

Ksenia Wróblewska<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1318-9995>

University of Warsaw

ksenia.wroblewska@uw.edu.pl**Malwina Żuchniewicz**<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2616-6135>

University of Warsaw

m.zuchniewicz@uw.edu.pl<https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.04>

Media Management Education Through the Eyes of University Students

ABSTRACT

Media management (MM) is an interdisciplinary and dynamically evolving field that lacks a unified definition, clearly defined research boundaries, and a coherent educational model. While existing scholarship has largely focused on establishing media management as a research subdiscipline, issues related to its teaching and learning remain underexplored. This article addresses this gap by examining media management education from the perspective of university students. The study aims to identify how students conceptualise media management, how they assess current educational provision, and what competencies and teaching formats they consider essential for professional preparation in the contemporary media environment. The analysis is based on qualitative data collected through focus group interviews with 24 students from four Polish public universities offering courses related to media management. Thematic analysis of the focus group material reveals a persistent gap between theory-oriented curricula and students' expectations of practice-based, applied learning. Participants emphasise the need for stronger integration of theoretical knowledge with practical skills, including project-based learning, case studies, data analysis, and the use of digital and analytical tools. The findings highlight students' preference for experiential learning, close cooperation with industry practitioners, and regular exposure to real-world media organisations.

KEYWORDS: media management, media management education, higher education, students, focus groups

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STRESZCZENIE

Edukacja w zakresie zarządzania mediami oczami studentów

Zarządzanie mediami (ZM) jest interdyscyplinarnym i dynamicznie rozwijającym się obszarem badawczym, który nadal pozbawiony jest jednolitej definicji, wyraźnie wyznaczonych granic badawczych oraz spójnego modelu kształcenia. Podczas gdy dotychczasowe badania koncentrowały się przede wszystkim na umiejscowieniu ZM jako subdyscypliny naukowej, zagadnienia związane z jego dydaktyką i procesami uczenia się pozostają w znacznym stopniu niezbadane. Artykuł ten odpowiada na tę lukę, analizując edukację w zakresie zarządzania mediami z perspektywy studentów uniwersyteckich. Celem badania jest identyfikacja sposobów, w jakie studenci konceptualizują zarządzanie mediami, oceniają aktualną ofertę dydaktyczną oraz określają kompetencje i formy kształcenia uznawane przez nich za kluczowe dla przygotowania zawodowego w warunkach współczesnego środowiska medialnego. Analiza opiera się na danych jakościowych pozyskanych w ramach wywiadów fokusowych przeprowadzonych z udziałem 24 studentów czterech polskich uczelni publicznych oferujących zajęcia z zakresu ZM. Analiza tematyczna materiału empirycznego ujawnia utrzymującą się lukę pomiędzy programami studiów zdominowanymi przez treści teoretyczne a oczekiwaniami studentów dotyczącymi kształcenia opartego na praktyce i zastosowaniach. Respondenci podkreślają potrzebę silniejszej integracji wiedzy teoretycznej z umiejętnościami praktycznymi, obejmującymi m.in. nauczanie projektowe, analizę studiów przypadków, pracę z danymi oraz wykorzystanie narzędzi cyfrowych i analitycznych. Uzyskane wyniki wskazują na preferencję studentów wobec uczenia się przez doświadczenie, ścisłej współpracy z praktykami branżowymi oraz regularnego kontaktu z rzeczywistymi organizacjami medialnymi.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Zarządzanie Mediami, Edukacja w zakresie Zarządzania Mediami, szkolnictwo wyższe, studenci, wywiady fokusowe

Introduction

Media management (hereafter MM) constitutes an interdisciplinary field of research and remains a field in the process of continuous development. This is evidenced by both the lack of a single, widely accepted definition and the absence of clearly defined and coherent research boundaries (Küng, 2010). MM draws on the contributions of numerous academic disciplines, including economics and finance, political science and public administration, management and quality sciences, law, communication and media studies, and international relations (Albarrañ, Chan-Olmsted & Wirth, 2006; Kreft, 2015). As Küng (2007) emphasises, media management should be situated at the intersection of general management theories and the specific conditions under which

media organisations operate. Consequently, MM emerges as a dynamic field, open to a plurality of research perspectives and methodological approaches.

The concept of “media management” can be interpreted in two ways: as the management of media and as management within media organisations (Nierenberg, 2013). The first perspective refers to the governance of media at various levels of management. It includes, among other things, legal regulations, market mechanisms, and the public or commercial use of media, thereby treating media as the “field relating to social, political, and economic phenomena” (p. 157). The second perspective focuses on decision-making processes within media organisations and corresponds to the definition of “the management of a media enterprise operating in a specific environment” (p. 157). This perspective is analysed from functional, processual, and structural viewpoints. Effective management within the media sector extends beyond day-to-day operations; it involves the strategic direction of media offerings—including decisions about what content is provided, how it is delivered, and to whom. This in turn shapes the overall communication landscape. Given the significance of these decisions, media management should be carried out by individuals possessing appropriate competencies and professional education (Donaj, 2019; Malmelin, Virta & Kuusmin, 2022).

Media education requires a systemic transformation that integrates professional training with a critical perspective on media financial structures and their social responsibility (Förster & Rohn, 2015). Zhang and Li (2021), in their study titled *Case-based Teaching Research of Media Management Course*, demonstrate that case-based teaching methods can substantially enhance students’ academic outcomes. They also emphasise the importance of assigning tasks with a moderate level of difficulty, as problems that are either too simple or overly complex may lead to frustration. Activities of an appropriate level of difficulty tend to be more engaging and satisfying, as a sense of achievement emerges from the problem-solving process itself. Furthermore, involving students in group projects focused on analysing the operations and management of media organisations requires extensive data collection. In this context, books, newspapers, academic journals, and relevant online sources—including official websites of media companies and industry platforms—serve as essential and valuable resources, particularly for obtaining information and current industry data.

The importance of education in this area was already emphasised by Hoag and Brickley (2001) as well as by Förster and Rohn (2015), who argued that the development of media management professionals requires a coherent understanding of what MM is, how it should be taught, which areas of competence it encompasses, and how students can be effectively prepared for work in this interdisciplinary field. Meanwhile, both the literature review and the conducted empirical study—including focus group interviews with students at Polish universities—reveal a clear gap in media management education.

Existing research in this field has primarily focused on establishing media management as a research subdiscipline, while largely marginalising educational and didactic issues. The lack of a unified approach to teaching media management can be interpreted within the broader context of research on entrepreneurship education, which has long faced analogous challenges related to conceptualisation. As noted by Cunningham and Lischerson (1991), Gartner (1990), and Mwasalwiba (2010), entrepreneurship education is marked by significant conceptual fragmentation, lacking both a standardised definition and a consensus on its primary learning objectives or disciplinary scope. Similar challenges are evident in the field of media entrepreneurship, where, according to Ferrier (2013), the ambiguity of theoretical frameworks stems, among other factors, from the dynamic transformation of the media sector and the diverse motivations of actors involved in educational processes.

In light of the above, this study aims to determine how media management and its pedagogy are conceptualised in contemporary academic discourse.

One of the most recent and comprehensive definitions of MM has been proposed by Santas, Inobemhe, and Asemahm in *Media Management. Principles and Strategies* (2024). The authors define media management as an “aspect of management that focuses on identifying and describing the strategic and operational phenomena and problems in the administration of media organisations” (2024, p. 16). From a practical perspective, MM is understood as a process initiated through strategic planning, within which media organisations formulate communication objectives and develop comprehensive media strategies. This process includes identifying target audiences, analysing their media consumption habits, and selecting communication channels that enable effective outreach to these audiences (Santas, Inobemhe & Asemahm, 2024, p. 17).

Media management, as defined here, encompasses a broad spectrum of professional roles, ranging from media planners, public relations specialists, and digital marketing experts to content managers and creative directors. Consequently, education in this field should focus on developing practical competencies, particularly skills related to identifying target groups, analysing audience preferences and habits, and selecting effective communication channels. Curricula should therefore emphasise the practical dimension of media management. The focus group study conducted with students from Polish universities sought to determine whether the teaching of MM reflects these assumptions.

Methodology

The methodological foundation of this paper is embedded in the broader research project titled *Media Management: An Educational Approach. Mapping and Identifying the Needs of the Academic Community in Poland*, conducted at

the University of Warsaw in cooperation with four public universities offering courses related to media management: the University of Warsaw, Jagiellonian University, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, and Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of media management education, the project employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, enabling methodological triangulation across three research components: (1) quantitative and qualitative desk research analysing curricula, syllabi, and publicly available educational materials; (2) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with university authorities and academic staff specialising in media management; and (3) focus group interviews (FGIs) with students, designed to explore their perceptions, expectations, and educational needs. While all three components collectively form the broader project, this paper focuses exclusively on the analysis of student focus groups, which constitutes an independent and thematically coherent dataset for examining MM education from the students' perspective.

The FGIs aimed to capture how students conceptualise MM, how they evaluate its integration into university curricula, and what expectations they hold regarding their professional preparation in this field. A total of four focus groups were conducted across the participating universities, involving 24 students (seven from the University of Warsaw, six from Jagiellonian University, six from John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, and five from Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin). Participants were recruited through open calls distributed within the participating academic units, and participation was voluntary. Each session lasted up to 120 minutes and followed a semi-structured scenario that encouraged reflection on students' familiarity with MM, their experiences with coursework, perceived gaps in educational offerings, and their views on the field's relevance to the contemporary media landscape.

The study received approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Warsaw. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the academic use of the data collected. Informed consent was obtained from every student. All focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently fully anonymised to ensure confidentiality, with personal identifiers and context-specific details removed or modified in accordance with ethical guidelines.

The primary aim of this study is to investigate how university students understand MM as an academic and professional field and how they evaluate the current state of MM education within their institutions. By analysing student focus groups, this paper aims to identify key expectations, perceived gaps in existing curricula, and areas in which educational offerings may require development or restructuring. An additional objective is to capture students' reflections on the relevance of MM competencies in the contemporary media

landscape, thereby contributing to a broader discussion of the future direction of MM education in Poland.

Despite the value of the findings presented, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is exploratory and based on a purposive sample restricted to four public universities offering media management-related courses; as such, the insights cannot be generalised to all higher education institutions in Poland. Second, the qualitative character of focus group interviews—although well suited to capturing in-depth perspectives—may be influenced by group dynamics, including the presence of more dominant participants or conformity pressures. Third, the analysis is confined to the student perspective, which, while essential, represents only a small part of the broader educational ecosystem. Finally, the findings reflect the state of MM education during the specific period in which the research was conducted and may evolve alongside institutional, technological, or labour market developments.

Analysis

Perceptions of the current state of MM education in Poland

An analysis of the focus group material revealed that students' perceptions of the current state of MM education range from appreciation for selected course components to a broader sense of structural and methodological inconsistency. While many students identified isolated examples of well-designed, engaging classes, their overall assessment suggests that the educational offer remains fragmented, uneven in quality, and insufficiently aligned with the realities of contemporary media work.

Several statements showed that students recognise the value of certain classes, typically those involving applied tasks, authentic cases, or simulations of real-life scenarios. One participant noted that even traditional lecture-based courses may offer meaningful takeaways: "At the beginning, I think that theory would be useful for introducing the topic and gaining a general understanding of it. Only then should exercises and discussion follow." Another highlighted the usefulness of assignments that required students to adopt a consumer's perspective, stating that such exercises "trained my mind to look at things from different perspectives and to help clients." Similarly, courses integrating research components were described as intellectually stimulating. However, students simultaneously pointed to a disconnect between academic studies and real-world situations: "Research is great and useful, but theoretical books that describe schematic approaches to media management seem not very credible, because we are all aware that every case is completely different and cannot simply be copied."

At the same time, students frequently underscored that these positive experiences represent exceptions rather than the norm. Many described their programmes as dominated by theoretical content, delivered without sufficient connection to industry practice. One participant described the lack of opportunities to test their professional readiness: “Of course, theory is also necessary, but I do not see the point in having all classes be theoretical. I definitely value more those classes that are practical and allow us to test ourselves and assess whether we are more suited to crisis communication or perhaps to marketing, and whether we have the psychological resilience, for example, to handle crises.” In another example, a student reflected on three years of study and concluded that practical learning remained marginal: “In my opinion, after three years of study we already have a great deal of theoretical knowledge, and now we need to work more on practice (...) it would be great if there were more practice-oriented classes.”

Some students emphasised that even when classes adopted an applied format, the tasks did not always reflect real organisational dynamics. Exercises such as creating fictional social media accounts or constructing hypothetical crisis scenarios were seen as valuable entry points, yet still lacked the complexity of real organisational environments: “We created fake accounts on Instagram or other social media platforms and simply learned how to run those accounts; for example, each week we were given a crisis scenario and had to present how we would handle it.”

Finally, expectations formed before attending a course often contrast with students’ actual experience. As one student summarised: “When I found out that we would have a course called ‘Image Creation,’ I was very pleased, thinking that we might learn some tools for example, how to create a virtual persona, especially since there is currently a major boom in influencers and influencers need specialists who can help them build their image. I expected the course to be conducted from that perspective. However, I was very surprised when I attended the classes, because they were carried out in such a way that the instructor first showed us a presentation, which of course contained texts, for instance, personality types according to XYZ or QR codes to scan to complete some kind of self-assessment quiz.” Such remarks highlight a recurring mismatch between course titles, anticipated learning outcomes, and the eventual structure of the classes.

Overall, students perceive the current state of MM education as characterised by isolated examples of good practice within a broader structure dominated by theoretical content, limited opportunities for skill development, and inconsistencies in teaching approaches.

The gap between theory and practice

Across all focus groups, students consistently pointed to a pronounced gap between theoretical instruction and practical skill development in MM

education. Although students recognise the importance of theoretical knowledge, they emphasise that it is not sufficient on its own to understand how media organisations operate in practice or how managerial decisions are actually implemented. Participants repeatedly pointed out that education should be more closely connected to real professional contexts. As one student noted, it should focus on “how everything actually works in the media,” allowing them to better understand real processes and respond to practical challenges.

Importantly, students do not question the role of theory itself. Rather, they stress that it should be more effectively combined with practice: “Theory should not be abandoned either, but there should be a clear and strong emphasis on the practical aspect.” In their view, theoretical knowledge becomes valuable only when it is directly linked to concrete examples and tasks reflecting real working conditions. In the absence of such integration, theoretical knowledge remains abstract and difficult to translate into action.

The collected material also reveals a mismatch between students’ expectations and their actual learning experience. Even when theoretical models were introduced, participants reported having limited opportunities to practice implementing them in ways that would reflect real project cycles. As one participant explained, they often know what the final outcome should look like, but lack the skills needed to achieve it step by step: “We had an idea of what such an advertisement should look like, but we had never learned how to actually create it and carry it through to completion in a way that would make it effective.”

Although practical assignments are generally evaluated positively, they are often described as too simplified or insufficiently discussed. Students point out that projects are rarely analysed in depth, and feedback is limited, which reduces their learning value: “There was never enough time to evaluate them in depth (...) it was brief and very superficial.” As a result, practical elements are often treated as additional components rather than integral parts of the learning process.

Students also stressed how hands-on work significantly increased their engagement and understanding. Activities that simulated real managerial processes—especially those involving decision-making, budgeting, or data analysis—were described as particularly valuable. One participant articulated this clearly: “For me, a workshop-oriented approach is very important... I understand management-related topics much better—how to apply models or strategies—when I can see them within a project example... when I analyse indicators... the workshop format is the most important for me, because that is where I understand the most.” Experiential learning not only enhances comprehension but also cultivates the analytical competencies essential for professional practice.

Ultimately, the theory-practice gap identified by students reflects not a rejection of theoretical knowledge, but a call for curricula that more effectively combine conceptual and applied dimensions. Their observations highlight

the importance of situating theoretical frameworks within concrete, professionally relevant tasks, suggesting that stronger integration between the two domains is central to improving learning outcomes and preparing graduates for the complexities of contemporary MM.

Preferred teaching methods and learning formats

Students articulated a clear and consistent vision of the teaching methods and learning formats they consider most effective in MM education. Their expectations are strongly oriented toward practice, interaction, and active involvement in the learning process. In their view, the most valuable classes are those that allow them not only to acquire knowledge, but also to apply it in situations that resemble real professional contexts.

A recurring theme in students' statements is the importance of learning by doing, particularly through project-based work. Participants emphasised that projects are most effective when they reflect the actual stages of media processes and require decision-making similar to that found in real organisations. As one student noted, working on a project made it possible to better understand how campaigns are created and managed: "We learned from our own mistakes (...) and through this project we were able to understand how such a campaign roughly functions, how it is created, and which key points need to be checked off." This suggests that students value tasks that go beyond isolated exercises and instead mirror real organisational dynamics.

Students also expressed strong support for case-based teaching, stating that analysing real-world scenarios provides much-needed context for understanding managerial challenges. As one participant explained, "There would be a great deal of interest in classes that focus simply on studying real-life cases." Another student similarly underscored the value of collaborative problem-solving, noting that group work fosters both analytical and interpersonal skills: "Group work (...) creates opportunities for developing critical thinking (...) and for better understanding other people's points of view."

In addition to structured project and case-based activities, students stressed the importance of learning environments that promote dialogue, personalised feedback, and active participation. Smaller groups were perceived as particularly conducive to meaningful discussion. As one participant argued: "The group cannot be too large (...) the more people there are in a group, the less opportunity each individual has to make their voice heard, so it is important that groups are not overly numerous." This indicates that students value discussion-based learning rather than large-scale instruction.

Another theme emerging from the focus groups concerns the need to differentiate students based on their initial competencies and professional experience.

One participant highlighted the limitations of generic assessments and proposed more systematic approaches: “A much simpler solution would be to distribute some kind of Google form at the beginning (of the course), where we could write down what skills we already have (...), perhaps also initial tasks that would show the instructor the group’s level, so that the level in the master’s program would be more balanced and people would not get bored during classes.”

Students also emphasised the importance of contact with practitioners, particularly in the form of workshop-based sessions. As one participant noted, this form of engagement is most effective when external guests provide practical, hands-on guidance rather than general lectures: “It would be good to have one main instructor, with guests (...) conducting sessions in a workshop-based format—more practice-oriented and engaging.” Such insights reveal that students see practitioner involvement as a key bridge between academic content and contemporary industry practice.

Moreover, many participants expressed a strong desire for regular visits to media organisations and the opportunity to observe professionals in real work environments. One student described these experiences as crucial for forming realistic expectations and making informed career decisions: “Going out to organisations would be very helpful (...) as it helps create a clear picture of what working there actually looks like.” Authentic exposure to industry settings is perceived not merely as an enhancement but as a core element of effective MM education.

Overall, students’ expectations point to a clear preference for teaching methods that combine practical experience, collaboration, and active problem-solving. Rather than passive participation, they expect educational formats that reflect the complexity of the media environment and support the development of competencies relevant to future professional work.

Expectations regarding gained competencies and professional preparation

Students’ statements clearly indicate that they expect an education that genuinely prepares them for professional work. They emphasise the importance of developing practical competencies that enable independent action in real professional situations and confident engagement with media organisations. In their view, theory should play a supportive rather than a dominant role—it becomes valuable only when it is directly linked to application. As one participant noted, “it should be more practical than theoretical education (...) not necessarily learning only theory, but practice—how everything actually works in the media.” At the same time, students emphasised that theory should not be abandoned, but consistently integrated with practical exercises: “There definitely needs to be a strong emphasis on the practical aspect.”

Expectations regarding the practical dimension of education primarily include project-based work, learning by doing, and case-based analysis. Students pointed out that “studying these examples is valuable because different people often come up with ideas that are not obvious but are very effective.” Students also clearly prefer teamwork, which fosters critical thinking, understanding others’ perspectives, and the ability to function within organisational structures.

Another important area concerned the development of analytical and business competencies. Students clearly indicated the need for stronger preparation in working with data, performance indicators, and budgets, as well as a basic understanding of economic mechanisms. As one participant noted, “I would like to have more classes related to economics and mathematics, because media always involve money, (...) numbers, and we have to work with them.” At the same time, students pointed out that the most valuable learning situations are those in which they can independently analyse data and draw conclusions.

An important expectation also concerns the acquisition of technological and tool-based competencies, covering both the use of office software and more advanced tools for project management, content creation, and data analysis: “I was missing skills like handling Excel and various Office programs in the context of marketing.” Particular emphasis was placed on the practical use of artificial intelligence, perceived not as a threat but as a resource: “learning how to work in a way where artificial intelligence cooperates with us rather than replaces us.”

Interpersonal competencies, such as communication, teamwork, coping with stress, and decision-making under pressure, were also identified as important elements of professional preparation. Some participants emphasised that media management is emotionally and situationally demanding work, and that university studies only marginally prepare students for these challenges.

Students’ reflections also clearly reveal a need for a strong orientation toward the labour market, including knowledge of professional roles, organisational structures, and real processes operating in the media. Many emphasised that direct exposure to the professional environment is crucial for making informed career decisions. Consequently, opportunities for contact with practitioners and experience working under real-world conditions were rated particularly highly. There was also a strong demand for classes conducted outside the university, within actual media institutions: “going out to organisations would be very helpful (...) to see what this work is really about in a real professional environment, not only in an academic one.” Students stressed that regular visits to newsrooms, television stations, radio broadcasters, or media agencies allow them to “see the profession from the inside” and gain insight into their own professional aptitudes.

Overall, students clearly expect degree programs not only to transmit knowledge but also to develop a set of competencies that enable a smooth transition

into the labour market, informed career decision-making, and an understanding of the real mechanisms that shape the functioning of contemporary media.

The profile of instructors and external experts

The profiles of instructors and the nature of invited external experts are among the key factors influencing the quality of MM education. Participants consistently distinguish between courses conducted by academics with predominantly theoretical backgrounds and those led by practitioners actively working in the media or marketing industries. In most cases, it is the latter that are perceived as more engaging, credible, and useful from the perspective of future professional work.

Students emphasise that practitioners do not limit themselves to presenting theoretical concepts, but illustrate them with examples drawn directly from their own professional experience. As one participant noted, such classes provide not only knowledge, but also practical guidance on how to operate in the media environment, “the instructor gave us really good tips on how to communicate with journalists and what to do so that they actually want to use the message that is important to us. (...) She gave us very constructive criticism about what we should change if we truly want to reach the media.” This type of feedback was perceived as particularly valuable, as it could be immediately applied in practice. Another student pointed out: “these are people who actually do what they teach (...) I personally feel respect for such an instructor, knowing that they really understand what they are doing.”

At the same time, courses taught by individuals without professional experience were often perceived as less engaging and detached from the realities of media work. According to students, such classes frequently focused on the transmission of theoretical knowledge or repeated content already covered elsewhere, which led to a sense of redundancy and limited their practical usefulness: “There was so much theory that there was no time left to really go deeper into management and into specific industries.”

Courses that involved external experts or included elements of direct contact with the industry, such as study visits, were particularly valued. Meetings with practitioners representing different sectors of the media market (including large organisations, cultural institutions, or independent creators) allowed students to better understand the diversity of professional roles and working models. As one participant explained, such experiences make it possible to observe how theoretical knowledge translates into actual practice: “We were drawn into participating in a medical conference (...), we could see what organising a conference looks like on site (...), we were told what to expect (...), it was really great! I probably wouldn't have paid attention to ads on staircases or in elevators, or to the fact

that an advertisement can be a Wi-Fi password named after a drug, which makes people remember it. It was shown in practice, and I learned a lot from that visit.”

Students also emphasised that direct exposure to professional environments plays an important role in shaping their career decisions. While university courses provide a range of competencies, it is only through contact with real organisations that students are able to assess where they see themselves in the future and what type of work suits them best. As one participant noted: “going out to organisations would be very helpful, because in practice we learn many skills during our studies, but when it comes to finding a job, we start wondering where we would fit, what we would like, what we would do, where we would perform well, and what such work actually looks like.” At the same time, respondents pointed out that such forms of engagement are still relatively rare and are treated as an addition rather than a regular component of study programmes. In their view, contact with the industry should be more systematic and embedded in the curriculum. Some students explicitly suggested that such activities should take place on a regular basis: “it would be necessary to go out every week (...) to see what this work is really about.”

Overall, the findings indicate that students expect a teaching model that goes beyond the transmission of knowledge and is more strongly oriented toward practice. The role of instructors and external experts is therefore not limited to providing information but includes facilitating the development of practical competencies and supporting students in their transition to the labour market.

Discussion

The results of this study point to a coherent and recurrent narrative in how students at Polish higher education institutions perceive education in media management. This narrative is centred on the tension between a predominantly theory-driven educational model and expectations of teaching that is more strongly oriented toward practice and the development of practical skills. While theoretical content is not questioned as such, its current dominance and fragmented character are perceived as problematic, particularly in the context of preparing students for work in contemporary media organisations.

Students consistently point out that theoretical knowledge, when detached from practice, becomes difficult to apply and loses its relevance in a dynamically changing media environment. In their view, theory gains value mainly when it is embedded in practical activities, such as case-based analysis, project-based learning, or decision-making simulations. The students’ views are fully consistent with what Hoag, Brickley, and Cawley observed in their research: “students want relevance, current information, and hands-on experience” (as cited in Förster & Rohn, 2015, p. 370).

The collected material also indicates that students clearly prefer workshop-based formats, which allow them to test theoretical assumptions in practice and better understand how media processes function in real organisational settings. The results obtained in this study are consistent with broader findings in education research, which highlight the gap between theoretical knowledge and its practical application (Eraut, 2004; Billett & Choy, 2011; Gosling, 2021). As shown in previous studies, knowledge becomes meaningful primarily through its use in practice and reflection on experience. In this context, Kolb's experiential learning model (1984) provides a useful framework, as it emphasises the importance of learning through action and reflection.

Students' preferences regarding teaching methods, such as project-based learning, workshops, case-based analysis, and small-group work, further reinforce this analysis. They can also be interpreted in the context of research on active and experiential learning, which indicates that a deeper understanding of a subject emerges when learners are required to solve problems and make decisions (Prince, 2004; Zhang & Ramli, 2025). Respondents stress that learning is most effective when it reflects real professional processes, including decision-making, teamwork, collaborative tasks, and operating under conditions of uncertainty. Tasks that allow learning from mistakes and provide in-depth feedback are particularly valued. At the same time, participants note that feedback is often insufficient or superficial, revealing a significant didactic gap. The absence of systematic reflection and analysis of decision-making processes means that even practice-oriented classes lose a substantial part of their educational potential.

Another important finding concerns the range of competencies that students expect to develop during their studies. In addition to creative and communication skills, respondents clearly emphasise the need to cultivate analytical, economic, and technological competencies. These include, among others, working with budgets, analysing data and using basic tools that support decision-making processes in media organisations (e.g., spreadsheets). A strong emphasis on analytical, technological, and economic competencies can be explained by labour market expectations, in which graduates are increasingly required to combine domain-specific knowledge with the ability to use data in a practical and informed manner (Ghodoosi et al., 2023; Amish, 2024). The identified deficit in this area suggests a mismatch between existing curricula and the actual expectations of the labour market. Students are aware that media management is strongly data-driven and economically grounded, which is not always sufficiently reflected in educational programmes.

The study also highlights the importance of instructor profiles. Courses taught by practitioners are consistently evaluated as more credible, engaging, and useful, mainly because they are based on real professional experience and provide up-to-date knowledge about the media market. This observation is in

line with research on vocational education, which indicates that contact with industry practitioners increases both the credibility and practical relevance of teaching (Popli & Singh, 2024; Selamat, 2025). At the same time, students do not reject academic teaching itself, but rather point to the need for stronger integration between theoretical knowledge and professional practice. This suggests that the key challenge is not choosing between theory and practice, but combining them more coherently.

Finally, students strongly emphasise the need for regular contact with the professional environment. Study visits, off-campus classes, and cooperation with industry partners are perceived as particularly valuable, as they allow students to better understand the realities of media work and make more informed career decisions. The expectation of closer links with industry indicates the growing importance of education focused on future employer expectations, which in turn increases the likelihood of employment and supports smoother transitions from the academic environment to the labour market (Ferns et al., 2016; Mabungela et al., 2024; Vlachopoulos & Tsitiridou, 2026). Although such initiatives do exist, they are still relatively rare and not systematically embedded in study programmes.

To sum up, improving the quality of media management education requires a shift from a predominantly theory-oriented model toward a more integrated, competency-based approach. Such an approach should combine theoretical knowledge with practical application, while also taking into account the growing importance of analytical and technological skills. This would not only address students' expectations, but also better reflect the realities of the contemporary media market.

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Ksenia Wróblewska holds a PhD in communication and media studies as well as MA degrees in journalism and media studies, cultural studies, and American studies. She has participated in numerous international scholarship programmes, conducting research and educational projects in countries including Turkey, Sweden, Spain, and Italy. She serves as Head of the Project Management

team in the marketing sector. She is a TEDx speaker, author of academic publications, and an active participant in international conferences and research projects. Her research interests include media marketing, digital advertising, social campaigns, silver marketing, television, and social issues in the United States.

Malwina Żuchniewicz, PhD, is a scholar in communication and media studies at the University of Warsaw. Her research focuses on communication, crisis communication, image crises, crisis management, and social media. Since 2017, she has worked as a promotion specialist at the Faculty of Journalism, Information and Book Studies at the University of Warsaw, where she co-organised major international conferences and professional congresses. She is also a TV presenter and journalist at Warner Bros. Discovery (TVN, TVN24, TTV).