

Sommer, von Rimscha, Verhoeven, Krebs, & Siegert (2016): Success factors of media product brands

Examining the building blocks for success across different media types.

Abstract

Media companies and their managers have to develop and adapt products and services as well as processes and business models to exploit opportunities in the digital era. In doing so, knowledge of success factors is crucial.

Success factor research in the media is a fairly broad and fragmented field. Studies till date have focused on single types of media; however, this technology-based distinction is no longer valid. It has been shown that products and services converge as well as their development and production processes. Therefore, the present study aims to synthesize the findings from different media contexts.

On the basis of a comprehensive literature review and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with media professionals from Austria, Germany and Switzerland, ten building blocks of media success are suggested: content, design, environmental orientation, internal processes, organizational aspects, leadership, human resources, marketing, distribution, and external evaluation. The findings support the transferability of success factors on an abstract level and their adaptability for different contexts. They function as hygiene factors representing industry standards and constraints to failure. This study concludes with presenting the implications for media management research and media practice.

1 Introduction

After decades of steady growth and stable business models, the media industry has become dynamic. Consequently, media companies and their managers have to develop and adapt products and services as well as processes and business models to exploit opportunities in the digital era. They need to adjust to their audiences' changing consumption patterns and advertisers' shifting budgets. To strengthen the market position of media companies and to stay ahead of the competition, research on success factors offers valuable insights.

Success factor research is a fairly broad and fragmented field. Studies till date have focused on single types of media; however, this technology-based distinction is no longer valid. It has been shown that products and services as well as development and production processes converge. Consequently, media brands have become increasingly important (Malmelin & Moisander, 2014). A media brand is a defining context for media content, independent of its means of distribution. Examples include news outlets which offer their services on printed paper as well as on a website and mobile applications or a writers telling stories through books, movies, and social media. Success factor research needs to adapt to these changes.

This study aims to synthesize the findings for different types of media and suggest building blocks of success, which are valid across the media industry. The focus is on audience success of individually branded media products or services, while neglecting portfolio strategies and other potential success measures at the corporate level. We empirically evaluate the building blocks of media success on the basis of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with media professionals from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. The analysis of the transcripts allows us to answer the research questions about the validity of our generalization of the success factors and potential similarities or differences between brands.

This paper is structured as follows: We provide a comprehensive literature review of success factor research in the media and deduce universal building blocks of media success. The empirical part of this study assesses whether these building blocks are in fact generalizable. Thus, we describe the empirical approach. Subsequently, we present the results and discuss our findings. Finally, we present limitations and suggestions for further research as well as a conclusion with implications for media practice.

2 Literature review

Success factor research in the media is a fragmented field. For example, studies tend to focus on one type of media or one region, seldom aiming for universality. Moreover, various methodological approaches have been deployed and no common standards regarding the operationalization of variables or the measurement of success have emerged. Even success as a measure has been disputed since it can be captured differently (Sommer & von Rimscha, 2013). On a basic level, economic and cultural success can be distinguished; however, the latter needs the former to some extent to be sustainable. Although, even when focusing on economic success, multiple options, such as revenue, profit, or return on investment (ROI), can be considered. In doing so, the funding of products and services by audiences, advertisers, or other stakeholders must be considered. As it is not possible to cover all of the different measures and profits as well as ROI figures are notoriously hard to obtain, most research focuses on well-documented success on the audience side, which is a determinant of revenue and arguably the most important (Kaiser & Wright, 2006; Perez-Latre, 2007). Ultimately, without readers, listeners, viewers, and users, a particular media brand cannot serve advertisers and/or stakeholders such as cultural institutions at all. In addition, the reach of media brands is comparable across different types of media and contexts, as media research provides audience figures for every media type.

Investigating factors that influence movies' box office revenues is a well-established subfield as new products frequently hit the market and secondary data is relatively easily available (Clement, 2004; Simonton, 2009). The same holds true in the book sector (Blömeke, Clement, Mahmudova, & Sambeth, 2007). For periodical media, the starting point is more difficult as product development is less frequent and success is difficult to define because data is often available only on an aggregated level. Therefore, studies in this field mostly rely on extensive content analysis or surveys (Habann, 2010; Schönbach, 2004). However, there are similarities between different types of media (Sommer & von Rimscha, 2014). Parallels in success factors show, for instance, between books and movies (Blömeke et al., 2007; Clement, 2004; Simonton, 2009), magazines and television shows (Bleis, 1996; Shamsie, Miller, & Greene, 2006; Tschörtner, 2008), and printed and audio-visual news (Cummins & Chambers, 2011; Schönbach, 2004). In a previous meta-analysis, 128 studies, which investigated the success factors of media products and services, were evaluated and emerging patterns across different types of media were identified (Sommer & von Rimscha, 2013). As these studies substantially differed in their methodological approaches and measures, a quantitative meta-analysis could not be conducted. Instead, we performed a systematic qualitative review by applying the

methods of qualitative content analysis to the 128 studies rather than to original material such as interviews (Schreier, 2014). In the following sections we will present a condensed version of this analysis by introducing the building blocks of media success as our results. These building blocks of media success can be considered as clusters of success factors, which have been reported to have an impact on different types of media. These clusters are based on similarities in the operationalization of variables in different studies and they were cross-referenced with (media) brand management literature.

Content: Numerous studies identify the content of a media brand as a success factor (Blömeke et al., 2007; Feddersen & Rott, 2011; Schönbach, Lauf, Stürzebecher, & Peiser, 1997). This can also be seen in the positive effect of the genre and the resulting age restriction (Chang & Ki, 2005; Desai & Basuroy, 2005; Elliott & Simmons, 2008; Hennig-Thurau, Marchand, & Hiller, 2012; Simonton, 2009). Within the scope of a media brand, diversity and variety help increase success with the audience (Kim, 2009; Schönbach, 2004). Research also shows the importance of the content's quality (Bleis, 1996; Kim, 2009; Schönbach, 2004; Wolf, 2006) and innovativeness (Bleis, 1996; Joshi & Mao, 2012; Shamsie et al., 2006) for its reception. In addition, success is supported by genres and topics already established, as sequels illustrate (Chang & Ki, 2005; Elliott & Simmons, 2008; Hennig-Thurau, Houston, & Heitjans, 2009; Joshi & Mao, 2012; Simonton, 2009). Star power, that is, the celebrity of actors or authors, also has a positive impact (Basuroy, Chatterjee, & Ravid, 2003; Clement, Proppe, & Rott, 2007; Desai & Basuroy, 2005; Elberse, 2007; Elliott & Simmons, 2008; Schmidt-Stölting, Blömeke, & Clement, 2011; Simonton, 2009). Unsurprisingly, exclusivity is particularly important. In this regard, media brands have to offer content that cannot be found elsewhere to be successful (Wirtz & Ullrich, 2009; Wolf, 2006). This building block is in line with content being at the core of brand identity (Fanthome, 2007; Kim, Baek, & Martin, 2010; Siegert, Gerth, & Rademacher, 2011).

Design: How content is presented has a positive effect on media success as well. Structure, layout, and consistency are among the investigated variables that have an influence (Bleis, 1996; Blömeke et al., 2007; Schönbach, 2004). Quality is another important aspect, which does not only apply to content but also to its presentation (Cummins & Chambers, 2011). Overall, design is a building block closely related to questions of branding (Grainge, 2010).

Environmental orientation: Research shows that media brands that take their environment into account are more successful: local orientation has a positive effect (Clement, 2004; Kim, 2009; Schönbach, 2004). Moreover, the competitive situation needs to be considered, and the

structured monitoring of trends in the marketplace is important for success (Clement, 2004; Habann, 2010; Kim, 2009; Meiseberg & Ehrmann, 2008; Shamsie et al., 2006; Simonton, 2009; Tschörtner, 2008). Environmental orientation is addressed in media brands' need to differentiate from the competition (McDowell, 2006).

Internal processes: Internal processes influence the success of media brands (Keller, 2009). Communication is characterized as a fundamental part (Büsching, Hellbrück, & Teluk, 2011). Research shows that integrating the audience in development has a positive effect (Habann, 2010). Diversification and multiple revenue streams of media brands can be considered as further success factors (Clement, 2004; Lubbers & Adams, 2004; Wirtz & Ullrich, 2009). Studies also show the positive impact of budgets (Chang & Ki, 2005; Elliott & Simmons, 2008; Lampel & Shamsie, 2000; Meiseberg & Ehrmann, 2008; Simonton, 2009). Overall, internal processes can be related to the concept of brand orientation (Baumgarth, 2009; Urde, 1994, 1999).

Organizational aspects: Research indicates the importance of the company backing a media brand. Realizing and utilizing economies of scale and scope leads to synergies, which have a positive impact on success (Bleis, 1996). The organizational environment can provide supportive opportunities for cross-selling and cross-promotion (Blömeke et al., 2007), and it may also offer resources otherwise unavailable (Tschörtner, 2008). Brand management and a match between product- and company brand, in particular, are further advantages to reaching audiences (Chang & Chan-Olmsted, 2010; Habann, Nienstedt, & Reinelt, 2008). Overall, the collaboration of principal and agent is important. Clear roles and agreements as well as the controlling of development and production processes in terms of quality, costs, and time have a positive influence on success (Zabel, 2009). This building block is related to the literature on corporate brands (McDowell, 2006).

Leadership: The management influences a media brand's success. The age, educational background, and social network of a media outlet's CEO are important. Older, business-trained, and well-connected leaders have a positive effect (Tschörtner, 2008). Other studies show that "good" project management and leadership foster success in the media (Büsching et al., 2011; Habann, 2010). On the product level, the support of stakeholders with leverage in addition to stakeholders with expert knowledge have a positive influence (Bleis, 1996). Leadership is also an issue in brand management (Burmamann & Zeplin, 2005; Burmann, Zeplin, & Riley, 2009).

Human resources: In addition to management and leadership, employees are valuable. High levels of skill and motivation (Bleis, 1996) as well as qualifications and specialized knowledge (Büsching et al., 2011; Wolf, 2006) are important for a media brand's success. Experienced individuals having successfully worked together in previous projects also have a positive influence (Meiseberg & Ehrmann, 2008). This building block is related to the literature on media brand centered human resource activities (Burmamann & Zeplin, 2005; Burmamann et al., 2009; Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

Marketing: Brand management is identified as a success factor in the media (Baumgarth, 2004; Chang & Chan-Olmsted, 2010; Förster, 2011; Habann et al., 2008). This is closely related to the brand's positioning (Greve, 1996; Wolf, 2006), price (Blömeke et al., 2007; Clement, 2004; Elliott & Simmons, 2008, p. 108; Kim, 2009; Rademacher & Siegert, 2007) and an adequate target audience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2012, p. 271). Adjusting to and satisfying the specific wants and needs of the audience have a positive effect on media success (Bleis, 1996; Boatwright, Basuroy, & Kamakura, 2007; Schnell, 2008). In addition, advertisers have to be taken into consideration. Their acceptance of a new product is of utmost importance (Habann, 2010). On the audience side as well as in the advertising market, the offer has to be more attractive and meet the needs better than competing products to be successful (Bleis, 1996). Market research fosters success through the collection of valuable information for development and planning (Schnell, 2008; Wyatt, 1994; Yoder, 2004). Technological developments facilitate the creation of communities around media brands, possibly resulting in increased loyalty, involvement, and intensity of usage (Kolo & Vogt, 2004). Furthermore, participation, motivation, and connection of users are ascribed a positive influence (Wirtz & Ullrich, 2009). Similarly, word-of-mouth has a positive effect on media success (Blömeke et al., 2007; Clement, 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2012; Liu, 2006). Finally, advertising materials and activities as well as marketing budgets are important for a media brand to be successful (Blömeke et al., 2007; Clement, 2004; Clement et al., 2007; Elliott & Simmons, 2008; Förster, 2011; Hennig-Thurau, Houston, & Sridhar, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2012; Schönbach, 2004; Simonton, 2009). This building block is closely related to brand management literature (Chan-Olmsted, Cho, & Lee, 2013; Pauwels & Dans, 2001).

Distribution: By whom, how, and where the content is distributed influences success in the media (Blömeke et al., 2007; Boatwright et al., 2007; Chang & Ki, 2005; Feddersen & Rott, 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2012; Lampel & Shamsie, 2000; Liu, 2006; Meiseberg & Ehrmann, 2008; Simonton, 2009). Getting the timing and (sequential) release date correct is also crucial (Frank, 1994; Hennig-Thurau, Henning, Sattler, Eggers, & Houston, 2007;

Schmidt-Stölting et al., 2011; Shamsie et al., 2006; Tschörtner, 2008). In recent times, multi- and cross-media distribution is ascribed a growing influence on success (Habann, 2010; Wolf, 2006). Cross-media issues have also received considerable attention in brand management and brand transfer literature (Chang & Chan-Olmsted, 2010; Habann et al., 2008; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2009; Tarkiainen, Ellonen, & Kuivalainen, 2009).

External evaluation: In addition to the internal factors that were previously discussed, the external perception and evaluation of media brands influences success. This holds true for media coverage in general, and particularly for critical reviews (Clement et al., 2007; Gemser, van Oostrum, & Leenders, 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2012; Lampel & Shamsie, 2000; Reinstein & Snyder, 2005; Simonton, 2009; Zuckerman & Kim, 2003). Additionally, awards have a positive effect on success (Clement, 2004; Lee, 2009; Simonton, 2009). This building block is related to brand management literature focusing on reputation (Eisenegger & Imhof, 2007; Lobigs, 2015).

Following the evaluation of the results of prior studies in the field of success factor research in the media, ten building blocks of media success can be identified: content, design, environmental orientation, internal processes, organizational aspects, leadership, human resources, marketing, distribution, and external evaluation. However, an empirical analysis of these building blocks of media success across different types of media is still missing. Therefore, the present study focuses on the following two research questions:

- Are building blocks of media success valid for media brands across different means of distribution?
- Are there similarities between different types of media brands in terms of the importance of certain building blocks of media success?

To allow for comparisons between different types of media, we utilize “reach” in the respective audience market as a measure for success. While universal, it has to be kept in mind that this measure is still relative, as the respective audience markets may differ considerably in size. For example, a television show needs a higher reach to be considered a success compared to a non-fiction book.

The following section describes in detail how we approached these two research questions.

3 Method

To answer the research questions, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with media professionals in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. This method is particularly suitable for exploratory research questions such as this first attempt to generalize results of success factor research in the media across the industry. It allows us to evaluate the suggested building blocks of media success, and to detect similarities and differences between media brands. Strictly speaking, in-depth interviews only allow us to assess success factors as they are perceived by our interviewees. However, as the “true” drivers of success are not accessible, the accounts of the involved individuals serve as suitable proxies.

Reflecting the idea that technological characteristics are no longer a valid distinction of media products and services, our case selection for the interviews was brand based. Media brands are a unique environment, as they are independent from a means of distribution and they can be distinguished depending on their seriality and content. Seriality defines production processes and it is closely related to media brands being experience goods. Content determines which resources are necessary and which needs have to be served. These two dimensions are particularly important for determining substitutes and competition in the digital era as well as potentially accounting for similarities and differences in the importance of building blocks of media success between media brands (Sommer & von Rimscha, 2014). For instance, *The New York Times* does not only compete with other newspapers, but it competes with media outlets such as *Buzzfeed*, *Circa*, *ESPN*, *First Look Media*, *Flipboard*, *The Guardian*, *The Huffington Post*, *LinkedIn*, *Medium*, *Quartz*, *Vox Media* and *Yahoo News* (The New York Times, 2014). To select brands, we distinguished between one-off, multi-part and continuous production in terms of seriality, and information, infotainment and entertainment in terms of content. On the basis of trade press coverage and brands’ self-classification, we compiled a list of more than 50 successful and unexpectedly unsuccessful media brands. In doing so, we considered the criteria balance, variety, and opportunity to learn (Stake, 1995). We aimed for a balanced distribution of brands across the two dimensions of seriality and content, meaning an equal number of brands in every category. At the same time, they should vary in terms of maturity and audience size to have young media brands and well-established ones in our sample as well as brands with mass appeal and a niche focus. In addition, media coverage had to emphasize something special about the brand, such as using multiple means of distribution or being very traditional. The selection of brands was qualitative and not standardized in order to utilize the vast knowledge of the team of researchers and to guarantee a diverse sample. To obtain a better picture of each brand, we

intended to interview three media professionals with a good overview of the brand as a whole and who were involved in its development, production, and marketing stages. Overall, we conducted 39 interviews between November 2014 and March 2015 across 20 media brands (see Table 1). Despite these efforts, this study remains qualitative in nature and it does not claim representativeness.

To conduct the semi-structured, in-depth interviews, we developed interview guidelines based on the literature review. They included questions on the relevance of every building block for media success as well as open questions on additional factors in case they had not been identified in previous research. We also asked the interviewees to name the most important ones. The interview guidelines were customized for every media professional on the basis of supplementary desk research on the media brand and the interviewee's professional background. Accordingly, the respondents were asked to refer to the media brand in question as well as their experience in other projects when assessing and elaborating on the importance of building blocks of media success. The interviews were informal in nature and lasted between 36 and 128 minutes. They were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Table 1: Brands and Interviews

Brand	Country	Interviews	Description	Content	Seriality
2012	AT	2	End of the world	Infotainment	Multi-part
Anno 1914	CH	2	History and fiction	Infotainment	Multi-part
Bestatter	CH	2	Fiction	Entertainment	Multi-part
Clixoom	DE	1	Explainers	Infotainment	Continuous
Das grosse Los	DE	2	Travel	Entertainment	One-off
Der Koch des Königs	CH	2	Portrait	Entertainment	One-off
Echo der Zeit	CH	3	News	Information	Continuous
Fack ju Göhte	DE	1	Fiction	Entertainment	One-off
FernOst	DE	2	Documentary	Infotainment	Multi-part
Jassen	CH	1	Game show	Entertainment	Continuous
Jung & Naiv	DE	1	Political interviews	Information	Continuous
Kastelau	CH	1	Fiction	Infotainment	One-off
Landlust	DE	1	Nature	Infotainment	Continuous
Puls 4 Wahlarena	AT	3	Political discussion	Information	Multi-part
SF DOK	CH	3	Documentary	Infotainment	Continuous
Tag und Nacht	CH	4	Fiction	Entertainment	Continuous
Tagebuch der Arabischen Revolution	AT	2	News about historical event	Information	One-off
The Voice	DE	1	Casting	Entertainment	Multi-part
Watson	CH	2	News and entertainment	Infotainment	Continuous
Wien Tag und Nacht	AT	3	Scripted reality	Entertainment	Continuous

The literature review and the interview guidelines served as a framework for coding the transcripts (Simons, 2009). However, we remained open for further themes emerging from the data. Moreover, we created abstracts for every interview and summarized the main points for each of the ten building blocks of media success. For our analysis, we followed two paths. On the one hand, we looked at the parts of the transcripts coded as “success factors”, while on the other hand, we worked with the abstracts. This approach helped us to cope with the extensive material and obtain a better sense of emerging patterns as well as the relative importance of success factors. In the following, we merged these two streams to cross-validate and strengthen our results. Throughout the analysis, we went back to the original material multiple times to further improve the findings.

When designing and conducting the study, we carefully considered the quality criteria of qualitative research (Yin, 2009). To enhance reliability, we defined the steps and processes to be followed whilst interviewing the media professionals and analyzing the transcripts. In terms of construct validity, we conducted supplementary desk research and aimed to speak with three media professionals per case. Internal validity was enhanced through alternative methods of analyzing the data such as cross-brand pattern matching and explanation building. External validity was supported by examining a diverse range of media brands and building the guidelines for data collection and analysis on the basis of a thorough literature review.

4 Results

In the following, we will present the interviews’ common themes and patterns, which emerged across different types of media for each building block of media success. The results are supported by quotes from the respondents representing media brands positioned differently along the dimensions of content and seriality. Consequently, we can assess whether a building block of media success is valid for media brands across different means of distribution.

Content: Overall, content was portrayed as the most important building block of media success. The genre and the way it is presented were said to be crucial. According to two interviewees, “*Content is king*” (Watson) and “*Content determines reach*” (SF DOK). Star power was also thought to have a very high impact on a media brand’s success. This holds true for actors and authors as well as for presenters and journalists. Positive topics were

considered to outperform negative ones, and diversity was valuable for reaching a wider audience. High levels of quality, credibility, and authenticity positively influence success. In the narrower sense, quality and credibility were particularly important for informational content. In entertainment, credibility and authenticity were related to characters and stories being successful. Timeliness was pointed out for news content especially, while capturing the zeitgeist is a crucial factor across cases: “*Asking why something is a hit-format is essentially asking what the zeitgeist is*” (*The Voice*). Finally, newer brands seemed to emphasize the importance of experimentation more than established ones. However, the interviewees agreed that incremental innovation of contents were accepted by audiences more easily than fundamental changes.

Design: Although not as important as content itself, its presentation was considered a success factor across all brands. For *The Voice*, “*A sophisticated production is important for success.*” Quality and consistency of the contents’ presentation were considered to have a positive effect. Aesthetics were particularly important for the initial selection of a media brand; although, design and style are becoming more valuable: “*Industry knowledge about dos and don’ts is readily available*” (2012). The interviewees referred to the importance of fulfilling certain standards and the comparison to American media products and services. *Koch des Königs* was described as “*state of the art,*” which illustrates design as being a hygiene factor. However, the scope of a project limits possibilities. This is particularly true for optimizing contents for the different channels that a media brand serves, which is becoming increasingly essential.

Environmental orientation: Although keeping an eye on current trends and the competition was regarded as important, it was seldom conducted systematically. The interviewees spoke about monitoring the environment on an ongoing basis; however, they did not describe particular processes for the collection and use of the information. As an exception, *The Voice* tailored its brand as an answer to its competitor. For *Anno 1914*, on the other hand, “*The analysis of the competition was not important.*” Local orientation enabled the Austrian and Swiss brands to distinguish themselves from German competitors and American content: “*As a rule of thumb, what’s local receives more audience attention than any other piece on far-away places*” (*SF DOK*). In entertainment, the importance of deploying Austrian and Swiss language was emphasized (*Bestatter, Wien Tag & Nacht*). Finally, German brands had fewer problems with competition from other markets in the information sector; however, they also needed to distinguish themselves from American entertainment.

Internal processes: Development and production followed standardized processes, which were similar from day to day and project to project. Guidelines and routines seemed to be well established across the industry. Accordingly, the interviewees did not describe their processes as unique and thus, they were another hygiene factor. As an exception, *Watson* focused on “*flexibility, decentralization, and communication.*” This startup challenged trusted rules and worked resource-efficient. Throughout many of the cases a “green light moment” was described. The resources (in terms of budget and time) were referred to as a success factor of media brands with potentially restricting effects for internal processes: “*We have comparatively more time to research and prepare our interviews, and that translates into superior quality*” (*Echo der Zeit*). Considering different revenue streams was regarded as important, yet media brands failed to include them in their initial strategy: “*It rather happens as an afterthought*” (*Wien Tag & Nacht*). For the younger media brands, integrating the audience in the creation of informational content was important. In entertainment, communities to discuss the content were established around the media brand. These communities were more important for periodical media, while one-off projects attempted to engage readily available communities. Integrating the audience was less important for one-off media brands. Internal processes also heavily depended on and greatly varied with the organizational background.

Organizational aspects: The backing of an organization was particularly important with respect to the resources available to a media brand. Without such support, stand-alone ventures would have difficulties surviving: “*In its current form, the media brand could not exist in a different setting*” (*Echo der Zeit, Jassen, Puls 4 Wahlarrena*). A strong fit of organization and media brand was considered to be a success factor. The interviewees emphasized the advantages of synergies (*Echo der Zeit*) and media brands supporting one another (*Anno 1914*). For one-off projects, organizational aspects had very limited external value and they were ascribed a marginal role on the audience side. However, the distribution process was an exception. Multi-part media products and services relied heavily on preexisting structures. Media brands with continuous development and production processes saw interdependencies and mutual influences between brand and organization (*Watson*). In some cases, however, the organization was perceived as hindering development of the product, for example, because of bureaucratic coordination procedures and adherence to overly strict guidelines (*Echo der Zeit, Tag und Nacht*).

Leadership: The project manager fulfilled a crucial role in steering the team and the brand towards success. Management styles were described as being democratic and laissez-faire to

give employees plenty of freedom and flexibility: *“I always try to create a team spirit. We are in the same boat. We do this together”* (Puls 4 Wahlarena). Support from within the organization and in particular management was described as being important, especially in the case of multi-part projects (2012, Puls 4 Wahlarena). The success of a previous project was extremely important for securing support and funding for a new project (FernOst). The star power of the leader, especially an individual with a high degree of status and prestige within the industry, can lure talent toward a media brand, which has a positive influence on success (Puls 4 Wahlarena). Conversely, a lack of knowledge and understanding for certain genres at top hierarchy levels were said to have negative effects (Tag und Nacht).

Human resources: The team was described as being extremely important for a media brand’s success. Employees’ know-how and competencies were crucial. For informational content, these lie in specialist knowledge, while creativity was important in entertainment. This is closely related to staff experience, which was considered another success factor. In addition, the level of motivation of employees was important. However, the staff was regularly described as replaceable. The necessary knowledge and skills were usually not specialized to such an extent that there were no alternatives at hand: *“When we have changes in the team we try to make sure that the balance remains the same. Experience and competence need to be assured”* (Echo der Zeit). Apart from these more objective categories, the chemistry and interactions within the team were emphasized. Moreover, it was stated that people have to work well together and the success of a media brand benefits from the team members having worked together on a previous project (Tagebuch der Arabischen Revolution). While this is easily achievable for periodical media, in one-off productions, it was compensated through consecutive projects and by re-using teams.

Marketing: Market research played a marginal role for the media brands we investigated. In some cases, it was even met with skepticism *“Market research kills ideas”* (2012). The advertising side of the media business was barely taken into account. The interviewees primarily had some information about the audience and thought of imaginary recipients when developing and producing content: *“We always think about who could be the extended audience”* (Das grosse Los). Focus groups and surveys were not extensively used. Market research was even less important for one-off productions. However, younger media brands, were more inclined to use audience information. Carving out a niche was expected to foster media success (Landlust), while advertising was seen as a success factor across media brands, since it was crucial for generating awareness. Public relations was another tool heavily used for this purpose. Using the media brand as a quality signal and being able to exploit its

reputation was seen as an advantage. In one-off projects, this was achieved through ingredient branding, such as building on the popularity of a participant (*Fack ju Göhte*). The interviewees emphasized that, for entertainment brands, matching advertising and content worked particularly well (*Bestatter*). For informational content, well-executed cross-promotion and collaboration played an important role (*Puls 4 Wahlarena*). These efforts ideally led to word-of-mouth effects, which were considered to be another success factor. Generating word-of-mouth was particularly integrated in younger media brands' strategies. They also place emphasis on social media. Finally, product pricing played a minor role in marketing efforts, since the media brands seemed to follow industry standards.

Distribution: Distribution was strongly connected to the type of content. Accurate timing of entering and serving the market was considered to be particularly important (*Wien Tag & Nacht*). Exclusivity was especially valuable. The interviewees emphasized the importance of optimizing the means of delivery for the target group. Cross-media predominantly played a role for periodical products and services. In addition, the younger media brands were more likely to serve multiple channels (*The Voice*). Cross-media's importance was increasing, but it did not reach very high levels. Overall, distribution was the only building block of success that strongly depended on the type of media that the brand originally or predominantly served. Accordingly, the success of television-based media brands depended, to a substantial degree, on the time slot. Streaming services were becoming increasingly popular; however, monetization still relied on traditional audience measures.

External evaluation: The external evaluation of media brands through reporting and reviews was considered to be important, and whether positive or negative, it increased awareness: "The main thing is that they write about you" (*Jassen*). Differing opinions were thought to be particularly effective in creating buzz about a media brand. In entertainment, the audience talking about the product or service and the resulting word-of-mouth effects were important. For informational content, the relevance of external evaluation was more connected to the reputation of a media brand. It was found that reviews were well established for one-off projects, where they have a significant influence (*Kastelau, Tagebuch der Arabischen Revolution*). For periodical media, reporting and reviews were less important. However, taking feedback into consideration was regarded as advantageous. Despite that it was rarely conducted systematically, the media brands monitored follow-up communication on social media (*Clixoom*). Finally, awards were predominantly important within the industry and they were not ascribed to have large effects on the success of a media brand in the audience market.

5 Discussion

Overall, the interviewees had no problems relating the building blocks of media success that we derived from the literature to their context. In doing so, they highlighted certain success factors within the respective building block. In some cases, they explicitly stated “*Yes we have that, but we don’t call it that way*” (*SF DOK*). Asking the interviewees about success factors not covered during the interview did not provide additional findings. They stated that the important aspects had been mentioned and they emphasized what they found most relevant. Therefore, our interviews support the transferability of success factors and the generalization of building blocks of media success.

However, the relevance of media technology prevails in the contexts of distribution and—to some extent—marketing. Path dependencies with respect to market release of media brands are strong and the distribution technology still has decisive repercussions. In analogy to research on newsroom convergence (García Avilés & Carvajal, 2008), one might say that the industry runs a cross-media model rather than an integrated one. For instance, a media brand based on a book focuses on the logic of the book market and adds a digital strategy. Entertainment production is still organized around television schedules and it mostly considers streaming as an afterthought.

Instead of focusing on distinguishing traditional types of media, we expected to find pronounced similarities and differences between media brands along the two dimensions of seriality and content. In our results, these patterns did not emerge strongly. Certain aspects of the ten building blocks were formed differently to some extent, emphasizing one aspect over another (e.g., quality for information vs. authenticity in entertainment) or having a slightly different meaning (e.g., getting the timing right refers to the perfect time slot in television and the best release date for a book). However, we see media brands and their building blocks of success converging, even when distinguished in terms of seriality and content. This shows through one-off media brands building on pre-existing teams and employees who have previously worked together successfully. It is especially the case for media brands that offer standardized content, such as familiar topics and genres, rather than experimentation and innovation. Thus, our results somewhat confirm the critique by Bolin (2007, p. 244) who claims that transmedia storytelling would “mean that texts are constructed in order to function on several platforms, which might then be limiting for what can be told or represented.” However, it must be kept in mind that success factors of one-off projects do not necessarily

have to be sustainable. Their added value can be captured before a competitor is able to imitate or substitute them. Entertainment orientation and gamification in news development and production are examples for convergence on the content dimension. In addition, a third dimension seems to have an influence on the formation of building blocks of success: the maturity of the media brand. As an example, younger media brands tend to think of potential revenue streams and social media strategies from the beginning, while it is only an afterthought for traditional media. However, the latter are attempting to catch up and adapt, which illustrates the convergence on this dimension (Chan-Olmsted, 2011; Chan-Olmsted, Cho, & Yim, 2013). While we are unable to answer our second research question sufficiently, these findings support the transferability of success factors identified for distinct types of media across other media brands.

When specifically inquiring about the dominant driver of audience success, the interviewees emphasized content and mostly referred to platitudes like “*the right idea at the right time*” or “*luck*.” This supports the notion that the building blocks of media success are hygiene factors and constraints to failure, which need to be in place to create a situation where success can occur. The building blocks of media success can thus be regarded as necessary but not sufficient conditions for success in the audience market. Figure 1 summarizes the ten building blocks of media success and highlights content as being perceived as most important, while marketing and distribution are described as being path dependent.

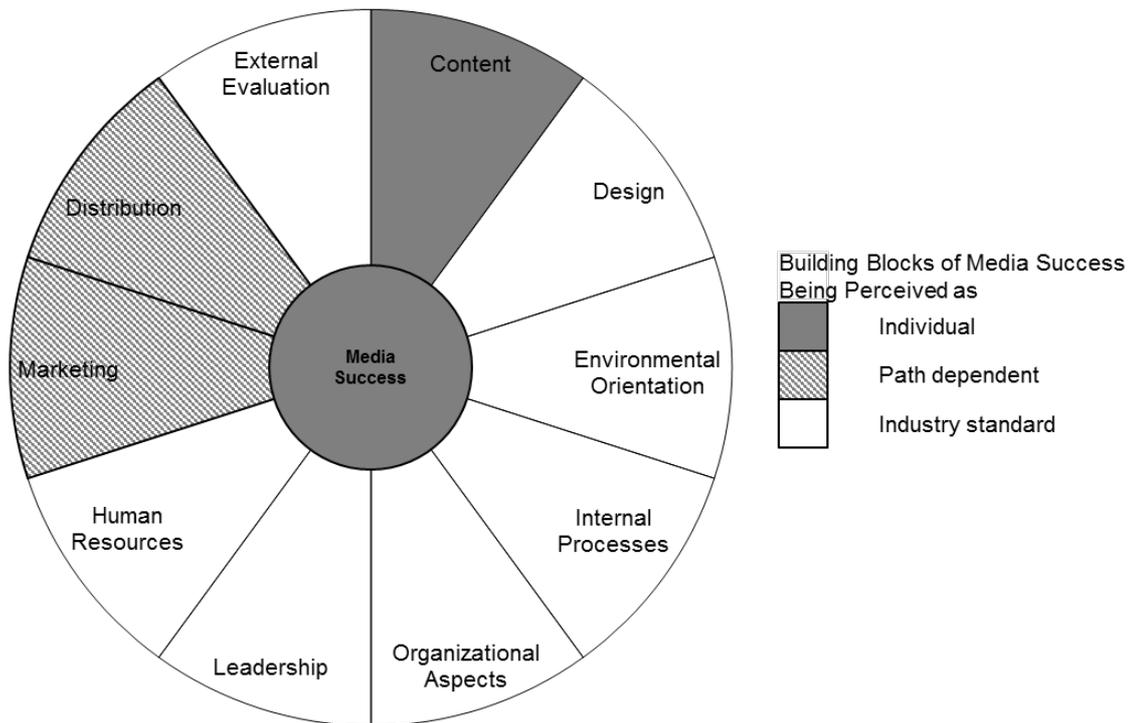


Figure 1: The building blocks of media success, as perceived by the interviewees

Certain building blocks of success in the media are very similar to those in other industries such as leadership and human resources. Thus, the results are of significance to success factor research in general and they should be taken into consideration when investigating performance as a dependent variable. However, in the media, different aspects are emphasized within these building blocks, such as the management of creativity, which makes the media industry unique (Chan-Olmsted, 2006; Sommer, 2015).

Consequently, the ten building blocks of media success have to be considered when developing, producing, and marketing a media brand. Different options for combining them can be evaluated. In doing so, media managers have the opportunity to analyze industry standards in order to build their competitive advantage and unique selling proposition. The building blocks of media success are particularly important in a transmedia environment, as the focus shifts towards capabilities and competencies. Depending on the challenge, they can be easily adapted and modified.

6 Limitations and further research

The literature till date merely lists factors that, for a limited number of similar cases, have had a positive impact on the success of a media product or service. When confronted with these success factors, the interviewees generally considered everything as important. However, the length and detail of their statements allowed preliminary conclusions about their relative importance. The media professionals also regarded their project as something special. However, when referring to other media brands and through the patterns emerging from the data, this argument does not hold true. To gain a better understanding of the relative importance of the building blocks of media success as well as the similarities and differences between media brands on a representative level, a standardized survey of media professionals is needed. Our qualitative data did not allow us to answer these questions sufficiently.

An initial basic model of media success would suggest a simple additive function where higher levels in each building block lead to greater success. Clearly, this is an oversimplification. When applying the building blocks of media success to different media brands, success factors will probably carry varying weight. Interactions between the factors might depend on the media brand in question. Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is a context-sensitive method that could lead to new insights for success factor research in the media as examples from other industries show (Ordanini & Maglio, 2009; Vis, Woldendorp, & Keman, 2007; Winand, Rihoux, Qualizza, & Zintz, 2011). Based on Boolean algebra, it would allow to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions of media success. In comparison to regressions analysis, different paths are possible and the building blocks of success interact rather than compete with one another (Ragin, 1987, 2000, 2008). Furthermore, QCA would allow to identify factors that usually act as drivers of success, but in some contexts, turn into constraints such as when an international star actor is impeding the credibility of a production building on cultural proximity.

7 Conclusion

In scientific literature, a wide range of success factors have been identified for different types of media. However, in times of convergence and digitalization, technical means of distribution lose relevance compared to media brands, which are becoming increasingly important. Accordingly, we aggregated the findings from different contexts and empirically evaluated ten building blocks of media success: content, design, environmental orientation,

internal processes, organizational aspects, leadership, human resources, marketing, distribution, and external evaluation.

We found that these building blocks of media success are applicable across different media brands. On an abstract level, success factors can be transferred to and adapted for different contexts. The building blocks of media success can function as hygiene factors representing industry standards and constraints to failure. For studies focusing on a single type of media, these findings mean that researchers should also look into research on other media types when designing their projects. However, brand-based approaches to investigating success factors in the media circumvent this issue and thus, they are potentially more valuable.

Overall, content is perceived to be most important for media success. The interviewees emphasized how it determined the audience that the media brand was able to reach. Moreover, they highlighted that it was crucial to meet the zeitgeist. From our study design, it remains open whether this is actually the case or simply the result of the desirable self-portrayal of media professionals as being content oriented.

The building blocks of media success should be taken into account in media practice. With media brands becoming increasingly important, platform-independent capabilities and competencies are crucial. While not providing precise directions to become successful, our findings lay the foundation for analyzing a media brand and comparing it to other players in the market. Consequently, media managers can define which success factors to focus on and develop in a unique way. In other words, the building blocks of media success form the “ground floor”, while designing the upper stories and the roof very much depends on the media brand.

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