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The influence of new digital technologies on media brands: creative control versus creative co-creation

Abstract

There is no doubt that digital technologies have disrupted and changed many aspects of media production, distribution and consumption. These new technologies have also created a collaborative and participatory media environment which has transformed many media brand management practices, particularly how media brands are created and developed. We discuss the influence of new digital technologies on media brand practice and explore the idea of *creative control* versus *creative co-creation.* As such, this chapter examines the emergence of co-creation as a theoretical paradigm and identifies the central arguments for and against the adoption of co-creation activities in the development and management of media brands.

Keywords: Digital Technologies, Media Brands, Brand Management, Creativity, Co-creation.

1.1 Introduction

The emergence and continual growth of new digital technologies has shaped and re-shaped many aspects of media production, distribution and consumption for more than two decades. This disruptive force has also contextualised the theoretical contributions of many media management researchers in recent years who have discussed the resulting market turbulence and transformational change for media firms (Hasenpusch & Baumann, 2017; Horst & Moisander, 2015; Oliver, 2014; Oliver & Picard, 2020).

At macro-level we have also seen the evolution of the World Wide Web. The key characteristic of Web 1.0 during the period 1996-2004 delivered audiences with read-only static information provided by media firms; whilst Web 2.0 evolved (2004-16) into a read-write platform that both delivered widespread connectivity and interaction between web users and allowed users to become media content producers on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram. However, the emergence of Web 3.0 (2016+) as an executable generation of internet services for websites and applications will allow users to 'collaborate' and 'participate' in a social web that simulates creativity and innovation (Choudhury, 2014).

The transformative digital environment whereby platforms have moved from being 'static' (1.0) to 'interactive' (2.0) to now fully 'collaborative' (3.0) has facilitated much greater consumer participation and collaboration with media brands. This chapter explores the impact of media brand practice in a digital environment which fosters and encourages the co-creation of media brands. It discusses the changing role of media brand management, moving from a remit of control to one of collaboration and co-operation with users and audiences. We argue that new Web 3.0 digital platforms have facilitated a co-creation environment which presents a dilemma for media brand professionals and institutions who were previously considered to be the guardians of creativity. Digital technologies now allow users to be collaborative creators of media content which raises important issues of creative control, accountability of ideas, the role of the creative employee, and the ownership of intellectual property rights.

This chapter explores the influence of new digital technologies on media brand practice and specifically explores the idea of *creative control* versus *creative co-creation.* It will examine the emergence of co-creation as a theoretical paradigm and provide the arguments for

and against the adoption of co-creation activities in the development and management of media brands.

2.1 UK Media Industry: the importance of media brands

As an important economic, cultural and political influencer, the UK Media Industry is widely considered to be innovative and often regarded as the instigator of many future media market trends (Forster, 2011). However, as the industry continues to evolve and as a result of technological, regulatory and social trends the role that media brands play within the industry continue to increase in significance with producers, distributors and users of media content (Siegert et al., 2015). The opportunities and threats presented by this dynamic environment has increased consumer choice, particularly as new digital technologies make it easier to access and engage audiences with more targeted mediated content. This has resulted in increased levels of competition as media firms saturate the market with new products and services. As a result, the cluttered competitive marketplace has enhanced the importance of branding and provides an opportunity not only to differentiate products and services, but also to help users make media consumption choices.

Whilst the advent of media brands emerged in the late 1990s, media firms have increasingly placed more emphasis on their role and significance to organisational performance (Lischka et al., 2018; McDowell, 2006; Ots 2008). Today, a media brand is one of a media firm's most important assets and brand development and protection is now recognised as strategic imperative (Chan-Olmsted, 2011; Siegert et al., 2015).

2.2 What is a media brand?

In its simplest form, a media brand is something that is 'named' and is 'different' from the competition, in so far as, it provides consumers with something of value (Keller et al., 2008; Kotler et al., 2013). A brand is often considered in terms of its identity which consists of a design, logo and other visual characteristics that help consumers differentiate and choose between various media products or services, which in turn, helps to build consumer loyalty which delivers long-term corporate financial success. Aligned to these visual aspects, a brand also consists of tangible characteristics and intangible associations held by consumers that provide a sense of identity, cultural memory and equity.

There is no doubt that the emergence of digital technologies has transformed the media consumption experience for audiences and users, however, the abundance of mediated content and delivery platforms has fragmented the marketplace often leaving audiences feeling overwhelmed and confused with the choices available to them. Media firms responded to this by developing compelling and distinctive media brands, that not only acted as a point of differentiation, but provided a means to sustain audience engagement and relevance. Importantly, a media brand can exist in different types of architecture that include the 'branded house' where all products and services use the same corporate brand; the 'endorsed brands' approach where individual brands are linked in some way to a corporate brand; and the 'house of brands' where unique brands are developed for each product (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). An example, of the branded house approach can be seen in the BBC (corporate brand), BBC2 (channel brand), Newsnight (programme brand) and long-term presenter Kirsty Walk (talent brand). Given the number of architectures levels in which a media brand can exist, a systematic and planned approach to their management is essential in order to maintain and protect their value.

2.3 A brief history of media brand management research

As mentioned previously, media brands emerged in the late 1990s, which in turn, led many academics to consider it to be an important topic for inquiry. Early contributors to the field examined the issue of strategic brand management in changing media markets (Chan-Olmsted 2006, 2011; Krebs & Siegert, 2015). Researchers also examined brand management in the specific context of different media sectors such as: McCourt and Rothenbuhler's (2004) investigation into brand management at radio stations; Förster (2011), Stipp (2012) and Singh and Oliver (2015) and Zeng and Han's (2012) research into brand management practices in television; and McDowell's (2011) study of brand management in journalism.

However, an emerging area of brand research concerns the 'collaborative and open dialogue' approach to media brand management (Bange et al., 2020; Malcorps, 2019; Villi & Jung, 2015; Wikström, 2014). This chapter contributes to this debate by examining the influence of new digital technologies and how they have acted as an 'innovation trigger' on media brand management practices and research. As such, it specifically explores the idea of *'creative control'* versus *'creative co-creation'* in the development and management of media brands. We draw heavily from the theoretical paradigm of co-creation and provide illustrative examples of how new digital technologies have created both opportunities and threats for the management of media brands.

3.1 Innovation Triggers: the influence of new digital technologies on media brand management

Digital technologies allow users to be 'collaborative creators' of media content which raises a number of important issues including: creative control, accountability of ideas, the role of the creative employee, and the ownership of intellectual property rights. These new digital platforms have facilitated a co-creation environment which presents a dilemma for media brand professionals and firms who were previously considered to be the guardians of creativity and value.

3.2 Brand Co-creation

Many media organisations aim to achieve competitive advantage by developing distinctive brands. *Co-creation* provides a platform to develop a media brand by encouraging interaction with and amongst users, and it is this type of user engagement that is considered to be the source of new and innovative brand management practices (Ind, 2014; Mertz et al., 2009).

Brand co-creation is about developing and managing a brand by looking both inwards and outwards (Ind & Schmidt, 2019). The principal argument underpinning brand co-creation is that 'value' will be created, in an interactive way, by media organisations and users rather than value merely being released at the point when the media product or service is used (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The aim of brand co-creation for media organisations is opening up their brand management practices to users in order to access a new source of creativity and innovation. The value associated with a co-created media brand, will therefore, be realised during and because of this user interaction.

3.3 Contemporary debates in brand co-creation

The UK Media Industry provides a rich and interesting landscape in which to investigate the practice of brand co-creation, as creative output is increasingly involving a higher number of stakeholders. However, the academic focus on media brand co-creation is still relatively new and examines a diverse range of issues that includes: the use of social media to engage consumers in brand conversation (Christodoulides, 2009); involvement of audiences in creative processes (Aris & Bughin, 2009); involving audiences in the creation, production and

marketing of music (Wikström, 2014); active participation in the creation of branded content and the direction of the format and content within magazines (Bange et al., 2020; Malmelin & Villi, 2017).

As noted earlier, brand co-creation is being driven by advances in digital technologies that enable a participatory culture that have made it possible to engage and interact with media audiences and users in a more open and discursive manner. However, there continues to be significant debate around the role of brand co-creation in terms of the advantages and disadvantages for the creation, development and protection of media brands. There is no doubt that future advances in new digital technologies will only increase the tension between the *creative control* versus *creative co-creation* of media brands.

4.1 The case for creative co-creation

Recent studies identified that media firms are engaging in co-creation activities which has led to greater levels of creativity (Gray, 2021; Malmelin & Villi, 2017). This has required media firms to change their brand management practices from being firm centric to an approach that embraces an open forum perspective with users engaged in the co-creation of media brands.

The environment that media brand managers now find themselves operating in is one where the conscious and unconscious voice of different users provides a rich source of creative thinking. New digital platforms and capabilities such as cloud enabled mobile applications, augmented, virtual reality and artificial intelligence have enabled an interactive, participatory and collaborative media world. As such, media brand practitioners can collaborate creatively with their users by actively embracing the opportunities presented by Web 3.0 enabled technologies. Progressive media organisations have started to extend their brand management practices by encompassing collaboration with online communities as a source of innovative ideas. As such, online networks act as new arenas for participation, enabling members to critique and share ideas with media firms about their brands.

There is increasing evidence of the creative nature of co-creation in the media industry, with examples from the magazine (Malmelin & Villi, 2017), TV and radio broadcasting, and advertising and marketing sectors (Gray, 2021). These studies demonstrate that integral to facilitating creative co-creation is an infrastructure that allows and encourages connection and dialogue between media firms and their audiences. Indeed, Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2013) argued that the main components required for creative co-creation were 'engagement platforms, experience areas and capability ecosystems' that encouraged creative idea generation and enabled media firms to cultivate a feeling of passion and connection between their brands and their audiences.

The case for the co-creation of media brands is illustrated and strengthened by the example of 4Music, the British free-to-air entertainment television channel. 4Music has always embraced dialogue between the company and its audiences, however, they wanted to evolve this into an organisational culture of co-creation, rather than regard it as a one-off project based activity. One example of this was demonstrated in their 'YouNews' programme which was completely co-created between the channel and their audience members. 4Music provided their co-creators with a structure and guidance for potential programme ideas, from which they filmed their own media content in relation to each topic, which 4Music subsequently extended, changed or edited. This co-created idea generation process for media content development is illustrated in the following practitioner quote:

"We put Twitter hashtags out into the world and our audiences' tweet and retweet the hashtag for their favourite artist as well as creating content. Real fans film their own content, post it, and tell us why they are the best fanbase in the world."
Head of Production, 4Music

Digital technologies have also enabled the development of online brand communities which allow users to connect with media brands and get involved in the creative process (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Smith et al, 2012). These communities not only play an important role in the brand co-creation process, they also help create value for other members as well as for the brand. An example of how digital communities have been utilised by media organisations can be seen in the work between the Latimer Group, an agency that facilitates brand co-creation, and the BBC. When BBC3, the youth orientated channel, was moving from traditional linear programming and distribution to an online only platform, they wanted to understand how to make the channel relevant and authentic to audiences and understand what content would work on a digital platform. BBC3 and the Latimer Group brought together 65 individuals from across the UK via an online platform and mobile app which resulted in the co-creation of over 300 content and programme ideas. The power of engaging online communities in co-creation activities is demonstrated in the following practitioner quotes:

"Co-creation is the future for brands. As audiences increasingly seek two-way conversations, collaboration and the opportunity to create their own content, brands must adapt to survive. The smart ones are those that are prepared to shift the balance of power: democratise, give audiences a say, realise they need to put consumers at the heart of their brand. The brands that will own the future, are those that co-create."
Managing Director, Latimer Group

"We have got a scheme called "Give Me a Voice" which goes out to look for young filmmakers in the UK, and we help to develop them. So, they come to us with an initial idea and then we'll help to develop an idea with them."
Senior Production Manager, BBC 3

4.2 The case for creative control

Whilst the case for the co-creation of media brands is evident from the previous discussion, there is a growing body of evidence that questions the involvement of media audiences in the creation and development of media brands, which considers the idea of collaborating with users in co-creation practices as an anathema (Cova et al., 2011; Krebs & Lischka, 2019; Villi & Jung, 2015). This view argues that media brands need to be protected given their tangible and intangible value to firms, and that, those who reside outside the firm do not add anything extra to the knowledge of the internal experts. Essentially, this view argues that media brands are valuable assets which are best protected by keeping control of it.

The case for the creative control of media brands is convincing. Brand management theory and practice has its roots firmly embedded in the idea of 'control'. Traditionally, the purpose of a media organisation controlling as many aspects of a brand as possible was to facilitate a consistent and continuous representation of the brand to audiences. Given this, it is clear to see why media brands are highly controlled and managed by firms. However, with the rise in co-creation activities, the control of media brands has placed an additional strain on media firms. At the heart of the co-creation philosophy is the notion of a media brand owner relinquishing control, however, when control is ceded, it represents a significant change in the fundamental

assumptions that underpin brand management practice. Controlling the identity and image of the brand is much harder given that digital technologies allow and encourage users to be 'collaborative creators' of media brands. Furthermore, as noted above the complexity of brand architecture means that a systematic and planned approach to their management is essential in order to maintain and protect their value.

As the conventional notion of brand management is being undermined, a large degree of uncertainty and resistance is being seen from practitioners over the potential loss of control over the brand. As noted above, the UK Media Industry is renowned for its creative output, and co-creation presents a significant challenge for some media firms whose reputations have been built on creative excellence. Relinquishing creative control is challenging and the complexities inherent in many creative projects accentuate the difficulties of co-creation, particularly where there may be pre-determined creative visions, and or, client/sponsor requirements. Interestingly, research by Van Es (2016) analysed several seasons of audience involvement in the US television show 'The Voice'. The key finding suggested that control of aspects of the production and content of the show was initially conceded to audiences before being regained as the seasons progressed. It appears that the programme makers wanted to represent the show in a way which did not always align with some of the audience views.

The case for creative control has been presented by Gray (2021) in the examination of brand management practices in UK media firms. The findings indicate that brand managers were protective of their creative knowledge and skills and did not welcome the involvement of external stakeholders in co-created brand activities. They also questioned the legitimacy and accountability of co-created ideas and their role in an industry where value is generated on the basis of creativity. The case for creative control is demonstrated in the following practitioner quotes:

"The art of TV making is about surprising audiences and doing things differently. Creative spark about new stuff is really, really important and the wisdom of crowds to get new ideas is a little bit dangerous as you end up aggregating answers. There are sparks of creative genius that only come from here".
Head of Research, Channel 4

"People are nervous about co-creation as people can sabotage it. You hand it over to an audience, and it's very difficult to set rules. There's too much accountability to let your customers run with it".
Head of Strategy, Walker Agency

The arguments for creative control have also been articulated by Banks and Deuze (2009) who argued that brand co-creation also reduces the prospects for employability in the labour market for professional creatives. Furthermore, Terranova (2000), Scholz (2008) and Ross (2009) argued that co-creation contributes to already precarious employment conditions for media professionals, and so it comes as no surprise, that there are significant levels of opposition to the idea of creative co-creation. This is supported in the following practitioner quote when referring to audience collaboration:

"He calls himself a director but he's not. He is basically just out of film school. He thought he could run before he could walk and do our job""
Senior Production Manager, BBC

Conclusion

The is no doubt that the emergence of digital technologies has transformed many aspects of media production, distribution and consumption. They have also changed the relationship between media professionals and institutions and the audiences they serve. Perhaps none more so, than in the creation and development of media brands where Web 3.0 digital technologies enable media producers to collaborate and participate with media users in a way that simulates creativity and innovation.

In this chapter we have explored the impact of these collaborative and participatory digital technologies on media brand management practices and conclude that the co-creation environment presents significant opportunities and challenges for media brand professionals and firms. The central issue in this debate is one of control. By relinquishing control of the brand and engaging media users in the creative development process, brand managers can drive user engagement by placing them at the centre of co-created brand activities in a way that facilitates and enhances creativity and innovation. However, by rejecting the philosophy of co-creation, brand managers act as guardians of creativity and control a process that delivers the accountability of ideas, protects employment and the inherent value of expertise, the ownership of intellectual property rights, and importantly, the (in)tangible value of media brands within an often-complex brand architecture.

The examples of creative co-creation and creative control illustrate the challenges faced by UK media firms. In an increasingly technologically driven and interactive media environment, the pressure on brand managers to embrace co-creation in the creative process will only increase. As such, there needs to be a realisation from brand management practitioners that both sides of the argument are relevant. Perhaps the observation by Van Es (2016) whose analysis of the US television show 'The Voice' provides an insight into a middle ground where the issue of creative control and co-creation is not a case of one or the other, but a case of 'navigating a course' through a creative process where both are necessary at different points in time.

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