

IMPLEMENTATION OF INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Olegs Nikadimovs

“HOTEL SCHOOL” Hotel Management College, Latvia

Abstract. *The hospitality industry is one of the most dynamic and competitive sectors, it has become more important to communicate marketing messages that are clear, unified and integral throughout all the communication channels to the target audiences. The paper aims to review the previously conducted research efforts on implementation of the concept of integrated marketing communications (IMC) in the hospitality industry. The aim of this research study is to collect and analyse the main concepts and conclusions of theoretical and practical research in the hospitality IMC implementation in the recent years. The methodology for paper selection was the following: 1) databases - Scopus, ScienceDirect, EBSCOHost, Emerald Insight - were examined; 2) main search criterion was “IMC hospitality implementation”, 3). additional research criteria were time of publication and peer-reviewed papers. Qualitative data analysis methods were used to assess the selected papers, while the review itself can be classified as narrative. Eight papers were selected for the analysis, showing an overview of the latest trends in research on IMC implementation in the hospitality industry. The findings indicated correlation between IMC strategy implementation and the impact on target audiences. This literature review can be used as the theoretical background for future researches.*

Keywords: *hospitality, literature review, integrated marketing communications, tourism.*

Introduction

Marketing and brand communications are the main persuasive elements of any organization, these tools can be used to connect with wider markets by transmitting clear communication messages to target audiences. In recent years, namely over the recent past decade, the world of marketing and the face of marketing has changed drastically with the ever-continuing rise of ICT, and especially social media advancements and integration into consumers' everyday lives. In today's dynamic business environments, standards for effective and sustainable communication among stakeholders are high. The modern-day customers are building strong relationships with certain brands or organizations only when the relation is founded on trust, which in its turn require a sustainable and consistent marketing communication (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010).

Major textbooks with emphasis on marketing communications have been around since as early as 1981, with Michael Ray's Advertising & Communication

Management being the first one (Ray, 1981). Although marketing communications have been used for several years as an umbrella term to refer to the various communications functions used by marketing, the strategic integration of these functional areas is what makes IMC a new approach to reaching consumers and other stakeholders. The IMC concept is used as the basis for executing each communications function, such as advertising, public relations, sales promotion, etc., throughout a variety of communication channels (Fitzgerald & Arnott, 2000).

In order to be able to make full use of the opportunities and benefits offered by a successful IMC strategy implementation and to develop scientific research in this area, *it is important* for practitioners and researchers to regularly obtain extensive and reliable information on the results and conclusions of studies so far obtained. The small number of published research studies on IMC implementation in the hospitality industry is the main limitation to this review.

The aim of the paper is to review the previously conducted research efforts on implementation of the concept of IMC in the hospitality industry. To reach the aim, the following tasks were formed: to define the concept of IMC; to review the selected papers on IMC implementation and its effectiveness according to the chosen methodology. The review aims to gather and analyse information on the main concepts and conclusions of empirical and theoretical studies on IMC strategies in recent years, thereby encouraging further researches in this field, both theoretical and empirical.

Methodology and approach

For this narrative literature review, the author has selected papers addressing implementation of IMC in the hospitality industry in top-level research databases, including Scopus (www.scopus.com), ScienceDirect (www.sciencedirect.com), EBSCOHost (<http://search.ebscohost.com>) and Emerald (www.emeraldinsight.com); data collection took time from November 2018 to January 2019. The main search criterion was “IMC hospitality implementation”, with additional variations - “implementation hospitality IMC”, “hospitality integrated marketing communications”, “tourism IMC implementation”. The publication year range was from 2000 to 2018, as very few peer-reviewed papers were published in regard to IMC in hospitality; thus, the publication year range had to be wider.

The selective process of the papers contained three main criteria – 1. only full-length papers in the English language were considered, 2. the author has detected the relevance to the research of the paper by reading the title and abstract of each considered paper – only the papers addressing implementation issues of IMC in the hospitality and tourism sector were selected; 3. final selection criteria:

time of publication and peer-reviewed papers. The selected papers were empirical, applying the qualitative, quantitative and mixed research methods.

Qualitative data analysis methods were used for the data collection and content assessment processes, in order to conduct qualitative interpretation of the available researches and to summarize what has been written on IMC implementation in the hospitality industry. The retrieved researches were then chronologically and thematically analysed. First determining the aspects of the data planned to be analysed, deciding on specific characteristics of each research to be reviewed and documented in this study, in order to identify relevant data and later use this data to address this particular study's questions.

The literature review itself can be classified as narrative, as this way of conducting the review is effective in gathering together a number of researches in the subject area, synthesising and presenting the findings; providing a background for understanding the previous knowledge and significance of this literature review.

A theoretical framework consists of concepts and definitions in reference to IMC that are crucial for this particular research study. The evaluation of theoretical assumptions allowed performing a qualitative content analysis more critically.

Development of IMC definitions and concepts

Theoretical framework, development of definitions

The original idea and foundations of IMC were pioneered by Dr. Donald Schultz., a professor at Northwestern University, who introduced consumer "touch points" and the complex interrelationship of opportunities used to influence the perception of brands. The list was long and included almost everything imaginable. Essentially, every place, person, and media had the potential to shape and build consumer expectations (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010). Many different definitions of IMC have evolved over the years. One of the original ones and most used by academics, practitioners and other stakeholders would be "*a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute, and evaluate a series of coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communication programmes over a period of time with consumers, customers, prospects, as well as other targeted and relevant external or internal audiences.*" (Schultz & Schultz, 1998). But during the past 30 years, many other definitions and perceptions have been coined by a large number of practitioners. Many practitioners heralded IMC as a useful up-and-coming marketing tool and some have opposed the idea of IMC as a misleading concept (Cornelissen & Lock, 2000; Schultz & Kitchen, 2000). The most important characteristic of this definition is that regards an approach to IMC as a "*business process*", encouraging

the creation of a plan through which all activities can be structured, implemented and evaluated. Pickton and Broderick defined IMC as “*a process which involves the management and organization of all ‘agents’ in the analysis, planning, implementation and control of all marketing communications contacts, media, messages and promotional tools focused at selected target audiences in such way as to derive the greatest economy, efficiency, effectiveness, enhancement and coherence of marketing communications effort in achieving predetermined product and corporate marketing communications objectives*” (Pickton & Broderick, 2001). On the other hand, Fill reaffirmed the idea of a coherent communication and strategic development when he defined IMC as “*a management process that strengthen brand proposals*” (Fill, 2002), creating an idea that IMC does not relate to communication exclusively, but also to business and brand management altogether.

As integrated marketing communications deal with merging or combining communication tools to form a combined message, Hutton argues that “*marketing, advertising, and public relations practitioners had been adept at coordinating their efforts long before the term IMC came into vogue*” (Hutton, 1996b). On the other hand, some researches accept the idea and concept of IMC but argue that it is a brand-new concept, appealing to the fact that it is only becoming more prominent due to the emerging digitalized environment and rapidly changing variety of marketing methods (Schultz & Kitchen, 2000).

Though the first time the term and definition were coined by the American Association of Advertising Agencies in 1989, as “*A concept of marketing communications planning that recognizes the added value of a comprehensive plan that evaluated the strategic role of a variety of communications disciplines, e.g. general advertising, direct response, sales promotion and public relations- and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communications impact*”. That was the earliest definition, and it has more tactical and centralized approach to that concept (Kerr, Schultz, Patti, & Ilchul, 2008).

According to Duncan, IMC is “*the process of strategically controlling or influencing all messages and encouraging purposeful dialogue to create and nourish profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders*” (Duncan & Caywood, 1996). The definition later was explained and expanded by Duncan and Mulhern, who addressed it as “*an ongoing, interactive, cross-functional process of brand communication planning, execution, and evaluation that integrates all parties in the exchange process in order to maximize mutual satisfaction of each other’s wants and needs*” (Duncan & Mulhern, 2004).

Kotler also proposed a definition that follows the inside-out approach, defining IMC as: “*the concept under which a company carefully integrates and coordinates its many communications channels to deliver a clear, consistent, and compelling message about the organization and its products*” (Kotler, 2000). In

addition, Percy, Rossiter and Elliot addressed the IMC concept with their definition, the “*IMC concept is the planning and execution of all types of marketing communication needed for a brand, service, or company to satisfy a common set of communication objectives*” (Percy, Rossiter, & Elliot, 2001). Some authors have suggested that IMC should be considered as a philosophy, whose implementation should be “*situationally specific*”; in that way, practitioners have the flexibility needed to implement IMC relative to market fluctuations. Gould considered IMC as a theoretical concept that could be seen as “*a set of contingently framed practices and discourses where localized, particular practitioner interpretations are just as important as general theoretic ones*” (Gould, 2004). In the recent decade, practitioners and academics are favouring other theories, and one of them is the Integrated Communication (IC) concept, which is defined as “*the notion and the practice of aligning symbols, messages, procedures and behaviours in order for an organization to communicate with clarity, consistency and continuity within and across formal organizational boundaries*” (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008).

The above listed definitions testify that over the last 30 years IMC has been defined and analysed from different perspectives: as a “*management philosophy*” (Stewart, 1996), as an “*educational movement*” (Hutton, 1996a) or even as a “*unified management practice*” (Moriarty, 1993). When applying this IMC approach, it is not only considered to be marketing communication with the end-customers, but also as a business and brand management process (Fill, 2002). The suggested approach does not only apply all promotional and marketing mix elements, using the coherent and unified message that was conveyed after thorough investigation of a target market; it also implies a more structured approach of creating segmented clientele databases and restructuring the whole organization to serve the needs of integral across-the-board customer orientation (Duncan & Mulhern, 2004). Han, Kim and Schultz suggest that IMC as a field of study is still a young concept and it is still at a relatively early growth stage and need much more research, analysis and time to define and finesse the cornerstones (Han, Kim, & Schultz, 2004).

Evaluation of the researches on IMC implementation in the hospitality industry

Tourism and hospitality markets are highly fragmented, consumers find themselves with fragmented marketing communications images in a confusing marketing environment. That is the reason why hospitality industry practitioners should coordinate their efforts in creating unified communication strategy in order to deliver consistent messages through their marketing activities (Hudson, 2008). Thus, academics and practitioners in the field of marketing and branding have

supported the notion that IMC plays an important role in building and maintaining stakeholder relationships and in leveraging these relationships to create customer-based brand equity (Seric, Gil-Saura, & Ruiz-Molina, 2014).

In their 2003 study, Kulluvaara and Tornberg performed a case study of a unique concept Icehotel, located in Jukkasjärvi, Sweden. This research had a fundamental limitation of being conducted by using only one hotel as a case study. The authors admitted that their research was time and resource limited and was conducted from the hospitality industry perspective, not the customer perspective (Kulluvaara & Tornberg, 2003). Their finding confirmed that IMC was implemented by Icehotel, but the management was not following any documented IMC concepts or procedures, but rather sporadically performing marketing activities and the strategy was rather informal, however, the marketing message was rather uniform and consistent. No clear measurable objectives and tools to evaluate them were set, however, overall objectives did exist.

Skinner's 2005 research was on IMC, and how it could be used to create unified marketing messages to promote Wales as a destination brand. Skinner alludes to the fact that Wales is a rather small Celtic nation in need of rebranding in an increasingly competitive global tourism marketplace, and suggests that the synergy of marketing tools and communication coupled with problem identification and solving involved can help the region to become more competitive (Skinner, 2005). An analysis of empirical data and evidence indicated the violations of "one voice" principle of IMC, due to inconsistency in marketing communications messages, namely their content and strengths. Following a discussion of IMC principles and strategies, the same author has concluded that the true integrated marketing communication can possibly be achieved and still remains, given the fact the all procedures are conducted in accordance with IMC principles within the key public bodies of the region and in cross-communication among them.

Elliott and Boshoff discussed the importance of IMC implementation within the hospitality small business enterprises (SBE) of South Africa. As the authors have suggested, SBEs are a catalyst of creating new jobs and are actively contributing to the economic growth, and the tourism and hospitality sector is the one where proliferation of small enterprises is observed (Elliott & Boshoff, 2008). The authors have suggested that access to the market and sending the unified "one voice" message to that market is the key to success for small businesses, namely reaching their highest business potential, improving effectiveness, increasing revenue, optimizing their marketing communication strategies – all that by implementing and utilising a well thought out IMC strategy. Industry stakeholders should strive to strengthen their ICT capacities through developing e-marketing and examining the feasibility of regional mechanisms to promote information communication and capacity building to improve the efficiency and

competitiveness of SBEs (Elliot & Boshoff, 2008). An exploratory study was conducted with 316 managers in small tourism enterprises interviewed in South Africa in order to analyse the impact of different business orientations on IMC. The findings indicated the positive effect of defining a marketing orientation, strengthening entrepreneurial orientation and taking pro-active competitor orientation in regard to IMC processes.

Wang, Wu and Yuan focused their research on a heritage tourism site as a brand destination, namely the popular township of Lukang, Taiwan. The objective of the research was to assess the importance of developing and implementing an IMC strategy for this particular destination (Wang, Wu, & Yuan, 2009). The methodology for the empirical research consisted of a constructed questionnaire and a total of 197 valid questionnaires were collected; all the empirical data were collected at the Lukang destination, Taiwan. The authors suggested evaluation and measurement of IMC processes from the target audience perspective. The correlation between the elements and different social and demographic characteristics were also explored. It was established that there was difference in perception of IMC among different age groups. No differences in the IMC factors were indicated in regard to genders or educational levels. The findings were suggested to help tourism public bodies and heritage site managers to better understand the principles of IMC and to outline marketing strategies, management plans to achieve greater success in reaching target audiences.

Dinnie, Melewar, Seidenfuss and Musa conducted their research with the aim of determining the extent to which the nation branding activities of export promotion organisations (EPOs), investment agencies (IAs), national tourism organisations (NTOs) and embassies follow the principle of coordination that characterises an integrated marketing communications approach (Dinnie, Melewar, Seidenfuss, & Musa, 2010). Dimensions of interorganisational coordination in a nation branding context were also defined. The authors have researched the principle of coordination of activities, which is commonly observed in the IMC approach, with limitations highlighted by the authors being the relatively small dataset as well as the restricted geographic scope of the research. From the authors' findings, there are seven key dimensions of the principle of interorganisational coordination in a nation branding context. The authors suggest that these findings should address the need of creating enhanced coordination between all key stakeholders engaged in nation branding and promotion, but not limited only to public bodies and governmental organization, and also including private sector organizations and their respective partners.

In the 2011 research initiated by Seric and Gil-Saura, the main objective was to study complexity of IMC and ICT concepts in the tourism sector in detail, specifically in hotels (Seric & Gil-Saura, 2011). The authors conducted an empirical study in 17 hotels in Dalmatia region, namely the high-class and luxury

class hotels, as this category of hotels was more inclined to adopt ICT and IMC principles (Daghfous & Barkhi, 2009). The findings of the data analysis suggested that a higher degree of ICT implementation was observed in both categories of researched properties, however the context and the elements of ICT might vary depending on the category of the property; moreover, with the hotel category increase, the same increase was observed in ICT implementation. In regard to IMC, which is the main focus of the present paper, the authors have concluded that the efficiency of IMC implementation decreased in line with the hotel category rating increase; especially in regard to the first two IMC dimensions – unified communications for consistent messages and images, and differentiated communications to multiple customer groups – and partially regarding the third one – database-centred communications for tangible results (Seric & Gil-Saura, 2011). As IMC implementation limitations, the authors have highlighted the socio-economic characteristics and educational traditions of the nation have been identified, as a large number of property managers are still affectionate to former traditional practices and not fully embracing the ICT and IMC possibilities in the digital age.

IMC implementation in the tourism and hospitality sectors is mainly focused on IMC from managers' perspectives (Seric & Gil-Saura, 2012). The double managers-guests perspective has been suggested for this research in order to identify the gap between the two stakeholder's groups, keeping the geographical region the same, Dalmatia region. The findings confirmed a high implementation rate of IMC by the relevant hotels, but also found differences between the perceptions of marketing communications messages by guests and by hotel managers. According to the research finding, the marketers believed in the greater IMC impact and implementation than it was actually perceived by the hotel guests (Seric & Gil-Saura, 2012). The gap in perception between the two groups could be explained by the nature of the sender-receiver subjectivity of the message, creative processes when creating the message and its intangible characteristics that are easy interpretable in many different subjective ways based on individual characteristics. As it has been established in previous research attempts, customers frequently tend to redefine brand messages and symbols, and modify or even change their meanings completely in ways not imagined by their creators (Christensen et al., 2008).

In the 2015 research, the following objectives were outlined: to find out if there are statistically significant differences in IMC implementation between Italian and Croatian hotels from the manager's point of view; if there are statistically significant differences in IMC implementation between Italian and Croatian hotels from the guest's point of view; if the impact of IMC on customer satisfaction is positive and significant but moderated by the country of the hotel location (Seric, Gil-Saura, & Ozretic Dosen, 2015). From the manager's

perspective, the results reveal a high degree of IMC implementation in high-quality hotels located in both countries. In Italian hotels, some factual differences were observed, namely consistency between communication tools and channels, decisions on creation of more than two target customer groups, decisions on creation of single or multiple brand images, compiling of consumer information in the course of marketing communications activities. Croatian hotels showed better results in terms of consistency among linguistic message components, brand image and long-term consistency, as well as when following, responses of consumers after marketing communications activities (Seric et al., 2015). In regard to the second objective, the findings showed Croatian hotels guests perceived all the IMC aspects better than those of Italian hotels did. As for the third objective, the finding indicated that the geographical location (country) had a significant effect on the relationship between IMC and customer satisfaction; in particular, path coefficients from IMC to satisfaction were stronger among the Croatian hotel guests than those of Italy. In addition, the authors have concluded that implementation of IMC in hotels will positively influence the guest satisfaction rate. Practical implications addressed the need to adopt a more holistic approach to marketing communications and to evaluate on a regular basis consumers' opinion in order to measure the campaign success.

The analysis reveals that not enough hospitality and tourism IMC implementation researches are being carried out. The author has reviewed the papers on IMC in hospitality published in the last 15 years and has come to a conclusion that only a fraction of them is relevant to the hospitality industry and tourism, and even fewer are addressing IMC implementation and evaluation issues. The eight papers were selected according to the chosen methodology and approach. The IMC research within the hospitality industry is being majorly neglected, even though the need for integration has proven to be as necessary there as in other industries (Hudson, 2008). It also should be noted that the research activity in regard to IMC in the hospitality sector had increased in the later years. Moreover, some hospitality operations have not implemented IMC due to lack of confidence in and resources for IMC concept integration (Seric et al., 2015). Limitations highlighted by the author are the relatively small dataset and sample, as well as the restricted geographical scope of the empirical research, which may question the overall validity of the results and findings. This research study provided a comprehensive overview of each research in regard to IMC implementation in tourism, but not an exhaustive one.

Conclusions

The IMC concept is not just a means of sending your marketing message, but is a meaningful and comprehensive strategy of communicating with the target

audiences where all processes are carefully linked together. Work is ongoing on evaluating IMC implementation in the hospitality industry and developing new effective tools for its implementation, adapting the latest technologies and theoretical knowledge base to new approaches. The current findings are indicating a strong correlation between a successful IMC strategy implementation and a positive brand perception by the target audiences. At the same time, research efforts should be continued to evaluate a positive impact on hospitality brands, as empirical evidence data are very limited. Studies are needed to help identify main IMC implementation barriers and other causes that are preventing hospitality business to implement the integrated marketing concept. Only with more evidence-based practices and studies, IMC can make full use of the possibilities in the hospitality industry. This review is not meant to be interpreted as exhaustive, the nature of the analysis is interpretive and subjective, other scholars make take a different approach and organize and interpret the literature in alternate ways.

Summary

The aim of this literature review was to analyse the previously conducted research efforts on implementation of the concept of IMC in the hospitality industry, to investigate findings and conclusions of empirical and theoretical research in recent years. Only 8 papers were selected according to the chosen methodology and approach. The IMC research within the hospitality industry is being majorly neglected, even though the need for integration has proven to be as necessary there as in other industries. The nature of this review can be classified as narrative; the findings demonstrate a strong correlation between successful IMC implementation by the hospitality and tourism sector's businesses and building customer attention and awareness of a particular brand. Implementation of IMC in the hospitality and tourism sector needs to be monitored and continued to be researched, with future researches focusing on both perspectives - organizational and customer. Several interesting avenues for future research on IMC implementation in the hospitality industry include investigations into how customers perceive and respond to certain marketing stimuli and the measuring process of that response, how different communication strategies affect customer behaviour and the roles and effects of IMC within that response. The findings of this review can be used to provide researchers, hospitality and tourism sector practitioners and other stakeholders with insights into IMC implementation. This review is not meant to be interpreted as exhaustive, the nature of the analysis is interpretive and subjective, other scholars make take a different approach and organize and interpret the literature in alternate ways.

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