The final publication is available at

https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs_00076_1

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News media brands' value within polarized media markets: Perceived quality vs. political congruence

ABSTRACT

This study measures the consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) of news firms in Catalonia (Spain). The aim is to determine the dimensions of news media brands that are most important to their audiences. We surveyed more than 15,000 readers of two legacy and three native online brands. We conducted an array of exploratory factor analyses (EFAs) and confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to identify the dimensions with more impact on CBBE. Since empirical research on news firms' CBBE is scarce and focuses on legacy news media, our project provides an updated and more comprehensive scale that measures both legacy and native brands. Moreover, the study finds that in a polarized media market, the

journalistic quality perceived by the audience has the strongest impact on CBBE. However, most consumers also prefer news firms that they perceive as politically congruent with their opinions. Theoretical and managerial implications of these findings are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Within a high-choice news media market, news firms attempt to keep readers' loyalty. Scholarship about consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) from a marketing perspective and later applied to the specific market of media shows how news media firms can improve their strategies (Bakshi and Mishra 2016; Oyedeji 2010; Keller 1993; Aaker 1991). Newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *The Guardian* appeal to their users by asking them to help finance good and watchdog journalism with normative messages that link their brand to truth and independent journalism, free from commercial or political bias (Nechushtai and Zalmanson 2019). However, most studies based on selective exposure theory show that audiences are more likely to select and appreciate the news brands that better represent their political ideology, especially within the most polarized media systems, such as those of many of the major western countries (Moreno-Moreno and Sanjurjo-San-Martín 2020; Fletcher et al. 2019; Medders and Metzger 2018; Garrett and Stroud 2014). Indeed, online alternative and partisan media are winning influence among audiences (Newman 2019). At the same time, the media branding literature urges addressing the lack of differentiation among online news brands and doing so without losing sight of their basic journalistic mission (Arrese and Kauffman 2016; Victoria-Mas et al. 2018).

The main aim of this article is to identify the dimensions of news media brands that are more important to audiences and should underlie their differentiation strategies. We measured the CBBE of two legacy and three native online news brands using a scale validated in a previous work based on data from just one legacy newspaper (Victoria-Mas et al. 2018). In this new work, we analyse more than 15,000 responses to a survey addressed to consumers of these five news media firms in Catalonia (Spain), a highly polarized news media market where – according to some previous studies on selective exposure – readers tend to choose politically congruent news brands (Valera-Ordaz 2018; Stroud 2011, 2017; Garrett and Stroud 2014; Humanes 2014).

While the literature on brand management and news media brands has shown that perceived quality is one of the main dimensions of brand equity, there is little empirical evidence on the relevance of political ideology. These types of symbolic attributes related to brand personality are particularly relevant to these specific brands, which have a material dimension but are also mainly constituted by intangible assets (Arrese 2004; Norbäck 2005). In an increasingly competitive news media market, symbolic attributes can enhance brand awareness, loyalty and differentiation more than functional associations related to quality because they help audiences choose among journalistic brands so that they can find those that best represent their interests and values (Pina and Dias 2020; Picard 2010; Aris and Bughin 2009; McDowell 2011; Ots 2008). Therefore, we analyse whether, in the current context, political congruence is a more important dimension than perceived quality for the CBBE of news media firms.

Since empirical research on CBBE within the media branding literature is still sparse (Krebs and Siegert 2015; Malmelin and Moisander 2014) and focused on legacy news brands (Bakshi and Mishra 2016; Victoria-Mas et al. 2018), our work aims to fill this gap. We provide an updated and more comprehensive scale to measure the construct and identify the dimensions that have a stronger impact on both legacy and native brands. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and strategic implications of our findings as well as the validity of our empirically validated scale for news media markets from other countries.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS

CBBE of news media brands

The CBBE of news organizations is associated with audience satisfaction and consumption, higher audience perception of media credibility and stronger loyalty (Bakshi and Mishra 2016; Chan-Olmsted et al. 2013; Oyedeji 2010). According to Keller (1993) and many other recent studies based on his definition of CBBE (Pina and Dias 2020), brand associations are the basis for these positive audience evaluations and behaviours. However, the marketing literature lacks an empirically based CBBE scale that considers which attributes of a brand are important to consumers (Baalbaki and Guzmán 2016). The same occurs in the specific field of news media branding, where few studies provide empirically validated CBBE scales of news media brands that determine which associations of news media brands are valued by their audiences and related to positive attitudes towards the brand (Victoria-Mas et al. 2018; Bakshi and Mishra 2016; Oyedeji 2010).

Bakshi and Mishra (2016) based their study on Aaker's theory (Aaker 1991) about CBBE and on many other studies focused on news media attributes to provide a CBBE scale of news media brands. Thereby, they identified several kinds of associations that influence this construct (e.g., localization, ideology, credibility and entertainment). A more recent study based on Keller's CBBE model confirmed and extended this construct and defined three types of associations: (1) functional, (2) experiential and (3) symbolic (Victoria-Mas et al. 2018). These types of brand associations are based on specific attributes of the news products that satisfy specific needs of the consumers. First, functional associations are based on the journalistic quality that defines the news contents, which satisfies basic information and surveillance needs. Second, experiential associations are based on the attributes related to the packaging and content tone of the news products. When these products are easily consumable and appealing, they satisfy sensitive needs such as entertainment. Finally, symbolic associations are based on the political ideology and the national identity that defines the brand and its news contents, which satisfies social and personal identification needs.

The studies mentioned in the last paragraph focused on legacy newspaper brands and did not consider other dimensions of CBBE, such as consumer attitudes towards the brand, as marketing authors suggested (Keller 1993). These attitudes are defined as positive evaluations that consumers make of brand associations and that form the foundation of consumers' positive behaviour towards the brand (e.g., purchase intention and time investment) (Keller 1993). To the best of our knowledge, only one study included consumer attitudes, such as loyalty and awareness; however, the study did not develop the associations' dimension of CBBE and instead focused on the influence

of readers' attitudes towards the brand on behaviours such as engagement (Krebs and Lischka 2017).

Given the lack of empirical research on news brands' CBBE, extant scales to measure this construct need to be applied to different contexts and news media brands to confirm their validity and to identify the type of dimensions that have a stronger impact on the equity of news brands (Victoria-Mas et al. 2018; Bakshi and Mishra 2016). On the one hand, identifying the specific attributes of news products that are related to the brand associations that determine the CBBE of news media brands is still needed. On the other hand, the new scales should include the dimension of attitudes in order to identify which specific brand associations and product attributes are more appreciated by consumers. Doing so will help to find the type of brand associations on which news firms' differentiation strategies should focus. So far, scholarship has showed that there are two kinds of brand associations that may be main value creation drivers for news media brands: quality perception and political ideology congruence.

Perceived quality

The strategies of legacy news brands to date have been focused on highlighting their quality and independent journalism free from political bias (Nechushtai and Zalmanson 2019). Indeed, quality perception is one of the CBBE dimensions included by all brand equity definitions in the marketing literature and in the few that are focused on news media brands (Victoria-Mas et al. 2018; Baalbaki and Guzmán 2016; Bakshi and Mishra 2016; Keller 1993; Aaker 1991). One of the previous studies on the CBBE of news media firms determined that news consumers associate quality with objectivity, independence and pluralism (Victoria-Mas et al. 2018). Several media branding authors also associate these attributes and others, such as unambiguousness, seriousness, research quality, depth, believability, critical coverage, impartiality and balance, with the credibility of news brands (Oyedeji 2010; Nienstedt et al. 2012).

When news organizations follow the professional norms that define journalistic quality, they are providing the basic benefits that consumers expect from them: information and advice that helps them in their own lives and activities (Picard 2010). However, doing so is not necessarily a differential characteristic of a news brand (Nörback 2005; Arrese 2004). Indeed, media branding authors claim that users likely appreciate news media brands based not only on their basic journalistic quality performance but also on a differential personality that assists them in choosing among competitors and finding those that are most representative of their interests and values (Arrese and Kauffman 2016; Picard 2010).

Political congruence

News brand equity studies conclude that, alongside quality perception, political ideology congruence is a dimension of CBBE (Victoria-Mas et al. 2018; Bakshi and Mishra 2016). Ideological congruence has even been identified by some authors as a predictor of news brands' credibility or journalistic quality perception (Moreno-Moreno and Sanjurjo-San-Martín 2020; Oyedeji 2010) and audience loyalty (Nienstedt et al. 2012). Thus, the literature on news media branding initially suggests that audiences likely categorize news brands that better fit their political ideology as high quality and credible.

Research on news media consumption based on selective exposure theory supports the conclusions offered by media branding scholarship. It shows that audiences tend to select news media brands that better represent their own political ideology. However, research also shows that whether audiences access pro-attitudinal news media and content in an exclusive way depends on various conditions. First, research focused on the more polarized media systems has found evidence of more pro-attitudinal exposure (Stroud 2011; Goldman and Mutz 2011; Humanes 2014). Second, recent studies have found differences as a function of audience partisanship: for example, while Republicans in the United States are significantly more likely to engage in selective avoidance of countervailing information, Democrats are more likely to select countervailing information (Stroud 2017; Song 2016; Garrett and Stroud 2014). In sum, research has shown how degrees of polarization and audience partisanship promote selective exposure to news media. This leads us to expect that the political congruence of news media brands may be a main dimension of CBBE, especially in high-choice and polarized news media markets.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

Extant research conclusions along with the sparse media branding literature have led us to the following research question and main hypothesis:

> **RQ:** Which are the main dimensions of the CBBE in news media brands, especially in high-choice and polarized news media markets?
> **H:** Political congruence is a primary dimension of CBBE and has a greater impact on the construct than perceived quality.

This article aims to fill the gaps in the still-scarce empirical research on news media brands' CBBE. To this end, we provide an updated and more comprehensive scale to measure the construct by including both brand associations and attitudes and by measuring the CBBE of both legacy and online native brands. Hence, the contributions of this article are twofold. On the one hand, we make an academic contribution to the literature on branding by providing an empirically endorsed definition of news brands' CBBE. On the other hand, we provide news firms' managers with a relevant snapshot of the brand dimensions that are more appreciated by the audience within a high-choice and polarized media market by identifying the dimensions with stronger impact on news media CBBE.

METHODS

We surveyed more than 15,000 readers of two legacy and three online native brands in the Catalan media system, a polarized media market. Traditionally, the Spanish media system has been associated with a polarized pluralist model characterized by a strong role of the state in owning, funding and regulating the media, a political elite-oriented press, a government model of public broadcasting media and an important tradition of commentary-oriented journalism and political advocacy role of the media that derives from a late achievement of freedom of the press due to the delayed development of liberal institutions (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Because of all these characteristics, this media system is defined by great political parallelism (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Humanes et al. 2013; Fletcher et al. 2019), which means

a high level of correspondence between the political and media systems that leads to a partisan performance by the audience (Humanes 2014; Valera-Ordaz 2018). Indeed, several studies have concluded that Spanish and Catalan audiences choose the news media outlets they consume according to their political ideology (Fraile and Meilán 2009; Humanes 2014; Valera-Ordaz 2018).

The political context of Spain and Catalonia during the time of this study was especially polarized due to the conflict over the independence process of Catalonia. The main national and regional news media outlets, as well as the public service broadcasters in the country, showed this polarization around the conflict (Besalú and Moragas-Fernández 2019). At the same time, the citizenship polarization increased during the years of the conflict between 2012 and 2019 (Medina Lindo 2021; Besalú and Moragas-Fernández 2019). Since we draw our hypothesis from the selective exposure theory, we suggest that this polarized context might lead readers to consider news media brands more valuable if they were congruent with their ideologies. In this context, we conducted an array of exploratory factor analyses (EFAs) and confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to identify the dimensions with stronger impacts on CBBE and whether political congruence has a greater impact than perceived quality.

Measures

We updated and extended a CBBE scale that was validated in a previous study (Victoria-Mas et al. 2018) (Tables 1–6). The items related to symbolic associations were adapted to the specific political Spanish and Catalan context (Tables 3–6), where two important political ideology cleavages collide and determine media consumption – the left–right wing and the centre–periphery. These are currently the core of the political conflict regarding Catalonia's independence from the Spanish state (Valera-Ordaz 2018). Additionally, we added the dimension of attitudes to offer a more accurate instrument for assessing the CBBE of news media firms (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993). The main attitudes that branding scholars have identified are satisfaction, loyalty and awareness (Bakshi and Mishra 2016; Krebs and Lischka 2017; Keller 1993). To assess their impact on the CBBE, we collected the items that were used by these previous studies (Table 7).

The survey was conducted from 28 May to 16 July 2018. We asked how users defined each news media brand, its products and their relationship with it by providing a list of attributes of and attitudes towards the brand. The participants were asked to respond to the following questions about the specific news brand they used: 'How would you define the news products and the brand of this news media firm?' and 'To what extent do you agree with the following statements about this news media brand?' All the measures were randomly presented as items for which respondents indicated their agreement on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). To avoid bias, the threshold used to maintain items was sufficiently strict to support internal reliability (Hair et al. 1998; Wolfinbarger and Gilly 2003).

Sample, data collection and questionnaire

The newspaper brands we selected have different profiles. *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico* are traditional newspapers with print and online editions. In contrast, *Diari Ara*, *ElNacional.cat* and *Vilaweb* are online native brands. The

five news firms selected are among the most read in Catalonia, according to EGM and *OJDinteractiva* (official sources for audience ratings in Spain): *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico* and *Diari Ara* are the three premier print news brands, and *Vilaweb* and *ElNacional.cat* are the first- and fifth-ranking digital-only news brands.

The news brands selected for our study are commonly associated with different political ideologies. The post-election Barometer of *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (*CIS*) of 2018, a reference study of public opinion in Spain, serves as a reference for this work to establish the political ideology associated with each brand under study (see Figures 1 and 2).[1] According to the data, most readers of the two legacy newspapers – *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico* – voted for left-wing parties. Additionally, although almost half of *La Vanguardia*'s readers voted for Catalan independentist parties and almost half voted for anti-independence parties, most of *El Periódico*'s readers voted for anti-independence parties. In contrast, almost all the readers who preferred online native brands voted for parties that were left-wing and supporters of the Catalan independence process. These data are consistent with recent studies that conclude that nationalist and leftist users are more likely to read local–regional outlets, such as the ones selected for our research (Valera-Ordaz 2018). Since media systems in Spain and Catalonia are characterized by a high level of political parallelism, we can sustain that the readers are choosing these news brands because they perceive their contents as congruent with their ideologies (Valera-Ordaz 2018; Humanes 2014).

1. The *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (CIS), under the Ministry of the Presidency, is a centre created to research Spanish society, mainly through surveys of the population. Since its creation in 1963, the CIS has contributed to a better understanding of the social and political climate by conducting more than 2000 opinion polls. For more information, please visit its official web page at https://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/EN/index.html (accessed 19 June 2019), and more specifically the survey catalogue at https://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/EN/2_bancodatos/catalogoencuestas.html (accessed 19 June 2019).

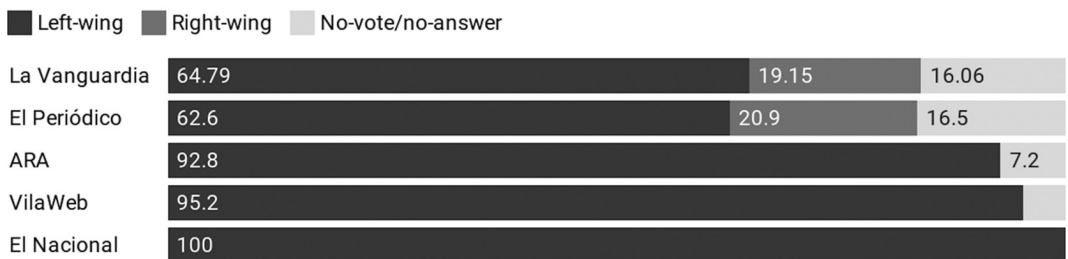## Left-right cleavage

Figure 1: Percentage of different political ideologies of the readers. Left–right cleavage. Source: CIS (2018).
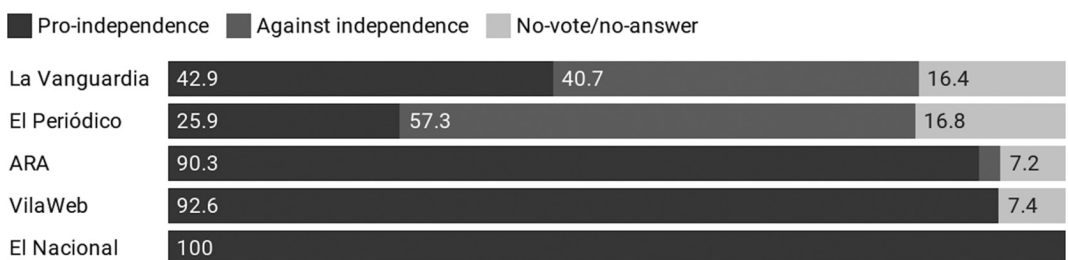
Center-periphery cleavage

Figure 2: Percentage of different political ideologies. Centre–periphery cleavage. Source: CIS (2018).

A convenience sampling selection process was used because we only targeted the readership of the brands under study in order to capture the dimensions that users appreciate the most in each specific media outlet that they choose to read. The survey form was sent by e-mail to the readers of each news brand, thanks to agreements with the respective media companies. To ensure the privacy rights of each participant, the managers of each outlet sent the questionnaire to the registered users. The survey process was conducted by a market research company, which programmed the survey and offered the incentive of taking part in a prize draw. In total, more than 15,263 valid questionnaires were collected: 6208 readers from *La Vanguardia*, 4376 from *Diari Ara*, 3844 from *El Periódico*, 692 from *ElNacional.cat* and 143 from *Vilaweb*. In the sample of readers, 70% were male, 81% were over 40 years old and 65% had higher education.

RESULTS

To confirm the validity of the main dimensions and items for measuring news brands' CBBE, we first conducted an EFA for each dimension: functional, experiential and symbolic associations, alongside attitudes. After confirming the reliability and validity of the scale, we conducted a CFA to identify the dimensions with stronger impacts on the construct.

Perceived quality

We analysed the first dimension (functional associations) using nine items (Table 1). A Kaiser–Meier–Olkin statistic of 0.928 forecasted good results for this analysis. A Bartlett test showed the same conclusion (χ^2 = 79,985, 36 degrees of freedom, and an associated *p*-value = 0.000). These results confirmed the linear dependence between the variables and supported our view that the results were sound. Two factors emerged with eigenvalues greater than 1 (Kaiser criterion), which accounted for 70.02 per cent of the variance. The scale was analysed in accordance with very strict criteria that retained only the items that (1) loaded at 0.70 or more on a factor, (2) did not load at more than 0.40 on two factors and (3) had an item-to-total correlation of more than 0.40.

The first factor is composed of seven items: objectivity, balance, independence, pluralism, rigour, transparency and credibility. This factor explains 52.42 per cent of the variance, and the suggested label is 'perceived quality'. The

Table 1: Matrix of two components extracted using principal component analysis and varimax rotation of functional associations' items.

Functional associations	Perceived quality	
Objectivity	**0.814**	
Independence	**0.791**	
Pluralism	**0.743**	
Nonpolitical		0.918
Rigour	**0.841**	
Balance	**0.761**	
Neutrality	0.448	0.663
Transparency	**0.822**	
Credibility	**0.844**	

Source: Authors' own analysis.

second factor explains 17.6 per cent of the variance and is composed of two items (neutral and nonpolitical), but only one of them fits the criteria to retain the items. Therefore, we discard this factor for the CFA and keep 'perceived quality' as one of the sub-dimensions of the construct that defines the type of functional associations that affect news brands' CBBE.

Content tone and packaging

We analysed the second dimension (experiential associations) using fifteen items (Table 2). A Kaiser–Meier–Olkin statistic of 0.955 forecasted a good result for this analysis. A Bartlett test provided the same conclusion (χ^2 = 110,696, 105 degrees of freedom and an associated p-value = 0.0000), confirming linear dependence between the variables and supporting the robustness of the results. Two factors emerged with eigenvalues greater than 1 (Kaiser criterion), which accounted for 57.01 per cent of the variance. The same criteria used in the previous analysis were used to retain items.

The first factor is composed of six items: authority, reflexivity, leadership, critical, inspiration and commitment. This factor explains 30.04 per cent of the variance, and the proposed label is 'content tone'. The second factor explains 26.97 per cent of the variance and is composed of four items: visual appeal, readability, design clarity and accessibility. The suggested label is 'packaging'.

Political ideology

When we analysed the eleven items together within the third dimension (symbolic associations), it was difficult to clearly label the extracted factors to measure the impact of the two different cleavages describing the ideology of news media brands in the Catalan context. Thus, we conducted an EFA of four separate and predefined dimensions representing opposite positions

Table 2: *Matrix of two components extracted using principal component analysis and varimax rotation of experiential associations' items.*

Experiential associations	Content tone	Packaging
Visually appealing		**0.758**
Readability		**0.724**
Design clarity		**0.811**
Authority	**0.666**	
Reflexivity	**0.751**	
Leadership	**0.697**	
Critical	**0.762**	
Simplicity		0.611
Technical quality		0.640
Writing clarity	0.470	0.580
Literary quality	0.576	0.434
Accessibility		**0.664**
Inspirational	**0.690**	
Committed	**0.712**	
Innovative	0.642	

Source: Authors' own analysis.

within each cleavage: right-biased, left-biased, pro-Catalan independence and against Catalan independence.

For the first EFA regarding right-biased associations, a Kaiser–Meier–Olkin statistic of 0.799 forecasted good results. A Bartlett test provided the same conclusion ($\chi^2 = 27,313.115$, six degrees of freedom and an associated p-value < 0.0001). These results confirmed linear dependence between the variables. One factor emerged with eigenvalues greater than one (Kaiser criterion), which accounted for 69.54 per cent of the variance and is composed of four items: conservative, traditional, monarchic and right-wing (Table 3).

In the second EFA regarding left-biased associations, the Kaiser–Meier–Olkin statistic of 0.702 forecasted good results. The Bartlett test provided the same conclusion ($\chi^2 = 13,380.780$, three degrees of freedom and an associated p-value < 0.0001). These results confirmed linear dependence between the variables and supported our view that the results were sound. One factor emerged with eigenvalues greater than one (Kaiser criterion), which accounted for 70.24 per cent of the variance in the sample and is composed of three items: progressive, republican and left-wing (Table 4).

For the third EFA on 'against-Catalan-independence' associations, one factor emerged with eigenvalues greater than one (Kaiser criterion), which accounted for 87.87 per cent of the variance in the sample and is composed of two items: Spanish supporter and Union Spanish supporter (Table 5). Thus, we do not pay attention to the Kaiser–Meier–Olkin statistic or the Bartlett test results.

Table 3: Matrix of component extracted using principal component analysis and varimax rotation of right-biased items.

Symbolic associations I	Right-biased
Conservative	0.887
Traditional	0.779
Monarchic	0.816
Right-wing	0.850

Source: Authors' own analysis.

Table 4: Matrix of component extracted using principal component analysis and varimax rotation of left-biased items.

Symbolic associations II	Left-biased
Progressive	0.826
Republican	0.829
Left-wing	0.859

Source: Authors' own analysis.

Table 5: Matrix of component extracted using principal component analysis and varimax rotation of against-Catalan-independence items.

Symbolic associations III	Against Catalan independence
Spanish supporter	0.937
Spanish Union supporter	0.937

Source: Authors' own analysis.

Table 6: Matrix of component extracted using principal component analysis and varimax rotation of pro-Catalan-independence items.

Symbolic associations IV	Pro Catalan independence
Catalanist	**0.916**
Independentist	**0.916**

Source: Authors' own analysis.

For the last EFA regarding 'Pro-Catalan independence' associations, one factor emerged with eigenvalues greater than one (Kaiser criterion), which accounted for 83.96 per cent of the variance in the sample. Table 6 shows the suggested factor, which is also composed of only two items (Catalanist, independentist).

Satisfaction, loyalty and awareness

We analysed the fourth dimension with twenty items representing 'attitudes' towards the news brands (Table 7). A Kaiser–Meier–Olkin statistic of 0.965 forecasted good results. A Bartlett test provided the same conclusion

Table 7: Matrix of three components extracted using principal component analysis and varimax rotation of attitudes' items.

Attitudes	Satisfaction	Loyalty	Awareness
I like it.	**0.839**		
It is a high-quality news brand.	**0.817**		
It is the one that best fits my preferences.	**0.765**		
I prefer to read it rather than other news outlets.	**0.705**		
It's always my first choice.	0.647	0.490	
I trust it.	**0.844**		
I'm rarely disappointed with it.	**0.763**		
I feel comfortable reading its contents.	**0.827**		
I would rate it as one of the best.	**0.820**		
It is a good place to spend my time.	**0.705**		
I am a fan of it.	0.512	0.597	
I usually recommend it to my friends.	0.541	0.502	
I feel attached to it.		**0.652**	
I know it well.		0.643	0.419
I consider myself loyal to it.	0.424	**0.664**	
I would not read other news brands.		0.573	
I can differentiate it among other competing brands.			**0.791**
I can quickly recall the symbol or logo.			**0.777**
Some characteristics of it come to my mind instantly.			**0.722**
I know some of the names of its reporters.			0.640

Source: Authors' own analysis.

(χ^2 = 202,107.632, 190 degrees of freedom and an associated p-value < 0.0001). These results confirmed linear dependence between the variables and supported the results.

Three factors emerged with eigenvalues greater than one (Kaiser criterion), which accounted for 64.62% of the variance. The first factor is composed of nine items and explains 35.15% of the variance. The suggested label is 'satisfaction'. The second factor is composed of two items and explains 15.45% of the variance. The suggested label is 'loyalty'. The third factor is composed of three items and explains 14.03% of the variance. The proposed label is 'awareness'.

Reliability and validity of news brands' CBBE scale

To examine the unidimensionality of the ten constructs that we validated together, we conducted a new EFA for each one. These analyses extracted only one factor each. Then, the reliability and convergent validities of these factors were assessed (Table 8). In every case, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability exceeded the threshold value of 0.7 for internal consistency (Baalbaki and Guzmán 2016; Fornell and Larcker 1981; Nunnally and Bernstein 1994). Moreover, the variance extracted for each factor was greater than 0.5, except for the factor that we called 'packaging'; therefore, we removed this factor from the CFA. The Cronbach's alpha did not improve when any of the items were removed from the scales of each dimension, and the correlations between each item and the total corrected scales were all higher than 0.5. Convergent validity was confirmed for all the factors, and all the items had significant loadings (t > 2.58) (Caro and García 2007).

We then confirmed discriminant validity using linear correlations or standardized covariances between the latent factors by examining whether the inter-factor correlations were less than the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) (Fornell and Larcker 1981). The square roots of each AVE were greater than the off-diagonal elements (Table 9).

News brands' CBBE in a polarized media market

To measure the CBBE of the two legacy and three online native brands, we analysed the four validated second-order constructs (functional, experiential, symbolic associations and attitudes) as dimensions of a third-order CFA (Figure 3). The model was estimated using the robust maximum likelihood method from the asymptotic variance–covariance matrix. The fit indices obtained in the measurement model estimation showed that the variables converged towards the factors established in the EFA (Table 10). The χ^2 Satorra–Bentler value was 21,545.22, with 652 degrees of freedom and a p-value of 0.000. The root mean square error of approximation was 0.046, and the comparative fit index was 0.916. Considering the low significance of the robust χ^2 statistic as a result of the high volume of the sample and the goodness of fit for all of the other indicators, we cautiously state that the global fit of the model was acceptable.

Four dimensions reflect the CBBE concept, but not at the same level (Table 10; Figure 3). News media brands' functional associations (F8) and attitudes (F11) are more important. In contrast, symbolic associations (F10) have a weaker impact than the other three dimensions and are inversely proportional to the CBBE.

Table 8: Loads of eight EFAs and statistics for their reliability analyses.

	Quality	Tone	Packaging	Right-biased	Left-biased	Against independence	Pro independence	Satisfaction	Loyalty	Awareness
Alpha Cronbach	0.921	0.863	0.812	0.853	0.785	0.862	0.804	0.946	0.801	0.762
Range of Cronbach's alpha if one item is removed	0.904–0.921	0.831–0.854	0.736–0.791	0.779–0.842	0.668–0.729	0–0	0–0	0.937–0.944	0–0	0.630–0.745
Range of correlations between items and total corrected scale	0.713–0.809	0.580–0.706	0.571–0.691	0.622–0.774	0.607–0.660	0.758–0.758	0.679–0.679	0.714–0.841	0.668–0.668	0.549–0.646
Composite reliability	0.964	0.948	0.737	0.922	0.909	0.935	0.912	0.983	0.909	0.867
Average variance extracted	0.688	0.608	0.414	0.686	0.685	0.878	0.839	0.74	0.834	0.684

Source: Authors' own analysis.

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Table 9: Correlation matrix of latent factors.

	Quality	Tone	Packaging	Right-biased	Left-biased	Against independence	Pro independence	Satisfaction	Loyalty	Awareness
Quality	*0.830*									
Tone	0.815**	*0.780*								
Packaging	0.493**	0.604**	*0.643*							
Right-biased	−0.376**	−0.320**	−0.195**	*0.829*						
Left-biased	0.567**	0.516**	0.307**	−0.709**	*0.828*					
Against independence	−0.364**	−0.321**	−0.168**	0.666**	−0.541**	*0.937*				
Pro independence	0.384**	0.373**	0.201**	−0.490**	0.608**	−0.683**	*0.916*			
Satisfaction	0.822**	0.771**	0.531**	−0.340**	0.503**	−0.369**	0.385**	*0.860*		
Loyalty	0.551**	0.555**	0.427**	−0.223**	0.339**	−0.270**	0.296**	0.657**	*0.913*	
Awareness	0.315**	0.364**	0.401**	−0.117**	0.184**	−0.145**	0.168**	0.388**	0.394**	*0.827*

Diagonal elements in italics are the square roots of the average variance extracted.
(**) Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral).
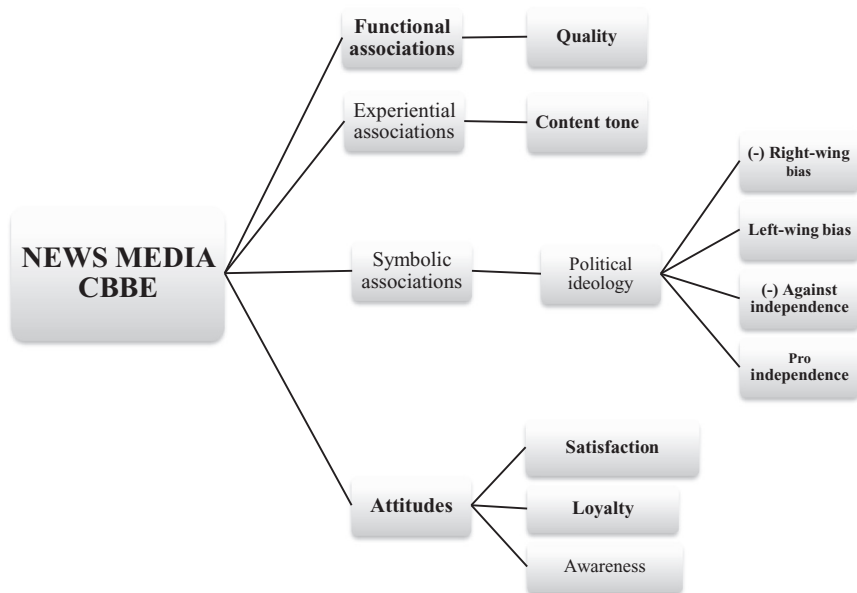*Source*: Authors' own analysis.

Figure 3: News brands' CBBE. See in bold the dimensions with a higher impact on the construct. Source: Authors' own analysis.

Table 10: Third-order CFA for journalistic brands' CBBE.

Dimension	Items	Load	*t*-value	r^2
F1 Quality	Objectivity	1		0.698
	Independence	1.047	135.28	0.637
	Pluralism	0.896	124.57	0.582
	Rigour	0.880	106.21	0.642
	Balance	0.826	98.91	0.535
	Transparency	0.901	107.26	0.644
	Credibility	0.847	104.40	0.669
F2 Tone	Authority	1		0.410
	Reflexivity	1.173	71.63	0.594
	Leadership	1.124	73.43	0.513
	Critical	1.309	70.11	0.610
	Inspirational	1.076	69.34	0.508
	Committed	1.161	56.67	0.470
F13 Right-biased	Conservative	1		0.674
	Traditional	0.757	87.39	0.430
	Monarchic	1.022	110.02	0.644
	Right-wing	0.961	114.90	0.632

Table 10: Continued.

Dimension	Items	Load	*t*-value	r^2
F14 Left-biased	Progressive	1		0.450
	Republican	1.500	81.70	0.695
	Left-wing	1.123	78.09	0.487
F15 Pro-independence	Catalanist	1		0.593
	Independentist	1.320	93.12	0.779
F16 Against independence	Spanish supporter	1		0.777
	Spanish Union supporter	1.011	114.25	0.739
F5 Satisfaction	Like it	1		0.745
	High quality	0.947	111.26	0.691
	Fits preferences	1.249	115.46	0.687
	Preferred	1.098	102.05	0.581
	Trust it	1.154	124.38	0.763
	Not disappointing	1.076	94.24	0.586
	Comfortable	1.013	123.15	0.712
	The best	0.856	92.95	0.543
	Worth it time	1.170	123.28	0.746
F6 Loyalty	Attachment	1		0.611
	Loyalty	1.091	78.84	0.730
F7 Awareness	Differential	1		0.651
	Graphics recall	0.941	56.62	0.520
	Characteristics remembered	0.976	54.87	0.429
F8 Functional associations	F1 Quality	1		1
F9 Experiential associations	F2 Tone	1		1
F10 Symbolic associations	F13 Right bias	1		0.742
	F14 Left bias	−0.768	−74.25	0.909
	F15 Pro independence	−0.876	−68.37	0.699
	F16 Against independence	1.057	85.21	0.694
F11 Attitudes	F5 Satisfaction	1		0.988
	F6 Loyalty	0.811	62.45	0.568
	F7 Awareness	0.371	35.67	0.204
F12 CBBE	F8 Functional associations	1		0.949
	F9 Experiential associations	0.629	69.20	0.888
	F10 Symbolic associations	−0.584	−52.76	0.323
	F11 Attitudes	0.782	91.19	0.828
Fit indicates goodness of fit				
Satorra–Bentler scaled χ^2			21,545.22	

Table 10: Continued.

Dimension	Items	Load	*t*-value	r^2
Degrees of freedom			652	
p-value			0.00000	
χ^2/df			33.04	
Comparative fit index (CFI)			0.916	
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)			0.046	

Source: Authors' own analysis.

Notable differences exist with respect to the third level of the construct. Quality (F1), tone (F2), satisfaction (F5) and loyalty (F6) show higher impacts on the second level of the construct. Additionally, right bias (F13) and against independence (F16) have stronger impacts on symbolic associations but are inversely proportional to CBBE. Instead, left-wing bias (F14) and pro-independence (F15) are directly proportional to CBBE.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As a first main contribution to research on news media branding, this study provides an updated scale for measuring news brands' CBBE. The construct dimensions are functional associations (journalistic quality), experiential associations (content tone), symbolic associations (political ideology congruence) and consumer attitudes towards the brand (satisfaction, loyalty and awareness). These findings reinforce the few previous empirically tested models of news media CBBE (Bakshi and Mishra 2016; Victoria-Mas et al. 2018) but also provide a more comprehensive definition and operationalization of the construct. Another novelty of our study is that it is based on data from readers of both legacy and online native news media outlets. In this way, the scale might be useful in identifying the value propositions that news brands should offer to increase audience engagement within high-choice media markets.

As a second main contribution, our results answer the research question we had posed and show the dimensions with stronger impacts on news media CBBE in the Catalan media industry, a polarized media market, as are many of the media systems of the main western democracies (Fletcher et al. 2019). On the one hand, the associations with a stronger impact are related to quality perception (balance, objectivity or political independence) and the differential tone of the content. Moreover, satisfaction and loyalty are the reader attitudes that have the strongest impacts on CBBE and are consequences of users' positive evaluations of brand associations (Keller 1993). On the other hand, we found that political congruence has a positive impact on the CBBE construct when readers perceive brands as left-wing and supportive of the Catalan independence process. Because the majority of the readers of the brands selected for this study voted for parties defined by these ideologies, we can conclude that most readers prefer brands that they perceive as politically congruent with their own ideologies. This conclusion

provides partial empirical support for our hypothesis linking political congruence with news brands, but this dimension does not seem to have a stronger impact than perceived quality. We conclude that in a polarized context, audiences do not perceive news media brands as high quality or differential when they are neutral or apolitical but rather when – in addition to good professional performance – they have personalities congruent with readers' own views (Arrese and Kauffman 2016; Picard 2010). However, since our study is focused just on one political context and on part of a media system where left-leaning and independentist audiences predominate, future research should examine whether the same can be said for other contexts and audiences with other ideologies.

From a managerial perspective, our findings suggest that the branding strategies of news media firms need to go beyond the traditional dichotomy between journalistic quality and political ideology. They should not only uphold traditional quality journalism principles but also evince their specific political stance. Bearing in mind that independence is an item within the perception of quality, this suggestion may be confusing. However, we need to consider that political independence is not synonymous with ideological neutrality but refers to a professional distance from political parties and their interests, which is compatible with having clear political principles and values. Transparency about these values and congruence allow consumers to freely choose the news media brands that best meet their expectations and to remain satisfied with and loyal to them. Yet in many media markets, trends of commercialization within economic crisis contexts move news organizations away from defining themselves as holding a clear political ideology and stance. In Spain, while legacy media outlets have often followed this strategy, online native outlets have been created with a clear identity that have earned them high levels of credibility, volume of consumers and subscriptions (Newman 2019). Thus, legacy news media may learn from their experience.

Although our scale was validated by examining five news media brands (*La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, *Diari Ara*, *ElNacional.cat* and *Vilaweb*) in a specific media context, the dimensions were defined based on general needs that all news media outlets can satisfy (Victoria-Mas et al. 2018). This makes it possible to apply the same scale to other news media brands (e.g., TV or radio) while adapting product-related items that depend on the format and technical attributes of the different platforms. Additionally, our results are transferable to news media brands from other media systems, as long as the items measuring symbolic attributes that depend on the ideology of the particular brand are adapted.

Certainly, our study has some limitations that should be considered to ensure that the findings are interpreted with the proper context. In addition to being legacy or native digital news media, a criterion for selecting the news outlets that we studied was the size of their audience. The readership of these specific news media was found to be predominantly left-wing and pro-independence, as is the readership of the Catalan news media. Further studies should consider a sample of readers from a pool of outlets that more heterogeneously cover the entire left-right and unionist–separatist spectra. Moreover, adopting a comparative perspective in applying this CBBE scale to different contexts will provide the further empirical evidence necessary to support the construct's validity.

FUNDING

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