



Strategic and organisational challenges in the integrated marketing communication paradigm shift: A holistic vision



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ABSTRACT

Digitisation and the consumer evolution have been leading to a paradigmatic shift in integrated marketing communication (IMC). Despite all of the research that has investigated the underlying topics of IMC evolution, little attention has been devoted to performing a comprehensive reading of the challenges that remain according to advertisers and communication players. In this paper, through an exploratory inductive and qualitative study (86 in-depth interviews), we develop a holistic conceptual model of these managerial challenges in a way that cuts across the different categories of players (advertisers, traditional and digital agencies, media centres and publishers/broadcasters). Our results reveal the various types of strategic and organisational challenges as well as the main specificities in practitioners' perceptions based on their player category. Finally, this article proposes recommendations for how players can address these challenges.

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1. Introduction

Digitisation, the disintegration of mass markets, empowered customers (Denegri-Knott, Zwick, & Schroeder, 2006; Kerr, Mortimer, Dickinson, & Waller, 2012), the fragmentation of traditional advertising media and audiences (Guräu, 2008; Kerr & Schultz, 2010), the emergence of new media, simultaneous media exposure and consumer multitasking (Chen, Venkataraman, & Jap, 2013; Wang & Tchernev, 2012) have been determining the paradigmatic shift in integrated marketing communication (IMC) for many years. The relational architecture of marketing has evolved from linear to reticular, with a combination of traditional communication models—push (outbound)—and innovative modes of communication that are based on pull (inbound) and/or collaborative approaches (Kozinet, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008; Schultz & Patti, 2009). The direct involvement of various nodes of the marketing communication network—that is, consumers, advertisers and various types of communication partners—is increasing in interactive communication flows.

In this evolving ecosystem, already in 2008, Ozuem, Howell and Lancaster called for 'reinvention' of the IMC managerial framework.

Despite the numerous studies that have examined the underlying topics of IMC evolution, little attention has been devoted to obtaining a comprehensive reading of the managerial challenges that advertisers and communication players continue to perceive as significant issues.

This important research effort should be conducted by considering not only the new digital ecosystem but also the entire IMC landscape, in which the distinction between online and offline media is disappearing and in which the traditional mass communication paradigm is becoming integrated with new interactive and social models. Thus, we consider the IMC ecosystem as a whole, in which old and new communication models are combined and in which consumers and different types of players are actively involved (Grant & McLeod, 2007; Mulhern, 2009; Vernuccio, Ceccotti, & Pastore, 2012).

In view of this approach, this paper aims to develop a holistic conceptual model of the remaining managerial challenges still posed by this paradigmatic shift, widening and deepening practitioners' interpretative perspectives through an exploratory inductive and qualitative approach.

1.1. The IMC paradigm shift

Although academic discussion on the definitional issues of the IMC concept retains a central position (Kitchen, 2005; Kliatchko,

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2008, 2009; Moriarty & Schultz, 2012), scholarly attention to the 'paradigm shift' in IMC is growing (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Winer, 2009). In 2009, Kitchen and Schultz argue for a completely new view and new agenda in this field, beginning with the recognition of some of the main topics of the IMC paradigm shift: the evolution of media, consumers and marketing organisations.

Regarding the media evolution, various studies have investigated the issues of media and audience fragmentation (Mulhern, 2009; Soberman, 2005), cross-mediality and the development of media synergies (Naik & Peters, 2009; Schultz, Block, & Raman, 2012). Kerr and Schultz (2010) highlight the importance of technological changes in media and messaging that lead to two communication marketing models that managers cannot manage separately. In the traditional outbound or push model, communication is one-to-many, and messages and channels are under the control of the company. In contrast, in the new inbound or pull system, communication is interactive, and consumers are more active multitaskers (Pilotta, Schultz, Drenik, & Rist, 2004) and are increasingly interconnected and 'ubiquitous' (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009). Academic research has focused on the significant evolution of the consumer role in the new marketing communication system (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006; Kerr et al., 2012). The consumer not only 'becomes more sophisticated and more time poor' (Kerr & Schultz, 2010, p. 550) but also is more engaged (Gambetti, Graffigna, & Biraghi, 2012) and 'technology-empowered', controlling what, when and how to use media and directly producing (or co-producing) and sharing brand-related content (Gensler, Völckner, Yuping, & Wiertz, 2013). Thus, centralisation is decreasing in favour of democratisation, a phenomenon that also results in a decreased level of company control in the production, distribution and consumption of their own marketing content (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

With respect to the marketing organisation evolution, Day (2011) emphasises the 'marketing capabilities gap' related to the limited response capacity of organisations confronting increasingly complex markets. With specific reference to the IMC, Schultz and Patti (2009) call for a greater research efforts and consider organisational issues to be 'the next step in the development of IMC' (p. 78). Moreover, Smith (2012) emphasises the need to give greater consideration to organisational factors such as culture, flexibility, adaptation and an open social system to facilitate integration into marketing communication. Recently, analysing challenges and solutions for marketing in a digital era, Leeflang, Verhoef, Dahlström, and Freundt (2014) emphasise that the organisational challenge has yet to be addressed by firms.

1.2. Purpose of the study

IMC studies have always sought solid empirical bases by analysing the perspectives of practitioners (Gould, 2004; Kerr, Schultz, Patti, & Kim, 2008), with the majority of contributions focused on advertising agencies and advertisers (e.g., Gurău, 2008; Kassaye, 1997; Kim, Han, & Schultz, 2004; Kitchen & Schultz, 1999; Kitchen, Kim, & Schultz, 2008; Kliatchko & Schultz, 2014). Nyilasy and Reid (2007) emphasise the importance of formalising the 'knowledge autonomy' of agency practitioners with respect to the academic world and the need to establish 'knowledge flows' between the two categories to reduce the inevitable gaps. Grant and McLeod (2007) point out the importance of overcoming the analysis of exclusively dyadic customer–agency relationships to arrive at a 'holistic understanding' that should embrace the different nodes of the communication network. However, with respect to the different categories of communication players (i.e., advertisers, traditional

and digital agencies, media centres and broadcasters/publishers), little is known about the main issues that all practitioners still regard as challenging in this evolving ecosystem.

Thus, our first aim is to develop a holistic conceptual model that systematises the previously perceived managerial challenges of the IMC paradigm shift based on an analysis of the variables considered to be more representative of this change. The holistic model is based on a transversal reading that accounts for concepts that are prevalent among different types of communication players. In view of this objective, our research questions are formulated as follows:

RQ 1: What key innovation variables are interpreted by the different communication players as representative of the IMC paradigm shift, and what are the relationships among those variables?

RQ 2: What are the resulting managerial challenges that have not yet been fully addressed from the perspective of these players?

A cross-cutting interpretation (holistic) of the paradigm shift currently underway has the advantage of overcoming partial views that are limited to a specific position in the communication network and defining a large, integrative conceptual framework. However, understanding whether and how this change can assume different meanings depending on the type of player is also necessary (Mulhern, 2009). For example, possible differences in perspectives—and even conflicting perspectives—arise because of differences in terms of business goals, skills, attitudes towards risk, information asymmetries and power/status within networks (Grant, McLeod, & Shaw, 2012). Thus, the third research question is formulated as follows:

RQ 3: What are the main points of specificity in players' perceptions based on player categories?

2. Research design

To accomplish the research aims and to elicit 'practitioners' knowledge' without exercising conditioning as a result of researcher knowledge, we follow an exploratory inductive approach (Armstrong, 1979) in which no formal hypothesis regarding the IMC paradigm shift is proposed. Thus, a qualitative study based on 86 in-depth, personal interviews (Creswell, 1998) with top managers and senior communication specialists was conducted. To obtain access to concepts that practitioners consider important with respect to the IMC paradigm shift and to determine how these concepts are interconnected, the cognitive mapping technique was chosen (Axelrod, 1976; Chaney, 2010; Swan, 1997; Wrightson, 1976). Cognitive mapping is useful for analysing the cognitive structures of individuals and permits graphic representation of 1) the concepts (that is, the mental representations) developed by the respondents in relation to a given stimulus/problem resulting from the frame of reference and 2) the relationships among the concepts.

2.1. Sampling and informants

The selection of managers and professionals included in the dataset to be investigated was made following the 'key informant approach' (Robson & Foster, 1989) to formalise the perspective of practitioners who have the capacity to assess the overall scenario because of their high levels of experience. Consequently, only subjects in high-level corporate roles were contacted and interviewed (e.g., CEOs, marketing directors, directors of communications, brand directors, creative directors). The broad spectrum of practitioner roles ensured considerable diversity within the data. On average, the interviewees had 18 years of professional experience in the field of marketing and/or communications and had worked at approximately four different organisations during the

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