

The Implementation of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) Principles in Branding and Advertising: A Conceptual Exploration

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Abstract

Theorists and advocates of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) behold that IMC was an innovation to rescue the downward of advertisement industry and to strengthen the strategic and tactical power of branding. IMC offer the option of integrating several marketing communication approaches in one message content for the purpose of developing effective brand equity. However, IMC is a theoretically celebrated panacea that has experienced a longstanding conceptual and practical muddling, which includes the practicality, definitions, implementations and measurement of its effectiveness. Pertinently, an explicit strategy and tactics of implementing the principles of IMC in advertisement still remain obscure. In a quest to quench the conceptual haziness of IMC and its implementation in advertisement-being one of the very crucial tool in marketing communications, this paper presents the review of the implementation process of IMC in the general marketing communication fields, advertisement and branding in particular. Relevant theoretical and practical gaps were deduced from past studies to inform future studies of possible ways to resolve the theoretical and practical inconsistencies in implementing the principles of IMC in an effective advertisement and brand equity.

Keywords: Integrated Marketing Communication; Brand Equity; Advertisement Effectiveness; Message Strategy.

1. Introduction

The theoretical nexus between advertisement, branding and the principles of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) is theoretically noticeable but practically hazy. Arguably, it is not just that the terms are theoretically interrelated; their practical challenges are also identical. For instance, the problem of accountability, errors in measuring effectiveness and the innovation of digital media are exemplary issues that unite the practice of IMC, branding and advertisement. Furthermore, IMC was conceptualized to rescue the downwards and other challenges facing the advertisement industry especially in the development of brand equity (Weilbacher, 2001). However, IMC being a theoretically suggested panacea to those challenges has experienced a longstanding conceptual debate, which includes issues on its practicality, definitions, implementations and measuring its effectiveness. Pertinently, the hazy theoretical and implementation journey of IMC must have partially or completely left the advertisement insuperable problems unresolved (Thomas, 2002).

Arguably, the cause of the turbulence witnessed by the conceptualization and implementation of IMC can be connected to its flexible nature and for being a readily multipurpose tool to numerous interrelated disciplines of marketing communication such as public relations, advertising, marketing and branding (Percy 1997). An important postulation of IMC as a concept is to integrate the practices of these marketing communication fields although executing such "integration" mystified and challenged concerned researchers and marketing communication theorists and practitioners alike over the years since the onset of conceptualizing IMC as a concept till present. This article is motivated to document notable conclusions of past studies with a constructive aim of informing future researchers of the critical unresolved problems pertinent to the implementation of IMC in advertisement and branding among other related disciplines of marketing communications. In this regard, past relevant studies are reviewed in order delve on the major connection between IMC, branding and advertising, generally to document different perspectives and conclusions of the longstanding debates on implementing IMC principles and specifically to emphasize the theoretical and the practical connection of IMC in branding and advertising and to recommend possible ways of harnessing the theoretical connection practically and effectively.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brief History of IMC

Historically, Schultz and Schultz (2003) contended that the evolution of IMC was driven by three main

influential changes that affect the marketing communication industry as a whole. These are the development and diffusion of digital technology, the elevation of branding as the major tool for differentiating products, and the marketing and business focus on globalization. These three changes challenged and raised alarm on accountability and financial returns of marketing communication activities; the strategic quests to address those challenges gave birth to IMC. During the era of brand copycatting in the 1980s; world evolving economies believed in innovating by imitating, and consequently deterred the triumph of true innovators especially in the private products industries. The quest to suppress the detriments of the brand imitation on economic growth and efforts on placating the true innovators brought about the conception of a better approach of consistent communication with their clients, branding products by communicating the unique features of their brands to them and a way of ensuring message recall and increasing communication effectiveness. This was the first evolutionary aim behind the practice of IMC (Schultz and Schultz, 2003). By the early 1990s, studies, essays and texts have evolved to explain the IMC model, the process of implementing it and stages of adopting it. There was substantial achievements from those efforts, most of which was inclined to defining and explaining the true model of IMC principles, resultantly one of the first consensus definitions was summarized and can be quoted as follows;

Integrated marketing communication is a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute, and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communication programs over time with consumers, customers, prospects, and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences

(Schultz & Schultz, 2003; p20-21)

Early empirical studies on IMC confirmed the growth of IMC in the US, UK, New Zealand, Australia and India and argued with similar tones that IMC is developing though there were little differences in their findings especially on the practicality and on the true implementation of IMC (Schultz et al, 2004). For instance, Duncan and Caywood (1996) developed seven stages of IMC implementation (*awareness, image, functional, coordinated consumer-based, stakeholder based, and relationship management*). On the other hand, Schultz and Kitchen (2000) developed a four implementation stage of IMC (*tactical coordination, outside-in, IT base, and management level*). Another notable contribution to the definition and implementation sphere of IMC is by Kliatchko (2008) where he articulates that IMC is a business process directed to audience both in the corporate and operational levels and develops a four pillar stage of IMC implementation (*stakeholders, content, channels and results*). Admittedly, these implementation stages are distinctive, yet slightly connected, most especially as they unite in portraying IMC as “stakeholder-based business approach”, “coordination of communication” and “integration through content and messages” (Schultz and Schultz 2003; Kitchen et al, 2004; Eagle et al., 2007; and Kliatchko 2008).

2.2 IMC and Branding

IMC is potentially a valuable tool in addressing the accountability and effectiveness issues of brand equity and brand development. In this regard, scores of researchers have explored the possibilities of implementing the tenets of IMC in branding. For instance, Integrated Brand Promotion (IBP) is an interchangeable term to IMC for two justifiable reasons. First is that the factors that call for the innovation of IMC is exactly the reason behind the conception of IBP. The second reason is that the functional purposes of the two terms as according to the ardent advocates of both IMC (Schultz & Schultz, 2003; and Shimp, 2000) and IBP (O’Guinn et al., 2009) has been described as a supplemental approach to achieve brand equity albeit incorporation of several marketing communication messages. Admittedly, IBP is a peculiar term to the development of effective brand equity and in advertisement message strategies, while IMC is centralized on the entire marketing communication tools. But considering the fact that the definition, development, measurement and above all the implementation of IMC still remain unresolved even after decades of conceptualization, and as researchers often and openly-recommend further directives on it, it is necessary to address the gap of past studies on the implementation of IMC, particularly by approaching IBP as a supplemental effort of implementing IMC. A research done by Sally and Kathleen (2011) objectively compared practical and academic connotations of IMC. They conclusively found that there has been a shift in the practitioners’ understanding of IMC for just being an approach to integrate media usage and marketing messages to a tactical and strategic tool of building a successful brand image. An exhaustive review by Kliatchko (2008) on the evolution of IMC since its inception affirmed that issues on IMC being a strategic approach to brand development and management has been persistent in literature since 2000. Since then, researchers have been examining the rationales of employing IMC to increase the development of effective brand equity. Such as Barnes (2001) empirically examined the

adoption of IMC in brand development and retailing. Dewhirst and Davis (2005) posit that IMC is a strategic communication tool employable to attain an effective brand equity and stakeholder value. Reid (2005) shed more light that the implementation of IMC process relatedly yields successful brand outcomes. Madhavaram et al. (2005) theorize the relationship between IMC and brand identity to be the two crucial components of organizational strategy of maintaining brand equity. Furthermore Ratnatunga and Ewing (2005) illustrated the influence of IMC on corporate brand equity. Similarly, Reid et al. (2005) developed a model that explains the link between IMC and brand orientations. Listed above are theoretical justifications on the compatibility of IMC process and concept in developing successful brand equity; those studies empirically reiterate the feasibility of adopting IMC principles in developing brand equity and emphasize the connection between IMC and branding. Above all, Shimp (2000) consistently buttress the functional power of IMC as a crucial component in brand equity which strategically serve agencies by anchoring the incorporation of their message information, persuasion together with stipulations of consumers' actions. Apparently, such functional integrations explain the implementation of the IMC principles in brand equity development.

Furthermore, Moriarty et al., (2012) contrasted advertising, marketing communication and IMC, and contended the possibility of branding through the assortment of marketing communications and especially advertising. A four staged-principle was proffered in order to understand the practice of IMC in brand development; (1) everything about a brand can be communicative, (2) the art and science of a brand must be unified, (3) brand value is the result of brand relationship and lastly (4) external integration can be attained through internal integration. The last stage of their principle was explained graphically which illustrated that advertising which is a major tool in developing brand image and brand awareness and other marketing communication tools are specific tactics of a broader marketing communication plan, which is embodied by the larger strategic aim of branding. Moriarty et al., (2012) emphatically believe that IMC is an art of brand management, and often refer to IMC as a brand communication tool.

2.3 Advertising in the IMC Era

Advertisement is an inseparable genre of communication and a prominent part of the marketing communication tools, which arbitrarily adheres to the theoretical and operational meaning of communication; the transactional ways of sharing idea, information and meanings, through symbols, effectively to negotiate understanding, attention, and feedback (Popescu, 2002). An effective advertisement must surely be communicative enough and must be able to employ its genre components; words, visuals, graphics, colors and other symbols to relay its functional messages which is conventionally to get audiences convinced, persuaded and informed about a corporate product and services (Shimp, 2000), while feedback and audience reactions serve as the only way to determine the effectiveness of advertisement like other genre of communication (Blythe, 2006). Admittedly, some industrial and developmental factors have posted several ferocious tussles in the advertising industry, which have aggressively challenged the advertisement practices, messages and appropriate media of delivering communicative, informative, attractive and above all persuasive messages to consumers. Clow (2010) expose that the aforementioned challenge yielded the emergence of IMC, thus synergizing all the marketing communications approach to get consumers more attracted. Theories and empirical reports have been consistent in advocating and justifying the transformational growth of IMC, as regarding its conception and theoretical backgrounds but lesser studies have shown concern towards the implication and practical challenge of IMC postulation in the marketing communication industry (Kailani, 2012).

Advertising like every other marketing communication tools are often useful to achieve certain promotional or commercial objectives. In the peculiar case of advertising, it is commonly employed to inform, persuade, and remind consumers of a product or service, meanwhile promotion is often availed to stimulate sales and affect audience purchase decision. Apparently, IMC has ideologically evolved to conjoin the two functions (Schultz and Schultz 2003). Wells, Burnett and Moriarity (2003) elucidate the word "marketing communication" as a bunch of communication techniques that are employed to get consumer or other types of end users informed, persuaded and attitudinally affected towards a product or price under the promotional phase of the marketing mix (product, price, place and promotion). Kailani (2012) justified the usefulness of IMC era particularly in advertising, stating that IMC was basically initiated to pragmatically help marketers identify effective pathway of communicating and influencing their consumers, and to understand the paramount way of creating communicative, persuasive, and appealing advertising messages.

The implications of IMC principles in advertising was initially controversial regarding the similarities

and differences of IMC and advertisement, even though executing the IMC principles in the entire marketing communication disciplines would not be constructive enough without attaining a referable contributions in the advertising industry. For instance; The thrust of IMC was said to be because of the inherent innovative feature of the communication industry and the result of the dramatic advent of communication technology (Winer 2009), Zinkhan and Watson (1996) notice that traditional advertising connote an obsolete way of persuading customers only, while the newly invented terms like IMC and relationship marketing have posited struggles in the minds of advertising practitioners as they try to sustain the current industrial development. Meanwhile, during the early stages of IMC pervasion, Berden and Madden (1996) reveal that it is economically, artistically and functionally irrational to think about the renaissance of the advertisement industry. Their radical knock down of advertisement was justified in their view; insofar IMC proffers to conjoin the communicative functions of advertisement and the promotional goal of marketing, therefore the practice of IMC principle would replace the functionalities of advertising, believing that the functionalities of IMC is not only employable in lieu of advertisement in achieving the promotional and commercial objectives of advertising but also supersede advertisement with the integration principle by incorporating other marketing communication tools together in a particular content, message or channel (such as the one look one voice approach). Their stand provoke practitioners and academia from all the main related disciplines of marketing communication (e.g., Hutton, 1996; Schuktz, 1996; and Zinkhan and Watson 1996) they lamented the inevitable adherent of these disciplines (such as; Public relation, Advertising, Mass Media, and CSR) in other to attain the integration of marketing communication messages proffered in IMC principles.

In contrary, Hutton (1996) conclusively renounce the idea of condemning advertising, purposefully for IMC tenets to reign, in lieu of charging advertisers to be more innovative and promote the integration of different other marketing communication tactics and strategy in advertisement contents for the purpose of developing effective brand equity. Schultz and Schultz (2003) corroborate that the conceptualization of IMC is basically to proffer integration of marketing communication messages, content and channels, this integration has constituted a practical obscurity since the conceptualization of IMC concept. Meanwhile, Sally and Kathleen (2011) and Kitchen et al, (2008) argue there is no monolithic approach of implementing the integration principle of IMC, thus the implementation of IMC principle differs according to its relevancy in the actual disciplines of marketing communications.

3. Conclusions and discussions

The aforementioned longstanding challenges of implementing the principles of IMC faced by the entire practitioners of marketing communication in general and advertisers, advertising agencies and brand developers in particular will continue to surface in the absent of a model that explicitly proffer the practicality and the executional methods of implementing IMC in the phases of message designing, media selection, audience engagement and so on. Hence, such model will be a clear-cut method of harnessing the definitional or conceptual phase of IMC with the implementation phase. Consistent with the definition of IMC by Kitchen et al. (2004), IMC was said to be a process and a concept of harmonizing different marketing communications tools and process for the purpose of achieving a particular marketing or communicative goal (e.g; the development of brand equity, promotion and brand awareness). Therefore the integrative method of IMC principles offer practitioners the efficient power of planning, developing, executing and evaluating the goal of marketing communication more effectively (Schultz and Kitchen 2000).

Continually, IMC can also be implemented by tactically harmonizing and integrating different types of advertisement message appeals/strategy (such as; brand advertisement message strategy, direct response advertisement message strategy; and so on) in the development of brand equity; brand awareness and brand image. This can be executed by adopting an integrated advertisement message strategy which is permeated with the sole aim of "integration" thus the aim behind the conceptualization of IMC. correspondently, the adoption of an integrated advertisement message strategy as a tactical method of implementing the concept of the IMC principle is also similar to the tenets of Integrated Brand Promotion (IBP); a conceptually synonymous term to IMC introduced by O'Guinn, Allen, and Semenik (2009). The concept approach advertisement copy/design as an embodiment of different message strategies that are adopted to serve either a creative, an attractive and or an informative role through different message appeals to achieve the basic and unique functional purpose of advertising, which is to persuade consumers/audience, and to induce purchase or to make consumers aware of a particular product or also the development of brand equity. In this view, IMC is therefore is not an innovation

that threatens the functionality of advertising, but rather to imbue and transform it functionally and operationally as oppose to the belief of Bearden and Madden (1996) and Hutton (1996).

Consistently, it is important to stress that the evolvement of IMC principles can be implemented in transforming the traditional way of advertising and brand equity (brand image and awareness) development with a new approach of converging all the techniques of marketing communications approaches, in one particular message or channel (Moriarty 1994). This coincides with the stages of executing the process of IMC as summarized by Shimp (2000) and Schultz and Schultz (2003), they listed five sequential roles of IMC objectives that can be employed through any or all of the marketing communication approaches (advertising, public relations, promotions and marketing); (a) affecting behavior, (b) by exploring customers prospects, (d) and executing synergy to (e) build relationship. Logically it is impossible to implement the entire highlighted facets of IMC through one particular marketing communication discipline such as advertisement, but advertising agents can therefore implement a relevant facet among the premises of IMC to prevail in the development of a more effective message copy and in developing successful brand equity.

Consistently, the overview of the past studies reviewed above shows that studies are continually evolving with distinctive views and approaches over the implementation of IMC, though there has been some notable agreement on the definition and conception of IMC, but the implementation phase, especially when it comes to practical or tactical utilitarian of IMC still drive researchers apart. In that view, it can be concluded that there is no monolithic approach or method of implementing the principles of IMC (Kitchen et al, 2008). In summary, this study arguably affirms that the implementation of IMC is any approach or message development method that can be practically used to integrate different message strategies or communication techniques or different communication channels for the purpose of making marketing communication messages more effective and influencing and stipulating positive decisions and attitudes and that accommodate the development of successful brand image and awareness.

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