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A PROPOSED MEDIA CHANNEL FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRATED BRAND COMMUNICATION PLANNING

ABSTRACT

Integrated brand communication depends on the development of a fully integrated media channel plan and ultimately, the implementation of a seamless consumer media contact journey in order for brand communication to be effective. The development of an omni-media channel strategy is guided by a media planning framework. A review of literature revealed a continued emphasis of traditional mass media channels and at best, references to new media channel perspectives. The study of literature was unable to uncover an integrated media channel framework in the public domain. In addition, media agency planning frameworks tend to be held confidential. An exploration of the perspectives and frameworks of media planning to achieve integrated brand communication was undertaken by conducting in-depth interviews with eight senior media channel planners from global leading media agencies identified through the Forrester Institute Report. The qualitative study delivered key strategic principles to develop an integrated media channel plan and a seamless consumer media contact experience, based on which an integrative media channel planning framework is put forward for industry and academe to consider, assess and test through application and further research.

Keywords: digital media; integrated brand communication; media channel planning; media planning; new media frameworks

INTRODUCTION

Digitalisation has changed the way consumers expect to find, share and discuss information across different online and offline media channels; thus, media channel planners have a wide array of contact decisions to make in developing an omni-media channel strategy (Kotler 2014; Reis 2016; Straker *et al.* 2015; Young 2016; Shpak *et al.* 2020). A consumer media journey characterises the consumers' interaction with the brand (Duncan 2005; Yorke 2015; Clarke

2014) and guides the media channel planner in understanding how the process of media channel integration can be achieved through the implementation of media contact points (Edelman 2015; Young 2016; Laurie & Mortimer 2019). A media planning strategy requires a balance of new and traditional media channels to provide the consumer with a seamless experience within the envisaged media journey (De Vries *et al.* 2012). Thus, integrated brand contact planning is seen as the process to deliver a cohesive consumer experience at every media contact point and it comprehensively leverages media channels through an integrated consumer media journey to sustain and grow the brand (Kotler *et al.* 2013; Rana 2015; Mosca & Casalegno 2020). Media channel planning naturally finds itself in a constant state of evolution as new media channels emerge in the media channel spectrum (Yorke 2015; Clarke 2014).

INTEGRATED MEDIA CHANNEL PLANNING

The development of an omni-media channel strategy in media planning is generally guided by a media planning framework. As a graphic illustration of a planning process a framework simplifies complex concepts, constructs, variables, operational definitions and propositions into comprehensible states and relationships (Castronovo & Huang 2012; Hadjicharalambous 2013; Huang *et al.* 2014; Kannan 2017). Frameworks have existed within brand communication since the advent of modern advertising to guide industry professionals in decision-making and planning processes (Killian & McManus 2015). For example, the emergence of niche marketing in the early 1960s introduced Agostini's (1961) widespread brand reach construct, the media mix framework (Belch & Belch 2008), and evolved constructs such as media channel relevance, media channel engagement and media channel timing (Lane *et al.* 2011; Kosterich & Napoli 2015; Katz 2016; Rubtcova & Pavenkov 2019). It is noted that a media planning framework should not be rigid but instead provide the foundation for the media channel planner to form a solution for integration with their brand contact plan. The value of a framework therefore lies in its efficiency to assist media channel planners to make informed and cohesive strategic decisions (Dias *et al.* 2013; Velasquez & Hester 2013; Maity & Dass 2014).

The review of existing published frameworks of media channel planning reveals a continued emphasises of traditional mass media channels. Frameworks have at best adapted to new media channels, instead of developing an integrated omni-media channel perspective that encompasses new media channels and enables integrated planning (Sissors & Baron 2010; Mirzabeiki & Saghiri 2020). Authors forewarn that the mere incorporation of new media channel options within existing media channel frameworks potentially leads to fragmented brand contact thinking and media channel planning, causing inconsistencies in the brand voice (Benady 2014; Newman 2014; Matthews 2015; Pagani *et al.* 2019).

The challenge with integrated brand communication, as several authors note, is that it is both a construct and a planning process. A media channel planner has to consider all brand communication needed in an integrated approach, ensuring what has become known as the "one-voice, one-look approach" to how a brand is presented across a myriad of media channels (Kotler *et al.* 2013; Huang *et al.* 2014; MacInnis *et al.* 2015).

Despite a wide search, the literature review was unable to find any existing framework that guides integrated media channel planning in the public domain. The review of literature also reveals that media agencies often adapt “public” media planning and media channel planning frameworks to develop proprietary media channel planning frameworks, which provide the media agency with a competitive advantage in the field (Mulhern 2009; Koekemoer 2014; Gálvez 2020).

Media channel planning frameworks

Three leading global advertising agencies contributed to the development of the concept of integrated brand communication and, by implication, media channel integration (Subramanian 2015). In 1985, the Ogilvy Group developed the concept of “Ogilvy Orchestration”. This concept provided prospective clients with a complete advertising spectrum through the coordination of all services the agency had on offer; it coined the phrase “many instruments and voices to form one big sound” (Hackley & Hackley 2015). Consequently, other agencies saw the need for integration and specifically for their departments to work together in order to overcome silo-thinking and planning operations. Even earlier, in 1972, Young and Rubicam spoke about the “Whole Egg”, while TBWA developed their framework of “Connection Strategy” (Kotler 2012). This was the start of integrating departments and other external agencies into a unified full-service agency that could develop an integrated brand communication framework (Frost 2015; Hepp *et al.* 2015; Kotler 2014; Straker *et al.* 2015; Gálvez 2020).

Today media channel planners strive to integrate a host of online and offline media channels to guide consumers through a consumer media journey (Kapferer 1993; Sissors & Baron 2010; Young 2014; Subramanian 2015; Katz 2016; Dasgupta & Grover 2019), and to deliver a cohesive brand experience of both traditional and new media channels (Armstrong 2009; Fuxman *et al.* 2018; Demmers *et al.* 2020). However, it seems that media channel planning frameworks merely provide a starting point for media channel planners in the allocation of media channels and lack an approach that facilitates the integration of new and traditional media (Kotler *et al.* 2013; Schultz 2014; Huang *et al.* 2014; MacInnis *et al.* 2015; Young 2016; Shpak *et al.* 2020). This study could not find a media channel planning framework in the “public” domain that incorporates both online and offline media channels across the consumer media journey, which enables and supports cohesive brand communication. The literature review also affirmed that a disconnect of the brand message often occurs when brand messages move from one channel to the next (Newman 2014; Young 2014; Wayne 2017; Gálvez 2020).

It must be noted that the development and introduction of new media channels will always result in new additions to a media channel planner’s spectrum; thus, planning frameworks should be able to accommodate an evolution in media channels and contact points. This research was motivated by the need for an integrated media channel planning framework to guide media planners in connecting both online and offline media channels in order to maintain the brand message across multiple channels (Demmers *et al.* 2020). Such a framework would need to consider the integration of media channels in relation to media contact points; the segmentation of media contact points to specific phases in the consumer media journey; and the inclusion

of both traditional and new media channels in the consumer media journey. As such, the introduction of a media channel planning framework to the “public” domain could contribute to integrative media channel planning, but also receive continuous input from practitioners and academics in order to serve a purpose (Rana 2015; Katz 2016; Wayne 2017; Chen & Xing 2019).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The exploratory and interpretivist research study revolved around three core questions in the development of a media channel planning framework:

RQ1: What media channel planning perspectives and frameworks support integrated brand communication?

RQ2: How are media channel planners incorporating new media channels in the development of integrated media channel frameworks?

RQ3: What media channel planning frameworks are media channel planners using to develop integrated brand contact plans?

A purposive sample was selected from Forrester Global Media Report, an international report consolidated from an independent consulting firm. This provided an unbiased source of media agency review criteria to determine the population and sample for the study (LoGrasso 2016). The aim was to collect the perspectives of senior media planning professionals who would have valuable insights into media channel planning constructs and frameworks for the development of cohesive brand contact plans (Saunders *et al.* 2012).

The Forrester Global Media Report tracks 34 leading media agencies across multiple regions and is based on comprehensive media services, global presence, activation capabilities and market share. It is compiled quarterly as opposed to other media agency reports that reflect an annual period. This was an important consideration as external factors cause the media landscape to change frequently, which encourages leading media agencies to remain continuously relevant in their planning practices. A quarterly review of media agencies assisted in identifying the media agencies that keep abreast of the media channel planning environment. The Forrester Global Media Agency Report Q3 2018 was selected to identify the sample of global media agencies and senior media planners, managers or directors who participated in this study. The sample provided a rich mix of global perspectives on media planning agency decision-making tools, techniques and frameworks within media channel planning.

The perspectives of senior media channel planners were explored through in-depth interviews and thereupon through sound-boarding iterations of the proposed integrated media channel planning framework. Interview saturation was reached at interview number eight (Saunders *et al.* 2012; LoGrasso 2016) with senior media planners, managers or directors from eight of the leading media agencies identified in the Forrester Global Media Agency Report Q3 2018. The names of the agencies and the participants are confidential and have been coded to ensure their identities remain anonymous.

ANALYSIS, FINDINGS AND ITERATIVE REVIEW

Thematic analysis was utilised in the data analysis and it produced five core themes and seven interrelated subthemes.

TABLE 1: HIERARCHICAL VIEW OF THEMES AND SUBTHEMES OF THE PRIMARY STUDY

Core themes	Subthemes
Integration – creates a seamless brand experience	Integration is built through media contact points
	Integration is delivered through consumer media journeys
Planning – Embodies media-neutral decisions	Biased media mixes prevent the balance of media channels in the brand contact plan
	Consumer need for information is delivered through relevant contact points
Perspectives – Professional perspectives influence decision-making	Media channel planners’ experience to integrate is based on prior learnings
Frameworks – Use in media agencies	Planning requires the balance of purposeful media channels
Media contact points – Relevance to overall media channel plan strategy	Brand engagement requires consumer centric media contact points

Key insight 1: Integration – creates a seamless brand experience

Most of the participants shared the notion that integration is a challenge across media agencies. While the goal is for media channels to be interconnected, interdependent and transparent, it is not always achieved through media channel frameworks. The subthemes indicated that integration is delivered through cohesive consumer media journeys and that integration can be built from media contact points. Participant 4 stated, “New channels are constantly added to our media landscape. Clients want to try them out but do not consider the goal or objective of using a new channel.”

Key insight 2: Planning – embodies media-neutral decisions

Several of the participants shared the notion that a seamless brand experience starts at the planning phase. Media-neutral decisions allow for a non-biased approach to media channel selection and, in turn, non-biased contact points as seen through the subthemes of unbiased media mixes that prevent a balance of relevant and meaningful media channels within the brand contact plan. Participant 7 mentioned that media agencies that are integrated within creative agencies often yield a better result due to the closeness of the relationship between both agencies, as the review of literature indicates, would produce a better collaborative working relationship. “By taking on the client’s interest in channels will often lead to a disconnected consumer journey,” as mentioned by Participant 4. The second subtheme requires that the consumers’ need for information is provided through relevant contact points.

Key insight 3: Perspectives – personal perspectives influence decision-making

The participants shared the notion that personal perspective can influence decision-making in media channel planning, as media channel planners learn from past experience and bring about their experience with brand contact plans and consumer media journeys. Participant 3 mentioned that some media channels are more important in different countries based on the consumer profile you are targeting. “Twitter is a social platform of choice for many Americans; however, in most of Europe Instagram is a better choice.” Thus, as a media channel planner one needs to consider the media channel selection available to ensure that there is integration within the consumer media journey.

Key insight 4: Frameworks – established media planning frameworks

Many of the participants shared the notion that integration starts from the client brief and that existing media agency structures often present silos that lead to media planning disconnects. The fundamentals to achieve integration of media channel planning is through discussion of proprietary frameworks. Participant 6, for example, stated that with the ongoing digitisation of media channels, the evolution of media channels and audience fragmentation appears to become a challenge for media planners to encounter if there is not an integrative media channel planning framework; thus, reinforcing the review of literature and the purpose of this study (Mulhern 2009; Matthews 2015). Participant 8 highlighted the increasing degree of separation and identified a number of negative effects’ impact on the start of a media channel plan. Participant 8 and Participant 5 suggested that creativity and exploration into new media relied upon a number of factors, including internal structures employed to reduce silo mentality, and the size and diversity of media agency expertise.

Key insight 5: Media contact points – relevance to overall brand contact plans

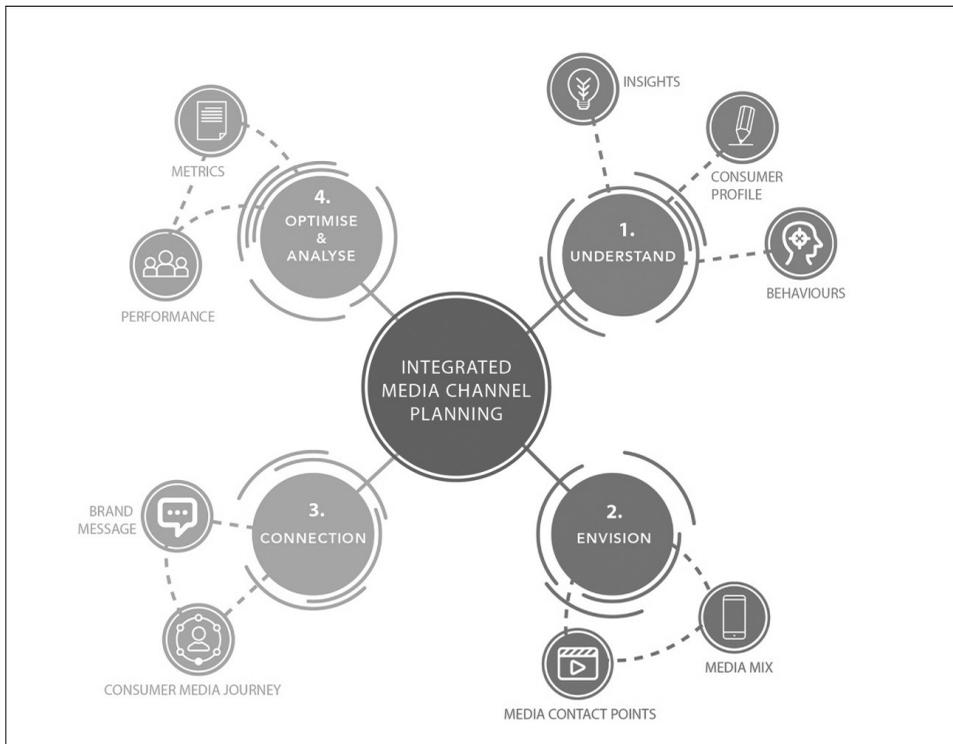
The participants were of the view that the balance of media contact points work in synergy upon identifying a media channel planning framework. Subthemes established under this theme build upon the consumer-centric synergy of the brand contact plan. Participant 7 found that traditional media channels, such as television, were more effective than new media channels, such as digital channels, as these media channels offer a range of measures relating to attitude and awareness aimed at gaining the consumer's attention. Participant 5 also established that the traditional channels of television, radio, newspapers and direct mail retain their historically favoured attributes of trust and reliability of information, even among "tech-savvy" younger audiences. For consumers to move through the brand contact plan, each contact point needs to be relevant and meaningful to the anticipated target audience. Therefore, the selection of contact points should encompass the consistency of the brand voice through the brand contact plan.

Upon completion of the in-depth interviews and consolidation of the thematic data analysis a proposed contemporary framework, which could be used within the field of media channel planning to provide integration of new and traditional media channels, was developed and shared with the participants in the study. Six of the eight participants assisted in crafting the proposed framework by primarily enhancing flexibility for media channel planners to revisit planning elements to ensure that brand and message integration can be achieved. To prevent the proposed framework from being seen as a linear process, its visual composition and depiction of elements consequently demonstrate how all elements of media channel planning work in unison to enable and achieve brand cohesion. Planning frameworks, as is also confirmed by the literature, should not be rigid and must provide a foundation for media channel planners to form a solution for integration within their brand contact plans (Matthews 2015; Pagani *et al.* 2019; Mosca & Casalegno 2020).

The changes incorporated in the proposed framework furthermore show a detailed approach with subtasks for media channel planners to consider. Media channel planners start with understanding the consumer profile, which specifically leads to insights into behaviours and determining a relevant media mix and media contact points, which in turn translate into potential connections delivered through the brand message and consumer media journey. However, as participants indicated, insights gained along the route can lead to planning movement within the framework, reviewing and reconsidering how variables could or should work together towards message integration and brand cohesion. Framework performance is therefore also reviewed as the final step to measure for improvements of the brand contact plan.

A final iteration of the proposed integrated media channel planning framework met with full participant approval and is presented in Figure 1. The participants confirmed that the framework supports the planning fluidity necessary to achieve integration within media channel planning.

FIGURE 1: PROPOSED INTEGRATED MEDIA CHANNEL PLANNING FRAMEWORK



Overall the final iteration presented a synthesis of the literature review and the primary insights gained from the qualitative research to provide an integrative approach to the media channel planning process and to avoid a disconnect between new and traditional media channels (Mulhern 2009; Kotler 2014; Matthews 2015; Young 2016; Mosca & Casalegno 2020). Achieving integration in media channel planning across the multitude of media channels available is the challenge participants mentioned most frequently. While the categories of new and traditional media channels are not shown as specific elements in the framework, this was purposeful to not limit the considered media to new and traditional. Instead, new and existing media channels can be considered using this framework to ensure integration. The measurement of success is ensuring seamless brand message transitions across the media channels.

The proposed integrated media channel planning framework brings together the common and essential elements of media channel planning (consumer journey, consumer profile, metrics and media contact points) into an integrative media channel planning framework for media channel planners. This contemporary framework is therefore also the starting point for future research and the development of case studies facilitating integration in media channel planning and measuring the effect of media channel integration. Several of the participants also suggested that further research

should explore planning dynamics in each of the categories and sub-categories to produce detailed guides for media channel planners.

Lastly, research could focus on the application and nuanced development of the conceptual framework in and for specific markets and media environments. Insights from such a study could contribute to the expressed need for appropriate media channel integration based on South African consumer segments, as consumers utilise media channels across a multitude of different media contact points (Beakbane 2012; Wayne 2017).

CONCLUSION

A study of literature was unable to uncover an integrated media channel framework in the public domain and media agency planning frameworks tend to be held confidential. Literature furthermore revealed a continued emphasis of traditional mass media channels and, at best, references to new media channel perspectives. Primary research thus explored media channel planning perspectives and frameworks through eight in-depth interviews with media channel planners at global media agencies and gained valuable insights into how new media channels are being incorporated into media channel planning frameworks. It is important to note that media channel planners recognise the need for an integrated media channel planning framework.

The overall value of this study is strategic to the practices of media planning as it presents a media channel framework for integrated brand communication planning and guides media channel planners to:

- ◆ recognise the importance of consumer targeting profiling in the planning of a brand contact plan;
- ◆ integrate new and traditional media channels in media channel planning;
- ◆ reflect the value of media contact points within the consumer media journey; and
- ◆ establish primary and secondary media channels as conduits in the consumer media journey.

Integration is achievable within media channel planning when it is shaped by thorough research, understanding of the target consumer profile, and a fluid consumer media journey. Based on the feedback from the experienced media channel planners interviewed, the proposed integrated media channel framework has the potential to assist media channel planners in effectively incorporating existing and new media channels in seamless consumer journeys toward integrated brand communication. In doing so, the media channel planners will thus be more effective in conveying the brand message to the target audience in each of the media channels they use within their brand contact plans.

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A proposed media channel framework for integrated brand communication

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