

NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM: AN ANALYSIS OF BRAND CUSTODIANS' CROSS-PLATFORM CONTENT STRATEGIES FOR BRAND ENGAGEMENT IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

This study explores the strategic decision-making processes of brand custodians in managing cross-platform content to enhance brand engagement within an emerging market context. While the tactical execution of omnichannel marketing is widely documented, the internal strategic governance guiding these efforts remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative phenomenological approach, conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 senior brand custodians from Sri Lanka's telecommunications, FMCG, and entertainment sectors. Thematic analysis of the data revealed three central themes: (1) Strategic Platform Alignment, a deliberate process of channel selection based on resource-to-impact analysis; (2) The Challenge of Personalisation-at-Scale, which involves balancing brand consistency with platform-specific content adaptation; and (3) Agile Governance Frameworks, highlighting the critical role of integrated organisational structures. The findings contribute a nuanced, managerial perspective to the literature, demonstrating that successful brand engagement is contingent not only on tactical execution but also on a coherent internal strategy and organisational agility. This research provides actionable insights for marketing leaders on structuring teams and allocating resources for effective omnichannel marketing.

Keywords: Brand custodians, brand engagement, cross-platform strategy, emerging markets, omnichannel, thematic analysis

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Introduction

In the contemporary digital landscape, brands interact with consumers across a fragmented ecosystem of platforms, elevating the importance of cross-platform strategies designed to create a seamless omnichannel experience (Verhoef et al., 2015). While a significant body of literature documents the effectiveness of such strategies in boosting consumer-facing metrics like reach and awareness (Chen & Wu, 2019), the focus has predominantly been on tactical execution and campaign outcomes.

However, a critical gap persists regarding the internal, strategic dimension of these activities. While the literature is saturated with studies on the tactical outputs of cross-platform campaigns (what is known), there is a distinct lack of research into the internal, strategic decision-making processes of brand custodians that drive these campaigns, particularly in an emerging-market context (what is missing). The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences and strategic frameworks of brand custodians as they navigate the complexities of cross-platform brand engagement.

Accordingly, this paper is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do brand custodians decide which platforms to prioritise and what resources to allocate for effective brand engagement?

RQ2: What organisational governance and processes enable or constrain the implementation of a coherent cross-platform content strategy?

This research offers significant contributions for marketing leaders by illuminating the operational models that facilitate success. Theoretically, it adds a much-needed managerial perspective to the literature on Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) and omnichannel marketing in an emerging market context. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature, Section 3 describes the variables, Section 4 outlines the methodology, Section 5 presents the findings, and Section 6 discusses the conclusions and implications.

Literature Review

The evolution from multi-channel to omnichannel marketing marks a significant paradigm shift. While multi-channel marketing focuses on providing consumers with multiple, often siloed, touchpoints, the omnichannel model emphasises creating a seamless and integrated brand experience across all channels (Verhoef et al., 2015). This integration is crucial, as modern consumers expect consistency in their interactions with brands, regardless of the platform. The principles of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) further support this, advocating for the synchronisation of all marketing activities to deliver a unified brand message (Schultz & Schultz, 2016). Our study builds on these frameworks by investigating the internal organisational structures required to deliver on the promise of a truly integrated omnichannel experience.

While much of the literature focuses on consumer behaviour, the role of the brand custodian is critical yet often overlooked. These managers are tasked with safeguarding brand equity—a construct comprising brand awareness, associations, and loyalty (Keller, 1993). In the digital age, this role has expanded to include the complex task of managing brand narratives across a fluid and fragmented media landscape (Gensler et al., 2013). However, the specific decision-making processes, resource allocation challenges, and governance models they employ, particularly in non-Western contexts, remain a significant gap in literature. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing directly on their professional lived experiences.

For this study, brand engagement is the central phenomenon being explored. It is conceptualised as a multi-dimensional construct reflecting the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural interactions a consumer has with a brand. This includes behavioural aspects (e.g., likes, shares, comments), affective components (e.g., brand loyalty, emotional connection), and cognitive elements (e.g., brand awareness, top-of-mind recall). This research investigates the strategies custodians use to enhance these dimensions.

As a qualitative study, this paper does not use independent variables in a statistical sense. Instead, it focuses on the following key areas of investigation that are understood to influence brand engagement:

Cross-Platform Content Strategies: This is the broad area of investigation, referring to the coordinated creation, adaptation, and distribution of brand content across multiple digital channels.

Strategic Decision-Making: This is the core focus of the analysis. It encompasses the qualitative exploration of the processes, rationales, and frameworks brand custodians use, including platform selection, resource allocation, content adaptation processes, and internal governance frameworks.

Methodology

To investigate the nuanced decision-making processes of brand custodians, this study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design, which is ideal for exploring perceptions of professional practice. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research questions are concerned with the "how" and "why" of strategy formation, requiring rich, contextual data that quantitative surveys cannot capture. We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 4 senior brand custodians (n=4) from leading companies in Sri Lanka's telecommunications, FMCG, and entertainment sectors. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy based on a minimum of five years of experience in a brand management role with cross-platform responsibilities. Each interview, lasting approximately 60 minutes, was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This rigorous process ensured the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Table 1
Participant demographics

Participant Name	Industry	Position/Title	Years of Experience
Mr.Imadh Irshad	Telecommunications	Campaign Manager Digital Marketing (Dialog Axiata)	7 years
Ms.Lahiri Balagalle	FMCG	Manager Digital Strategy (Mind Share Sri Lanka – Advertising Agency works with Unilever Sri Lanka)	5 years
Mr.Chanaka Perera	Entertainment	The Director of the movie Gajaman 2023	8 years
Mr.Nilaksha Srimal	Entertainment	Social Media campaign manager at Studio 101	10 years

(Source: Authors' Compilation)

Ethical approval for this study was granted by Senior Supervisor Senior Lecturer Divanka Randula Podduwage, Department of Drama, Cinema and Television of the University of Kelaniya. All participants provided informed written consent before the interviews. To ensure confidentiality, all personally identifiable information has been anonymised. Data is stored securely and will be destroyed after five years. No conflicts of interest are declared by the authors.

Findings and Discussion

The thematic analysis revealed three primary themes characterising the strategic management of cross-platform brand engagement in Sri Lanka.

Theme 1: Strategic Platform Alignment Contrary to the narrative of needing to be "everywhere," custodians described a deliberate, data-driven process of platform selection. This was a strategic choice, balancing audience presence against internal resource capacity and brand alignment. The mechanism involves a trade-off analysis where potential reach is weighed against the cost of creating bespoke content, preventing brand dilution and ensuring a higher return on investment. This aligns with IMC principles emphasising synergy over ubiquity (Schultz & Schultz, 2016).

“In the early days, we tried to be on every new platform. It was a disaster. Our content was generic, and our team was burned out. Now, we focus on three core platforms where our key demographic lives. We'd rather have a deep, meaningful conversation there than shout into the void on ten others”. – (Manager Digital Strategy (Mind Share Sri Lanka – Advertising Agency works with Unilever Sri Lanka))

Theme 2: The Challenge of Personalisation-at-Scale. A central tension identified was maintaining brand consistency while delivering personalised content adapted to the unique syntax of each platform. Custodians explained that true personalisation requires understanding the user's mindset on a specific platform (e.g., entertainment-seeking on TikTok vs. professional development on LinkedIn). The mechanism for achieving this involves creating a central "brand playbook" with core messaging pillars, which local teams are then empowered to adapt. This avoids a "one size-fits-all" approach known to reduce engagement (Kim et al., 2020).

“Our brand voice is consistent—that’s non-negotiable. But how that voice speaks on Instagram Stories is very different from how it speaks in a YouTube tutorial. The challenge is scaling that adaptation without losing the core of who we are”. – (Campaign Manager Digital Marketing (Dialog Axiata)).

Theme 3: Agile Governance Frameworks is the ability to execute a responsive strategy was found to be heavily dependent on internal organisational structures. Custodians in siloed organisations reported significant friction and delays. In contrast, those with integrated, agile governance models characterised by cross-functional teams and devolved decision-making power were able to launch more timely and coherent campaigns. This finding underscores that effective external communication is a direct result of effective internal organisation.

“We can have the best strategy in the world, but if it takes a week to get a tweet approved, we’ve already missed the moment. We moved to a pod structure where content, design, and analytics sit together. It’s the only way to move at the speed of culture.” – (The Director of the movie Gajaman 2023)

Conclusion

This study explored the strategic decision-making of brand custodians in Sri Lanka. Our findings contribute a crucial managerial perspective to the literature, revealing that the success of cross-platform engagement is less about the volume of content and more about the coherence of the underlying strategy and the agility of the organisation. These themes resonate with the Omnichannel Marketing Model (Verhoef et al., 2015), but our research illuminates the internal mechanisms required to deliver it.

Managerial Implications: For practitioners, this study offers key insights. First, leaders should adopt a data-driven, resource-aware approach to channel selection. Second, balancing brand consistency with personalisation requires investment in both central guidelines and empowered creative teams. Finally, marketing leaders must champion organisational redesign, breaking down silos to create agile teams capable of responding to the digital ecosystem.

Limitations and Future Research: This study has limitations. As a qualitative study with a small sample size focused on Sri Lanka, the findings are not statistically generalizable, though they offer deep contextual insights. Future research could build upon these findings through quantitative studies to test the relationship between specific governance models and brand engagement metrics across a larger sample.

In conclusion, achieving effective brand engagement is a dynamic process profoundly shaped by the strategic foresight and organisational design championed by brand custodians. By adopting a data-driven, audience-centric, and organizationally agile approach, brands can forge deeper connections and thrive in an ever-evolving digital landscape.

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