

A Study of the Strandzha Brand in the Bulgarian Media Ecosystem

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Abstract

The article presents results of an analysis including cyber ethnography, discourse and critical discourse analyses as tools for revealing the ways in which the Strandzha brand is presented. The object of research is Strandzha, it is a unique region with a rich cultural, historical, and mythological heritage in Bulgaria. The hypothesis is that the Strandzha brand is multifaceted, heterogeneous, and evolving as a result of the interpretation of its historical, cultural, and mythological heritage, and this requires new approaches and techniques for its reconceptualization and promotion using digital tools, through the creation of partnerships and networks, and its positioning from the regional to the national level, and from there as a contribution to the creative industry in Bulgaria, the region, and Europe. Opportunities have been identified for using brand journalism, podcasts, and social networks to promote the brand through content creation with digital tools and artificial intelligence. Steps are proposed for developing a communication campaign to build and promote the Strandzha brand in Bulgarian media ecosystem and virtual environment through digital marketing and public relations. Opportunities for changing the paradigm when presenting the Strandzha brand in a communication campaign are described too.

Keywords

Brand Personality, Brand Equity, Media Ecosystem, Strandzha

1. Introduction

The topic of branding is highly relevant and significant from the perspective of marketing, public relations, and public and media communication. The choice of Strandzha as an object of study, as a brand rather than merely as a geographic

region, is driven, on the one hand, by its importance at the regional and national levels, and on the other hand, by the insufficient research conducted on the topic in Bulgaria.

In the Bulgarian academic tradition, the topic of branding is relatively new and has been developing for 30 years. Publications are primarily theoretical in nature and focus on personal image and branding; this subject area was developed by Milko Petrov (Perov, 2005). Stefan Serezliev presents theoretical and methodological approaches to branding related to integrated marketing communications and design (Serezliev, 2014). He explores the topic of an actor's personal brand (Serezliev, 2024). Tanya Dimitrova defends a dissertation on the Bulgaria brand in tourism and business contexts and on the methods for creating and managing this brand (Dimitrova, 2020). To date, no in-depth and comprehensive studies have been conducted from a communications and media perspective on how a regional brand such as Strandzha can contribute to the development of a national brand. The aim of this study is to identify and describe opportunities for building Bulgaria's reputation by showcasing its rich cultural and historical heritage as an attractive tourist destination and for the development of the creative industries.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

2.1. Brand, Types, Components, Features

Brand types are based on various criteria depending on the subject: regional, national, product, personal, party, institutional, corporate, organizational, and others. Depending on the sphere in which a brand is built and developed, it can be political, cultural, educational, academic, or military.

In their analysis of the regional brand, Klára Margarisová and Lucie Vokacova conclude that, "Regional branding is one of several ways to promote rural regions and support development of socially, culturally and environmentally oriented economies in areas that are interesting due to their natural and cultural heritage." (Margarisová & Vokacova, 2016: pp. 2059-2066)

In their analysis of the Transylvania brand in Romania, the authors conclude that "We dare presume nation branding and region branding, even though created for special 'products' (countries and regions), function very much like any product or company brand, and play the same roles in elaborating promotion strategies for tourism destinations and services." (Negruşa & Coroş, 2008: pp. 194-204)

Eric Kau examines the regional brand and draws the conclusion "Place branding/regional branding brings together the public and private sectors in an attempt to achieve similar goals" (Kau, 2006: p. 1). He introduces the term and acronym "public-private partnerships" (PPP) and believes that there are three key elements to its establishment and success: working, living, and spending free time—along with the partnership itself (Kau, 2006: pp. 1-2).

In view of the object of this study, we will use the terms regional/territorial, national, and cultural brand.

Brand equity is regarded as a key characteristic of a brand; at the same time, it is considered a complex and multifaceted concept that encompasses quality, recognition, and distinctiveness; it is also evaluated from the company's perspective using the firm's financial market value. At the same time, brand equity is assessed using indicators of brand value and consumer perceptions and attitudes toward the brand. Brand equity contributes to building trust once recognition and attachment have been established, and subsequently influences the formation and enhancement of loyalty to the brand and the company (Rao et al., 2023: pp. 375-385).

Brand personality is another key characteristic of the brand, and through it, it denotes human-like qualities attributed to a brand. A strong brand personality enhances the attractiveness of the brand. A consistent brand personality helps to increase consumer loyalty, encourages to buy again. A positive brand personality impacts consumers' perceptions and they become more likely to choose that brand over other brands (Rao et al., 2023: pp. 375-385).

There are relationships, crosspoints and intersections between brand equity and brand personality. Brand personality plays a key role in developing a communication strategy and managing the brand, and it also contributes to enhancing brand equity. A brand personality also relates to consumers and their attitudes, which shapes how they perceive, connect with, and remain loyal to a particular brand. The brand occupies a special place in consumers' perceptions, which in turn contributes to increasing the brand's value.

Anwar Sadat Shimul, Anisur R. Faroque and Esnaina Quader analyse brand advocacy as a term, manifestation, and contribution and they conclude that it establishes opportunities for companies to increase visibility, credibility and profitability as well as "brand advocacy refers to the proactive and voluntary actions taken by consumers to promote and endorse a brand to others" (Shimul et al., 2025: pp. 16-32).

The terms brand personality, brand equity, and brand advocacy are building blocks of the brand, they have their own specifics, but at the same time, there are not only intersections between them, they must be combined when building an effective communication campaign.

2.2. Media Ecosystem, Media, Social Media, Films

Richard Holliman presents the roles of digital tools concerning media and content: "Developments in digital technologies relate closely to emerging social practices. In turn, these are influencing, and are influenced by, the political economy of professional media and user-generated content, and the introduction of political and institutional governance and policies" (Holliman, 2011: p. 1).

Antonio Lopez interprets the potential opportunities of media ecosystems, the interconnection between the media and culture and the role of the media in the economy on a local and global scale (Lopez, 2012).

Ethan Zuckerman examines social media, content and media ecosystem and concludes: "The complex relationships between user-generated social media and

professionally created news media are best understood as a complex media ecosystem with its own emergent behaviours that only become visible when studied from a perspective broader than considering a single medium in isolation.” (Zukerman, 2021: p. 1495)

The brief review of publications also derives the terms media ecosystem, media, social media, films.

The assumption is that a media ecosystem in principle and in particular in Bulgaria includes media, social media (radio, television, newspapers, journals, online media, podcasts, etc.) as well films produced by media or companies broadcasted by sites, platforms and streaming models.

Media ecosystems are not static in terms of genres, journalists, changes in the media market, enhancement of professional skills, management, technology. They are dynamic and necessitate an analysis across the Internet, technology, software, digitalization, artificial intellect, virtual reality, augmented reality, creative industry, online media, blogs, podcasts, platforms, legal regulations on national level and international institutions, codes of ethics play a role in reshaping the media ecosystem too.

In line with the aims of this study, the analysis focuses on a selection of media content created, published, and shared on topics related to Strandzha on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Media content containing information about Strandzha and presented by journalists in radio, television, and podcasts is also examined.

Bulgaria has a well-developed media ecosystem, and the evidence supporting this conclusion is based on an analysis of data published by the National Statistical Institute (NSI). As of December 31, 2025, Bulgaria’s population was 6,423,207 according to the NSI. According to the NSI, based on data from May 2025, there are 119 television operators; in Southeast Bulgaria, where the Strandzha region is located, there are 10. There are 71 radio stations, with a total of 606,888 hours of airtime. In Bulgaria, 481 magazines and 178 newspapers are published. Regarding podcasts, there are 300 active ones as of May 2026. The genre system in the Bulgarian media is very well developed: news, reports, interviews, articles, chronicles, commentaries, reviews, features, profiles, and more. Online journalism and photojournalism are developing, and platformization is catalyzing the creation of video clips. Reality and talk shows are gaining traction on television. The subject matter is broad: art, culture, science, education, technology, entertainment, sports, music, commentary, news, and weather.

It is impossible to provide the exact number of people working as journalists, but the dynamics of the labor market are significant; there were 5800 in 2016, and their number decreased to 3800 in 2020, according to NSI data. Some journalists work on a freelance basis, while others serve as correspondents for multiple media outlets. Additionally, there is outsourcing, e.g., for editors, proofreaders, technical staff, IT specialists, and others.

The selected broadcasts are the Bulgarian National Television and Bulgarian

National Radio as public media, the Military Channel as professionally oriented television, commercial television stations, Bulgaria Air, bTV, Nova TV, Euronews, etc. According to Everybodywiki data, as of January 2026, there were about 300 podcasts in Bulgaria, covering various thematic areas in both audio and video formats. There were 190 films produced in 2024, including 24 documentaries. The study examines companies related to the topic of Strandzha in general from 2000 to the present.

Digital marketing has been evolving rapidly during the third decade of the 21st century, both as a practice and in terms of its positioning across various fields. Business organizations, cultural and educational institutions, and municipalities are highly valuing its role in brand building, particularly regional, cultural, educational, and corporate brands. Communications specialists recognize the importance of digital marketing in increasing brand visibility through social media. Digital content creators produce materials such as infographics, dynamic visual images and thumbnails, interactive maps, and more.

2.3. Digital Marketing and Tools

Vaibhava Desai presents definitions concerning digital marketing: “Digital marketing encompasses all marketing efforts that use an electronic device or internet. Businesses leverage digital channels such as search engines, social media, email and their websites to connect with current and prospective customers.” This can also be referred as “online marketing”, “internet marketing” or “web marketing”. Digital marketing is defined by use of numerous digital tactics and channels to connect with customers where they spend much of their time: online. From website to business’s online branding assets—digital advertising, email marketing, online brochures, and beyond—there’s spectrum of tactics falling under the umbrella of “digital marketing”. “Digital marketing is the marketing of products or services using digital technologies, mainly on the Internet, but also including mobile phones, display advertising, and any other digital medium.” (Desai, 2019: p. 196)

Among the established techniques, methods, and communication channels are social media marketing, storytelling—particularly in the context of emotional branding. Digital marketing includes virtual tours, virtual exhibitions, digital guides, digital catalogues, interactive routes.

Contemporary branding strategies also require and stimulate the production of user-generated content, especially when social and ecological causes and the interpretation of cultural and historical heritage are involved. The use of drone footage has likewise emerged as a preferred visual technique for constructing emotionally driven brand narratives.

Marketing, advertising, and public relations agencies increasingly produce cinematic destination videos at a professional level. Gradually, virtual communities are formed in which persuasion and influence are achieved more through recognized authorities, experts, prosumers, and active participants in digital communication.

3. Methodology

The methodology incorporates several approaches due to the specific nature of the research object—various social media platforms, traditional media, and films—namely critical discourse analysis and cyber-ethnographic analysis. These methods have been adapted for the purposes of the study, and the rationale for their selection is as follows.

3.1. Cyberethnography

Cyber-ethnographic observation is an established method that has been in use since the beginning of the 21st century. Among the first authors and researchers are Natalia Rybas и Radhika Gajjala find, “In this essay, we discuss the production of subjectivities at the intersection of local/global and online/offline environments through an engagement with the contexts ethnographically, to illustrate a methodology based on epistemologies of doing (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007: p. 1).” Ulun Akturan makes a review of cyber ethnographic research and he focuses on a research technique to analyze virtual consumer communities (Akturan, 2009: pp. 1-18). Elizabeth Keeley-Browne presents this method as suitable for research in the 21st century (Keeley-Browne, 2011: pp. 330-338). Dhiraj Murthy describes the method in different contexts, and he uses the term digital ethnography in social research (Murthy, 2008: pp. 1-20; Murthy, 2011: pp. 158-179). Brett Lunceford explores the potential of this method by adapting it to 21st-century rhetoric and writing rhetorical autoethnography (Lunceford, 2015: pp. 1-20). Christine Hine distinguishes online ethnography and virtual ethnography as evolving approaches and presents opportunities for their use in the study of online spaces as new platforms for online interaction (Hine, 2017: pp. 401-413). Lucien Peters conducts research from the perspective of social anthropology and contemporary ethnography, and uses social media ethnographic methods to study life in real and virtual environments during a pandemic (Peters, 2021).

Elisenda Ardévol and Edgar Gómez-Cruz discuss digital, media, and virtual ethnography and present opportunities for analyzing content, communities, and language as well as how digital media is articulated with everyday practices and with the new dimensions (Ardévol & Gómez-Cruz, 2014: pp. 1-21).

3.2. Discourse and Critical Discourse Analyses

The methodology also includes discourse and critical discourse analyse. Teun van Dijk has contributed to the development of discourse analysis, as it relates to discourse, context and cognition (Van Dijk, 2006: pp. 159-178). Delia Oprea uses discourse analyse researching social media and she concludes that the technologies themselves come to shape the nature of content and discourse (Oprea, 2019: pp. 315-320). Critical discourse analyses (CDA) is developed and presented by Teun van Dijk (Van Dijk 2015, pp. 466-485). In the past two decades, CDA approaches to the traditional media and social media have multiplied. These studies have not only investigated the social and communicative contexts of news and

other press or broadcast genres. The second focus of research is on the structures of media discourse, such as lexicon, syntax, topics, figurative language, clichés, coherence, creator of media content description, social identities, modality. This method has been adapted to the objectives of this study, assuming that media, films and social media are part of the social, cultural, media ecosystems and they have specific features. The assumptions are that professional films and video clips as well as user generated content in social media influence the opinions of certain groups living in different geographic regions in particular and Bulgarian society in general by sharing values, knowledge, opinions, experiences concerning building of the Strandzha brand.

3.3. Data Sources and Collection

Discourse analysis and cyberethnography methods are used during the research of corpora of selected broadcasts are from Bulgarian National Television, Bulgarian National Radio, Military Channel, Bulgaria Air, bTV, Nova TV, Euronews, etc. From the overview of the chronology and types of research, it is clear that cyber-ethnographic research is conducted in various fields. For this study, it has been adapted to include criteria for analyzing social media, authors, or content creators—verbal, visual, multimodal, photos, maps, infographics, video clips, visits, subscribers, topics, comments, hashtags, internal and external hyperlinks, and others. The social media platforms are YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. The selection covers the period from January 2016 to May 2026 when YouTube videos, Instagram posts and reels, Facebook posts, and TikTok videos and reels were examined. The total number of posts is 200, following a second selection based on the criteria of content significance and relevance to the Strandzha brand within the thematic scope of folklore, mythology, crafts, nature, ecology, tourism, etc. To ensure the clarity and ease of review, the summaries of the analyzed media outlets, podcasts, and social networks are presented in lists and tables, with the criteria being both fundamental and adapted to the specific medium. The criteria include authors/creators/podcasters; title, link, followers, subscribers, digital tools (hashtags, internal links, websites, visual elements), comments, sharing, virtual communities, and others.

4. Results

4.1. Historical, Cultural, Political, and Business Context of Strandzha

The Strandzha brand is being developed on the basis of interpreting its cultural, historical, business, and natural heritage, as well as by identifying its values and causes. Therefore, this section briefly presents research on the history, mythology, folklore, and nature of Strandzha.

Bulgarian scholars began actively analyzing Strandzha as early as the 1970s and continue to do so today in the third decade of the 21st century, with a focus on mythology, the Thracians, cultural and historical heritage, and industry. In 1978,

Alexander Fol presented the results of his research at a scientific symposium on the Thracian heritage of Strandzha (Fol, 1978). Ivan Karayotov studies and Strandzha—Sakar and the Black Sea in a cultural-historical aspect (Karayotov, 1980). Valeria Fol in her book “Fire and Music” examines the attitude of “Nestinari” (fire-dance) in the Strandzha Mountains toward the icons and sacred objects they use in their rituals. Nestinari are a unique phenomenon in the folklore traditions of Bulgaria and these are people who dance on embers and fire and carry icons of Saints Constantine and Helena (Fol, 2000).

The issue of the Strandzha Brand has been studied in Bulgaria and the focus is on specific topics, primarily history, mythology, folklore, language, customs, crafts, and others. At the national policy level, programs and concepts have also been developed. Strandzha has historical and cultural identity. The assumption is that all these elements are individually strong and recognizable, but are not united compactly and cohesively according to the understanding of a regional brand with a contribution to a national and European brand.

From a mythological and historical standpoint, Strandzha possesses a multi-layered heritage. It dates back to ancient Thracian civilization and a particular Orpheus, Bastet (Cat Goddess), etc. Archaeological evidence, including sanctuaries, dolmens, and burial sites, demonstrates the region’s importance during antiquity and for example Mishkova Niva is presented as the tomb of the Goddess Bastet.

The cultural context of Strandzha is significant too. The region is widely recognized for preserving authentic folklore traditions and as well ritual practices and they have survived modernization in the global world. One of the most notable cultural phenomena is the Nestinarstvo, it is a fire-dancing ritual, which has been recognized by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Local crafts and religious customs continue to play a role in community identity and social cohesion in the 21st century. In addition, the interaction between natural landscapes and human activities has created a unique cultural environment where local traditions remain closely connected to the surrounding forests, mountains, and rural settlements.

Traditionally, the regional economy in Strandzha has relied on agriculture, livestock breeding, forestry, beekeeping, herbal production, and small-scale local manufacturing. In recent years, tourism has become an increasingly important sector, particularly eco-tourism, rural tourism, and cultural tourism, which capitalize on the region’s natural and cultural assets.

4.2. Media Monitoring and Analysis

Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and Bulgarian National Radio (BNR), as public broadcasters, feature news about Strandzha; through folklore, current affairs, review, and analysis programs, they provide information on historical events, notable figures, creators, artists, and scholars from Strandzha. For example, BNT’s program “Here Comes Our Music” with Daniel Spasov and Milen

Ivanov features songs, folk dances, and rituals from Bulgarian folklore, including those from Strandzha. In its programs, BNT highlights magical songs from Strandzha with Zhechka Slaninkova.

The BNT program “History.BG” explores topics related to Bulgarian history, and in the episode aired on November 28, 2022, titled “Sacred Wisdom. The Worldview of the Thracians”, Prof. Valeria Fol, Prof. Vanya Lozanova-Stancheva and Prof. Kalin Porozhanov discuss topics related to the Thracians.

The Bulgarian National Radio broadcasts reports on tourism in the Strandzha region and on folklore events, as well as interviews with well-known poets, writers, local historians, and craftsmen, along with information about folklore traditions. The Bulgarian National Radio’s regional station in Burgas airs a special program called “Strandzha Sings”, presenting folklore traditions, famous singers, dance ensembles, and more.

In addition to public media, topics related to the Thracians, the Nestinari, Orpheus, uprisings, heroes, and participants in resistance movements are also discussed in private media. What these programs have in common is that the participants are knowledgeable in the fields of history, mythology, and folklore; they work at universities or are journalists researching history. Even when individual programs are not specifically dedicated to Strandzha, this topic is discussed at an expert level.

As productions of these television stations, films are also presented in this section; for example, the Military Channel creates and broadcasts on YouTube the documentary films “May the Power Seize You—A Documentary on Nestinarstvo”, which includes opinions from local historians participating in folk dance groups that observe traditions and customs. There is information about respect for the Strandzha brand indirectly through shared experience and emotional branding; it has 28,451 views as of August 7, 2019.

bTV presents information about Strandzha, the nature park, customs, Nestinarstvo, crafts, local people, and culinary traditions through news reports, feature stories, and interviews with experts and local residents.

Nova TV broadcasts news, reports, and interviews about sacred sites such as Beglik Tash and Mishkova Niva, the nature park, and Nestinarstvo.

Euronews Bulgaria also devotes airtime to presenting news related to Strandzha, mainly focusing on customs, “Nestinarstvo, and mythology: Despite the Church’s ban: Firefighters in Strandzha danced on embers with icons in their hands”. Clips and interviews about the firework and firecrackers, are made by the media, for example—the film *Firecrackers* is made by Folklor TV Official, it has 46,370 views till 15.05.2016. In the television program “Operation History” (Bulgaria ON AIR television) hosted by Rosen Petrov—which has 116,000 subscribers, topics related to the history and mythology of the Strandzha Mountains are discussed, with participants including researchers, writers, and journalists. The episode “The Ancient Mysteries of the Strandzha Mountains—Their History”, featuring journalist and researcher Hristo Bukovski, interesting facts are presented

about Mishkova Niva, a Thracian sanctuary and mystical site in Strandzha associated with the tomb of the cat goddess Bastet; This episode has 37,397 views as of July 26, 2023. In another episode, the guest is journalist Irena Grigorova, who discusses topics related to the secrets and mysteries of Bulgaria, including the Thracians, Orphism, cults, dragons, and heroes—particularly those of the Strandzha Mountains. The episode, aired on January 23, 2020, has 69,809 views.

On eTV-Haskovo's program "Bez Format" (No Format), topics related to Bulgarian history, mysticism, folklore, and sacred sites are discussed. In the episode "The Mysteries of Orpheus" from May 7, 2026, host Kristina Kotlarska speaks with the academic, musician, and artist Valentin Stamov about Orpheus and, in particular, about Strandzha.

At the discursive level, the analysis shows a high frequency of use of words such as Bastet, Mishkova Niva, Thracians, Nestinarstvo, mysticism, mystery, sacred mountain, natural resources, authentic environment, folk traditions, preserved traditions, rich spirituality, and others.

4.3. Analysis of Films, Podcasts, Video Clips

The films by Stilian Ivanov, which are professional productions by Dodo Film Bulgaria, are available online on YouTube. One of them is dedicated to Orpheus, a character from Thracian mythology; as of August 31, 2016, it had 43,253 views, 9310 likes, and 398 shares. Therefore, there is reason to speak of very good media and online coverage and distribution, and indirectly, through this film, information about the Strandzha brand is presented, albeit indirectly.

Films on topics related to Strandzha are being produced and are available online. For example, the film "The Mystery of the Goddess Bastet" produced by the ROSKATA ARCHIVE, whose premiere was scheduled for September 16, 2025, has 7970 subscribers, 9978 views.

Hashtags are used, along with modern digital tools for informing and reaching a virtual audience. The language helps to present the brand personality intriguingly: "The story takes us to undiscovered underground palaces shrouded in darkness, where the sarcophagi of mighty pharaohs meet ancient altars and sacred sites dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Bastet". Another organization, Fun-Busters, has 71,800 subscribers, and once again, the focus is on Bastet and Strandzha.

One of the most popular podcasts The Clashers, with 1.63 million subscribers, The Clashers, publishes videos on topics related to Strandzha. One of them is titled "What Didn't I Tell You? Analyzing the Bastet Episode." Podcaster Slavi Panayotov presents footage, stories from local residents, and drone footage.

Nelly Hadjiyska produced the episode "The messages of the firecracker with Ivaylo Ajanski" and it is presented on the website of magazine 8 as a video clip. It is the interview with Ivaylo Ajanski named the prophet firecracker.

Nelly Hadjiyska as Elay presented interviews with Olga Lloyd Part in the episode of the podcast "Mishkova Niva and Malko Tarnovo—Ancient Sanctuaries".

Organizations dedicated to presenting mythology and esoteric knowledge, such as Videlay, maintain a website and online communication channels and have 45,800 subscribers. It has also published a film about Bastet and Strandzha. There are several videos in the series; one is titled “About the Mystical Goddess Bastet in Strandzha” and has nearly 5000 views.

Another organization named “Secret Seeker 369” published a video titled “The Mystery of Bastet—The Expedition That Changed Everything. The Forbidden Secret Beneath Strandzha”. The topics are related to the alleged tomb of the goddess Bastet, secret expeditions, and interpretations of artifacts.

Individual projects, such as that of Mancho Staikov, also address the topic of Bastet and Strandzha and it includes story tellings with local people as a proof.

Podcasts are developing dynamically and cover topics primarily related to the mythology, history, and folklore of Strandzha. The themes of the podcasts revolve around Mishkova Niva, Bastet, sacred places, dolmens, chapels, and tourist sites, while on a discursive level the key words are Thracians, Nestinarstvo (fire-dancing rituals), prophets, gods, mythology, mysticism, ghostly, mystery, unknown, inaccessible, secret, and hidden. The results of the analysis of the podcasts in which the Strandzha brand is presented are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Podcasts about the Strandzha brand.

Creators	Podcasts	Topic	Link	Subscribers	Views
SlaviPanaytov	The Clashers	24 hours at the Tomb of Bastet?	https://www.youtube.com/@TheClashers https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbhEsloU8kM&t=42s	1,630,000	1900 video clips
NellyHadjiyska	Neli Elea	Mishkova Niva Ancient Sanctuari	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXWhz0NOC4E	449,000	12,000
NellyHadjiyska	MindCast	Ivaylo Ayanski—the prophet Nestinar	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iB4-cEXlCk	45,000	26,000
SecretSeeker 369	Secret Seeker 369	The forbidden secret under Strandzha.	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=od_n_T56Ff8	18,400	42,000
FunBusters	Stephan @FunBustersBG	All night in the ghostly Strandzha	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4f-Yc9E89c	71,800	4900
Mancho Staikov	Strandzha	Bastet in Strandzha	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhI-X21oO5Q	0	54,440

5. Digital Tools, Social Media and the Strandzha Brand

The analysis was conducted using the cyber-ethnographic observation method, based on a corpus comprising 200 social media posts from January 2016 to May 2026. The selection was made between December 2025 and May 2026 and was based on the following criteria: content creation and online publication on social media, use of digital tools, subscriptions, traffic/viewership, reposts, comments,

virtual groups, and others.

The analysis shows that the main communication techniques used to promote Strandzha are social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, while Instagram is being used more and more actively. TikTok is becoming increasingly popular, especially among young people who actively post short videos with content they have created, primarily in the fields of folklore, tourism, and ecology. Blogs and vlogs appear sporadically and inconsistently.

The evidence and specific conclusions based on the analysis of individual online publications are as follows.

The websites of museums, galleries, libraries and community centers in settlements in Strandzha present basic information, there are no interactive tours/routes, digital catalogs, virtual excursions. The websites present basic information about tourist routes, for example, the website of the museum in the city of Yambol contains information about sacred places, a description of eco-trails, directions, but they are static, without good visualization and without digital tools for Google Maps and navigation for the villages in Strandzha. The cyberethnographic analysis shows the same results on the websites of travel agencies, although there are more innovations and use of digital tools there, for example, on the website of SlowTours there is information from 2020 about the Secrets of Mishkova Niva—the Thracian sanctuary in Strandzha. Modern ways of presenting information through video clips are also observed, for example in Montana Play 806 with subscribers, the information is presented through video, the technical equipment for filming is modern, the music is appropriate, this is a contribution to the development of the emotional brand of Strandzha through content created by visitors. Again, with the methods of cyberethnography and discursive analysis, progress has been established in the use of digital tools; there are now interactive maps @laryykruchev1576; an interactive map of sites with embedded videos or photos: <https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mi>. Such is the information about the “Holy Trinity” chapel, the “Holy Prophet Elijah” chapel, given by local historians from the Strandzha region, i.e. content created by a team. The video clips about an Underground labyrinth to a cave sanctuary under an old temple, are created by laryy 555. This is a modern way of getting involved in the environment, the navigation is modern and fast. Other objects are easily discovered by accessing the virtual environment and it is a way to get involved in the history of Strandzha from different periods: Thracians, Christianity, modern tourism and eco-trails.

YouTube is a preferable video social media by persons, cultural and educational institutions, nongovernmental organisations about the building the Strandzha brand. YouTube is used to stream folk music, movies, and TV shows. Over the years, from 2017 to 2026, there has been a steady increase in digital literacy and engagement, with citizens becoming subscribers and starting to post comments, use hashtags, etc.

Chef Ivan Zvezved (La Cocina Búlgara) showcases traditions associated with specific recipes (Strandzha-style bulgur pilaf) and the culinary traditions of the

Strandzha region; through their participation, residents are presented as active citizens who contribute to promoting Strandzha. This could develop into a creative industry and culinary, mountain, wine, eco, and religious tourism.

YouTube presents videos of singers performing songs from the Strandzha folklore, as well as interviews with them. For example, folk singers Lazar Nalbantov, Rositsa Zheleva, Zhechka Slaninkova, Ivan Polinchev.

The Biodiversity Foundation creates interesting videos related to nature and ecology—Sustainable Forest Development in Strandzha in 2017.

Petya Paneva and Mitko Denev run the official channel “Favorite Songs from Strandzha” featuring music videos.

Veneta Nikolova presents short video clips under the general theme “Strandzha—Mystical and Secretive. 8 Ideas about Walks Around Malko Tarnovo”. She uses digital tools to boost the reach of her content.

The subtopics are divided by duration with internal hyperlinks to the sections Thracian Sanctuary, the Meanders of the Veleka River, the “Petrova Niva” area, Strandzha “Kamaka”. There is a quick access to each subtopic, i.e., the content is geared toward an interested audience and mini-targets.

Zhechka Slaninkova has 10 clips, one video had 35,157 views as of October 16, 2017.

FERDI DZHEMIL launched the initiative “Strandzha: Where the Earth Remembers”. The message is “Uncovering the Secrets of Strandzha: Mysteries, History, and Natural Beauty!” Deep in the heart of Bulgaria lies a mysterious mountain that has captivated people’s imaginations for centuries. “This is Strandzha—a place that combines ancient legends, untamed nature, and incredible beauty.”

A professional approach to the creation and distribution of singers’ music videos is gradually emerging. Lorena “Heart of Strandzha”—Lorena Official has 30,200 subscribers.

Among regional YouTube channels in Burgas, “Kanal 0” has 11,300 subscribers and focuses on rituals, workshops, events, and concerts related to folklore, which is a way to reach target audiences interested in topics related to the heritage of Strandzha. This is a way to build a sense of belonging to the emotional brand of Strandzha through the shared experience of emotions from participating in events. The information is presented in a series of video clips and interviews with prominent figures from the region who serve as ambassadors and guardians of traditions, helping to build trust and attract active residents to events related to Strandzha.

Content created by students and local residents related to fire-dancing is produced and shared on the video channel: “About Fire-Dancing...”.

Consequently, digital marketing in YouTube is oriented toward the creation of a regional Strandzha brand through the promotion of cultural identity, folklore, historical heritage, social values, nature etc. The results of the analysis of YouTube video clips in which the Strandzha brand is presented are shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2. YouTube about the Strandzha brand.

Ceartor	Name	Link	Views	Subscribers	Digital tools
Chef Ivan Zvezved	La Cocina Búlgara	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqJtU6vVV-0	241	289,000	https://zvezdev.com/virtualcommunity
Videley	About the Mystical Goddess Bastet in Strandzha	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhbvRCDIqfs	4808	45,800	virtual community https://videlei.com/za-nas
Kanal 0	The Strandzha phenomenon	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLkX4Zu6Umk	176	11,300	virtual community 7000 video clipsD0%A3%D0%A0%D0%93%D0%90%D0%A1
Petya Paneva and Mitko Denev	Favorite Songs from Strandzha	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtTDCU2kOwY	1,015,676	27,700	hashtags #петяпанева #фолклор#миткоденев #странджанскипесни
Veneta Nikolova	“Strandzha—Mystical and Secretive.”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBodHHEjrL8	16,943	5470	262 likes, and 10 positive comments.
The Biodiversity Foundation	Sustainable Forest Development in Strandzha	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL56Ptaz3w2aM5_T7pQQsz0I2RYq1GOlgv	13	895	virtual community digital activism brand advocacy
Lorena Official	Heart of Strandzha	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XoiWvcEszfQ	1822	30,200	17 shares
FERDI DZHEMIL	Where the Earth Remembers	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWZtlf7yYo	20,000	10,900	comments sharing hyperlinks virtual community
134th Secondary School	About Fire-Dancing	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JmsZ5l76sE	33,926	19,000	virtual community

TikTok is becoming increasingly popular when it comes to the building of the personal and regional brands, in particular Strandzha. Content creators come from a wide range of ages and professions; short videos featuring folk songs, dances, customs, crafts, myths, and legends predominate. The songs are performed by both established singers and young Bulgarians who are continuing the tradition of performing folk songs from the Strandzha region. Digital media literacy and positioning skills are displayed through modern digital tools and when using TikTok. For example, Maria Stefanova shares information and short videos, mainly about the traditions of Strandzha.

Songs and dances from the Strandzha region, under the name “Hubavata Elitsa” (Beautiful Elitsa), are featured on TikTok, with calls for shares, positive reactions, and likes, as well as a sense of virtual community and respect for content created

by young Bulgarians. Digital literacy is combined with values, patriotism, and the continuation of Strandzha traditions. Folk festivals and those from the calendar of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church are featured.

TikTok is the platform of choice for posting short clips of young people performing folk songs, such as “Teodora”. There is a personal touch, and the performers demonstrate knowledge of and respect for the traditions of the Strandzha region, as well as respect for the musicians’ copyrights and the arrangement.

Yanka Rupkina, Magda Pushkarova and Zhechka Slaninkova and other folklore singers are presented through short video clips of songs performed by them and of media interviews with them, some of which are from archives. In this way, through republishing, a wider virtual audience is reached, and respect is expressed for the historical, cultural and folklore traditions of Strandzha. In group videos, footage from events in different villages is presented and this is a way to build emotional branding. The results of the analysis of TikTok reels and video clips in which the Strandzha brand is presented are shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. TikTok about the Strandzha brand.

Authos	Topics	Link
Maria Stefanova	Folklore song	https://www.tiktok.com/@maria.stefanova/video/7244491078336908570
NellyNedialkova	Folklore song	https://www.tiktok.com/@nellynedialkova/video/7609389259430153475
Bgdanapetrova	Folklore song	https://www.tiktok.com/@bogdanapetrova/video/7254274489955912987?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc
Yanna_sing	Folklore song	https://www.tiktok.com/@yanaa_sing/video/7393355936624119072 https://www.tiktok.com/@yanaa_sing/video/7381475709266496800
Petya.paneva	Folklor dance	https://www.tiktok.com/@petya.paneva/video/7505867826666769687

Instagram is used not only to promote activities but also to build virtual communities united around a cause. One such example is a project “savestrandzha” that includes educational activities focused on the Strandzha region, where digital citizens actively participate in initiatives aimed at raising awareness about nature in the area. This digital activity could develop and evolve into a prosumer and online advocacy brand and achieve sustainability. Visualisation and digital tools are used relevantly: “🌿 Become the ‘voice of nature’ 🌿 savestrandzha”.

The language used in online posts created by users and visitors to the Strandzha region is emotional, expressive, attention-grabbing, and builds trust:

“Strandzha Nature Park is the largest protected area in Bulgaria – a place where people and nature coexist in harmony, and traditions remain alive to this day. Forests cover nearly 80% of the territory, and its biodiversity is among the richest not only in Bulgaria but also in Europe.”

Strandzha Nature Park maintains an Instagram account, it is very active, and has 828 posts related to nature conservation; the brand is built through rational and conscious actions by citizens. They use the #SaveStrandzha campaign, have 205 posts, 1545 followers. Example:

“🌿 Young people working for nature and the sustainable development of Sinemorets and Strandzha Nature Park. #savesinemorets”.

Digital tools such as hashtags are already well established and contribute significantly to the dissemination of information and the rapid reach of audiences within the virtual environment.

Todorraveo¹

The play of light and shadow in the Strandzha Mountains above the village of Varsilo 🏞️

#странджа #българия #бургас #вършило

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DXCgLWFjNHs/>

Spring Awakening in the Heart of the Strandzha Mountains.

#странджа #българия #бургас #вършило #пролет²

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DXMwMMjjCCj/>

Hyperlinks are actively and appropriately used across social media platforms, podcasts, and media outlets, enabling content validation, limiting the dissemination of fake news, and preventing the emergence of reputational crises related to the Strandzha brand.

The textual component, as an essential element of multimodality, together with visualisation, accompanies every video recording regardless of its duration. An increasing trend can be observed in the creation of user-generated content and its dissemination through short video formats. The results of the analysis of Instagram photographs, maps, reels and video clips in which the Strandzha brand is presented are shown in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Instagram about the Strandzha brand.

Creator	Topics	Link	Digital tools
Savestrandzha	ecology	https://www.instagram.com/p/DXHN8AtiHzi/	Virtual community
Todorraveo	ecology	https://www.instagram.com/p/DXMwMMjjCCj/	Visual content
Strandzha Nature Park	ecology	https://www.instagram.com/explore/locations/316370385860550/	Visual content
cityguide.bg	tourism	https://www.instagram.com/p/DVrEaLVAipB/	Visual content

Facebook

There is reason to conclude that digital literacy is developing rapidly, as content creators use several online communication channels: websites, social media, and they also frequently publish content that is interesting and relates to Strandzha, created through knowledge, experiences, and a willingness to share. Virtual com-

¹Todorraveo <https://www.instagram.com/todorraveo/>.

²#странджа <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B4%D0%B6%D0%B0/>, #българия <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F/>, #бургас <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/%D0%B1%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%81/>, #вършило <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/%D0%B2%D1%8A%D1%80%D1%88%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%BE/>, #пролет <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B5%D1%82/>.

munities are also being built sustainably, starting with followers and subscribers, as well as a gradual increase in comments. For example, Todor Raveo Stoyanov, digital creator, BurgasME Click. This is not merely an expression of local patriotism toward the region, Burgas, and Strandzha, but rather a conscious effort; that is why it presents an opportunity for prosumers and brand advocates. There are also content creators who identify as members of the non-governmental organization “Green Strandja”. The Thracian Society in Burgas honors traditions and folklore and presents information about folk singers such as Yanka Rupkina, about the national hero Captain Petko Kiryakov and others; about customs, traditions, festivals, there is digital civic activity and constant information and building of virtual communities around the Strandzha brand.

The conclusion drawn from the cyber-ethnographic analysis is that Facebook is used to present the history, mythology, customs, and traditions of the Strandzha region, to organize around causes related to nature conservation, and to form virtual communities. Facebook profiles employ digital tools for user-generated content creation, mainly through personal experiences, which creates an opportunity for building emotional branding.

At the discursive level, the results of the analysis demonstrate skills in creating verbal and visual content, positive connotations in the words used, and a high frequency of terms such as Strandzha, authenticity, preserved nature, and the protection of natural landmarks. Personal stories related to visits to sacred places are presented through engaging narratives. Accounts of historical events and figures include specific details and specialized terminology. The results of the analysis of Facebook posts featuring the Strandzha brand are presented in **Table 5**.

Table 5. Facebook about the Strandzha brand.

Author/Creator	Name	Link	Followers	Digital tools
Todor Raveo Stoyanov	BurgasME Click	https://www.facebook.com/raveo85	9000	Sharing Comments
Zelena Strandzha Tourist Association	The Green Strandzha	https://www.facebook.com/zelenastrandja/?locale=bg_BG	52,000	Virtual community Comments https://zelenastrandja.com/
The Thracian Society in Burgas	Burgas	https://www.facebook.com/Trakiisko.Drujes tvo.Strandzha.Burgas/?locale=bg_BG	1500	Comments Virtual community Site https://www.strandja.org/

Based on the analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn: social media platforms are profiled for presenting information related to the Strandzha brand. TikTok is preferred for presenting folklore songs and dances performed by Bulgarians of different ages. Instagram is chosen when it comes to environmental topics and tourism. Facebook is used for promoting information from various fields. YouTube has a broad scope, and content creators focused on Strandzha use

their own video channels to present topics such as mythology, folklore, ecology, traditions, eco-trails, and others. Digital tools are applied appropriately, including visual elements, hashtags, internal links, hyperlinks, emojis, high-quality visualization, interactive routes, digital maps, and more.

6. Discussion

The results indicate that there is no consistent support at the national level in terms of state policy aimed at promoting and developing the Strandzha brand. Therefore, there are currently insufficient grounds to discuss the existence of digital communication campaign to build the Strandzha brand on the regional and national level. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that it is necessary to integrate state policies with local administration and to organise activities as well as to use systematic application of digital tools, digital marketing and contemporary communication channels. The assumption is that after the implementation of such an integrated approach, the Strandzha brand can contribute substantially to the development of the creative industries in Bulgaria.

7. Conclusion

Based on thorough research, the significance of the topic, the Strandzha brand in Bulgaria was proved on a scientific and practical scale. Analysis of websites, media, social networks and films dedicated to the branding on the basis of cyberethnographic observation helps to describe a model combining advice concerning communication campaigns on how to build the Strandzha brand.

At the same time, representatives of non-governmental organisations, podcasters, and local media are increasingly turning to storytelling approaches which have a substantial effect on the development of emotional branding. The analysis demonstrates that museums, galleries, and libraries are still insufficiently prepared for the creation of virtual tours and virtual exhibitions. One of the probable reasons is the inadequate training of human resources and the limited awareness of the advantages these digital practices offer for the development of a competitive Strandzha brand.

Only a limited number of municipalities, such as Burgas, have initiated attempts to create and implement digital guides and digital catalogues. Environmentalists and activists engaged in green policies, as well as entrepreneurs in rural, cultural, religious, culinary, and wine tourism, demonstrate growing interest in the development of interactive routes. Initial attempts have also been made to utilise drone technologies for capturing natural landscapes and significant cultural and historical sites, including churches, dolmens, sanctuaries, and caves. Young people with advanced digital competencies are increasingly producing and publishing live-streaming content.

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