



Through the looking glass: Understanding Thai academics' viewpoints on integrated marketing communications

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 5 June 2017

Revised 19 August 2017

Accepted 12 October 2017

Available online 27 October 2017

Keywords:

academics,
communication,
education,
integrated marketing communications,
Thailand

Abstract

After its debut in the 1980s, the concept of integrated marketing communications (IMC) has been widely adopted by local and international businesses. Previous studies on IMC, however, have primarily focused on marketers and advertising agencies. Thus, this research aimed to investigate academics' perspectives on four key areas of IMC: (a) the definition of IMC, (b) the key principles of IMC, (c) the benefits and barriers to IMC implementation, and (d) the future of IMC. Six qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with academics who had had at least eight years of direct experience in teaching IMC or marketing communications-related courses from top-ranked public and private universities in Thailand. The findings revealed that they had a good understanding of IMC. Surprisingly, this was limited to the strategic perspective, not the corporate perspective. In terms of IMC definition, they agreed that no matter what it was called, the most important thing was to understand the concept and core principles. They also believed that IMC would remain in this digital era; in fact, IMC would likely be driven by technological advancement. In addition, an inflexible organizational structure, turf battles, and lack of support from top management were frequently referred to as barriers to IMC implementation.

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Introduction

With its continuous growth and popularity, integrated marketing communications, recognized as IMC, has been broadly adopted since its inception (Kim, Han, & Schultz, 2004; Kliatchko & Schultz, 2014; Luxton, Reid, & Mavondo, 2015; Reid, 2005). The notion of IMC has gained considerable attention among academics and practitioners across the U.S., as well as in European and Asian countries. Thorough research on IMC has been conducted over the past two decades. So far, however, there has been little discussion about academics' views on IMC issues (Griffin & Pasadeos, 1998).

In Thailand, IMC was first introduced by Ogilvy & Mather, a well-known U.S. advertising agency (Pattarathammas, 2004), and quickly gained acceptance among Thai marketers and agencies (Chaihanchai & Anantachart, 2013). IMC has also drawn the attention of Thai academics, and became a popular topic of academic research. However, no previous study has investigated academics' opinions. Most findings have presented the practitioners' (advertising practitioners and marketers) viewpoint. By focusing on the practitioners' role in IMC, researchers have missed the opportunity to study another key player—the academic. Academics are not only responsible for conducting research, but they also teach and produce future IMC practitioners to implement this integrated approach in the real world.

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Peer review under responsibility of Kasetsart University.

This study, therefore, aimed to examine the academics' perspectives on four key areas—definition of IMC, key principles of IMC, benefits and barriers to IMC implementation, and the future of IMC—to understand their insights into interpreting IMC 30 years after its adoption in Thailand.

Literature Review

Looking Back at Its Definitions

Labeled as a new form of advertising, and sometimes referred to as orchestration, whole egg, one-stop shopping, seamless communication, one-to-one marketing, or 360-degree marketing, IMC has been handed a variety of definitions (Schultz, 1993b).

Initially introduced in the late 1980s at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University in the U.S., integrated marketing communications was first defined in a research study by Caywood, Schultz, and Wang (1991), in cooperation with the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4As). The 4As defined IMC as a marketing communications concept emphasizing the values and advantages of an amalgamation across marketing communications tools, such as, advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion, and public relations, to create clarity, consistency, and maximum communication impact.

According to the aforementioned definition proposed by the 4As, Schultz (1993c) further explained that IMC is a process of development and application of communication programs adjusted to suit target markets. Kitchen, Brignell, Li, and Jones (2004) explained IMC as the process of combining, integrating, and synergizing marketing communications components to complement the chosen tools.

In addition, since the marketplace is now global, the IMC perspective has been growing toward integrated global marketing communications (IGMC). That is, the integration must take place not only at the product brand level, but also at the business or corporation level. Both levels are driven by mission, value, strategic vision, but at the business or corporate level, integrated corporate communication focuses on internal and external publics. At the product brand level, integrated marketing communication focuses on markets and audience. These two forms of communications must be interactive and ongoing (Kitchen & Schultz, 2003; Kitchen & Schultz, 2000a). Similarly, global integrated marketing communications (GIMC) has its roots in global markets and in IMC. It highlights global communications across both countries (horizontal dimension) and promotional disciplines (vertical dimension) (Gould, Lerman, & Grein, 1999; Grien & Gould, 1996).

With the continuous growth of IMC's importance and ongoing digital advancements, Kliatchko proposed a new definition of IMC in 2008 as a customer-oriented business process with a strategic management of stakeholders including external customers and internal customers, contents, communication channels (any brand touchpoint that can create customer experience), and communication results—both behavioral response and financial outcome.

Moreover, recent results showed that instead of using the term IMC, practitioners use other terms, for example,

integrated thinking, integrated planning, integrated marketing, or full-service integration. They also all agreed that no matter what it is called; IMC is practiced in their companies (Kliatchko & Schultz, 2014).

Essences of IMC

IMC has evolved to embrace much more than a narrow marketing approach. It has captured organizational activities or internal processes. IMC, therefore, is perceived as a new marketing paradigm, which can be applied under diverse business circumstances (Lucka & Moffatt, 2009). From this definition, it can be concluded that IMC has five outstanding principles. The first principle is that of starting with the customer or prospect. Because the primary objective is to create a behavioral response in consumers, the IMC process should start with the customer's needs (on the outside), then, revert back to the brand communication plan (the inside), in order to determine the communication strategy, channel, and message to stand in-line with different target needs (Shimp & Andrews, 2013).

Second, IMC process should use relevant contacts or touchpoints to efficiently and effectively reach target consumers. The third principle is speaking with a single voice meaning that all messages relayed to targets across communication channels and touchpoints should be consistent. The fourth IMC feature is building relationships with customers because a good relationship with the customer will lead to repurchasing behavior and brand loyalty. Lastly comes affecting behavior, which states that a successful IMC plan should generate a behavioral response (Shimp & Andrews, 2013).

Moreover, Schultz (1993a) pinpointed six key IMC features. The first feature is outside-in planning, which emphasizes consumer needs, then using the collected data to select the most suitable communication approach to meet the consumer's needs. The second feature is a customer-oriented database, which help marketers understand and predict consumer behaviors, as well as aid them in reaching the right targets. The third feature is brand contacts, which implies that integration of different marketing communications disciplines would produce a greater impact than using a single tool. The fourth feature of IMC is zero-based planning. It considers the current market environment and brand situation, not the previous year's communication plan and budget.

The fifth IMC feature is one voice. The focal point is to maximize each communication tool with consistency and harmony under the same brand concept. A cross-functional working environment is another feature of IMC. It involves coordination across every department to put the business forward.

Advantages and Backfires of IMC Implementation

Although integration is considered a relatively new way of thinking, IMC implementation has been increasingly practiced by small-sized and large-sized organizations across the world. According to previous research, IMC can produce several advantages for organizations (Kitchen & Schultz, 2000b; Lucka & Moffatt, 2009; Schultz, 1998). It

offers companies a competitive edge, increases sales volume, and develops customer satisfaction (Kitchen & Schultz, 2000b). Owing to its central idea as a consumer-centric notion, IMC can heighten the relationship between brand and customer. Brand equity, therefore, is a product of strong brand relationships (Burmans, Jost-Benz, & Riley, 2009).

Besides building strong brand equity, creating a greater message impact, and making more profits, it also reduces media waste, saves time and budget, and helps centralize a communication plan (Kliatchko, 2005; Low, 2000). In addition, it plays a crucial role in managing the intangible side of business, that is building relationships with customers and stakeholders (Reid, 2005). The benefit of a market-oriented notion is also positively related to increased brand loyalty and higher customer satisfaction (Zahay, Peltier, Schultz, & Griffin, 2004). A recent study on IMC capability demonstrated that IMC has a significant direct effect on campaign effectiveness and a significant indirect effect on a brand's market-based performance (Luxton et al., 2015).

While there are considerable upside effects from practicing an IMC approach, there are some barriers to its implementation. One concern is that managers may not fully understand the process; believing that IMC is about creating a similar message (Duncan, 2005). Lacking skillful personnel, who can plan and execute communication tools, is another obstacle to this integrated approach. A further issue that can affect implementation is an inappropriate organizational structure, such as, vertical structure, independent-working style of specialists, poor marketing standpoint, and a fixed organizational culture (Shimp & Andrews, 2013). Further weaknesses include the lack of a clear definition, difficulty of execution, and organizational culture (Brown, 1993). It is suggested that they can be resolved through training, organizational restructuring, adjustment of organizational culture, increased support from top management, attention to consumer insights, and communication centralization (D. Schultz & H. Schultz, 2004).

IMC and the Digital Era

In the digital age, technological advancement plays an increasingly important role in daily life. In the era of increased ease of access to information, most consumers are no longer passive. Brand communication, thus, is no longer a one-way conversation, creating and sending messages that the brand wants consumers to hear. It is, instead, an interactive two-way communication between the brand and its customers. IMC, henceforth, becomes interactive IMC.

Due to new media and its potential and role in interacting with customers, Peltier, Schibrowsky, and Schultz (2003) emphasized an interactive IMC approach. It is a concept developed from relationship marketing, exploiting customer data to create an individual exchange and to design a longitudinal contact strategy. With an interactive IMC approach, long-term planning is required. This will in turn help to build relationships with customers and build brand equity. In the meantime, a corporate communication plan should be designed with clear objectives and tactics in

mind, while organizations should evaluate their communication plans to assess their effectiveness.

According to Peltier et al. (2003), the differences between traditional IMC and interactive IMC concern the role of databases, communication issues, relationship dynamics, relationship metrics, and IMC metrics. In an interactive IMC notion, the importance placed on database gathering is high and encompasses both traditional and interactive methods of data collection. Under this new method, a greater emphasis is placed on gathering psychographic and behavioral data for further use. With regards to communication, the chosen media are based on customer's current media preferences and are more targeted and personalized.

With increasingly connected consumers who operate and live in digital communities, businesses should already have become adjusted to the current environment and should be prepared to adjust as new situations arise. IMC must also incorporate technological advancements within society to develop more in-depth brand engagement and to create greater involvement with customers (Kliatchko, 2009).

Methods

In order to explore the perspectives of academics and their understanding of IMC, a qualitative approach was employed for this study. All six in-depth interviews were conducted in person with each key informant, in this case, professors from both top-ranked public and private universities in Thailand. The interviews were conducted between April and May 2016, and each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min.

A semi-structured question guideline was designed for the interviews and was sent to the respondents two weeks before the interview. The interviews were conducted in a semi-formal manner due to the nature of the interviewees. The question items were designed to cover the necessary issues of the study which were IMC's definition, the key principles of IMC, the benefits and barriers to IMC implementation, and the future of IMC.

The universities were selected systematically within the defined criteria. The first criteria stipulated that each interviewee must be from a top-ranked university in Thailand in accordance with the QS World University Rankings 2014/15. Second, those universities must also have an IMC-based academic course that includes marketing communications and advertising. Following the criteria, six universities were selected. An equal number of public and private universities were selected. One professor from each university was purposively selected based on teaching record in IMC or related fields. Two were male, while the rest were female. Three of them hold master's degrees while three hold doctoral degrees. On average, all of them had had at least 10 years teaching experience, and they were in the age range 38–58 years.

Results

The study aimed to explore the academics' understanding towards IMC and subsequent insights on the

subject. In accordance with the previous literature review, this study sought to investigate their views on four issues perceived vital to the field of IMC—the definition of IMC, the key principles of IMC, the benefits and barriers to IMC implementation, and the future of IMC.

IMC Definitions

In terms of the definition of IMC, three of the respondents described IMC as a form of communication; not a process or a concept. It was understood that IMC was a type of communication designed specifically for marketing purposes, focusing on maximizing the integration of marketing communications tools. For example, one female respondent from a private university stated that, “*IMC is a communication for marketing purposes with the integration focusing on marketing communications tools for the greatest communication effectiveness.*” Similarly, one male professor from a public university viewed IMC as an important marketing strategy, augmenting communication effectiveness via a coordination of marketing communications disciplines. In addition, IMC was also viewed by one female respondent from a public university as an objective-based brand communication concentrating on the integration of marketing communications tools with a consistent message across contact channels.

However, only one female professor, hailing from a public university and holding a master’s degree from Northwestern University in the U.S., defined IMC as a business process. The given explanation was that, “*IMC is a customer-oriented business process covering internal and external communication for financial and behavioral results.*”

Still, all respondents agreed on the following issues with regards to the definition of IMC. First, IMC is the only approach that combines business units, allowing its practice in all types of business, whether non-profit, or profit-oriented businesses. Second, an IMC approach is not just about communicating with the targets. More specifically, it is about strategically planning how to use the right tools to speak with the right targets. Besides the definition, all respondents agreed that it should be deemed compulsory to study IMC because its core ideas merge well with today’s highly competitive market environment. However, unexpectedly, only one male respondent from a private university indicated that the course relating to IMC at his university had been designated as mandatory for all communication students.

The respondents were in agreement that integration is not just about using as many marketing communications tools as one can, but it is a strategic planning and managing marketing communications tool. Each tool has its own strengths and weaknesses. It is a matter of how to strategically select each tool, so that they may complement each other. The integration among these marketing communications disciplines should also be planned to achieve the communication objectives. Moreover, integration has a higher likelihood of effectiveness if all messages speak in a single voice across brand channels. Clarity combined with uniformity will create a more impactful communication effect.

To further investigate their opinion on IMC definition, [Kliatchko’s \(2008\)](#) definition of IMC was provided to clarify

the meaning of IMC because it embraces both strategic and corporate view focusing on the four core pillars of IMC: stakeholders, contents, channels, and results. Based on his definition, “*IMC is an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels, and results of brand communication programs.*” Overall, every respondent agreed with this definition. Two respondents were in complete agreement stating that this definition was complete and contained the key elements of IMC. However, three mentioned that with regards to Kliatchko’s reference to results, it should include both short-term and long-term results. Short-term results include behavioral response, for example, sales promotions that are used to stimulate an immediate consumer response. Long-term results involve brand relationships and brand equity.

Key Principles of IMC

For the second part of the study, the respondents’ views were examined on the key principles of IMC. All of the respondents were in agreement that IMC is a customer-centric or outside-in approach. A female professor from a public university claimed that “*Consumers are heroes.*” Likewise, three out of six respondents also mentioned consumer insight as one of the key IMC principles. As IMC is a customer-oriented notion, finding or getting to know consumer insight is fundamental for organizations before they can design their marketing communications plans.

Another key IMC principle that respondents agreed upon was the focus on producing consistent messages across brand channels, or a so-called single voice. Every message delivered should be unified, with a clear direction set for brand positioning, brand essence, and brand identity. In addition, all respondents agreed that there should be synergy among marketing communications disciplines. In addition, a male professor from a public university mentioned another key IMC feature—zero-based planning. He explained that it is communication planning based on the current brand situation. It is not a budget-driven or profit-oriented plan. A previous year’s marketing communications plan should be used for analysis, not for determining the current plan, he added.

Two female respondents from public universities highlighted that IMC effectiveness should not exclude results and measurements. Successful IMC implementation should lead to both financial and behavioral results over time. Measurements of IMC effectiveness should be considered at the early stages of planning. It should be gauged from both the output and outcome of its practice.

The next IMC principle covered the organizational level. All the respondents stated that an IMC approach focuses not only on external customers, but also on internal customers, that is, employees. Internal communication is crucial for the IMC process. If employees do not embrace the same core brand concept and lack a customer-centric notion, IMC implementation cannot be complete. The respondents were then further questioned if IMC matters should be solely the responsibility of marketers. All respondents presented the same answer that IMC is a joint responsibility. A female professor from a public university

explained that, “*IMC is everyone’s duty. Everyone is a brand touchpoint and an organization should make its employees feel that they own their brand.*”

Benefits and Barriers to IMC Implementation

For the third key area of IMC, the participants were asked to give their opinions on the benefits of and barriers to IMC implementation. With regards to the benefits of IMC, all the professors interviewed agree that IMC offers companies a competitive edge and long-term profits. One female respondent from a private university mentioned that IMC also unifies departments and directs them to a shared purpose. Another two explained that owing to its consistency principle, IMC centralizes brand communication across brand touchpoints.

In terms of branding, all respondents agreed that IMC is highly connected to branding. It communicates brand differentiation to stand out in the mind of the consumers. Without IMC-driven thinking, a brand might communicate its personality in different directions. Therefore, another benefit of IMC is that it enhances and makes brand personality distinctive through congruent and harmonious brand messages. Consumers, then have a clear and strong image of that brand in their minds. More importantly, if brand personality matches or resonates with consumers, they are more likely to purchase that brand, either for emotional or functional benefits because that brand connects with them. Each respondent expressed the opinion that a strong brand personality that is driven by IMC will strengthen brand equity. Eventually, this will lead to long-term organizational profits.

In terms of barriers to IMC implementation, there was unanimous agreement that organizational structure affects IMC implementation. Fragmentation of specialists, independent working environments, turf battles, and lacking a shared purpose, were given as examples of poor organizational structure. In addition, they believed that for an organization with a rigid structure or system, such as governmental units in Thailand, it can be more difficult to implement IMC. All respondents drew the conclusion that IMC would not be successful without support from top management. Another concern expressed by the respondents is that cross-functional teamwork should be encouraged within an organization because it helps increase coordination and bridge gaps across departments. Also, they all agreed that the lack of a true understanding of IMC concepts is a major obstacle to its implementation. Marketers, especially at the managerial level onward, should have basic marketing communications knowledge. A manager that has studied and is equipped with knowledge of IMC would be ideal.

The respondents also suggested solutions to the barriers to IMC implementation. All six professors viewed that a cross-functional approach would smoothen and drive IMC practice. They also concurred that an IMC process would not be successful without the support of top management. Two respondents suggested that a more comprehensive understanding of IMC could be achieved through training that allows all employees to become equipped with IMC-based knowledge and customer-centric thinking. Lastly,

one professor noted that internal communication plays a crucial part in the practice of IMC. An organization has to make its employees feel that they are a part of their brand as they are the driving force of the brands success.

Future of IMC

With regards to the future of IMC, the respondents were asked whether IMC would remain relevant, particularly in the digital era. All agreed that IMC would survive alongside the rise of digital media. All respondents claimed that technological advancement would drive IMC forward, especially in the area of database management. Any company that is equipped with a state-of-the-art database system will have access to tangible consumer data. Databases are thus a valuable tool for customer relationship management.

One male professor mentioned that online media would play a greater role moving forward, and would be used to a higher degree because it was cheaper and more easily accessible to both mass target and personalized audiences, compared to traditional media. A professor from a private university added that there would no longer be above-the-line or below-the-line communications. Lines and boundaries would disappear leaving in their place a seamless flow of communication assisted by technology and digital media usage. Consumers would consume or be exposed to more than one media platform simultaneously. Although media platforms had changed and would continue to change, the central ideas of IMC would remain. The underlining challenge was learning how to select each discipline to be consistent with the target consumers. In addition, a professor from a public university stated that the advancement of technology also aided IMC in terms of measurement capabilities. IMC effectiveness would be more accurately measured. Consumer responses, both financial and behavioral, would also be properly gauged. One respondent also suggested that, apart from technological advancements, improved organizational management would be able to advance IMC in the future. But business ideas must be adjusted or they would fail in a highly competitive market environment.

Half of the professors went further saying that with technology-driven communication, mobile marketing and one-on-one marketing would play a greater role. One suggested that content includes not only text-based, but also everything that can communicate to consumers, such as, store ambience, staff, or service. Lastly, only one respondent mentioned that IMC would be driven further if IMC could be installed as a mandatory course. Marketing communications students, the next generation of marketers or practitioners, would continue to misinterpret the concept of IMC unless they were taught to have a better understanding of IMC concept.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate academics' viewpoints on four main areas of IMC—the definitions of IMC, key principles of IMC, benefits and barriers to IMC implementation, and the future of IMC.

Definitions of IMC

Consistent with the literature review and previous research on the key issues of IMC, including practices of IMC conducted with marketers and practitioners (Anantachart, 2003, 2006; Chaihanchai & Anantachart, 2013; Chu, Hsu, & Li, 2009; Duncan & Everett, 1993), this study showed that Thai academics had positive views on IMC and had a good understanding of its concepts. It was somewhat surprising that the interview responses were focused on IMC from an operational or strategic viewpoint. That is, when asked to define what IMC meant to them, most of the interviewed professors viewed IMC as either one form of marketing communications or marketing strategy with a focus on the importance of strategic integration among marketing communications tools for greater effect.

Most of their explanations were consistent with early IMC definitions, such as, the 4As' (1989) definition. IMC is a concept of marketing communications planning that recognizes the added value in a program that integrates a variety of strategic disciplines, for example, traditional advertising, direct response advertising, sales promotion, and public relations, then combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency, and maximum impact. A further definition of IMC similar to the findings was brought to light by Kotler and Keller (2012) who argued that IMC is a concept under which a company carefully integrated and coordinated its many communication channels to deliver a clear, consistent, and compelling message about the organization and its products. This was also similar to an IMC definition provided by Stuhlfaut and Davis (2010), whereby IMC is an umbrella term covering the total range of promotional activities across multiple communication disciplines.

On the other hand, the results of this study differed from Kliatchko and Schultz's (2014) findings whereby they concluded that senior management and agencies in the Asia-Pacific region mainly viewed IMC as a process at the organizational level. This study's were also contrasted with studies undertaken by Eagle, Kitchen, Hyde, Fourie, and Padiseti (1999), and by D. Schultz and H. Schultz (2004). According to both studies, IMC is viewed as a business process, inferring that IMC implementation involves both the corporate and operational levels, with a focus on strategic and management issues.

However, only one professor from a public university defined IMC as a business process with a holistic view. She described IMC as a business process with customer-centric orientation embracing internal and external communications for financial and behavioral responses. Her explanation was parallel to D. Schultz and H. Schultz's (2004) definition that IMC 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.

In terms of integration, all respondents highly agreed that it is not just a combination of a wide range of communication disciplines but rather it is the strategic planning and management of different communication

disciplines to maximize integration for a greater impact. This was consistent with Duncan and Everett's (1993) explanation that integration is in the sense of strategic amalgamation among marketing communications disciplines. It is also a fundamental concept of IMC that need to be appreciated.

In summary, the findings showed that all respondents have a basic understanding of the definitions of IMC, although the majority viewed IMC as a strategic level process. They also agreed that no matter what IMC was called, the most important thing was to understand its concepts and core principles. Congruently, Schultz (1993a) stated that IMC has been defined in a variety of ways depending on who provided the definition. Similarly, Kliatchko and Schultz's (2014) findings revealed that most senior management and agency respondents did not use the term IMC. Yet, despite not using the term explicitly, IMC has still been implemented in their organizations. In addition, Kliatchko and Schultz also discovered that IMC is a standard and essential practice today in their organizations. Likewise, all the professor respondents agreed that studying an IMC course should be considered a prerequisite for students because its core ideas are well-suited to the current highly competitive business situation.

Key Principles of IMC

When asked about the key principles of IMC, all of the interviewed professors had an understanding of the primary principles such as, IMC starts from customers. In other words, IMC is a customer-centric based thinking. Thus, it implied that they comprehended the centrality of this approach. Moreover, integration among marketing communications disciplines should be in line with communication objectives and place importance on synergy. The results supported an earlier study by Eagle et al. (1999) that, in terms of synergy, IMC practitioners should accurately understand how each discipline works and should consider the issue of organizational and consumer contexts. Similarly, the results also reinforced Schultz's (1993a) study that synergy among marketing communications tools is a crucial IMC principle. It can create a greater impact than using just one tool, yet the power of synergy will be most successful if the delivered brand messages are congruent and harmonious with the target groups.

The results were also consistent with Shimp and Andrews (2013) findings that the IMC process should start with consumers or prospects, and work backwards to the brand. It was also parallel to Kitchen et al. (2004) that IMC is an outside-in marketing driven by consumers or potential buyers. In addition, one professor's explanation covered zero-based planning which was in line with Schultz's (1993a) explanation on the six principles of IMC. According to D. Schultz, zero-based planning is a concept of communication and budget management beginning with communication objectives. A communication strategy should not depend on the previous plan and budget, instead taking into consideration the current market and brand situation.

In line with the previous review (Schultz, 1993a), all of the professor respondents supported the consistency

principle. They agreed that brand messages should be consistent across all communication channels. Each communication discipline has its own strengths and weaknesses; therefore, strategic planning is required in this process for maximum effectiveness.

Benefits and Barriers to IMC Implementation

In terms of the benefits of IMC, the results supported the previous studies. All respondents agreed that an IMC approach offers a company a competitive edge, as well as generating long-term profitable results (Kitchen & Schultz, 2000b; Lucka & Moffatt, 2009; Schultz, 1998). IMC also strengthens brand personality and enhances brand equity through the clarity and consistency of brand messages. According to Burmann et al. (2009), IMC can improve a brand's relationship with its customers, and brand equity, in turn, is a product of a strong brand relationship.

One third of the respondents mentioned that IMC centralizes brand communication across all channels, which supports D. Schultz and H. Schultz's (2004) explanation that all brand communications must be controlled in order to deliver unified messages. One respondent indicated that IMC helps unify coordination within an organization. According to Lucka and Moffatt (2009), with a cross-functional approach, IMC can elevate coordination among employees because everyone must work together for the same-shared purpose.

Likewise, for barriers to IMC implementation, the results presented uniformity with previous research (Brown, 1993; Percy, 1997; Shimp & Andrews, 2013). All of the professors were in agreement that organizational structure was an obstacle to IMC practice such as, an inflexible working system and structure, organizational culture, and turf battles. Thus, organizations in Thailand, with rigid structures, a high context culture, and complex hierarchical levels, need to adjust themselves to fit the current market situation or they might not be able to survive (Duncan & Moriarty, 1997). To solve this problem, all of the respondents offered the same solution; IMC implementation required full support and involvement of top management in order to succeed. These findings were also supported by previous studies. For example, Eagle et al. (1999) found that top management needed to take control of integration and steer the organization toward a customer-oriented culture.

Another solution offered by the respondents was training, which matched with a study by Kitchen and Li (2005). It implied that training must be accorded to employees. Organizations should hire well-rounded IMC experts to properly train their employees to have a better knowledge of IMC. The issues of turf battles and egos could also be worked on through training (Low, 2000).

Future of IMC

Finally, with regard to IMC in the digital era, the study sample agreed that IMC would survive; in fact, IMC would be driven by technological advancement and the rise of digital media. Congruent with the previous review (Peltier et al., 2003), IMC would be more interactive in creating a two-way communication between brand and consumers. It

could be concluded that database usage would be more widely exercised for customer relationship management because it helps an organization understand its customers better through recorded data such as, purchasing behavior, complaints, and compliments. It can also predict consumer behavior, as well as help a company communicate with the right target at the right time and place.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study's primary contribution was to provide insights into academics' points of view and to record their suggestions for IMC implementation. The findings reflected that academics had a good understanding of the IMC concept. Yet one unexpected finding was that half of them viewed IMC as a form of communication and most of them viewed IMC only at the strategic or operational level, although in terms of a holistic perspective, IMC is viewed as a business process or a total brand communication, whereby integration is not only the responsibility of the marketing communications department, but the duty of all departments across the company (Kliatchko, 2008; Moriarty, Mitchell, & Wells, 2015; D. Schultz & H. Schultz, 2004).

In addition, the findings of this research not only reflected academics' viewpoints, but also showed similarities and differences in the theoretical and practical world. That is, both academics and practitioners had positive opinions of IMC (Anantachart, 2003, 2006; Chaihanchai & Anantachart, 2013; Chu et al., 2009; Duncan & Everett, 1993). Yet they had different views on the overall IMC concept. Senior management and agencies in the Asia-Pacific region mainly viewed IMC as a process at the organizational level (Kliatchko & Schultz, 2014), while academics here mainly recognized IMC as a strategic processor at the operational level (Kliatchko, 2008).

Thus, it could be concluded that the academic respondents did not yet have a complete understanding of IMC, which led to a major concern about the long-term future of IMC education in Thailand. Advertising, public relations, or IMC-related educators should embrace broader perspectives of IMC and investigate the growing concept of IMC. Moreover, since most companies require practitioners with a broader area of communications, it is suggested here that an introductory course to IMC or marketing communications programs should be made mandatory so that graduates who will become practitioners can build a strong theoretical foundation and deeper understanding of the IMC concept. Apart from the background of IMC, graduates in communication fields should be equipped with managerial courses, such as business management and organizational behavior and management, because in terms of business or the corporate level, IMC requires integration and coordination across a company to move the business forward. Educators should also include additional training based on the local professional marketplace in order to prepare their students for the practical communities.

In addition, with the rise of digital media and its popularity, it is undeniable that online and social media will be integrated in marketing communications plans. Even so, we

must remember that it is just a communication tool, not the entirety of IMC. At some point in the future, new tools will be introduced, but the core principle, which is integration, will remain—it does not change according to the emergence of new tools. At the end of the day, what is important is how to strategically use those tools with the right target and align them with communication objectives. Therefore, IMC key principles will continue, no matter how each discipline changes its form. IMC, consequently, will survive in this digital age because its core principles remain.

Limitations and Future Research

This study provided only the viewpoints of academics. Thus, for future research, a syllabus analysis of IMC or related courses should be attempted for a more profound investigation. This study was limited to its scope with six in-depth interviews conducted, though the respondents were professors in IMC-related fields from top-ranked universities. Furthermore, the interviewees showed consistency and uniformity across their answers and no new themes emerged. However, for a greater range and more complete overview of how well the IMC concept is understood and interpreted within localized areas, future research should attempt to expand its scope across the Asia-Pacific region. This would include in-depth studies with more advanced, as well as less developed universities across the region.

This study would provide useful results for researchers who are interested in the field of IMC and professors who teach IMC courses. The academics' viewpoints and suggestions can also serve as a guideline for IMC practitioners with regards to their general understanding and resolution of IMC adoption.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

This research study was supported by the 100th Anniversary of Chulalongkorn University Fund for Doctoral Scholarship and the 90th Anniversary of Chulalongkorn University Rachadapisek Sompote Endowment Fund.

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