Trends in Media Branding: Case of Latvia. The Younger Audience in Focus

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ABSTRACT

The research paper presents the significance of new value chains in local media branding. The brand non-product related attributes - user imagery, usage imagery and secondary brand associations - are significant media brand equity builders to meet the needs of younger audiences, to strengthen local media brands and to grow the future audience for local media brands in Latvia.

The study is based on primary and secondary information sources, first, in-depth interviews with media managers, second, focus groups and finally, quantitative experimental research.

The study focuses on local online media brands and local print media brands with online extensions.

The authors present a conceptual framework for local media owners, first, to develop consumer-centric branding strategies, second, to create new value chains for the audience by generating intense content experiences outside media platforms, third, to build local media brands by branding content for the younger audience. The study provides an example model for practical application building media brand attributes for audiences 15-24 years old.

Keywords: media branding, media brands, media brand associations, media brand equity, media brand attributes

1. INTRODUCTION

The way people consume information through the media has changed during the last 15 years. New patterns in local media consumption regarding volume, channel, device and time, and attitude have emerged due to the development of technologies. Social network sites create new possibilities for content distribution, readership, branding, moreover, bring new challenges for local media. In 2016, on average a person in Latvia consumed media 12:01 hours per day, while in 2014 - only 9:55 hours per day.[5]. Besides, in 2016, on average, 2.3 screens were used simultaneously. In 2016, traditional media usage decreased by 30% (in comparison to 2014), and more than 42% of all media content is consumed through mobile devices and social platforms. Time-shifted viewing and video-on-demand content consumption are growing in Latvia. In 2016 there is a 7% decrease of favourability and importance towards

brands and advertising compared to 2014 (audience 15-64 y.o.).[5]

The media consumption habits for a younger audience (15–24 y.o.) differs in comparison to universe data in Latvia. They consume traditional media below average and prefer media content on online platforms. Younger audience significantly higher access online content via mobile devices - index 194 and use social media more than other age groups – index 182. [5]

The younger audience in Latvia chooses international media and social network platforms over local media content.[13]

The changing media content consumption habits create challenges for local media owners to maintain and build audience loyalty and volume. Changes increase difficulties to attract and grow the future audience – the younger generation who uses less local media content, use less media content in Latvian language and has used to do it via social media platforms. The main challenges for local media brands are audience ageing, decreasing younger audience share and shorter time spent on media content by the younger audience. These factors signal future challenges for local media brands to attract and keep new audiences and intense competition from global media in terms of audience readership. Besides, the need (dictated by the audience) to distribute content via multiple platforms decreases media brand associations and endangers local media brands' present and future strength against "fake news" media.

The authors analyze the challenges of Latvian media brands and highlight the significant media brand associations that impact media brand equity for a younger media audience.

The research **goal** is to identify media brand non-product related attributes that directly influences the younger audience (15 – 24 y.o) media brand usage and increase media brand usage and engagement. The research tasks are:

1. Identify media consumption patterns and attitude towards local media brands within the younger audience (15 – 24 y.o),
2. Find the correlation between local media branding attributes and media consumption patterns within the younger audience (15 – 24 y.o),
3. Identify media branding attributes that increase media brand content consumption level and engagement within the younger audience (15-24 y.o).

These findings may be incorporated into local media branding to attract and engage a younger audience and establish media brand preference for future media consumption.

The research is limited to focus on online news brands and print brands with digital extensions to determine the most significant brand associations the target audience already uses and research product non-related attributes that have most significant weights to media usage and loyalty. Research is limited to media brands in the Latvian language as main study aim is to analyze and determine aspects how local media brands may overcome increasing trend in younger audience non-local media usage and attract and retain a future audience for local media brand content. Research is limited to non-product related associations as content as a branding aspect is out of this research scope. From media branding research perspective, the product perspective looks at media brands as branded content

2. THE METHODS

The research is based on primary and secondary sources - 4 in-depth interviews with media managers in 2017 and 2019, three focus groups with a media audience 15-24 years old. (18 respondents). Extensive consumer research in Latvia was done in 2016 and 2018 on media consumption and consumers attitude towards media, advertising, also on values and attitudes towards media and communication. These data are used as secondary research. The sample size of this research is 3000 in 2016 and 2945 in 2018. The study continues with ongoing quantitative empirical research with a sample size of 300 respondents in 15-24 years old media audience segment to evaluate essential media brand attributes for a younger audience. Quantitative empirical research built on the questionnaire to find brand attribute factors behind the most consumed and engaged media brands by the younger audience.

Quantitative empirical research supports findings of focus groups and attempts to discover the most significant brand attributes that (1) build a positive attitude towards local media brands, (2) increase usage within the younger audience in Latvia, (3) determine brand equity building aspects that are the most significant to consume local media, and (4) define brand awareness and brand image aspects that increase positive brand attitude and usage.

3. THEORY: MEDIA BRANDS AND CHALLENGES

The growing media content consumption via digital platforms and social networks, increasing media content consumption on-demand choosing a time and a platform, the growth of mobile technologies regarding media content consumption create ample of opportunities for media brands to reach the audience and in the meantime create challenges. This shift towards the use of multimedia outlets presented both opportunities and challenges for media firms [1].

Customer-based brand equity theory is used as a theoretical framework for this study. Customer-based brand equity is defined as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand [2].

Content distribution and multi-platforms

In regards to content delivery, when a branded content is accessible through multiple platforms, there are more brand touchpoints and better responsiveness to consumer needs [1]. In 2017 more than 50% of Latvian online news and media content was accessed and consumed through social networking sites and mobile platforms, increasing non-direct and referral audience traffic, while decreasing direct visits to media brands.[15] The increasing social network usage and accessibility provide the potential to distribute media content and reach the audience. Social network sites present opportunities to distribute content to the broader audience, deepen relationships with the existing audience and due to the nature of media products as experience goods, recommendations on social networks are crucial and can help media brands reach new audiences [3]. Digital content distribution opportunities via different platforms, new audience engagement possibilities on social network sites, building a dialogue with the media audience and user-generated content creates a new value chain for media brands to reach the audience and build brand equity. As recognized by media managers of Latvia's local media, increasing opportunities by social network sites, the size of the audience and content distribution options ensured by technologies attract website visitors, thus, multiplying media users. In the meantime, too many new factors as content formats, social network sites' measurements of effectiveness, resources and decreasing readership from direct sources causes questions regarding the impact of social network sites on media usage and media brand effectiveness.

Decreasing media brand associations

The shift has created challenges for media brands to build and maintain substantial brand equity. Use of multiple delivery outlets has the potential to dilute brand associations for media brands [1]. The main issues surrounding the brand proposition have changed. More fluidity in content moving across multiple platforms, the brand identity of the source might become less relevant, mainly, when the content or programming itself has acquired its unique brand associations [4]. Content consumption via multiple platforms decreases brand associations with a content creator and distributor; therefore, multi-platform media content experience benefits audience reach, while drops brand associations of media content creators. The younger audience (15–24 y.o.) consumes media content on-demand. Only 74% of this audience in Latvia use linear television content compared to 83 % of the universe audience (15–64 y.o.) in the year 2018. [5] The younger audience prefers access to content digitally via video-on-demand platforms. 93% of this audience in Latvia use YouTube platform weekly compared to 64 % of the universal audience in 2018.[13] The content consumption for the younger audience is about the content consumption experience, not about media brand platform experience. With the proliferation of connected devices, the focus is on the act of consumption, not the devices or access points. The media audience today, and especially the younger audience requires media content consumption experience that is mobile, non-linear, modular and not the device, platform or outlet dependent [6]. Users and different interfaces are new sources in the value chain of media branding. The extensive opportunities of engagement, feedback, interaction with media audiences via social network platforms, content distribution and consumption via multiple platforms shift the power of creating and maintaining brand associations towards the audience and audience communities [1], [7]. The audience relevance will mitigate the need for consumers to wield their power to change brand associations. Consideration must also be given to integrated platform delivery, as consumers will be able to avoid brands that are not omnipresent on all media platforms [6]. Consistent media brand content experience through different platforms is essential as the younger audience does not pay attention to a single platform for a longer time. Consumers expect fluid transitions from one access point to the next [7]. The content needs to follow the

consumer and be presented in the optimal format for consumption on that particular platform or combination of platforms [6].

Audience power and necessity of consumer-centric media branding

The power and necessity of audience engagement is a significant part of building and maintaining media brand equity [1]. The possibility of audience feedback and engagement in social network platforms is a new significant part of media brand building, integrated and platform-specific content attract attention and build engagement [8]. The power of the media audience makes it significant for media owners to develop consumer-centric branding approach, including branding content consumption experience rather than branding the platform and being consistent with multiple platforms and channels. The power and necessity of engagement require integrated media branding. The more consistent branded content experience is delivered via different platforms, the more effectively a media brand is perceived. Defining specific perspectives in 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. [9]. This research scope is to focus on media branding from the consumer perspective. Further research will deploy finding and provide integration with a study from the product perspective that looks at media brands as branded content. In the consumer perspective, media brands are considered as an audience construct. If media brands are considered as a construct integrating the audiences' perceptions, such as cognitive associations or emotions and thereby related behaviour, there is a 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 does the audience perceive media (brands) and why do recipients use specific media (content) while avoiding another [10]?

Consumer-based brand equity in media branding aspect

The media consumer perspective allows researching the significant media branding aspects based on consumer-based brand equity building model [2], that, firstly, allows to define the behaviour of new media consumers and, secondly, contributes to media branding by explaining how brand associations form brand equity.

Brand awareness positively impacts the perceived quality and brand associations. Brand loyalty is mainly influenced by brand associations. Perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty are the main drivers of overall brand equity [11]. Consumer-based brand equity is defined by Keller [2] as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on the consumer response to the marketing of the brand". Keller states this definition contains three essential concepts - first, differential effect, second, brand knowledge, and, third, consumer response. The differential effect is determined by comparing the marketing of a brand to that of an unnamed version of the product or service. Brand knowledge is determined by brand awareness and brand image. The consumer behaviour defines consumer response to marketing to the marketing mix [2]. Consumer-based brand equity has occurred if the consumer knows the brand and holds favourable brand associations in memory [2].

4.   MAIN FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The younger audience consumes content via online platforms, gives preference to non-local media and social network sites

The research achieved **goal** and tasks to identify media consumption patterns of the younger audience and the leading brand attributes that influence local media content consumption and engagement level.

In 2016 the average daily media consumption in Latvia was 12 hours and 1 minute.[12] The younger audience prefers to access content via online platforms more often than universe audiences (15-65 y.o.), besides 71% of 15-24 years old can be reached daily via different social networking platforms, and 74% engage daily with different content on social network platforms, while 45% react to brand content, and 30% discuss the brand daily. That kind of behaviour assigns these platforms as a valuable channel for engaging and information distribution as well as information collecting.[12]

In 2017 the most used platforms in Latvia for the younger audience (15-24 y.o.) were WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Draugiem.lv, Google and Gmail.com. The five most used local media brands for a younger audience are Tvnet.lv, Delfi.lv, Skaties.lv, Jauns.lv and Sportacentrs.com. [13]

The audience usage of the most consumed local media brand is 40% (at least two times per week) compared to the usage of the most consumed social network platform is 78% (at least two times per week).[13] The younger audience mostly consumes global media brands and non-Latvian content. 74% of focus groups respondents confirm their primary source of news is social network platforms, global news sites and Google. [14]. In comparison, only 15% use media brand platforms to access local news, and very few respondents assure trust and reliability towards local media brands, pointing out the lack of positive brand image and engagement with the audience.

Three non-product related brand attributes as user imagery, usage imagery and secondary associations are significant for a younger audience

Focus groups' findings create a foundation for empirical research to determine the new significant aspects of local media branding in Latvia, in order to build more favourable, unique and strong brand associations to attract a younger audience. The research focuses on aspects of media brand associations that positively impact brand image and usage. The level of favourability, strengths and uniqueness of associations determines the association's impact on image and attitude toward the media brand. Due to the decrease of media brand associations when content consumption occurs via multiple platforms and increase of global media brand usage as well as low level of local media brand usage and image, there is a need of revaluation of media brand-building strategies via association towards a younger audience. As Keller [2] stated, the different types of brand associations making up the brand image include product-related or non-product-related attributes; functional, experiential, or symbolic benefits; and overall brand attitudes. These associations could vary according to their favorability, strength, and uniqueness.

Media brand user imagery and usage imagery on social network sites build favourability and strength of media brand associations

Focus groups and quantitative research study product and non-product related brand attribute to find the most significant aspect that attracts a younger audience to a particular media

brand, increase engagement and usage. The analyses confirm that three leading non-product related media brand attributes significantly impact positive media brand image within the younger audience. These are user imagery, usage imagery and secondary brand associations that strongly correlates with a positive brand image and higher usage of media. [11,14] User imagery association is what type of person uses the product or service, and usage imagery is association connected where and in what types of situations the product or service is used. User and usage imagery attributes can be formed directly from a consumer's own experiences and contact with brand users or indirectly through the depiction of the target market as communicated in brand advertising or by some other sources of information (e.g., word of mouth). Associations of a typical brand user may be based on demographic factors, psychographic factors and other factors [2].

Associations of a typical usage situation may be based on the time of day, week, or year, the location. User and usage of image attributes can also produce brand personality attributes. The media brand user profile or community image is a significant contributor to the more favourable, durable and unique media brand association. The more target audience feels connected, engaged and associated with media brand audience community, the positive it feels towards the media brand. The user imagery attribute is significant trust builder towards media brand as the younger audience (15–24 y.o.) trust building lies in peers, word of mouth and their authorities. The quantitative research results and the first model of local news media Tvnet.lv confirms usage imagery as dominant factor building media brand attitude to reach audience 15-24 years old.

Positive usage experience via different platforms, ensuring consistent content experience and platform-appropriate content format increase positive brand attitude towards media brand, increase usage, engagement and build audience loyalty. As the leading platforms used by the younger audience are social network sites such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, the media brand should be present on all social networking platforms to build relationships with their audience and build audience communities to create a sense of belonging, engage in dialogue with the audience and create content strategy applicable to each of the platform ensuring format, message and interactions appropriate to the each of platforms. The media brands should reconsider presence on these platforms as having a social profile brand page, and sharing content is only a part of building brand associations. Top five content types the younger audience is more open to share and engage are, first, educational and informational content; second, topical events, (e.g., sports, cultural events, news); third, funny and entertaining content; fourth, cute content and, fifth, something unexpected and emotional. Almost 67% of all target audience consumes video format as the primary content format.

As the study showed the primary channels for actualities and information gathering for a younger audience are social network sites, Google platform, friends shared and sent content via messenger applications and social network sites. These findings in media branding aspect let media brands to reconsider their presence in social network sites and use this presence more strategically to build media brand outside their platform.

Currently, the local media brands use social networking platforms to build brand awareness and share content to attract an audience to their platforms. Strategic brand building outside brand platform requires persistent community building on social networking sites and other outside platforms. It requires a new aspect of content creation, formatting applicable for each of multi-platforms because content consumption experience builds strong brand associations. Engaging audience via healthy and positive content experience on multi-platforms via mobile, desktop or another screen means ensuring visual and audial requirements related to the platform, media brand platform accessibility and usability via desktop, mobile and another screen, uses of video, live video technologies, gif format and another content format available for each platform. User-generated content is a significant part of user imagery association building aspect. It requires a media brand to engage in conversation with the audience, listening audience using available data technologies for analyses. Market intelligence or data strategy is another significant aspect of media branding in terms of building effective user and usage imagery associations. Data technologies and their applications in media branding would be further research in consumer-based media branding.

Secondary brand associations as a brand image builder for a younger audience

Third significant brand association builder essential to a younger audience is secondary brand associations. Belief associations are created in two ways: (1) by direct experience with the product or service, (2) by information about the product or service communicated by the company, other commercial sources, or word of mouth. Of these two, direct experience may create stronger associations in memory, given its inherent self-relevance [13]. Another type of inferred association occurs when the brand association itself is linked to other information in memory that is not directly related to the product or service. Because the brand becomes identified with this other entity, consumers may infer that the brand shares associations with that entity, thus producing indirect or "secondary" links for the brand. These secondary associations may lead to a transfer of global associations such as attitude or credibility or more specific attributes and benefits related to the product or service meaning. Secondary associations may arise from primary attribute associations related to (1) the company, (2) the country of origin, (3) the distribution channels, (4) a celebrity spokesperson or endorser of the product or service, or (5) an event [2]. The last two types of secondary associations occur when the primary brand associations are for user and usage situation attributes, especially when they are for a particular person or event. The research presents the strong correlation between the target audience perceived influencer endorsements, media representative or author brand image, community events and positive brand associations. Compared to an older audience, the youngsters (15–24 y.o.) are more inclined to follow and engage with their own defined influencers – Instagram micro-influencers (up to 10 000 followers), YouTube vloggers, their own peer's authorities, bloggers and media authors. [13,14] These personas influence the younger audience brand decisions more than media communication and traditional advertising. Recommendations, video reviews, content sharing by influencers increase favourability of brand associations for a younger audience. 31% of younger audience seek brand-related advice on social networking platforms, 30 % discuss the brand and 45% react to brand content. [12]. These findings underly the significance of influencer, media personality and event branding strategies for local media brands to build unique, reliable and favourable brand associations.

The local media brands should rethink community building strategies outside media platforms by delivering more seamless, format-wise and engaging content to a younger audience via platforms they use more often by leveraging technological opportunities offered by social networking sites and messaging apps. Branding content outside platform to grow usage

experience and build stronger brand associations means elaborating content format, channels and using data-gathering technologies to analyze the most useful content formats and types for a particular media audience. Encouraging positive word of mouth and integrating target audience influencer and author strategies into media brand-building increase brand favourability and usage. Local media brand should be aware of target audience's trust in influencers, and online celebrities are carefully selecting a persona that builds positive brand associations, and the target audience can associate with a sense of belonging. The media brand journalist, author or personality, can be considered as a part of building media brand associations considering weighted risks where media brand is too much dependent on one or two brand representing personalities.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Ongoing quantitative empirical research with the sample size 300 respondents (15–24 y.o.) designed to support secondary data and focus group study findings and will build example model for practical application to media branding for audience 15-24 y.o.. Further research should integrate the findings from ongoing quantitative empirical research into media branding as branding content perspective by further building engagement models for media brands. Further research requires determining correlations between the strength of the media platform brand and media brand outside the brand platform, e.g. media brand image on social networking sites. Also, the relationship between self-congruity and brand personality could be the next in-depth research area for local media branding researchers and academics.

This study presents:
1) the first foundation for further local media branding aspects,
2) a starting point for more rigorous research,
3) a small but significant contribution with potential implications for media practitioners.

The authors also use the experimental method applying these findings directly to local media brand strategy. The print media brand developed content branding strategies on social network sites, directly influencing user imagery and usage imagery aspects. The media brand curate and deliver content specially designed and created for the community on social network sites, engage and communicate with the audience via different formats and builds secondary brand associations via its own YouTube video channel. The first measurable results show an increasingly positive brand association. Reliable results will be analyzed within six months.

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