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ABSTRACT

In spite of the increased emphasis being placed on Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), limited attempts have been made to critically analyse existing viewpoints, the evolution of the concept and its application. The research problem of this article is based on this limited mind-set which arguably created a problem in understanding IMC as a process and the integration of actions which appears to be superficial in most cases. The main objective of this article is hence to contribute to these viewpoints in addressing this problem through an analysis of existing literature to stimulate the necessary debate on this phenomenon and the progression of IMC thinking which is increasingly being challenged from the perspective of the emerging paradigm of strategic communication. This is done through a combined categorical, theoretical and integrated communicative perspective, highlighting the need for an alternative perspective of IMC thinking from a strategic and corporate brand perspective which could assist to engender dramatically changing expectations and demands across organisations for a clear understanding of IMC practice and theory. Subsequently an alternative re-orientated strategic perspective based on all current approaches is proposed into what is termed Strategic Integrated Communication (SIC). The focus of this perspective is on the strategic intent of the organisation to enhance strategic, integrated communication and knowledge management of information through creative media strategies and environmental scanning based on trust, loyalty, integrity and credibility to ensure valuable long term stakeholder relationships.

Key words: Marketing, Evolution of Marketing Communication, Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), Integrated Communication (IC), Internet Integration (II), Strategic communication, Relationship Marketing, Strategic Integrated Communication (SIC)

INTRODUCTION

"On the one hand, integrated marketing communications is the major communications development of the last decade of the 20th century. On the other hand, it is still in its infancy in terms of theoretical and conceptual development". (Kitchen and Schultz, 1999, p.35).

In spite of the popularity of the concept Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and that many scholars still embrace its use, IMC is in the face of mounting challenges by some researchers who recently questioned its relevance (Von Freymann 2010, 388). For example, researchers challenge the significance thereof (Cornelissen 2001; McArthur and Griffin 1997); that integration appears to be incomplete, mainly because of organisational inconsistencies (Kitchen and Schultz 2009); and the difficulty to define and measure IMC (Kerr, Schultz, Patti and Kim 2008: Kliatchko 2009; Zahay, Mason and Schibrowsky 2009). This is in contrast with more positive viewpoints held by earlier authors such as McArthur and Griffin (1997) and Duncan and Moriarty (1998), and others who argue that within the IMC framework, the integrative process improves marketing accountability, it elevates from a tactical or executional communication discussion to a strategic marketing level, not only increasing brand messaging and positioning, but also building customer trust with all stakeholders through a synergy process. According to Kliatchko (2009), synergy inherently refers to *one spirit, one look or one voice,* which can also be seen as the starting point of IMC (Luck and Moffatt 2009). On the one hand we have the supporters of IMC who argue that it offers competitive advantages to traditional marketing communication approaches due to its consistency in brand images and messages. On the other hand, we have the detractors who question the validity of IMC and point to the fact that most of the supporting evidence of its effectiveness is anecdotal in nature. If analysed critically, the challenges posed by consistent messaging and the necessity to reduce customer's perceived purchase risk raises the question on whether or not it is possible to translate or add tangibility to service offerings through integration and positioning of messages in all communication forms mainly from an integrated communication perspective.

The main **research problem** is hence based on these criticisms that little or no research effort has been done to systematically investigate the true value of the different IMC concepts and that insufficient knowledge exists about the employment and impending competence of marketing in the literature. The **main objective** of this article is to contribute to this debate through a critical analysis of existing viewpoints on the progression of IMC thinking and the provision of integrated solutions which evolved over time and have been advocated by various academic definitions and descriptions in marketing literature. In order to do this, the research methodology includes a thorough critique of existing literature from the inception of the concept up to the recent literature.

KEY CONCEPTS DEFINED

With the introduction of the Internet and from an organisational perspective, the field of communication and marketing has been infiltrated by strange streams of nonsensical characters complete with secret-code-like phrases like www, slash, dot-com and at. This was followed by the emergence of social networking websites and social media which connected millions of complete strangers in real time. The adoption of social networks which include, inter alia, discussion forums, blogs, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, online message boards, Twitter, LinkedIn and others and more recently WAZZUB (a new internet phenomenon where users are sharing in profit), as communication methods enabled marketers to *reach* new markets through the *richness* of this new media, but also increased competition, detractors, scepticism, information and brand overload. At the same time we saw the introduction of countless new marketing buzzwords such as convergence, closed-loop, network solutions and customized marketing, to name a few. The focus on 'hyper reality' or 'simulated reality' today, compels organisations to realise that customers are exposed to new experiences, have multiple selves, more choices, greater control and are exposed to a more creative world presented in both 'real' and 'virtual' realities.

For the purpose of this article, the following key concepts will be used, which probably encompass most of these concepts used in practice.

Integration

The need for integration to properly coordinate communication in the organisation should be an integral part of every efficient and result driven organisation. Integration is about the coordination of strategic efforts to ensure clear, consistent and competitive messages through synergy and a unified approach (Angelopulo and Barker 2013). Some approaches focuses on the consistency of message through an IMC approach to ensure financial, competitive and effective benefits to be achieved through the synergy afforded by the process of integration (Kehinde 2011), others on the provision of integrated efforts to increasingly create value and competitive differentiation (Li 2011). For the purpose of this article, the author proposes that integration should contribute to the coordination of functions, processes and actions of the organisation in support of the corporate brand to ensure achievement of the organisation's *strategic intent* to attain long term sustainable relationships with stakeholders.

Communication

Numerous definitions of communication exist in the literature pending the research stance taken, with most researchers focusing on the importance of two-way communication (Kitchen and Burgmann 2010, 11) and mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and stakeholders (Grunig, Grunig and Dozier, 2002, 548; Grunig and Huang, 2000, 32). According to Thorne (2005:2) and Farquhar and Rowley (2006:162) the relationship-marketing paradigm offers the opportunity to knowledge-based organisations to enhance communication relationships with individuals through online social networks, not only on a one-to-one and one-to-many, but on a *many-to-many* basis. More recently, Johansen and Nielsen (2011, 206) argue that "…traditional unidirectional means of stakeholder communication must be replaced or replenished by two-way communication". For the purpose of this article, communication is hence defined as a strategic process in

which interactive integrated communication takes place and where messages are created and shared through *knowledge management of information* [own emphasis] to establish mutual understanding and beneficially relationships between an organisation and its stakeholders through the integrated use of traditional and new media.

Strategic

Different viewpoints exist on the definition of strategic, ranging from those who view it as the purposeful use of communication to fulfil an organisation's mission (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Vercic and Sriramesh 2007), to those who refer tostrategic asa comprehensive and integrated communication approach to align all actions of the organisation to the corporate brand or objectives of the organisation (Kitchen and Burgmann 2010; Angelopulo and Barker 2013). The concept 'strategic' therefore refers to the use of a guideline or plan with consciously set-out actions to achieve organisational goals and to manage environmental change (Morden 2007, 184; Swart 2010). In an IMC context, this probably resonates to the fact that strategic communication should rely on strategic integrated communication actions to ensure the achievement thereof. The importance of strategy is one of the dimensions highlighted in the findings of a study conducted by Dinnie, Melewar, Seidenfuss and Musa (2010, 398) where they argue that "the dichotomy within this dimension lies between a centralised approach on the one hand and a decentralised approach on the other" to determine the optimal balance between clear, consistent branding activities and the flexibility in the use of integration in alignment with the strategic intent or guidelines of individual organisations (own interpretation).

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC)

Definitions of the concept of IMC emerged during the 1980s in response to the need for organisations to have a more strategic integration of communication tools (Du Plessis et al 2010) but these definitions have evolved notably over the last two decades. The most widely used definition seems to be that of the American Association of Advertising Agencies (Belch and Belch 2012, 9), which defines IMC

as a concept of marketing communication planning that recognises the added value of a comprehensive plan which evaluates the strategic roles of a variety of communication disciplines; Schultz and Patti (2009) suggest that IMC is the apparent progress made by mass market media advertising towards targeted direct marketing; Kliatchko (2009) argue it is a strategic audience-driven business process; Kitchen and Burgmann (2010, 2) that it is a process of strategically managing audience-focused, channeld centered and result-driven brand communications; and Kehinde (2011) emphasises that it is strategic and result driven. For the purpose of this article, the definition proposed by Bruhn (2008, 17) that IMC is "a process of analysis, planning, organization, implementation and monitoring that is oriented toward creation unity from diverse sources of internal and external communication with target groupts to convey a consistent impression of the company or the company's reference object" is relevant.

In spite of the continued emphasis being placed on the importance of IMC, no specific theoretical perspective or model is proposed in the literature. According to Kitchen and Schultz (1999, 22) little attempt has been made to formalise the concept "one sight" "one sound" IMC and Dinnie et al (2010, 399) stress the need for future research to include "critical studies that question the received wisdom that a coordinated approach is 'per se' a desirable phenomenon."   Bruhn (2008, 100) also emphasises the fact that research has been done to investigate and discuss the phenomenon IMC, but says that "research in IMC should develop and discuss new approaches to analyse planning and coordination of the integrated task of communication". In more recent articles, Kitchen (2011, 5) agrees that the integration of messages is complete and has been done, but that the *journey towards integration from a customer perspective has scarcely begun.* He furthermore realises the limitations in the application of IMC, specifically that messages are still linear and outbound in all media; integrated brand marketing is an unrealistic dream in most organisations; the 'one voice' phenomenon is fading against the background of return on investment; it is in reality situation-specific and context-dependent on needs and wants of stakeholders; and the difficulty in measuring or evaluating the outcome thereof. In order to address these stumbling blocks, Kitchen (2011) proposes that a 'central theory' be developed and even suggested a change to

'integrated brand customer marketing'. Unfortunately today, the main emphasis is still placed on the concepts and processes, with no real attempt to conceptualise or visualise the process which can be due to the complexity and difficulty to test it in practice and lack of empirical studies to support it. The question then arises, is it enough to focus on the different concepts and processes only, or is a unified perspective the answer to structure all the functions, processes and planned actions? From the above, it is clear that authors accept the fact that it is indeed a complex phenomenon and because of its multiplicity and cross-disciplinary nature, difficult to mould into one theoretical perspective or model. This article hence propose an alternative perspective based on the premises that the multiple aspects and viewpoints on the progression of IMC thinking be incorporated based on the argument that all communication should not only be aligned with the corporate brand of the organisation, but also with the strategic intent of an organisation to ensure that it stay in line with drastic changes in the business context.

Some attempts have been made to visualise the IMC concept. For example, Luck and Moffatt (2009, 318) graphically presented seven common themes of IMC based on the literature which they argued function interdependently and is linked through strategic management, namely: communication, branding, relationship management, cross functional planning, integration, synergy and market orientation. Another example is that of McGrath (2010, 361-387) who focussed on two aspects, *design consistency* and *number of media*, which he used in testing IMC effects. In his results, he put forward that the test presented a disappointment in the advocacy of IMC and that it possibly failed due to firstly, a lack of possible theoretical explanations; and secondly methodological flaws. Interest in the knowledge management approach to integrated communication and the use thereof in social media also gained ground recently and is worth mentioning. Barker (2011) defines this knowledge management as a multifacted socio-technical process which comprises various forms of knowledge creation, storing, representation and sharing to the benefit of the customers and organisation through tacit, implicit and narrative knowledge to all human knowing. According to Dinnie et al (2010, 399), a knowledge management perspective could be an insightful theoretical perspective to look at a coordinated approach to branding to enhance knowledge-sharing.

Based on these results, this study set out to investigate some of these possible explanations.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the main objective of this study to critically evaluate existing perspectives on the progression of the phenomenon IMC, a thorough literature review of current literature will be analysed. In order to do this, the study uses a qualitative method drawing up on useful viewpoints and implications of current studies to suggest an alternative prespective of IMC. This is done through tracing the evolution of the concepts as well as investigating and synthesising the context, time frames and different focus areas. Subsequently, this article contextualises the existing integrated marketing communication viewpoints from an alternative perspective to stimulate debate on the phenomenon which is increasingly being challenged from different perspectives. According to Naidoo and Moroke (2011, 4), such a study will assist communication practitioners to adapt, develop and grow in the new era and adjust their marketing efforts accordingly to ensure the best marketing communication possible to deliver creative, innovative strategies and long-term relationships in support of the overall intent and brand of the organisation. The objectives of the article are therefore to ascertain the main premises of IMC and the different concepts that enhance it, identify the different focus ares in the progression of IMC thinking which affects the consistency, coordination and innovative use to create communication solutions and discover the potential implications to view it in terms of a brand perspective and the strategic alignment of the different approaches in terms of a more competent disclosure and integrated communication based on the strategic intent of the organisation.

EVOLUTION OF IMC

The evolution of marketing can be traced back to the 1800s, in formats ranging from direct personal relationships; personal selling; mass production; and marketing during the industrial revolution to the concept of mass communication (using broad-

based media to reach large customer markets, advertising, publicity, and so forth) as part of communication strategies (Du Plessis et al 2010, 8). Hence, IMC evolved from direct personal relationships and selling communication strategies in the 1800s to the holistic communication approach that characterised the 1990s (which saw the amalgamation of elements of the promotional mix such as public relations; marketing; advertising; promotion; and online media). During the industrial revolution and mass production, mass marketing was used to sell products, with the focus on broad-based media to reach a large and diverse population. Although mass media was the major marketing tool during the 1950s and 1960s, a definite move towards sales promotion and the measurement of results became evident in the 1970s, while in the 1980s the need for strategic integration elicited a move towards the process of IMC (Kehinde 2011, 65).

To address the needs of the marketplace, communication and marketing agencies started to merge to form larger groups to provide a more comprehensive range of services in marketing communication. As a result of increased global competition and increased competition, *environmental scanning* became important to organisations to research both the the internal environment (*micro level)* and the external environment (*macro level).* This assisted organisations to assess trends that can affect both the organisation, its customers and the effectiveness on organisational level.

From an IMC perspective, a competitive brand strategy that ensures messages are aligned with the corporate brand; uses appropriate media to communicate (reach and richness of the media) with customers cost-effectively with the aim of enhancing mutually beneficial relationships; and conducts environmental scanning addresses crucial elements. Integration in this sense entails an understanding of the *brand identity* (in terms of the vision, values, value proposition, positioning and associations); and *brand positioning* (which refers to the exact or explicit and intended meaning of the brand that is to be created in the minds of the customers) (Tybout and Calkins 2005).

Figure 1 provides a broad overview of the progression in the evolution of the IMC concept and research focus areas of each stage (adapted from Kliatchko 2009) and overlaps can exist.
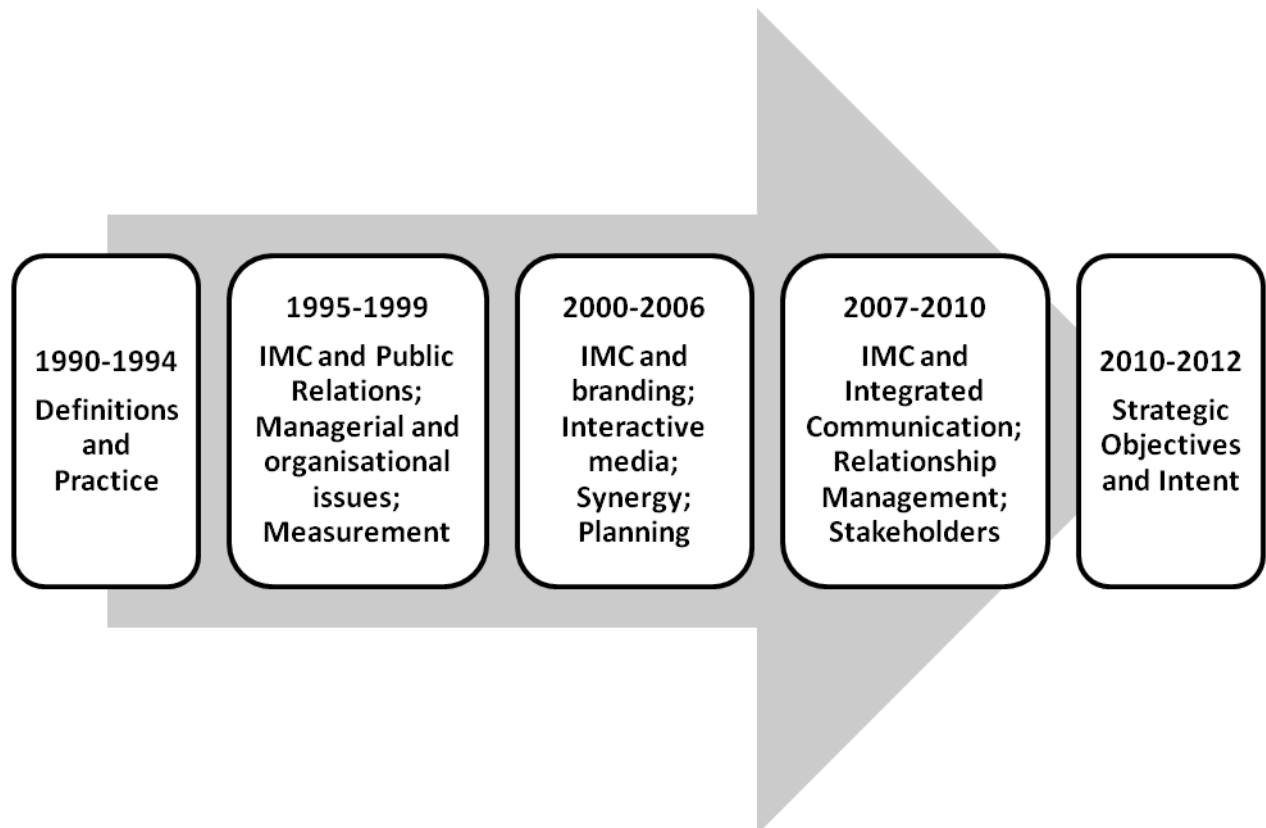

Figure 1: Evolution of IMC and focus areas (adapted from Kliatchko 2009)

INTEGRATION MARKETING COMMUNICATION: AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE?

Because it is argued for the purpose of this article that all marketing communication should be integrated with organisational operations on a strategic level, it is argued that it is problematic to continue to view marketing communications as a separate field of activity. It is hence proposed that IMC is seen as an approach that is used to operationalise the relationship between the elements of marketing communication, as well as the integration between these elements and in terms of the brand perspective, focus on the strategic intent of an organisation in alignment with and to enhance its corporate brand.   In Figure 2, a graphical presentation of the main aspects in the existing IMC perspectives in communication is illustrated.
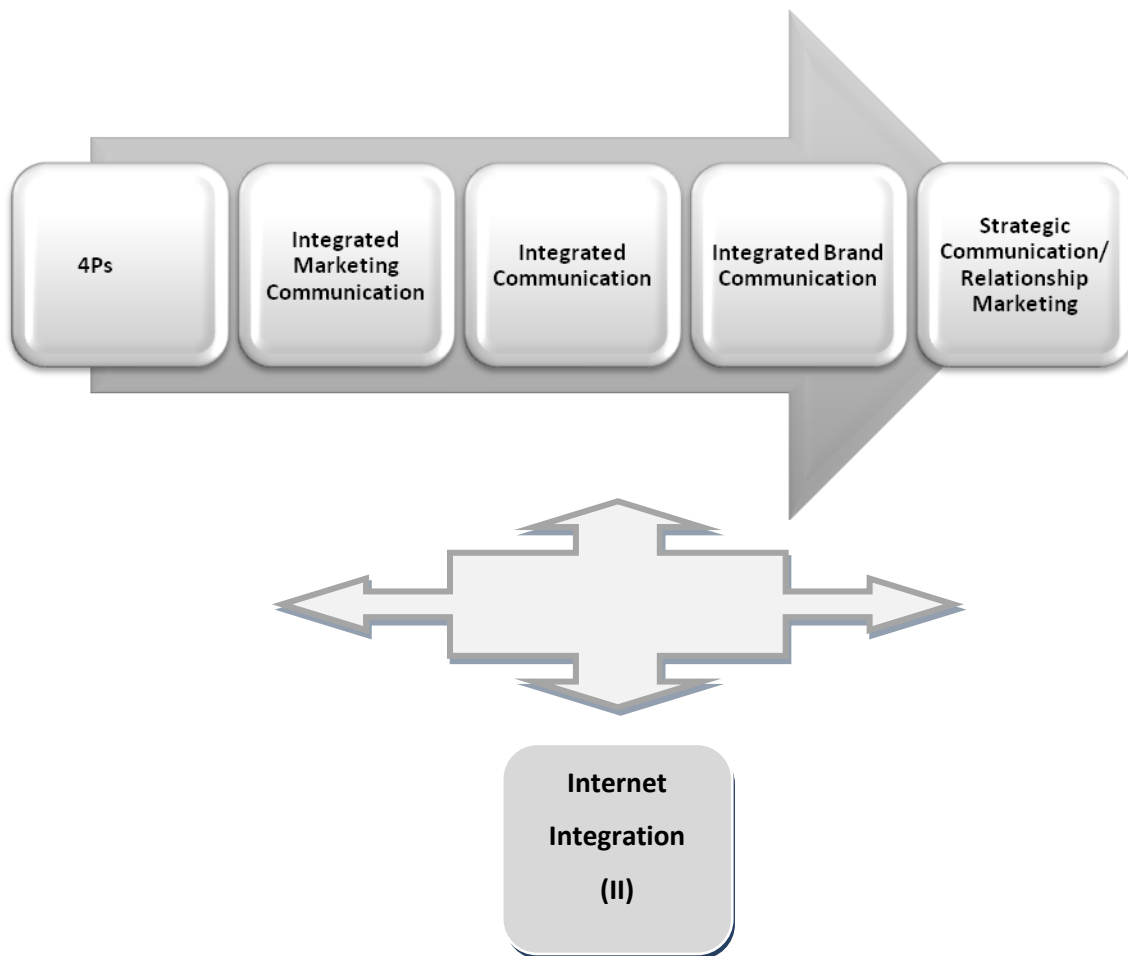
Figure 2: Progression of thinking on IMC

The progression of thinking on IMC presented in Figure 2 are loosely categorised and is probably best understood if it is noted that each perspective is not only a result of the one prior to it, but that it builds onto each other, that overlaps exists and that each perspective not necessarily follows a chronological evolution. A brief summary of each stage follows.

The first stage originated in the use of the traditional **4 P's** of marketing, namely product, price, place and promotion (Berndt, Grove and Jooste, 2006, 6). According to Belch and Belch (2012, 3), these four Ps are elements of the marketing mix where the basic task of marketing is to combine these elements into a marketing programme to facilitate potential exchange of products/service to customers. McDaniel, Lamb and Hair (2011, 4) define the term marketing in terms of a process

of the 4 Ps in which exchange between the organisation and customer is described in terms of three values, namely: creating value; communicating value; and delivering value with the final outcome customer value and beneficial relationships. It is important to realise that although these aspects are still relevant in any marketing strategy, marketing today also demands the following: a change from mass products to mass individualisation; a swift response to specific requirements of customers which will impact on standard prices; distribution channels to include digital or new media; and communication to change from traditional unidrectional one-way to ubiquitous and ever-present access to network marketing.

The previous stage shifted to **Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC),** which is seen as both a concept and a process, with the main focus on a fully integrated and holistic approach by business in all its marketing efforts with consistentency in messages communicated, highlighting a customer-centric apporach (outside-in) (Lake 2010; Johnston and Marshal 2008, 73). Within this approach, all marketing communication efforts or elements of the marketing communication mix should be fully integrated. The marketing communication mix include according to Barker (2012) several elements namely: advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, sales management, sales promotion, publicity, marketing public relations, direct marketing sponsorship, online communication and relationship marketing. The concept of IMC is more customer focused than the practice of the 4 Ps approach in an attempt to build relationships with customers through consistent, customer focused messages.

The next paradigm shift was that of **Integrated Communication (IC)** aimed to combat the perspecitve on the external customer orientated focus by focusing on the integration and alignment of both internal and external messages in support of the corporate brand of the organisation (Barker and Angelopulo 2006). The main premise of this perspecitve is based on the argument that IMC failed in many ways as it did not represent all the organisation's internal and external communications and interactions (also referred to as two-way communication or dialogue by some authors although it is argued that it is not necessarily the same and recently also include one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many) throughout the entire business

and brand. The IC perspective also presented a shift away from the customer-centred approach to a stakeholder-centric approach where stakeholders are seen as any individual or organisation who are necessary for the long-term health of the organisation (Lake 2010); and that coordination can be seen as a powerful element of an IC approach (Kehinde 2011, 65). Some authors (like Barker and Angelopulo 2006; Angelopulo and Barker 2013), regard IC as the umbrella term for all strategic communication, pending from which stance it is looked at. The integrated communication approach and consistency of messages remain the same as within the IMC perspective.

The next perspective was towards **Integrated Brand Communication (IBC),** the process for leveraging brands to sustain and proliferate the business by placing the brand at the centre of all business actions (Ray 2010) – a brand-centred approach. The emphasis in IBC is placed on the importance of brand competition which compels organisations to implement the most effective communication strategy to create and enhance relationships with customers and other stakeholders where integration is the key component to do this (Du Plessis et al 2010, 8). Accordingly, it is argued that the messages communicated do not have to be consistent (like in the case of IMC and IC), but rather that all actions and messages communicated, internal and external, be brand-focused through manipulation of the overlapping concepts.

A similar perspective dating back to the early 1990's and 2000, is **strategic communication** which can be defined as the planning of all organisational communication activities in a single co-ordinated effort working together to ensure synergy and to mirror or window the boundary spanning functions (White, Vanc and Stafford 2010; Wang 2007). In its broader application, the rise in customer activism (Bonewits-Felder and Meisenbach 2007, 207) and the development of products and services in customers' minds as a result of all these interactions with the organisation and brand across all points, the creation of a balanced approach in communication became crucial to ensure credibility, trust and the right amount of information, at the right time, in the right place to the right customers – hence a more strategic approach. This is emphasised by Li (2011, 1) who argues: "that since the

mid-1990s, the provision of integrated solutions has become more widespread as firms capitilize on the possibilities of growing ... and react to customer demand for more complex solution based on multi-vendor technologies, products and services."; as well as Hulsmann and Pfeffermann (2011)who argue that the changing environments and effects on the development of media market structures, necessitated that communication become a strategic factor for a company's success.

Another important perspective is that of **relationship marketing** (Baker 2003). The focus of this kind of marketing is communication *with* customers rather than *to* customers, and it emphasises the importance of feedback and two-way communication. This represents a move away from transactional marketing towards interactive marketing where the need for integrating the different perspectives, and extending beyond the singular view of marketing to a multiple perspective, becomes apparent. Relationship marketing therefore seeks to combine all internal and external marketing activities by highlighting the significance of inter-relational relationship marketing.Criticism against this marketing perspective is based on the idea that symbolic two-way communication cannot replace genuine two-way communication, and that a symbolic relationship will not have the same effect as a real relationship. In its quest to simulate a relationship, this perspective can be persuasive and authoritarian and, as a result, can be classified as similar to persuasion, which does not use a genuine two-way communication process (Angelopulo and Barker 2013). This perspective challenges the traditional marketing management approach (with its focus on the 4Ps of the marketing mix, especially on product) and emphasises the value of both the buyer and seller in the exchange process, thereby stressing the significance of managing exchange relationships (with more emphasis on price, package and people). This led to the perspective that the 4Ps of the traditional marketing mix be replaced with the 4Cs of relationship marketing, which include: Customer needs and wants; Costs; Convenvience; and Communication. Relationship marketing is therefore according to Grönroos (2004) based on the 'who', which adds value to the product or service to ensure long-term and ongoing relationships.

From the literature it is clear that the relationship marketing movement, which acknowledges the significant role of the customer in the value-creation process, had a powerful impact on IMC in terms of turning it into the 'integrative function' that would provide other departments with the market-related input they need to function in a co-ordinated way. According to Kitchen (1999, 406), the purpose of relationship marketing is to "establish, maintain and enhance relationships with customers and other partners at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties involved are met". Relationship marketing is hence defined as the commercial activity between economic partners, service providers and customers to create, maintain and enhance long-term relationships in order to achieve mutually beneficial objectives based on profit, trust, commitment and mutual benefits between these parties (Barker 2012; Kitchen 1999). McDaniel et al (2011, 9) emphasise that long-term relationships depend on customer-orientated strategies to attract and increase business with existing clients, and to retain them. Many marketers conduct marketing strategies under the guise of relationship-building but in fact ignore these important concepts. This problem can be attributed to the fact that relationship marketing is often incorrectly seen as the equivalent of direct marketing, in which the database is at the core of the relationship.

One collective/overarching approach not labelled yet, but with prominence that is probably becoming more and more dominant, is what is referred to in this article as that of **Internet Integration (II)**. For the purpose of this article, II is defined as the use and integration of the Internet as marketing and communication digital platform or medium based on integrated strategies to enhance information and knowledge creation and sharing through intelligent agents or experts in a quick, intensive and many-to-many approach to gain a competitive edge and create value for the organisation. Although this viewpoint is proposed for the integration of messages on the Internet, it is important to realise that various strategic communication scholars challenge the synergy of two-way communication and internet integration in view of the shift from one voice proposed in IMC to many voices, the shift from consensus to dissent and the role of social networks and the need to integrate online and offline strategies (Roberts and Zahay 2013; Bruhn 2008; Halahan et al 2007; Johansen and Nielsen 2011; Kehinde 2011; McDaniel et al 2011). For example, Zahay et al

(2009) argue that effective integration will only be possible if databases are developed about each customer's activities, purchases and company interactions over time. Against the main premises of the knowledge management theory, it is argued for the purpose of this article that this will be possible if II is reliant on knowledge management which necessitates the use of 'experts' in the organisation in an effort to manage and control the creation and sharing of information in terms of content, comprehensiveness and connectivity to gain a competitive advantage. Up to now little attention has been given to this concept in isolation as it has been regarded as one of the many media channels available to integrate in all approaches. On its own, the importance of internet integration should not be overlooked. Not only does it create a low-cost gateway to global customers, but has become a crucial element in relationship building due to the important role it can play in networking on a global scale and if managed, it can make provision for the sharing of business information, transactions and knowledge creation.

Based on various author's viewpoints and interpretations, the main differences and/or similarities between the different perspectives are summarised in Table 1 (McGrath 2010; Barker 2012, Luck and Moffatt 2009). It is clear that overlaps exist and that some components, elements and characteristics can be typical of all perspectives.

Table 1: Differences and/or similarities between existing IMC perspectives

	4 Ps/ Promotional/ Marketing mix	Integrated Marketing Communica-tion (IMC)	Integrated Communica-tion (IC)	Integrated Brand Communication (IBC)	Strategic Communication/ Relationship Building
Components	Product Price Place Promotion	Brand equity/ Consistency in brand relationships with customers Consistency in messages ("one voice") Ongoing dialogue between	Consistency in messages aligned with the brand Move towards relationship building with stakeholders	Consistency of message not necessarily needed but should be brand-focused	Strategic approach to communication How organisation presents/promotes itself Long term relationships

		customers and marketers Holistic thinking			
Elements of promotional mix/ marketing mix	Mostly used in isolation	Use all elements of brand relationships in a single unit – fully integrated Use IT Communication from each marketing mix element also integrated Same messages in all channels	Integration of all communication in alignment with the brand Multimedia approach	Strategic brand building in all elements Multimedia approach	Planning of all communication activities in a single co-ordinated effort to work together and create synergy Cross-functional and integrated approach Multimedia approach Strategic
Characteris-tics	External focus One-way communication Goal to find as many customers as possible	Customer-focused/ Customer-centric approach ("outside-in") Goal to develop right products for valued customers based on trust Nourish profitable relationships	Internal and external focus Stakeholder-centred approach Two-way communication	Brand-centred Two-way communication	Two-way internal and external communication to ensure all stakeholders have a positive experience of the business, brand, products and/or services Focus on information and processes New technologies Trust, commitment and mutual benefit
Main criticisms	Mass communication approach Narrow definition of brand Ignores customer	Broad definition of brand	Information overload	Brand and information overload	Information overload Overabundance of information is often ignored Incorrectly regarded as direct marketing through use of databases

In considering the content of Table 1, it is argued that the different perspectives indicate that message consistency may or may not be important, that the use of the 4 Ps and/or integration of all the elements of the marketing mix may or may not be necessary, that brand alignment may or may not be important, that integrated communication may be or may not be true interaction or an idealistic viewpoint, that a stakeholder focus may or may not be the key to strategic and integrated marketing communication. What is proposed, is that all these perspectives should be considered in any strategic decision taken by the organisation – whether it is in support of its brand, messages, stakeholders, relationship building or whatever. In other words, it is argued that the focus should be on the strategic intent of the organisation. The key concepts of this approach are therefore not limited to and could be any one or more or a combination of all the following elements: message consistency; customer-centred; brand-centred; stakeholder-centred (internal and external); communication-centred; relationship-centred (longterm/sustainable/ profitable/valued customer relationships); environment-centred (analysis/change); trust/loyalty/integrity-based; knowledge management-centred (information, knowledge creation and sharing, processes - interaction with customers, use of databases, and mass customization of goods and services); cross-functional; new media/IT-centred; individual/organisational solutions; and/or strategic planning/communication.

Using the cliche of the current "rapid changes in the environment and field of communication", it is probably essential to reconsider, re-examine and review the current situation of the field – not only to solve actual business, message and brand problems, but also to focus on new creative strategic business solutions. In the past, the traditional media-centric approach of purchasing space and filling the space did not work. With media-neutrality and the focus on relevance and context of ideas before choosing the media made the 'creative idea' more strong than the medium. In this sense, the creative idea hence refers to the 'creative integration' of creative themes, concepts and messages across the myriad of marketing communicatin activites. The move towards the use of creative strategic communication to solve actual business and brand problems whilst still being media-neutral, shifted to end

results and satisfied stakeholders rather than only profit. At the same time, to maintain brand loyalty and brand distinction (which has become an obvious problem due to the high rate of media profiliration, message saturation or clutter customers are faced by on a daily basis), to refocus on the importance of a strategic integrated approach with appealing content, hence introducing as one of its key competencies knowledge or content-creation. In order to obtain true integration to the benefit of both the organisation and all its stakeholders, the point has been reached where the intentional communication activities of communicators should make business sense through a holistic approach, strategic integrated communication solutions to business and brand problems andengagement with stakeholders. This emphasises the need for an alternative strategic communication perspective of IMC. For the purpose of this article, it is therefore argued that a clear link exists between all the existing perspectives and that based on the strategic intent of an organisation, a specific integrated approach be followed. In Figure 4 it is indicated that all the existing perspectives could ultimately be linked to the strategic intent of an organisation with the main focus on the integration of the relevant key thrusts of each perspective.

Figure 4: Strategic Integrated Communication (SIC) perspective: integration of the key thrusts of existing IMC perspectives

Hence, and at the core of this, an alternative perspective is proposed, namely **Strategic Integrated Communication (SIC)**. SIC is seen as the process of strategically managing mutually beneficial organisational and stakeholder relationships where the planning thereof recognises the added value of a strategic integrated communication approach through the integration of all functions which is information driven, interactive, and focus on consistency in brand, messages, knowledge creation and sharing, processes, functions and the strategic intent of the organisation. In essence, this perspective includes the main thrusts of existing approaches, but is flexible in that the way in which these elements are presented, is dependant on the strategic intent of the organisation, which can be information

driven, brand centred, message centred, stakeholder centred, etc. or a combination of one or more or all. Figure 3 presents these aspects graphically.
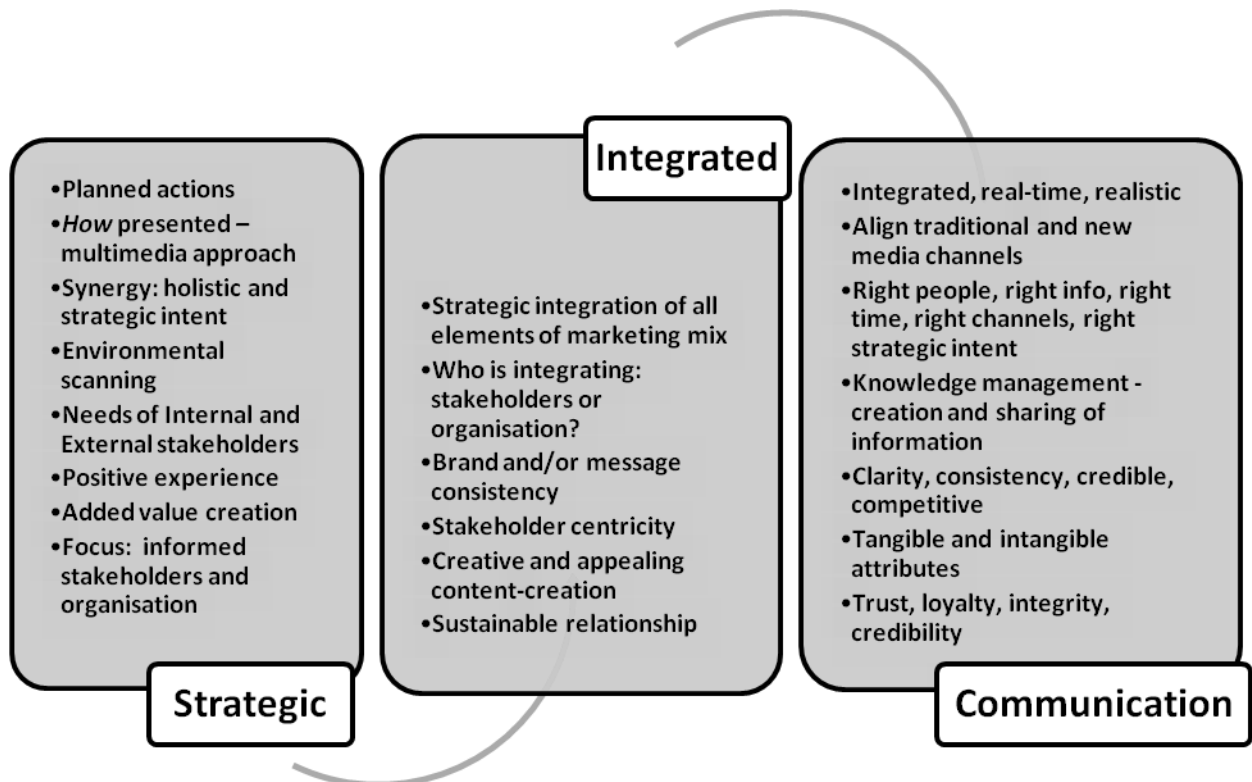

Integrated

- Planned actions
- *How* presented – multimedia approach
- Synergy: holistic and strategic intent
- Environmental scanning
- Needs of Internal and External stakeholders
- Positive experience
- Added value creation
- Focus: informed stakeholders and organisation

Strategic

- Strategic integration of all elements of marketing mix
- Who is integrating: stakeholders or organisation?
- Brand and/or message consistency
- Stakeholder centricity
- Creative and appealing content-creation
- Sustainable relationship

- Integrated, real-time, realistic
- Align traditional and new media channels
- Right people, right info, right time, right channels, right strategic intent
- Knowledge management - creation and sharing of information
- Clarity, consistency, credible, competitive
- Tangible and intangible attributes
- Trust, loyalty, integrity, credibility

Communication

Figure 4: Strategic Integrated Communication (SIC)

Each of the components of the the proposed perspectivess is briefly discussed below:

In order to be **strategic**, an organisation should build on planning by being strategic in the coordination of communication actions, focus on how it is presented based on the needs of all internal and external stakeholders obtained through thorough environmental scanning. To do this, synergy is needed, not only to ensure that stakeholders have a positive experience through the management of knowledge and information obtained, but also to create trust, loyalty and integrity through integrated communication to ensure longterm relationships based on added value creation for stakeholders and the organisation at large. The focus is more on informed stakeholders and organisations, and the realisation not to only focus on needs, wants or what they do not want, but on engagement of stakeholders and creative appeals and messages to compete with the increased customer choice which

lessened the ability of organisations to dictate what customers should or should not buy.

Integrated interaction is the key to an integrated approach based on an understanding of the strategic integration of all communication processes and functions to ensure sustainable stakeholder relationships. The question is: who is integrating – the organisation or the customer? In this sense, integration means the strategic use of all elements of the marketing mix, it can be brand and/or message and/or stakeholder centred, but the content of the information being communicated should be creative and appealing to ensure mutually beneficial long-term relationships between the organisation and its stakeholders based on trust, loyalty and integrity – only then sustainable relationships are possible to attain internal and external stakeholders in the competitve environment of today. To move towards this, implicitly also means that organisations should adopt to the changing environment, needs of stakeholders and the strategic coordination and use of all channels of communication of brand messages, including new media and database marketing.

Communication should be integrated and in real time which necessitates a multi-media approach where traditional and new media channels are used in an integrative manner to ensure that integrated messages (whether brand related, customer focused, etc.) be communicated to the right people at the right time through the right channel to ensure that the right knowledge has been created and shared through knowledge management of information. This communication should indicate that products and services possess varying degrees of tangible and intangible attributes. Tangible attributes will typically include product, price, customisation and functional specifications (which supports the earlier paradigms of the 4 Ps); intangible attributes (focusing on what customers need, want or do not want to obtain status, etc.) will for example include the brand, values, trust and loyalty, etc. to augment the organisation's reputuation and ensure long-term relationships with all stakeholders. Furthermore, all information communicated should ensure clarity, consistency, credibility and competitiveness in the knowledge creation and sharing through a knowledge management process to ensure the significance of a strategic, coordinated and integrated approach to communication.

In reviewing the current approaches, many of the principles, concepts, elements and characteristics proposed in the SIC perspective remain unchanged. What has changed is the need to view it holistically from an integrated strategic and tactical perspective which embrace and focus on the following: an extended dimension of communication vehicles and avenues; the dimension in message distribution, including the use of new flexible, ever-changing, interactive, digital communication platforms which are constantly evolving; driven by constant dialogue/interaction, innovation and stakeholder/customer insights and emotional bonding; integrative strategic communication solutions provided through knowledge management of information (as tangible and intangible assets); sustainability; and not only contributing to the organisation, but also adding value to the stakeholders and society in general.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The main limitation of the study is that it is conceptual and non-empirical in nature and mainly provided a critical analysis of existing viewpoints to contribute to the debates on IMC and IC which are increasingly being challenged by various scholars. However, it is argued that this article provided an overview of the main thrusts and a suggested timeline of the progression of the thinking on the IMC concept and argued for an alternative perspective which suggested a reorientation to IMC and its related concepts.   Future studies need to extend this debate and possible implications thereof, develop a model and test the arguments in practical settings to reinforce the interpretations and applications presented. Despite the limitations, it is believed that this alternative perspective could potentially stimulate some academic debate on whether IMC is an idealistic reality or not, and in practice the realisation that engendering dramatically changing expectations from stakeholders demand organisations to advance their strategic communication efforts within a context that is based upon integration of functions and adherence to the creation of relationships based on integrity, loyalty, trust, values, and so forth. This alternative perspective is thus proposed as a starting for further development in alignment with the changing environment which requires an integrated multidimensional media approach to

communication which should be constituted and built upon contemporary marketing communication practice; and based on a reorientation to ensure responsibility, accountability, transparency, integrity and credibility of the organisations to enhance long term relationships with all stakeholders, and at the same time to add value to the customer, organisation and society. Although this study provided an alternative perspective into the concept and process of marketing, it is still a work in progress and future studies need to extend the study to reinforce confidence in the proposed perspective and to enhance the understanding of the marketing phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

Grounded in a competence-based literature review of existing perspectives on marketing, this article identified the most critical factors which provided impetus to the core concepts of Integration, Marketing and Communication to ensure competence and accountability to all stakeholders and proposed the alignment of all communication based on a Strategic Integrated Communication (SIC) perspective.

The main argument in this article is probably best accentuated with the following quote from Baudrillard (in Poster 1988): "For many, this inexorable fragmentation of modern life, the widespread belief that *'anything goes'* and the apparent loss of fixed point of societal reference cannot be divorced from latter day advances in telecommunications, informatics, mass media [and new media] ... this ceaseless parade of vivid images has denuded people's ability to discriminate between important and trivial, and fact and fiction.*"*

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