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**Article**

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# "IMC is dead. Long live IMC" Academic vs Practitioners' views

The purpose of this research is to establish whether academics and practitioners are similar in their perceptions of what Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) is and the role it has to play in today's dynamic landscape. This objective is achieved by firstly examining the IMC literature to establish the main themes that underpin the construct and to identify the topics that have been most discussed over the past ten years. These findings are then utilised to perform a content analysis of ten essays that were published by Campaign magazine in December 2010 by high profile practitioners under the heading of "What's Next in Integration". The findings indicate that there are differences in the perception of academics and practitioners on IMC, mainly in the area of internal audiences and its strategic role within an organisation. These findings are of interest to academics, clients and agencies as these areas of misunderstanding may be acting as a barrier to IMC implementation.

Summary statement of contribution

This research identifies significant differences in how IMC is perceived by academics and practitioners in the advertising industry. This identification is important because organisations can only benefit from IMC fully if there is a common understanding across clients, agencies and academics of what it is and how it works. Misunderstandings can create barriers to full implementation and it is the responsibility of the industry as a whole to address this and enable meaningful dialogue to take place and progress to be made.

Keywords

Integrated Marketing Communications, content analysis, advertising agencies, branding, internal communications

**Integrated Marketing Communications**

The exploration of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) as an area of academic interest has been taking place since the early 1990's. Kliatchko (2008) provides a comprehensive overview of the development of our understanding from 1990 to 2006 and identifies the main topics have that evolved during that time, which is presented in Figure 1.

As one would expect with a new concept, the initial discussions on IMC were mainly based on definitions and theoretical understanding and this discussion is still taking place. In 1996 the Journal of Marketing Communications produced a special issue on IMC where most of the papers were still concentrating on building theory and identifying key issues (Kitchen and Schultz, 1998). However other strands of research did develop to discuss how IMC might be implemented in the industry and the impact that may be felt by agencies and clients, including its relationship with Public Relations.  An understanding of how the effectiveness of IMC should be measured was also recognised as fundamental to its operationalisation and these discussions started around 1996 and are ongoing, with a growing recognition of the importance of measuring behavioural responses rather than the traditional attitudinally based models (Schultz and Schultz 2005).  Kliatchko (2008) identifies the main topics of debate since 2000 as Branding, Media synergy and Internal Marketing, and these areas are examined in this paper and used as a tool to measure the development of understanding of IMC amongst advertising agency executives.

Figure 1: Research topics on IMC from 1990 to 2006 ( Kliatchko (2008)

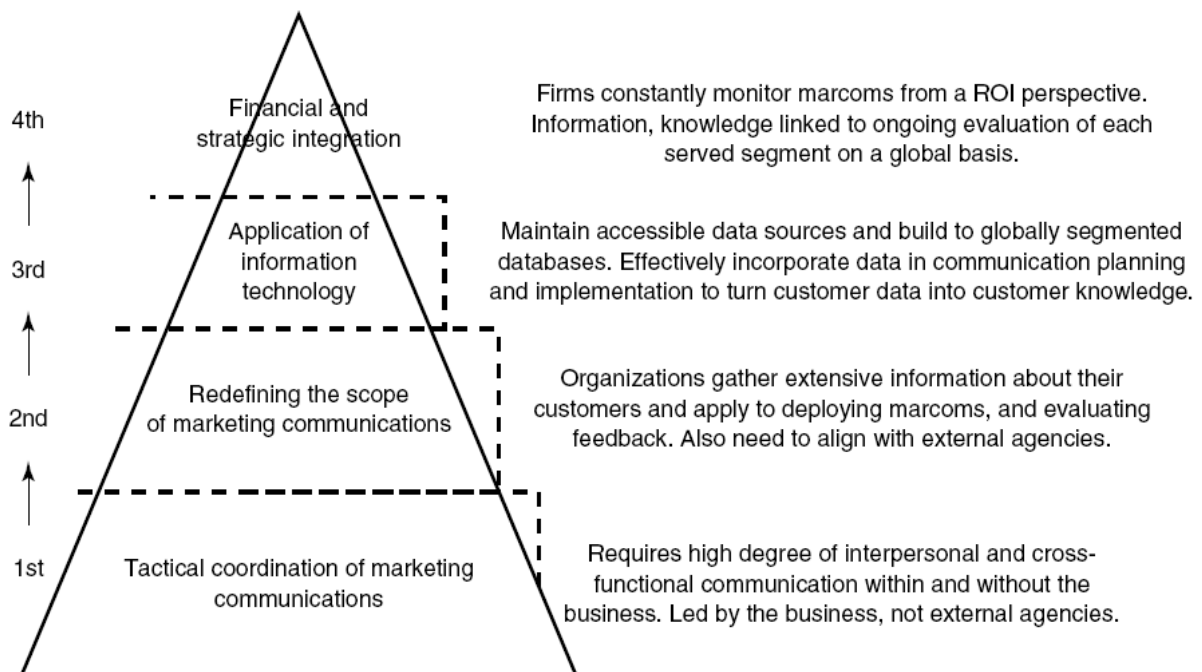| Year/topic | 1990–1994 | 1995–1999 | 2000–2006 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Definitional issues | ██████ | ██████ | ██████ |
| Practice of IMC | | ██████ | ██████ |
| IMC, PR and other controversies | | ██████ | ██████ |
| IMC in other countries | | ██████ | ██████ |
| IMC and managerial/organisational issues | | | ██████ |
| Measurement issues | | | ██████ |
| IMC and branding issues | | | ██████ |
| IMC and media synergy/habits/planning/interactive issues | | | ██████ |
| IMC and internal marketing | | | ██ |

Despite the maturity of the discipline, there is still debate, within both academics and practitioners, as to the definition and usefulness of IMC and it is still referred to by some as an "emerging discipline" (Kitchen et al 2008). This state of flux is reinforced by Schultz and Patti (2009) who continue to recognise the need for an accepted definition and specifically identify the areas of measurement and the relationship between brand and IMC as needing further investigation.  In the Journal of Marketing Communications second special issue on the subject in 2009, further deliberation is illustrated by an article entitled " Has anything really changed?" in which Luck and Moffatt (2009) propose that IMC is still misunderstood by many and the benefits it can  provide are not being enjoyed due to poor implementation.

One of the most recent attempts at providing an overview of the subject and some clarity for it to move forward is provided by Kliatchko (2008). Based on this overview, he provides a new definition of IMC:

> *"an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders,*
>
> *content, channels, and results of brand communication programs"*

His main theme is that the process must be customer-centric or audience driven, which

acknowledges the shift of power that has taken place over recent years due, to some extent, to

changes in technology. This is achieved through the use of extensive databases that provide

information on customer purchase behaviour and consumer insight. This outside in orientation

flows through the IMC literature as a common theme. For example Kitchen et al (2008) talk

about "planning that starts with receivers, not senders" and Schultz (2006) goes further to

suggest that there is a big difference between being customer focused and customer-centric.

Customer focused is when an organisation learns more about the habits of the customer so that

they can identify opportunities for cross-selling etc. Customer-centric is when the company is

listening to the customer, establishing his or her needs and trying to satisfy them.

Figure 2: four levels of integration (Kitchen and Schultz, 2001).



4th — Financial and strategic integration — Firms constantly monitor marcoms from a ROI perspective. Information, knowledge linked to ongoing evaluation of each served segment on a global basis.

3rd — Application of information technology — Maintain accessible data sources and build to globally segmented databases. Effectively incorporate data in communication planning and implementation to turn customer data into customer knowledge.

2nd — Redefining the scope of marketing communications — Organizations gather extensive information about their customers and apply to deploying marcoms, and evaluating feedback. Also need to align with external agencies.

1st — Tactical coordination of marketing communications — Requires high degree of interpersonal and cross-functional communication within and without the business. Led by the business, not external agencies.

The other important premise that needs to be explored here is that of the possible levels or stages of IMC. IMC is perceived as having an impact at a number of different levels of an organisation but its ultimate stage is proposed to be at a corporate or strategy level where its impact is felt right across the organisation (Holm, 2006). The stages that lead up to this point are described in various forms by various writers but they generally start at the tactical level involving the co-ordination of promotional elements e.g. activities of a Promotions or Marketing Communications department. The influence of IMC can grow to encompass other elements of the marketing mix leading to clear and consistent brand values. This is where brand touch points are considered and the use of databases is fully utilised to understand the customer journey and use of media. Lastly IMC is considered at a corporate level where not only marketing but business objectives are considered. Building relationships with stakeholders at this stage includes not only customers but also employees, suppliers and other key influencers (Kitchen and Schultz, 2000, Kliatchko, 2008). An example is provided by Kitchen and Schultz (2001) where four levels are proposed, moving from the tactical level to financial and strategic integration (see Figure 2). It is interesting to note that the model suggests involvement with external agencies at the second level where the scope of marketing communications is redefined.

Duncan and Moriarity (1998) identify three main levels, communications mix, marketing mix and corporate level and propose how different stakeholders may be involved at each.

Figure 3: Communication Based Model from Duncan and Moriarity (1998)
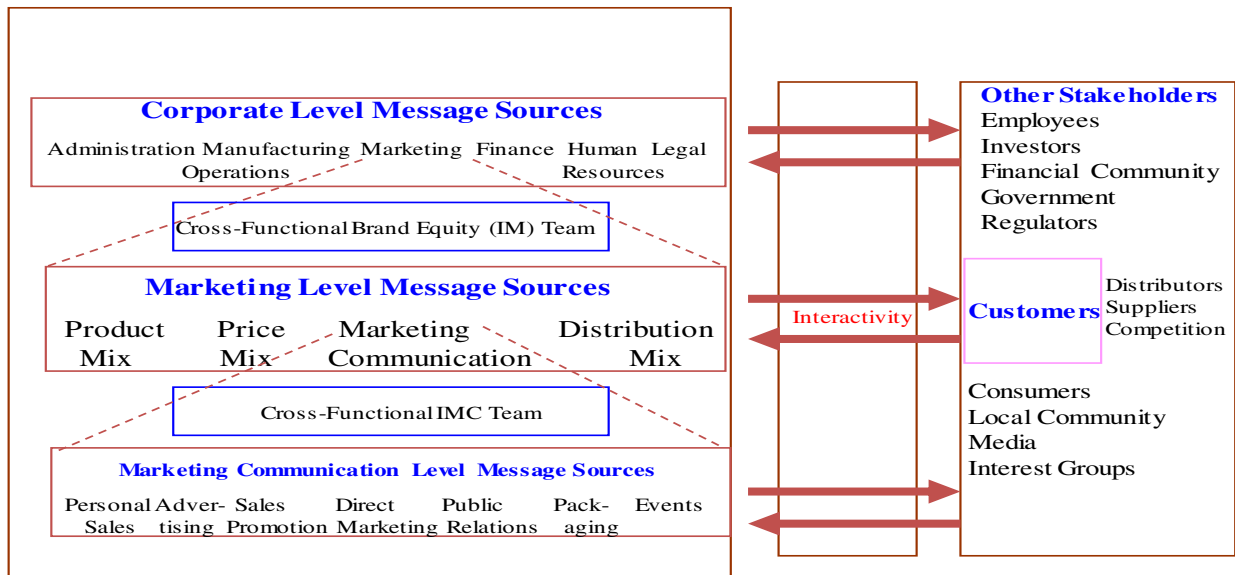


This model also identifies the important role of different stakeholders at each level of the process and places suppliers, which may refer to agencies but does not specify, at the Marketing level.

It has been suggested that few organisations achieve complete integration at the highest level (Kitchen and Burgmann, 2010) which means that not many companies have been able to benefit from all the advantages that IMC can offer. Luck and Moffatt (2009) state that this is because client organisations find the concept difficult to understand. Instead of taking the time to implement comprehensive and fundamental changes they prefer to undertake small-scale adjustments which often provide disappointing results leading to disillusionment.

*Branding and IMC*

The importance of Branding and the contribution that IMC can make to creating a strong brand identity is evident in the more recent literature on the subject. The interaction between a consumer and  a brand is ever increasing due to technological advances and it is suggested that IMC, due to its flexibility and wide selection of marketing communication tools, enables the identification of these touch points and is able to ensure consistency, increase brand knowledge and strengthen the customer's relationship with the brand (Luck and Moffatt, 2009). Power has shifted to the consumer in terms of communication and it is therefore increasingly important for companies to have a dialogue with them and be prepared to share the ownership of the brand (Kliatchko, 2008). This is an area of particular interest to this research because is brings up the role of the communications agency and the client. Although many brand touch points may be under the influence of the agency i.e. marketing communications, others are normally the responsibility of the client e.g. after sales service, and cooperation and coordination between the agency and client is essential to ensure that there is consistency and synergy across them all.

*Internal audiences and IMC*

The higher levels of IMC as discussed above, all identify the important role of employees in enabling IMC to reach its full potential. It is proposed that employees need to "live the brand" (Fill 2009). This is not just at the lower levels of the organisation but at the corporate level where senior management need to instil a culture of marketing across the whole organisation including areas such as Human Resources and Finance (Kliatchko, 2008) so that they are all working together to achieve a common goal. Fill (2009) refers to this as building "internal marketing relationships". The importance of employees has always been recognised as an important issue in the Services Marketing literature but its contribution is now being acknowledged across all types of organisations to ensure that brand values influences not only what a company sells but how

they operate internally and externally (Luck and Moffatt, 2009). This is also of interest in that the involvement of internal staff in IMC activity is another area that may be outside of the remit of most communications agencies or not part of the brief given to them. Indeed it may be out of the remit of the marketing department within the client company (Schultz, 2006) which means that the involvement of internal audiences is linked closely with the implementation of IMC at the corporate level.

*Media synergy*

Although integration across different media types may be considered by many as the cornerstone of IMC, the topic has received more frequent attention from researchers during the last ten years. The fast pace of technological advances make this a very dynamic area of study and there is growing evidence that a variety of media can have a strong impact on the overall effectiveness of the campaign and one medium can improve the effectiveness of another (Kliatchko, 2008). This ties up with the idea of Media Neutral Planning which suggests that if the approach is truly customer centric that any media option has the same probability of being chosen because the media plan is chosen to purely achieve the given objectives with no bias or pre-conceived ideas. This idea of synergy can be expanded to encompass IMC in its fullest form by identifying the importance of "one voice" across everything that the organisation says and does, internally and externally to all its stakeholders and also the stakeholders' view of the organisation and its brands (Luck and Moffatt, 2009).

**The views of advertising practitioners**

Communications agencies obviously have an important part to play in the implementation of IMC campaigns in their clients' organisations and their views and perceptions of IMC are therefore crucial in its on-going development.

Schultz and Kitchen undertook one of the first examinations of US Agency executives' views in 1997 and found that half of them were spending more that 50% of their time working on what they considered to be IMC campaigns. This percentage seemed to be linked to the size of the agency, with smaller agencies spending more time on IMC campaigns than larger ones. The agency executives identified one of the main barriers to IMC being the client in terms of lack of knowledge, skills and inappropriate organisational structure. It was felt that the agencies were happy to implement an IMC approach but the initiative had to come from the client. The agencies generally perceived IMC as being able to provide communications consistency and increased impact, with little evidence of a more strategic focus.

Kitchen and Schulz (1999) replicated the above study a year later across the UK, Australia and New Zealand. A comparison of the results reveals that agencies in the UK were spending less time on IMC campaigns than their American counterparts (39% were spending over 50% of their time). However their perceptions of the main barriers were very similar in terms of identifying the client's staff and organisational structure as being important. Their top three considerations of IMC were identical to the USA "Greater communications consistency", "Increased impact" and "Creative ideas being more effective with IMC". The overall findings of these studies were that the understanding of IMC, held by advertising agency executives was "in the early stages of its development". Such a result is perhaps not surprising at that early point in the development of

IMC. However a similar study was undertaken in 2004 in the UK and very little seemed to have changed ( Kitchen et al 2004). The results suggested that IMC was still generally perceived by advertising practitioners as being a more tactical than strategic tool. When the executives were asked about their views on IMC the statement "Coordination of communications disciplines" received the highest score while "A way to organise the business or firm" received the lowest. Kitchen et al (2004) concluded that agencies were project-driven and consequently responded to clients requirements. It was therefore necessary for the client organisations to take the lead here and become integrated themselves and would then be in a position to allocate tasks to the agencies to assist them in reaching IMC objectives.

The most recent study in this area, by Kitchen, Kim and Schultz (2008) compared IMC implementation of UK practitioners, with advertising executives from US and Korea and this revealed a big shift in perception since 2004 between the US and the UK agency staff. . The UK agency personnel ranked the statement "A way to organise the business of the firm" as the lowest of five statements while the US participants ranking it as the highest. The highest ranking statement for the UK participants was "Coordination of the various communication disciplines" which is the same result as the 2004 study, suggesting that little progress had been made in that time in terms of understanding the role and benefits of IMC and the more strategic levels. However the agencies suggested that they were able to put together strategic campaigns but were dependent on being given that responsibility by their clients. The paper concludes that practice is leading theory in that clients and agencies around the world are experimenting with and developing IMC despite the lack of guidance in terms of clear agreed and strong theories in the subject.

This study picks up from these findings of 2008 to explore the views that advertising agencies have on IMC from another methodological perspective. More specifically it is important to establish whether communications agencies still perceive IMC to be a tactical tool or whether their understanding and perception has changed to acknowledge higher levels of the process during the last six years. Academic understanding during that time has continued to develop, with particular emphasis on interactive media, branding issues and internal marketing. (Kliatchko, 2008). It is therefore also of interest to establish whether these themes are evident in the views of practitioners today.

**Methodology**

This exploratory research was undertaken by examining the content of ten essays provided by industry "thinkers" that were published in Campaign on 3rd December 2010 under the heading "What's next in Integration?" Campaign is the main weekly trade magazine for the communications industry in the UK.

The essays were examined by performing a content analysis. This is an observational research method that can be used to examine a variety of communication forms such as advertising and printed materials (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). It enables the researcher to observe the content of communications and categorise it in order to examine trends and make comparisons. This observation is unobtrusive and therefore has no effect on the data itself (Weber, 1985). Kassarjian (1977) whose article on the subject is considered to be an important milestone in the development of this methodology (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991) states that objectivity is achieved by providing clear rules and procedures to ensure that any analysis, utilising the same rules, would

reach similar conclusions. This is obviously important to remove any researcher's bias, although it should be noted that the design of the thematic template itself leads to a certain interpretation of the data.

The ten essays that were analysed, with accompanying podcasts, were provided by senior communications executives representing ten well known agencies based in London. It should be acknowledged that this is an examination of the views of a small sector of the London advertising industry and is not considered to represent the hundreds of communications agencies across the country. However these are well known industry leaders whose opinions are valued and may well have influence over the readers of this magazine. It is therefore considered important to examine their views. Further empirical research amongst agencies and clients would be necessary for any generalisations across the industry to be made.

These agencies were a cross section of organisations in terms of type and structure. They included three companies that referred to themselves as "creative agencies", one media agency, three "integrated" advertising agencies, one digital/direct marketing specialist and a "marketing services" company. Their structure also varied with four independent companies and six subsidiaries of international holding companies. Lastly the authors of the essays were either Managing Directors or Planning Directors of their organisations.

This background information is of interest because it indicates that the essays may not only be presenting the views of individuals within the industry but also in some cases presenting the company viewpoint on the subject. Agencies obviously need to differentiate themselves from competition in a similar way to any other industry and some of the themes in the essays are reflected on their websites in terms of specific terminology and interpretations. Despite this

heterogeneous grouping of representatives, it was felt that the essays did provide a current insight into the agencies viewpoint on IMC and were therefore considered to be of interest.

The checklist that was utilised for the content analysis was based on the main points as identified from the literature review, and contained the following headings:

- **Level of integration 1, 2 or 3**

  This was based on the Duncan and Moriarity (1998) model which was felt to provide a straight forward representation of many of the theories proposed by other writers. Level 1 represented the Marketing Communications level, Level 2 indicated the Marketing level and Level 3 identified the Corporate level of integration.

- **Branding issues**

  Evidence was being sort here on how IMC can contribute to strong brand values and brand identity. Brand touch points and ownership of the brand in terms of emotional relationships and interactivity

- **customer centric**

  Does the agency bring the customer into the creative process as an active partner or are they still sending messages out to them and controlling the relationship? How customer – centric are they?

- **Involvement of internal staff**

  Is the role of staff and their contribution to the success of the campaign acknowledged and considered during campaign development?

- **Media synergy**

  Are the benefits of media synergy and integration being identified and exploited fully in the campaigns utilising a media neutral planning approach?

The first two topics are chosen as they are the two main themes emerging from the definition provided by Kliatchko (2008) and they also assist in identifying whether practitioners' views of IMC have changed in terms of tactics vs strategy. The last three topics are chosen as they represent the developments in the academic literature on IMC over the last 10 years and therefore can be used as an indicator of how current the practitioners' views of IMC are. It may therefore be possible to explore whether practitioners are in line with the academics in the exploration of the topic or if academics seem to be more advanced in their understanding.

The coding was undertaken on all ten essays by two researchers who were instructed to try to get behind the jargon and establish whether there was evidence that these topics were identified as important elements of IMC within their agency. The coding sheets of both researchers were compared and any area of discrepancy were discussed and resolved, although there was very little difference in interpretation.

**Results and Discussion**

Although this analysis is on a small sample of agencies it is interesting to observe the differences between them. The agencies are obviously attempting to differentiate themselves from each other which explains some of the new terminology but behind that it is possible to identify differences in their interpretation of the meaning of IMC. The findings from the analysis are presented in Table 1. The qualitative evidence to these conclusions is now presented for each topic. .

*Levels of IMC*

There is evidence to suggest that understanding has developed since the study of Kitchen et al (2008) in terms of levels of IMC. Five of the ten agencies talk about corporate goals as summarised by Agency 2 "*Integration works best when there is a unifying thought driving the whole business, not just the marketing*". Unfortunately this agency refers to these views as "post-integration", suggesting that integration only refers to "joined up conversation". The academic literature clearly identifies true IMC as reaching these corporate levels without any need to change its name. Agency 3 suggests that "*creative business ideas arise from and influence business strategy not just communications strategy*" and Agency 6 describes IMC as "*about moving marketing out of a department and into the fabric of an organisation*".

Two of the agencies seem to consider IMC still at the Marketing level, with discussions on integrated platforms where brand activities can be brought together and shared.  Agency 1 talks about the importance of bringing together the right combination of people including individuals such as designers and software developers to produce powerful brand ideas. There is no evidence of the acknowledgement of the more strategic side of IMC. Three of the agencies would appear to still perceive IMC at the Marketing Communications level. Agency 8 argues that integration has previously meant the use of all media channels available, which they suggest was relevant in the past but now not possible due to the huge increase in media options. Their whole discussion is based on Marketing Communications tools and media alternatives. Agency 9 also emphasises the importance of integration across social and mainstream media.

*Branding*

The acceptance of the important role of IMC with reference to branding is strong throughout the essays and again shows some development from the placing of emphasis on communications found in previous studies. Agency 1 talks about "*A diverse network of creative and strategic*

*minds and craft skills, dedicated to producing the most powerful brand ideas"* and this theme of

bringing together the right and diverse group of people is evident in many of the essays. Agency

6 identifies the importance of an emotional attachment to the brand and this recognition of brand

engagement and relationship building is evident elsewhere in the essays with some identifying

the use of customer data to assist building that relationship.

*Customer centric*

The main theme in Kliatchko (2008)'s work is this idea of being customer centric and working

from outside in. Six of the agencies provide evidence of that type of thinking. The other four

discuss interactivity and participation and engagement but the ideas and the motivation still seem

to come from the agencies. This is perhaps understandable because that is their job but the

academic literature stresses that it is the customer who is now in control and that must be the

starting point. Agency 4 puts it well by suggesting that *"integration is something best left to the*

*customer, not the marketer. That's why the integrating framework needs to be customer-based ,*

*not brand-based."* Agency 9 state that advances in digital has resulted in true integration

requiring the need to let go and "*surrender control*" to the customer so that they take ownership.

Table 1: Analysis of IMC essays

| Check list | Levels | Branding | Customer | Internal | Media | Take-outs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Agency 1** | 2 | Y | N | N | N | Integration involves people and talent not media |
| **Agency 2** | 3 | Y | N | Y | Y | Unifying idea that works across the entirety of a client's business |
| **Agency 3** | 3 | Y | N | N | Y | Brand choreography – audience interactivity |
| **Agency 4** | 3 | Y | Y | N | Y | Integrate brand and commerce – customer based , not brand based |
| **Agency 5** | 2 | Y | Y | N | Y | Integration is critical to creating innovative platforms |
| **Agency6** | 3 | Y | Y | Y | Y | Integrated creative thinking across all parts of a business |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Agency7** | 3 | Y | Y | Y | Y | The brand must be something staff can get behind. |
| **Agency8** | 1 | N | N | N | Y | Integration is an excuse for not making choices |
| **Agency9** | 1 | Y | Y | N | Y | core engagement platforms that are orchestrated by data |
| **Agency10** | 1 | Y | Y | N | Y | Focus on the identity of the individuals we want to talk to |
| **Yes/No Total** | | 9/1 | 6/4 | 3/7 | 9/1 | |

*Internal audiences*

Kliatchko (2008) also recognised the importance of the internal stakeholders in successfully implementing a true IMC programme. Only three of the agencies talk about the role of internal staff within IMC. Agency 2 talks about company culture and getting people to live and breathe the brand. They sum it up by saying "*Integration …needs to drive the whole shebang: the product, identity, NPD, attitude to customer service, way to treat shareholders, PR, CSR, HR and so on*". The essay from Agency 7 puts a great emphasis on the importance of Internal audiences and states that "*getting staff on board with a real sense of pride in what they are dong can achieve real integration*". It provides a number of examples of campaigns where the staff and the customer were important considerations.

*Media synergy*

The practitioners seem to agree on the importance of media synergy and interactivity, made all the more important by the ever changing media landscape. The essays imply that the practitioners feel media synergy is the original home of IMC and that they recognise that it has moved on from there. Agency 3 talks about the customer journey and ensuring that appropriate communications are taking place along that journey and working together, with particular emphasis on the benefits of integrating PR and advertising.  Agency 8 states that integration is no

longer about utilising an array of channels but about choosing the right ones for the job and in some cases that might be just one depending on the customer use of media.

**Discussion**

Although a direct comparison cannot be made between the findings of this study and previous investigations in the agency perspective of IMC due to methodological differences, the overall impression is that the leading UK agencies are beginning to understand the complexities of IMC and appreciate how it needs to operate to achieve its full potential in terms of efficiency but there still seems to be a gap between the academic viewpoint and the practitioner viewpoint.

Firstly the importance of media integration and synergy is evident throughout the paper. This is not that surprising as previous studies have indicated that agencies see this domain as where IMC began, (Kitchen et al 2008) and its contribution in this area in terms of media neutral planning has only strengthened due to the expansion of media options now available to the agency. There has also been a general shift from the perception that integration just refers to messages and media to considering it as an essential tool in building a strong brand image, with only one agency out of the ten still being media-focused. The importance of creating a strong brand platform to provide stability across intricate campaigns came through strongly in the essays.

However, it is surprising to discover that only six out of the ten agencies provide evidence of the outside-in, customer centric approach highlighted by Kliatchlo (2008). Perhaps some agencies are reluctant to recognise that customers are increasingly in control and can no longer be perceived as passive receivers of communications. Acceptance of that fact leads to questions of the role of the agency and what their contribution to the whole process is. Agency 6 expressed

these views. "*On the fact of it, this seems like a terrifying prospect for marketers. After all, if we don't own the connection between the brand and customer, what's our purpose?*" But they go on to suggest that acceptance of these changes provides new opportunities for agencies in terms of working on projects rather than campaigns and using their skills to simplify complex issues.

One development in the academic literature on IMC that seems to be gaining little recognition within these agencies is that of internal audiences. Only three agencies identified this as an issue, with one agency basing their whole essay around this topic. As proposed earlier, one reason for this may be that the agency sees internal communication as outside of their remit, concentrating more on the brand and relationships with the customer. However the IMC literature would suggest that strong brand values need to be communicated not only through the branding and marketing communications activity but also through the actions of the organisation and its staff. The importance of the role of external and internal staff is identified as a key component in reaching the highest level of IMC implementation and it is only at this level that a company can really benefit from the increased efficiency that IMC can offer (Luck and Moffatt, 20009).

Despite a general lack of emphasis placed on the role of employees, half of the agencies did acknowledge IMC encompassing all levels of the organisation, which would again suggest a shift from opinions voiced in 2008 (Kitchen et al 2008) when IMC was mainly perceived to be "Coordination of the various communication disciplines". This result would suggest that the UK agencies are following their American colleagues who identified IMC as "A way to organise the business of the firm" in the same study in 2008. Perhaps one reason for this is the globalisation of the advertising industry. With so many international campaigns being created it would be very difficult for agencies in different countries to have opposing ideas of how an integrated campaign should be organised. It is also relevant to consider that six of the agencies in this study are

subsidiaries of international holding companies which may well impose a corporate view on these issues and thereby squash any cultural differences across countries.

The relationship between the agency and the client has been a common theme throughout the study and needs to be recognised as a possible explanation for our findings. Kitchen et al (2004) found that agencies would not adopt an integrated approach unless it was a requirement of their clients and it was therefore necessary for the client organisations to take the lead and become integrated themselves. In the Kitchen et al (2008) study it was suggested by the agencies that they were able to put together strategic campaigns but were dependent on being given that responsibility by their clients. Kitchen and Schultz (2009) suggest that too many studies have examined the role of the agency in the implementation of IMC while it is now accepted that the client businesses are the prime movers in development of integrated programmes. If companies are failing to implement IMC at the higher levels then that may be prohibiting or restricting the development of IMC campaigns in agencies. It is therefore important to examine further the clients' perspective on IMC in more detail and the role they see their agencies play in its implementation. A study by Eagle and Kitchen (2000) proposed that barriers to IMC implementation included clients' skills, issues of centralisation and organisational challenges while agency talents and how they organised their time and resources issues could also be detrimental to advancement.

A number of significant industry reports on the role of agencies today have been published recently which throw some light onto this debate. The Forrester Report in 2010 entitled "The Future of Agency Relationships" suggests that agencies will become more important for client organisations in the future due to the growing complexities of the environment and they will be depended on to provide *ideas* that create emotional links, *interaction*, to connect with customers

and *intelligence* in terms of predicting outcomes by using analytics comprehensively. The report suggests that agencies need to adapt to create platforms rather than campaigns and this development can be seen in the IMC essays. The second industry report of note was published in 2006 by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising ((IPA) and other industry bodies entitled "Magic and Logic". This report concludes that both clients and agencies have joint responsibility to adapt to the changing environment but that agencies are limited in their advancement if clients are not adopting best practice. It suggests that agencies are already recognised for their creative imput i.e. Magic, but that the Logic side of the business in terms of project and financial management is also fundamental and sometimes overlooked.


**Conclusion**

The purpose of the research is to establish whether academics and practitioners are similar in their perceptions of what Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) is and what role it has to play in the present dynamic business environment. This comparison was achieved by performing a content analysis of ten essays on IMC provided by leading UK communications agency personnel. This analysis has revealed that, although the agency perspective has developed since previous studies in 2004 and 2008, there are still areas of discrepancy. In fact, there are only two agencies in the sample who provide evidence of being completely up-to-date in terms of the academic literature. These UK agencies seem to acknowledge the importance of IMC in terms of media synergy and branding but some still perceive IMC as a marketing or marketing communications function rather than a corporate function and do not acknowledge the customer-centric approach or the internal marketing orientation proposed in the academic literature. It

should also be noted that these essays were written by agency executives who are considered to be experts in this field and thereby there may be hundreds of agencies who are not as "advanced" in their views.

Some of the agencies express a view that IMC is an antiquated construct and the world has moved on from the "matching luggage" connotation that it seems to have. It is suggested that the word should be "reclaimed" or renamed as "post-integration". However the definitions given for "post-integation" and other terminology provided are very similar to the way in which our understanding of IMC has developed in the literature. The agencies are not proposing anything that is not already incorporated in IMC. There is therefore no need to rename IMC, just a need to understand and incorporate it fully.

But, perhaps the academic world needs to take some responsibility for this situation. It is clear that a number of viewpoints of the definition of IMC and its meaning still exist in the literature which is not helpful for client or agency advancement. Indeed evidence suggests that confusion and misunderstandings are still a significant barrier to its implementation at the higher levels of an organisation (Holm, 2006). The academics need to make some progress in terms of agreeing basic elements of the construct and then formulate some guidelines or procedure to assist clients and thereby agencies towards full integration to the benefit of all. This discrepancy between academics and practitioners is not helpful in the development of IMC. So it is important to encourage more dialogue between agencies, clients and academics so that they can create some integration of their own to the benefit of the industry as a whole.

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