment in multimedia production. Interest in adopting artificial intelligence (AI) tools is expressed by 30.2% of respondents, indicating an early stage of technological transformation.

3.9. Overall Summary of Results

The results suggest that media organisations with an active presence across multiple platforms, combining multimedia production, audience participation, and regular performance measurement, are associated with higher levels of visibility and stronger audience engagement. In contrast, media outlets that remain focused on a single platform exhibit significantly more limited reach and lower levels of brand visibility.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This study suggests that multiplatform branding strategies represent an important prerequisite for the visibility and sustainability of local and regional media in conditions of digital audience fragmentation. The findings indicate that media organisations focused on a single platform tend to have the smallest overall audiences and the weakest brand reach.

Comparative analysis of average follower numbers indicates that, compared to single-platform outlets, multiplatform media are associated with higher follower counts across platforms, including 41.86% more followers on Facebook, 419.75% more on Instagram, and 3175% more on other platforms. The exceptionally high percentage differences, particularly in the category of "other platforms", are partly attributable to the very low baseline among single-platform media and should therefore be interpreted with caution.

These disparities suggest that multiplatform presence is not merely a matter of distribution but a factor directly associated with audience growth and enhanced brand visibility, especially on visually oriented platforms.

This conclusion is further supported by the perceptions of the media organisations themselves. When asked whether they had observed an increase in visibility after adopting a multiplatform approach, 83.6% of respondents reported some degree of positive effect on brand visibility, while 11.6% observed no noticeable change and 4.6% reported not using a multiplatform approach. This finding is significant as it demonstrates that the effect is predominantly positive, though not automatic, highlighting the need for better integration and coordination across platforms.

The results also indicate that multimedia content and user-generated content (UGC) act as strong "accelerators" of visibility. Among the most frequently used formats are photographs (86%) and videos (79.1%), and a large majority of respondents (88.5%) report some level of increased visibility or engagement as a result of incorporating multimedia content (significant, moderate, or minor increases).

A clear gap is evident in the use of interactive formats (such as polls, quizzes, and interactive graphics). While more than half of media organisations do not use these formats (approximately 55%), those that do report higher levels of audience engagement and participation (e.g., 35.6% report increased engagement, 31.3% greater interaction, and 26.7% improved visibility). This suggests that interactivity represents a substantial but underutilised potential, most commonly constrained by limited resources and organisational capacity.

Finally, the findings show that the multiplatform approach is widely recognised by media organisations themselves as a strategic necessity: 65.1% rate it as "extremely important," 27.9% as "very important," and 7% as "moderately important" for future sustainability. This reinforces the argument that local and regional media increasingly acknowledge the platform-based logic of the contemporary media environment; however, the key challenge remains how to translate this awareness into coordinated and strategically integrated practice.

4.1. Practical Implications and Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following practical recommendations can be formulated for local and regional media organisations:

1. **Shift from mere presence to strategy:** Multiplatform publishing should be coordinated, with a unified brand identity, tone, and visual language, and with clearly defined roles for each platform.
2. **Prioritise investment in video content:** Given that video is the most effective format for audience engagement and follower growth, even a basic production plan is essential (e.g., short vertical videos combined with longer-form content where capacity allows).
3. **Establish clear UGC protocols:** Media organisations should systematically encourage and curate user-generated content through audience calls, clear guidelines, and appropriate verification processes, as UGC contributes to trust, diversity, and organic reach.
4. **Increase interactivity through "lightweight" formats:** Polls, questions, quizzes, and simple interactive graphics, particularly on platforms such as Instagram, should be used more consistently, accompanied by regular measurement of their effects.
5. **Institutionalise performance measurement:** A minimum set of indicators should be adopted as a standard practice, including reach, engagement, follower growth, website clicks, and conversions to subscriptions or donations where such models exist.
6. **Invest in capacity building:** Continuous short-term training initiatives (e.g., mobile journalism, multiplatform journalism, content distribution, and verification of user-generated content) are essential, as resource constraints remain the most commonly reported challenge.

5. Limitations of the study and directions for future research

Although this study provides relevant and empirically grounded insights into the impact of a multiplatform approach on the visibility and branding of local and regional media, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

First, the research is based on a sample of 46 local and regional media outlets in North Macedonia. While this allows for an in-depth understanding of the national context, it limits the direct generalisability of the results to other media systems. Media markets across the region and beyond differ in terms of regulatory frameworks, funding structures, and levels of digital maturity, all of which may affect the applicability of the findings.

Second, part of the data relies on self-reported responses from participants (managers, editors, and journalists), which introduces the potential for subjective assessment, particularly in evaluating the effects of branding and visibility. Although these responses are complemented by platform analysis and numerical indicators (such as follower counts and platform presence), future research could incorporate more detailed analyses of platform analytics, including reach, impressions, and engagement rates.

Third, brand visibility in this study is primarily examined through quantitative indicators such as follower numbers and platform presence. While these measures are widely used and relevant, they do not fully capture audience-based perceptions of the brand, including trust, loyalty, and qualitative relationships between media outlets and their audiences.

Fourth, the research represents a cross-sectional snapshot in time and does not track the long-term effects of multiplatform strategies. As a result, causal relationships between the adoption of specific strategies and sustained growth in visibility cannot be established with certainty over longer periods.

5.1. Directions for Future Research

Building on these limitations, future research could:

- conduct comparative analyses of local and regional media across multiple countries in the region in order to examine differences in multiplatform practices;
- incorporate longitudinal research designs that track the effects of branding strategies over extended periods of time;
- combine quantitative and qualitative methods, including audience-focused research on brand perception and trust in media;
- analyse the influence of algorithms and automated content distribution, as well as the growing role of artificial intelligence in media branding and content dissemination;
- place greater emphasis on economic sustainability and the relationship between multiplatform strategies, monetisation, and emerging business models for local media.

These directions may contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of multiplatform branding and its significance for the future of local and regional media.

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