Developing an Integrated Communication Plan in the Digital Age

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Abstract Marketers are constantly exploring the best communication channels to deliver the best possible message to their targets. Therefore, technological advances are continuously shaping communications, especially in digital environments. Bidirectional and interactive dimensions characterize digital media communications. This study explores relevant literature on integrated marketing communications and communication in digital environments, including child-oriented marketing communications. As a result, theoretical framework on digital communication is provided for academics and practitioners.

Keywords Digital marketing · Integrated marketing communication · Digital communication · Business-to-business · Business-to-consumer · Child-oriented marketing communication

1   Integrated Marketing Communication

Advances in information technology and the consequent expansion of new digital media have brought new possibilities and perspectives to modern marketing and have made the management of marketing communications much more complex and

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challenging [1]. According to the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4As), Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) is characterized as:

> A marketing communication planning concept that recognizes added value in a plan that integrates a variety of strategic disciplines, for example, general advertising, direct response, sales promotion, and public relations, and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency, and maximum communication impact. (Shultz p.13, quoted in Amanda Zwerin et al. [2])

Nowadays, marketers are continually testing different communication channels to develop an effective communication. The reach of the message has become a key element of the best marketing practices, helping the companies to meet their goals and increase their value [3]. Hence, IMC strategy consists of analyzing, planning, and aligning the communication of the entire company, improving the impact of each communication channel. Its primary goal is to build long-term relationships between members of the organization and its customers [4, 5]. Consistency between messages sent through different channels as well as the consistency with previous messages are crucial [6].

Therefore, organizations are increasing their advertising budgets to prmote their products and services on social networks, developing a competitive advantage [7]. To date, traditional IMC consisted of a few popular tools, such as advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, and public relations, which are not fully effective in researching and evaluating the differences of Generation Z [8, 9]. Consequently, digital marketing and social networks must be integrated into traditional IMC tools to obtain a fully updated tool for the challenges of technological innovations [10].

As a result, it is expected that in the near future, marketing communication will undergo constant changes due to the development of technology, which indicates that new studies and research should be carried out for continuous growth and alignment with marketing objectives in order to reveal, the true effectiveness of a IMC strategy [11]. In this sense, the originality of this study is to further explore IMC, trends and child-oriented marketing communications.

1.1 Integrated Marketing Communication's Strategy

Currently, with the new communication´s environment, marketers should be able to structure IMC plans. In this sense, they should start having a clear understanding of the functioning of all the different types of communications, as well as the process and consumer buying decision process [1].

The development of a IMC plan sets the basis for the implementation of integrated marketing communications in organizations [12]. According to those authors, the IMC plan coordinates the components of the marketing-mix to achieve harmony in the messages sent to consumers.

Clow and Baack [12] suggest dividing the analysis into two steps (see Fig. 1). First, it necessary to carry out an analysis of the current external and internal environment based on primary and secondary data. Next, marketers should develop a

Fig. 1 Plan steps IMC [12]. *Source* Own preparation adapted from Clow and Baack

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

SWOT ANALYSIS

MARKETING OBJECTIVES

TARGET AUDIENCE

MARKETING STRATEGIES

MARKETING TATICS

IMPLEMENTATION

PERFORMANCE'S EVOLUTION

SWOT analysis, analyzing the elements present in the internal and external environment of the organization. This includes: the identification of the company's strengths and weaknesses (internal analysis), opportunities and threats (external environment). Subsequently, the definition of marketing goals should be suggested. Defining the primary goals of marketing communications enables companies to define different types of goals, e.g.: higher sales, increase in market share or a new competitive positioning. Those objectives must be related to the main target of the company. Therefore, the fourth step is related with the identification of the target(s). Based on the outlined marketing objectives and the selected target, the fifth stage concerns the development of the marketing-mix. Defining strategies should include the marketing-mix, brand image and positioning tactics, differentiation, and brand information. The tactical communication plan is the sixth stage of this model, aiming to support the required actions of the marketing-mix. The final two steps in the marketing plan are: (i) operationalizing the plan,monitor the performance of each element. Next, the budget and schedule of the IMC plan must be defined. The last stage of the model consists of its evaluation and control.

1.2 Tools for Integrated Marketing Communication

Technological developments changed the way companies and consumers communicate [1]. Over the years, promotional elements have included advertising, sales

promotion, and personal selling [12]. Furthermore, other advances such as: data analytics, e-advertising, digital marketing, direct marketing, social networks, public relations, play an important role in the development of communication in digital environments.

As mentioned by Key and Czaplewski [13], advertising consists of the development of any message, reminder or persuasion directed at a target market or audience, usually carried out in a generalized, non-personal way, and identified by a specific sponsor. Television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and billboards have long been some of the traditional advertising media [12]. In the current digitalization age, the dissemination of advertising is much faster and more effective, leading to the transmission of a more segmented, interactive, and responsive message [14]. Marketers can use their digital assets through bidirectional and interactive communication, namely digital media a part of the Digital Marketing. Digital marketing includes email marketing, websites, blogs, APPs [12].

Networks are extremely important as they influence users' social perception and behavior [15]. Compared to the more traditional communication channels, social networks are more persuasive as they allow consumers to express their satisfaction with product [16, 17]. Surprisingly more than 90% of companies use social media platforms like Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Tumblr to increase brand awareness and attract new customers [18, 19]. Social networks facilitate the location, measurement, and analysis of online strategies, allowing companies to draw conclusions and adjust strategies rapidly [13].

Traditional advertising has almost always faced several communication challenges and as such, new approaches have emerged that establish the fundamental basis of alternative marketing, such as buzz marketing, guerrilla marketing, product placement, branded advertising. entertainment, and lifestyle marketing [12]. Organizations identify new opportunities in the customer's purchase path. Therefore, companies should prepare their marketing messages to draw attention to these touchpoints, providing a complement to mass media and digital advertising. Carrying out a guerrilla marketing campaign can also include elements of buzz and lifestyle marketing, thus showing versatility and synergy between different alternative marketing programs.

In this context, Data Base Marketing (DBM) plays a vital importance and it defined as the process of building, maintaining, and using databases of customers, suppliers, or resellers, with the purpose of creating contact, relationships and carrying out interactions or transactions [20]. In the same line, Clow and Baack [12] refer that DBM consists of collecting and using customer data to improve interactions with the public to achieve customer loyalty. Data warehouses, data encoding, data mining, are some of the DBM program, allowing companies to better know their targets, which can make message dissemination more effective [13].

Direct Marketing consists of directing products to consumers, not using other channel or intermediaries [20, 12]. While advertising consists of non-personal communications, direct marketing seeks to create individual personal relationships with the target audience with the main objective of acquiring responses [13]. In direct marketing, organizations have the possibility to use certain channels to reach

consumers, such as direct mail, direct email, catalog marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), Inbound and Outbound telemarketing, interactive television, websites, and mobile devices [12, 20]. In the current digital technological age, companies are increasingly using mostly direct communications with their customers [21]. Textual paralanguages include the use of visual, audible, and non-verbal elements that usually replace written language with symbols, images (e.g.: emoji's) [22]. The existence of databases is what allows direct marketing to be carried out, which is a way for companies to better know their customers [13, 20], specially through DBM.

Consequently, Clow and Baack [12] refer that personal selling is an opportunity to build long-term relationships with consumers. Personal selling is one of the best techniques applied to convert the preference of the audience's behavior,however, it depends a lot on other elements of the communication mix. Personal selling efforts cannot be optimized without the existence of direct marketing, database support and advertising dissemination that creates awareness and knowledge about a certain situation otherwise, personal selling is likely to be lost [13]. According to Clow and Baack [12] the standard steps of a personal selling process consist of lead generation, lead qualification, knowledge acquisition, sales presentation, handling objections, closing the sale, and customer follow-up.

The public relations department manages advertising and other communications with all groups in contact with the company, with many of the functions being similar to those provided by the marketing department [12]. Subsequently to Kotler and Keller [20], public relations offer several options to promote and protect the image of a company or individual products, including company's newsletters, internal messages, public relations communications, correspondence with shareholders, annual reports, various special events and social networks. Public relations work closely with the other elements of the marketing mix in an integrated way [13].

2 Integrated Marketing Comunication B2B and B2C

From a marketer's perspective, it may seem that marketing communication strategies in business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) industries are fundamentally based on price promotions, however, there are several aspects in which both strategies have many points in common and one of the most important factor for both processes is customer orientation [23].

According to authors Rėklaitis and Pielienė [23], companies in the B2B sector focus on the logic and characteristics of the product, while in the B2C market the decision of consumers will be more emotional, that is, there will be no effort to analyze other alternatives or competitors. In marketing products and services to the B2B market, there is little or no personal emotion involved in the purchase decision. The message is very different when it comes to the marketing approach in the B2B and B2C business sectors. The B2C marketing message, especially if it is online, requires immediate action such as: using a coupon, subscribing to a newsletter, buying at a discount, among others. The B2B marketing message is informative: it calls a

consumer (or customer) to discover something [23]. Povolná [24] refers that the advertising messages issued by B2B organizations should be totally creative and more appealing to maintain a good relationship and attract the attention of business managers.

Choosing the right media channel can be crucial on the way to a successful communication strategy. Camilleri [25] emphasizes that B2C companies with limited budgets choose two or even fewer channels in the dissemination of their message, which increases the risk of wasting time and resources on activities that do not lead to the intended goals and objectives. Therefore, the author highlights that organizations with larger budgets have a greater choice of communication channels, can go for an electronic media channel (TV and radio), print advertising (newspapers and magazines), direct offers such as email, personal selling, public relations, and the internet.

On the other hand, budget constraints in the B2C industry can be overcome by choosing the right marketing tools and fostering the creation of relevant messages to attract consumers, unlike companies in the B2B business sectors that tend to use different communication channels [24]. According to Swani et al. [26], the appropriate media channels for B2B companies are television, online communication, and print advertising. Povolná [24] states that part of B2B communication has become online and predicts that this trend will continue to increase.

Many business-to-business (B2B) organizations are turning to digital marketing to increase customer acquisition [27]. In addition to interactive strategies to connect with consumers, digital marketing offers precise segmentation of potential customers [28, 29]. Organizations have realized that digital marketing in the B2B space increases the flow of information and trust between customers [30, 31]. Today through digital media, B2B customers have access to information about various products and services, which traditionally were not readily available to buyers and as such, this information helps B2B customers to make informed decisions. B2B organizations must maintain an online presence where they convey trust, whether through websites or blogs in online business communities or through social media platforms [32].

Brands drive business performance by influencing the market's perception of a company's products and services, thus making consumers pay a premium for the perceived value [33, 34]. Very recently, some studies have explored the interaction between customers and stakeholders and its effects on the performance of a company in the B2B sector [35]. Organizations make use of social networking sites as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and blogs, to acquire new customers, maintain long-term relationships with consumers, and increase brand recognition [36–38].

Industrial buyers use social media for their purchase as they compare products, research the market, and build relationships with salesperson [39].

Due to digitalization customers are becoming more informed and rely less on traditional selling initiatives [40]. Buyers are relying more on digital resources and their buying process more often involves the use of social media. For example, in the research B2B buyer survey, 82% of buyers stated that social media content has a significant impact on the purchase decision [40]. As a result, these changes in

consumer behavior place high pressure on B2B salespeople and traditional sales companies [40].

Additionally, 50% of the companies stated that social media has improved their marketing optimization and customer experience, while 25% stated that their revenue went up [41]. Even though B2B companies are benefitting from social media used by marketers, it is argued that research on that area is still in the embryonic stage and future research is needed [42–45]. There is a limited understanding of how B2B companies need to change to embrace recent technological innovations and how it can lead to business and societal transformation [46–48].

Furthermore, the author confirms through previous studies, that the content available on social networking sites is crucial for building advertising strategies. According to the authors [27], researchers have found that effective social media strategies require content that is valuable, engaging, relevant, and timely in which, should focus on helping rather than selling.

Regading price, Rėklaitis and Pielienė [23] compared to the B2C end-consumer market, the sales process in the B2B market takes longer. The price factor is obviously important in a B2B sales strategy, but its importance is limited to the buyer's budget. decision making in B2B markets can sometimes become a very formal process as it can involve several people [26]. Therefore, any organization that focuses on customer service should focus on after-sales activities such as customer loyalty and clarifying doubts about the characteristics of products while, in a organization that operates in the B2B market, it would be wise to provide consultancy services as well as discussions on technical, technological, legal, budgetary issues even without the certainty that the sale will be consumed [23].

In general, it can be concluded that the success of the business will be proportional to the degree of trust between the seller and the buyer since customer service is a highly important element in a marketing communication strategy regardless of the market in which the company operates.

Table 1 presents the types of channels and their preferred tools to communicate in which channel.

3   Child-Oriented Marketing and the New Media Channels

Nowadays, children have many options when it comes to digital entertainment. YouTube has emerged as an alternative to traditional television content as it offers new possibilities for brands to promote a degree of interaction with children and their parents [49, 50]. Young people who use social media are true audience creators and can easily promote electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in which they increase the visibility and notoriety of any brand and possibly gradually increase its sales [51]. By identifying the impact of eWOM on consumer decisions and attitudes, brands started by approaching social media influencers (users with a high degree of influence on social media channels and with a large audience of followers) and encouraging

Table 1 Types and communication channel's. Source

Channels	Communication channels	Author(s)
Business-to-Business	• Television • Online Communication • Print Advertising	Swani et al. [26]
	• Digital Marketing • Social Media	Pandey et al. [27], Michaelidou et al. [36], Pandey and Singh [38]
Business-to-Consumer	• Electronic Media Channel (Television, Radio) • Print Adverting (newspapers and magazines) • Email • Personal Selling • Public Relations • Internet	Camilleri [25]

them to create and distribute relevant content related to the brand, a practice called influencer marketing [52].

In the last decade, the advertising and marketing landscape aimed at children has changed dramatically. For example, children find advertising messages from vloggers on YouTube, read sponsored articles on websites, play advergames on tablets, see targeted ads on Facebook, etc. [53]. Thus, children are no longer only exposed to advertising messages on television and print media (such as commercials or brand positioning), but also with online advertising (such as advergames, social media advertising, or banners) and are approached by advertisers on their mobile devices [54].

As mentioned by Schouten et al. [55], celebrity endorsements are a popular way for marketers to promote their brands, products, and services. Many academic studies have confirmed that celebrity endorsement significantly increases the effectiveness of advertising [56]. However, in addition to using 'traditional' celebrities like actors, supermodels, and athletes to add value to their brand, companies are increasingly turning to social media influencers (also called 'microcelebrities') such as vloggers and 'Instafamous' personalities, to endorse their brands [57]. In contrast to traditional celebrities who gained public recognition because of their professional talent, social media influencers (hereinafter referred to as 'influencers'), gained fame by successfully identifying themselves as experts on social media platforms [58]. By enthusiastically sharing self-generated content on topics such as beauty, fitness, food and fashion, these social media users (mostly women) have gained a large following, turning their online social presence into a core profession such as a 'fashionblogger' or 'fitgirl' [59].

Influencers attract millions of followers by sharing curated content from their daily lives on platforms like Instagram and YouTube, evolving around a specific interest domain [60]. While "traditional" celebrities also found their way onto social media, influencers built their careers online and were unknown to the general public before. Not only do influencers have the power to directly influence the purchasing

decisions of a large audience, but their followers also deem them to be credible sources of information [52, 61].

A growing body of academic research is investigating the merits of influencer marketing and the processes that play a role in influencers' effects on brand responses. For example, Lee and Watkins [62] showed that vloggers positively affect consumer purchase intentions for (luxury) brands promoted in their vlogs. Similarly, as showed by Chapple and Cownie [60], consumers claimed to regularly follow lifestyle vloggers' product recommendations, whether buying a product or recommending it to others. In another study, Colliander and Dahlén [63] found that a blog post about a fashion brand resulted in higher brand attitude and increased purchase intent compared to an online magazine article on the same topic, because readers felt closer to the blogger. According to authors Djafarova and Rushworth [61], interviews with Instagram users suggest that influencers are perceived as more trustworthy and relatable than traditional female celebrities, and their product reviews have a significant impact on the purchasing behavior of young women. In a previous study comparing the effectiveness of celebrity recommendations with product reviews from an unknown "average" customer, female participants were more positive about a promoted experience product when it was promoted by a relatable consumer [64].

Previous studies on influencer marketing, conducted among students and adult participants, have shown that influencers are considered more credible and trustworthy than traditional celebrities and are found more likable when they have a high following, as they are then perceived as more popular [61, 52, 53].

4 Conclusion

The objective of this work was to explore the relevant literature on integrated marketing communications and communication in digital environments, including child-oriented marketing communications.

In that sense, we contribute to the innovation literature by showing that in the current digitalization age, marketing communications are constantly changing due to the development of technology. As a result, marketers need to continually test different communication channels to achieve an effective communication. By doing so, we expand the established by Keller [1] and Patti et al. [11], identifying clear benefits of integrated marketing communications. Consequently, this study is line with the literature (e.g.: Rèklaitis and Pilelienè [23]), supporting that B2B and B2C industries should focus on developing a customer's service strategy to develop a degree of trust between the seller and the buyer. Furthermore, this work also contribute to the IMC literature by providing clear evidence of the positive impact that celebrity endorsement has on brands. This result is line with the recent work of Schouten et al. [55], making it even more clear that the celebrity endorsement is a popular way for marketers to promote their brands, products, and services. Relevant insights on the social media influencers are also provided.

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