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Modelling the influence of integrated marketing communication on consumer behaviour: an approach based on hierarchy of effects concept

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Abstract

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) is one of the most challenging and controversial areas of research, the concept evolving from a narrow view of elaborating communication mix and coordinating communication tools to a complex strategic process. Adopting the approach according with IMC is not part of the marketing mix, but a holistic concept using marketing mix elements to create and strengthen relationship with consumers, it could be outlined a synergistic action of product, price, placement and marketing communications, focused on the consumer behaviour. Starting from the consumer-centric view of the modern marketing, it can be stated that the main goal of IMC is affecting the consumer behaviour and implicitly its structural processes: perception, attitude, information, motivation and actual behaviour. Therefore, this study aims to identify the ways in which IMC could influence the consumer behaviour, starting from the hierarchy of effects concept, seen as a result of the whole IMC process, rather than only an outcome of advertising. The highlighting of the IMC impacts reflected in its effects on the consumer and further evidenced in the structure of consumer behaviour processes is made using a conceptual model built on this purpose.

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1. Introduction

In a competitive economic system, survival and development of the companies involve existence of accurate and detailed information about consumers, so the concept of modern marketing highlights the need for having detailed and correct information about the consumer needs, motivation, attitude and actions. In the contemporary era is almost universally accepted idea that the main purpose of marketing is not finding and persuading people to buy what a company produces, but satisfying the consumer, which is the essence of consumer orientation. Adopting the approach according with IMC is not part of the marketing mix, but a holistic concept using marketing mix elements to create and strengthen relationships with consumers and to send a unified message, this paper presents a model of

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research IMC influence on consumer behaviour, based on the consumer response described by the hierarchy of effects model.

2. Literature review

Communication effectiveness is determined both by understanding the message and getting the desired reaction from the part of the receiver, in response to the message (Popescu, 2002). Marketing communications occurred during the last decades of the twentieth century, as a result on the marketing outstanding development during that period. Although so far, there is not unanimity of specialists' opinion in terms of concept content, we can talk about a consensus on the role and importance of marketing communications.

In a global market characterized by high dynamism and fierce competition, organizations try to find the most efficient way to get their word out so that customers understand the benefits that can be obtained by consumption or use products or services (Clow, 2010). Consequently, marketing communications have become a fundamental aspect of marketing, a business vision and an essential factor in successful marketing communication. Its importance have increased dramatically in recent decades, considering that the marketing and communication are inseparable, all organizations business areas using various forms of marketing communication to make their offer and to meet financial or non-profit targets (Shimp, 2003).

The IMC concept that emerged in the last decade of the twentieth century has been constantly evolved from a limited view of coordinating communication tools to a strategic process (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan & McDonald, 2005). The multiple facets of IMC have been analyzed by many specialists whose opinions outline two major thinking directions. According to the first direction, IMC is a new paradigm (Kitchen & De Pelsmacker, 2004) and a new way to develop marketing communications. This vision has embraced several stages, each one having a particular field of analysis and research (Kliatchko, 2008):

- a. Conceptual issues, theoretical framework and understanding of IMC (Duncan & Everett, 1993; Nowak & Phelps, 1994; Schultz & Schultz, 1998; Hartley & Pickton 1999, Shimp, 2003);
- b. Practice and implementation of IMC in organisations, managerial and organisational issues (Gronstedt & Thorson, 1996; Cornelissen, Lock & Gardner 2001; Blakeman, 2007; Beverland & Luxton, 2005; Caemmerer, 2009);
- c. IMC relation to internal marketing issues and corporate communications (Schultz, 2004; Beverland & Luxton, 2005; Finne and Gronroos, 2009);
- d. IMC relation to brand equity, brand identity and outcomes (Barnes, 2001; Naik & Raman, 2003; Schultz 2004; Dewhirst & Davis, 2005; Ratnatunga & Ewing, 2005)
- e. IMC synergy, measurement and effectiveness (Eagle & Kitchen, 2000; Ewing, de Bussy & Caruana 2001; Low, 2000; Naik & Raman, 2003; Schultz, Cole and Bailey, 2004; Belch and Belch, 2008,);
- f. Adapting of IMC strategy to the new interactive media and to the changes in consumer landscape (Schultz, Block & Pilotta, 2005 ; Court, Gordon & Perry, 2005; Mulhern, 2009).

The second perspective of IMC is based on the opposite view that argue that considers IMC a management fad or fashion, with weak theoretical foundation, not more than a collection of specific concepts traditional marketing, presented in a new form (Spotts, David & Mary, 1998; Cornelissen, 2000; Gould, 2004).

As Kitchen and Schultz (2009) explain, IMC proved to be much more than an alternative to the planning methodologies, supporting the implementation of consumer information technologies such as CRM (customer relationship management) and loyalty programs.

A more recent approach of IMC concept (Clow, 2010), sustain the idea that it incorporates every elements of the marketing mix (product, price, distribution, marketing communications). This paper shares the point of view according with IMC means and involves much more than a coordinated action of marketing communication tools.

The importance of IMC vision and strategy is generated by its main goal, focused on affecting consumer behaviour (Shimp, 2003). If initially the concept of IMC took into account the consumer needs and interests, based on the assumption that integrating communication elements would be a value to both consumers and organizations, today is a certitude that consumer is essentially driving the marketplace (Kitchen & Schultz, 2009).

The study of consumers helps firms and organizations improve their marketing strategies by understanding issues such as the psychology of how consumers think, feel, reason, and select between different alternatives and

how marketers can adapt and improve their marketing campaigns and marketing strategies to more effectively reach the consumer.

Butler and Peppard (1998) argue that the heart of marketing management is to understand consumer psychology. Kotler (2000) also suggests that for marketers to successfully communicate with their customers they need to study the behavior of consumers. Understanding consumers has become the focus of attention in the business world due to the fact that the prosperity of companies is heavily dependent on satisfying customers and keeping them loyal (Kotler, 2000).

To evaluate the impacts of IMC on consumer behaviour it is important to study consumer's response to the unified message sent by all the IMC components. One problem in connecting a purchase to a marketing communication message could be that other marketing-mix factors may improve or decrease the chance for a positive response (Duncan, 2004). The price may be in contradiction with the quality perceived by the consumer or his preferred brand may not be carried in the store where he is shopping.

Approaching IMC as a complex system that influence consumer response using the communication potential of elements of marketing mix, solve the problem of perceived difference between the marketing communications message and the message incorporated in price, package, brand or distribution channel. Consumer response could be studied using various models of effects that help marketers to set marketing goals, structure objectives and analyze message impact as a series of steps called **response hierarchy models**. As Belch & Belch (2008) explain models have been developed to depict the stages a consumer may pass through in moving from a state of not being aware of a product or brand to actual purchase behaviour and could be used in a broader framework to analyze the impact of IMC on consumer behaviour. The response hierarchy models could be divided in two main categories: traditional models and alternative models

Traditional response hierarchy models include AIDA sequence that identifies four steps that a marketing message might have on consumers: attention, interest, desire, action. In 1961, an additional variation to the model of effects was added called the **DAGMAR** model - Defining Advertising Goals for Measured Advertising Results (Coney, 1961). The DAGMAR model begins with awareness, moves to comprehension, then conviction, and ends with action. The model developed by Lavidge and Steiner (1961) highlight that consumers seem to progress through three stages: cognitive (thinking), then affective (feeling) and finally conative (doing). Other models belonging to traditional approach are *the innovation adoption model* elaborated by Everett (1962) that represents the stages a consumer passes through in adopting a new product and *the information processing model* developed by McGuire (1978), that assumes the receiver in a communication situation is an information processor or problem solver.

The alternative response hierarchies depict a model of information processing developed by Ray (1973) that identifies three alternative orderings of the three stages based on perceived product differentiation and product involvement (Belch & Belch, 2008).

The model described in this paper starts from an adaption of the classical hierarchy of effects model, in order to create a research framework for study the influence of IMC on all the processes of consumer behaviour (perception, learning, attitude, motivation), not only on the actual behaviour.

3. A conceptual model for research the IMC influence on consumer behaviour based on hierarchy of communication effects model

A conceptual model of IMC relationship to consumer behaviour, based on information offered by one of the modalities of consumer response investigation - hierarchy of effects could be useful for research influence of IMC 's components on perception, learning, attitude, motivation and actual behaviour (Fig 1).

IMC - refers to the ways in which communication is found in all four components of marketing mix namely the product, price, distribution and marketing communications (Mihart, Stancioiu & Teodorescu, 2011). The instruments which support and organize the integrated marketing communication activities are integrated communication strategy and integrated communication plan. The integrated communication strategy is reflected in market positioning based on the objectives aimed by the company and on communication axis. The integrated communication plan is focused on choosing the specific components, taking into account their effective correlation in terms of optimizing costs.

Consumer response to IMC (based on hierarchy-of effects model) – describes the response process the consumer go through in moving to a specific behaviour (purchasing a product).

Consumer behaviour - is composed of five processes: perception, learning, attitude, motivation and actual behaviour. These basic processes of consumer behaviour are also used by the real marketing, through the definition of operational endogenous or exogenous variables, as appropriate.

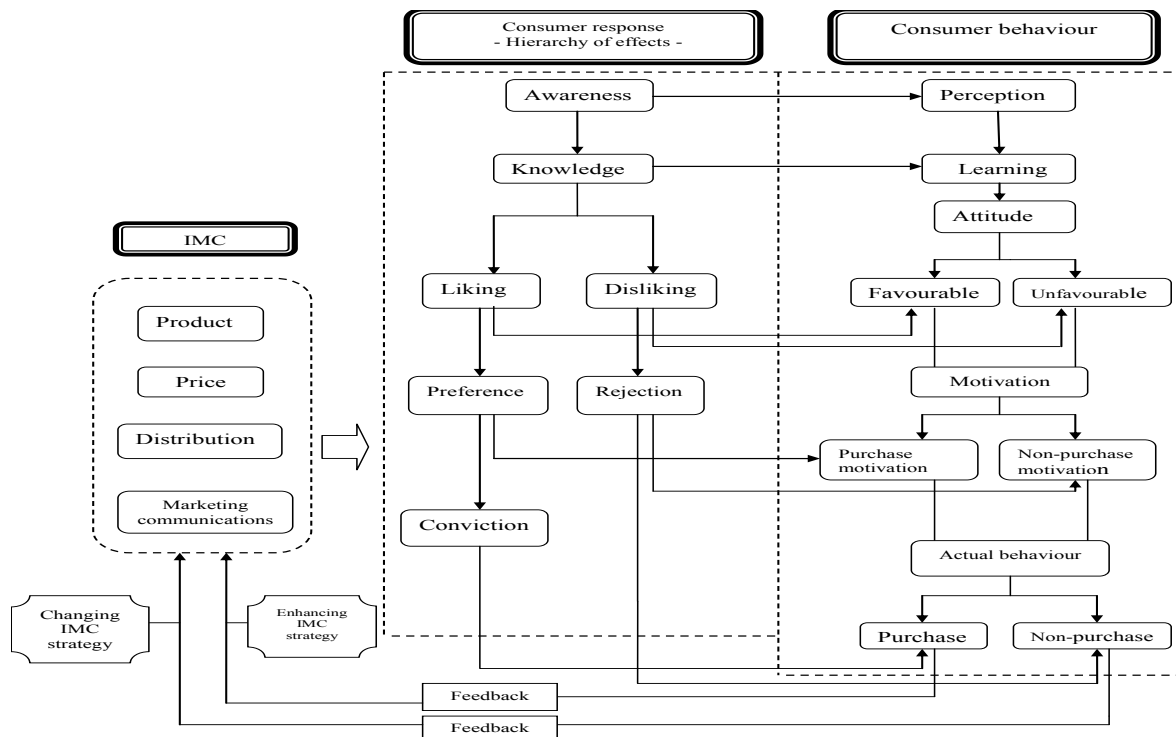


Figure 1. Model of research IMC' s influence on consumer behaviour based on hierarchy of effects concept

IMC → Consumer response (hierarchy of effects) → Consumer behaviour

IMC influence on consumer behaviour processes, based on results of market research and market segmentation, is propagated by each component of marketing mix (product, price, distribution and marketing communications), exploring its communicational potential and is reflected in each step of the hierarchy of effects which can be used as an intermediate measure of communication effectiveness. For a company it is important to know where targeted consumer is on the response hierarchy so it can plan appropriate activities to fulfil the task relating to each stage. For example, product/brand awareness could be increased by package changing, product sampling or marketing communication activity. Gathering information about product/brand awareness, a company will be able to evaluate consumers' perception about its product/brand and will focus on the IMC components that can affect this perception. The second stage of the hierarchy of effects is also part of the cognitive stage as awareness and includes knowledge, information or comprehension about attributes, characteristics or benefits of a product. Analysis of consumer level of knowledge regarding a product/brand offers useful landmarks related to learning process and represents a way to enhance it. All IMC components transmit to consumers various information, so they support the learning process by which they acquire the purchase and consumption knowledge. Learning process permanently evolves and changes as an effect of newly acquired knowledge gained from reading, observation, discussions and actual experience.

The affective stage in hierarchy of effects model refers to consumer's feelings and affect level (like or dislike) for a particular product/brand (Belch & Belch, 2008). This approach highlights the affective dimension of attitude which could be favourable or unfavourable. Forming or changing attitude is one of the most important goals of IMC, being influenced by product, price, distribution and marketing communications, but also resulting from direct or vicarious experience that an individual has with the attitude object. The stronger level of affect, preference is reflected in purchase motivation, meaning that consumer appreciate that a specific product/brand fulfil his aspiration and need and determine his conviction to purchase it, passing in the behavioural stage. The rejection of a product is generated by various reasons which must be investigated in order to discover the core of non-purchase motivation and try to influence it. The complex process of motivation has the force to activate behaviour, providing in the same time purpose and direction to that behaviour (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2009). IMC could globally influence preference, hence motivation, especially through marketing communications component.

Consumer behaviour → IMC

After the fifth stage of consumer behaviour process, the feedback which follows purchase or non-purchase decision underlying the evaluation of IMC strategy: if feedback is positive, IMC strategy can be maintained or enhanced, if feedback is negative, IMC must be revised and changed in order to generate a positive future effect on consumer behaviour.

4. Conclusions, implications and further research

The research of integrated marketing communication influence on consumer behaviour is a complex activity involving in-depth analysis of the relationship and instruments through which this influence is exercised. The consumer response to IMC effects could be easier investigate than the endogenous processes of consumer behaviour and research results may offer useful information about the consumer decision-making mechanism. Validation and practical use of the model must be based on findings of a quantitative research (i.e. survey) which offer the possibility of checking model's viability.

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