

COMMUNICATIONS AT A CROSSROADS: WHAT PLACE FOR INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS IN A POST-COVID-19 LANDSCAPE?

LA COMUNICACIÓN EN UNA ENCRUCIJADA: ¿CUÁL SERÁ EL ROL DE LA COMUNICACIÓN INTEGRADA DE MARKETING EN EL CONTEXTO POST-COVID-19?

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Abstract:

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) has become a core part of business success in the 21st century, but is facing exceptional challenges, some of which predate the devastation wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The various stages of IMC offer rich potential to enhance marketing techniques, harness the power of data analytics and build brand success. However, while most firms would claim to be deploying IMC, many are offering little more than sales-orientated mass marketing, having failed to move beyond the most basic form of its operation. This paper describes the evolution of IMC, and two overarching questions facing IMC at this time, intended as rhetorical devices to explore IMC, with an attempt to answer them. The paper provides a strategic overview and introduction to the excellent papers to follow. It sets the scene for issues surrounding IMC, laying a foundation for subsequent research.

Key words: Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC); Past Present Future; Critical Overview; Contextualisation.

JEL Code: M37.

Resumen:

Las comunicaciones integradas de marketing (CIM) han llegado a representar una parte fundamental del éxito empresarial en el siglo XXI, pero se enfrentan a retos excepcionales, algunos de los cuales son anteriores a la devastación causada por la pandemia COVID-19.

Las diversas etapas de la CIM ofrecen un gran potencial para mejorar las técnicas de comercialización, aprovechar el poder del análisis de datos y construir el éxito de la marca. Sin embargo, aunque la mayoría de las empresas afirman estar implementando la CIM, muchas están ofreciendo poco más que marketing masivo orientado hacia las ventas, habiendo fracasado en su intento de ir más allá del nivel más básico de su funcionamiento.

Este artículo describe la evolución de la CIM, y aborda dos cuestiones generales a las que se enfrenta la CIM en este momento, pensadas como elementos retóricos que pueden servir para

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explorar la CIM, llevando a cabo un intento de dar una respuesta a las mismas. Este trabajo proporciona una visión estratégica y una introducción que puedan servir para los estudios futuros. Además, establece el escenario para las cuestiones que rodean la CIM, sentando las bases para la investigación posterior.

Palabras-clave: Comunicación Integrada de Marketing (CIM); Pasado Presente Futuro; Revisión crítica; Contextualización.

Código JEL: M37.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are many marketing challenges facing businesses in 2020 and beyond. Admittedly, the COVID-19 pandemic and many other global issues are causing a marked slowdown in investment, but the challenges and issues impacting integration are not new particularly. Instead, they are multi-faceted and diverse - and unless tackled robustly - may lead to a reversion to former stages of communication and thus offset or negate subsequent IMC development. Thus, the research question or problem concerns the relevance and significance of IMC in the current context, and further asks which model or stage of IMC offers the most promise for the future? These interrelated issues are fundamental to understanding the way(s) forward.

Two decades ago, organisations were challenged with transitioning from where they were then - i.e. mainly traditional functions and operations to the apparently 'brave new world' of the 21st century and an apparently benign, expansive and ever-expanding global marketplace/space. However, the benignity and expansiveness seem to be receding into the sedimentary strata of a previous (to some) golden age.

Today, transitional challenges continue to vex managerial and executive minds at different marketing levels for all businesses and organisations where managers continue to admit they are not that good at marketing or communications in current marketplaces and spaces. For other organisations, who have successfully managed communications in their chosen spaces and places, the challenge is to keep up with current changes in big data/connectivity, not to mention environmental turbulence caused by political, economic, competitive and legislative change.

Virtually all businesses, and the agencies that service their needs, would claim to have adopted some form of IMC. However, this claim raises a number of questions that require detailed investigation. What form of IMC have they adopted? Do these forms have equal validity and relevance? Is marketing communication becoming ever more focused and relevant to consumers? What issues and problems are emerging? Is IMC somehow failing in its approach? These questions are particularly relevant because research to date has not identified an IMC model suitable for use in all circumstances (see Kitchen and Tourky, 2020). Instead, there are multiple models whose application depends on the material being accessed and the level of time, energy and resources available. This paper therefore discusses five models of IMC application, including where they originated, how they work in practice, and why some may be, if not irrelevant, potentially damaging to businesses. The growing global trend of treating customers poorly once purchases have been made (Kitchen, 2020) will also be explored.

This paper is conceptual with evidence of the scope for research in companies and/or in agencies servicing their communication needs.

2. BACKGROUND

The research question demands some type of historical excursus. Early in 2000, Schultz and Kitchen argued that IMC was the best mechanism for adjusting to new or changing marketplace realities. This was support by many scholars who agreed that IMC offered the greatest potential then in communication and marketing. Twenty years on, this claim appears to have stood the test of time. When IMC first appeared, branding and consumer orientation were not mentioned (see Schultz *et al.*, (1993), but - in the intervening years - brands and branding have become the framework within which IMC operates, and are fundamental to its progression. Thus, brands and branding became the ready-to-hand crucible into which IMC had to be poured. Building and sustaining brand equity and of course annual sales for all businesses has become paramount Major brands as diverse as as Apple, Amazon, Carrefour, Pierre Cardin, and Lidl have navigated this change and continue to manage their communications processes well.

TABLE 1: TOP 10 MOST VALUABLE BRANDS

Ranking	Brand	2020 Brand Value	YoY per cent Change	Country	Sector
#1	Amazon	\$220B	17.5 %	United States	Retail
#2	Google	\$160B	11.9 %	United States	Tech
#3	Apple	\$140B	-8.5 %	United States	Tech
#4	Microsoft	\$117B	-2.1 %	United States	Tech
#5	Samsung	\$94B	3.5 %	South Korea	Tech
#6	ICBC	\$80B	1.2 %	China	Banking
#7	Facebook	\$79B	-4.1 %	United States	Media
#8	Walmart	\$77B	14.2 %	United States	Retail
#9	Ping An	\$69B	19.8 %	China	Insurance
#10	Huawei	\$65B	4.5 %	China	Tech

Source: Most Valuable Brands, 2020.

The world's most valuable brands (see Table 1) have achieved success, not purely in performance terms, but also in their understanding the needs and wants of their target markets and delivering desired satisfactions more ably than others in the same marketing sector. Their well-designed information gathering mechanisms and data analysis techniques enable them to develop effective integrated communications, including interaction with customers wherever possible.

However, many other businesses are not doing so well in terms of performance, equity, or sales performance. With the full impact of COVID-19 yet to be felt, as economies are forecast to contract in size (see Table 2), and businesses in certain sectors face particular difficulties, these challenges can only be expected to deepen. According to the OECD, the UK (mainly in lockdown in December 2020) will be worst hit as it faces not just COVID-19, but also a bumpy self-inflicted exit from the European Union, and the consequences flowing from that decision.

TABLE 2: FORECAST DECLINE IN GDP AS A RESULT OF COVID-19

UK	-11.5 %
France	-11.4 %
Italy	-11.3 %
Spain	-11.1 %
Brazil	-7.4 %
US	-7.3 %
Sweden	-6.7 %
Germany	-6.6 %
China	-2.6 %

Source: The Guardian and OECD Economic Database, 2020.

Before discussing the five IMC models in detail, it is useful to discuss recent trends in IMC development which impact on them.

3. RECENT TRENDS AND COMMENTARY

Over the past 30 years, IMC has accelerated to become one of most significant marketing management frameworks. It takes the place of dominance in every marketing communications text, is now the preferred title for chapters in marketing management texts, and tends to be the repeated mantra of online and offline professional books and articles presented at practitioner and academic conferences. Moreover, academic journal special issues and editorials have been presented by Journal of Advertising, Journal of Advertising Research, Journal of Marketing Communications, the International Journal of Advertising. The outcome is several hundred papers in the marketing and communications practitioner press, with continuing calls for papers for special issues most recently the European Journal of Marketing in 2017. Major marketing associations now include courses on IMC as a norm, and indeed students everywhere can expect that modules previously focused on ‘promotion’ will now concentrate on integration. The American Productivity and Quality Council (APQC), the American Marketing Association (AMA) and advertising associations such as the Institute of Advertising Practitioner (IPA) and their equivalents in other countries, spend time focusing on the issue. Further, the focus on measuring marketing investments and activities and developing integrated approaches to marketing was one of the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) priorities from 2014 to 2016. That emphasis continues as from 2016 to 2018 the priority has been adjusted to: ‘delivering *integrated*, real-time, relevant experiences in context’ (MSI, 2016), a point reinforced in a paper by Tafesse & Kitchen (2015) that ‘the first, and perhaps most important, research priority is measurement’ and supported earlier by Taylor (2010). Undergirding and overarching the academic crescendo is the apparent adoption and usage of IMC by companies and agencies of all types. But, is IMC more about vocalization, volume or does it concern actual usage? (Kitchen, 2017). The special issue discussed not only why IMC progressed, but also its growth and why it may have stalled somewhat *en route* to its current status. As stated by Kitchen (2020) in the special issue:

“However, though the road toward IMC practice as found in earlier texts and seen as the integration of promotional mix variables (or the the ‘one-voice’ phenomenon) reached its zenith, the journey toward integration from a consumer or corporate perspective has scarcely begun. Thus, what Don Schultz and Phil Kitchen (2000) regarded as a four-stage

process, for *the majority of companies*, has – to all intents and purposes - stalled at its very beginning. Yes, we have ‘message integration’ but not necessarily ‘consumer integration’. Most companies carry out poor, ineffectual market research. There is an insufficiency of real understanding of markets, marketplaces, or marketspaces. There is a concomitant lack of investment in database and data systems to gather information from customers and consumers on an ongoing basis. Thus, most messages are still outbound and linear, with the added virtue of looking or sounding the same via all media. Integrated brand marketing, where one measures behavioural outcomes in response to marketing communication, remains a far-fetched dream for most companies. IMC, while it has achieved its goal in one direction i.e., message integration, has not reached its subsequent purpose as a strategic business process (Schultz *et al.*, 2011) in terms of strategic integration or for that matter organizational integration. It is, however, moving in these directions as evidenced in these pages”.

“Further, there are techniques, processes and workable techniques for after-the-event evaluation of integrated marketing communications. But, as in all searches for a holy grail, almost none work with immediacy, or during campaign implementation. However, a more realistic picture of IMC may be *gradually* emerging from the maelstrom of debate, conceptualisation and available empirical evidence. For example, it can be claimed that IMC adoption, irrespective of theory, is both situation-specific *and* context-dependent. Thus, while it is a widely accepted model and paradigm, its use or implementation depends on what the company wishes to do within its own budgetary constraints or what senior managers proscribe, particularly in terms of investment in data analytics, customer interfaces and communication modalities”.

These statements powerfully suggest that there are still IMC problems and issues to address. For many companies in 2020, it could be argued that, in terms of economic, commercial and communication history, there is little evidence of progression toward a more robust communication process which both benefits and is relevant to senders *and* receivers. A major part of the problem lies in business application which utilises a form of IMC, but certain forces precludes businesses from its fuller applicatory development. For other firms and businesses, both online and offline, there is even little or no attempt to move away from mass intrusive communication, a form of sledgehammer marketing which is hugely annoying and irritating to consumers, but apparently legally permissible – an extra price to pay for our current communication revolution.

3.1. The Five Models or Stages of IMC Development

The five stages of IMC have appeared in many publications since 2010; assessing them in the following paragraphs provides a useful reminder of how the IMC debate has developed over that time.

Stage 1: Tactical Coordination

As argued by Schultz *et al.* (1993), businesses at this initial stage of tactical coordination or IMC development concentrate marketing and communication minds on the *one sight, one sound approach*, effectively integrating promotional elements such as advertising, sales promotion, marketing public relations, direct marketing, and/or the Internet into one consistent repeatable form. In this stage, firms are advised to maximise consistency and synergy among all promotional mix elements and further instruct advertising agencies to maximise all potential exposures to the brand through a multiplicity of different media. In accord with marketing communication theory, messages may vary in content, but the same core values will be depicted repeatedly. However, adopting a rigidly repetitive approach internationally may prove

disastrous, given the large differences in global markets, such as variations in consumers mindsets, cultures and aesthetic tastes. For example, the brashness of American themed ads do not resonate well, even in countries perceived to be culturally similar. The real weakness of this approach, is that very little or no market research is required. It is often seen as an 'inside-out' approach to marketing communications. While it offers coordination and potential synergies among promotional mix elements, it may not resonate with or be received well by customers. It is almost a pure usage of what could be termed 'sales orientation' that is almost entirely sales orientated: the risk of many potential customers being irritated by the method are regarded as acceptable if some will respond positively. It is perhaps the most simplistic modality of IMC adoption, and yet appears to be the most popular and widespread adoptive approach.

Even though online messages are targeted at particular individuals by algorithms based on actual buyer behaviour or their search history, they may feel inappropriate from the consumers' perspective. Many such messages are unwanted, intrusive and annoying. It is not unsurprising that alongside the barrage of online messages, would-be target markets and consumers can reduce their exposure by using sophisticated ad blockers.

While there is cost involved in this business adoption, it is the least expensive way of adopting IMC. It is worth remembering though that adopting a sales orientation was roundly condemned 60 years ago by Theodore Levitt (1960), and his argument has apparently been supported during the past six decades of marketing development. If the hypothesis is correct that most firms do adopt this form of IMC – in effect using a type of mass marketing based on hard selling of unwanted goods - it suggests there is little sophistication in the way that IMC and marketing in general are being operated.

Stage 2: Redefining the Scope of Marketing Communication

In Stage 2, businesses adopt an outside-in (as opposed to an inside-out) perspective. This connects far more closely with a marketing orientation built upon exchanges that satisfy organisational and consumer needs. In essence, it treats sellers and buyers or potential buyers as equal partners, unlike Stage 1, where sellers use a megaphone approach to shout out at a passive audience. Rather than simply bundling promotional mix elements together as in Stage 1, businesses look at all potential contacts a customer or consumer may have with a product, service, brand, or company. Firms using this approach seek to understand as much as they can about the dynamics of their target market which is a key element as knowledge and understanding of markets are the valued currency of 21st century exchanges. On the basis of this understanding, firms develop IMC from the dual perspective and to seek to align all communication with the needs of customer, consumers and prospects who are exchange partners. The costs in of Stage 1 exceed those of Stage 1 because of the investment required to understand consumers and markets and apply this knowledge to achieve more effective communications. It is estimated that only around 30 per cent of all businesses have moved to this stage. This low-take-up rate is not only a significant problem for IMC as such, but also indicates the failure of marketing itself to effectively supplant sales orientation. There are always budgetary considerations as well. A very real risk is that with COVID-19, budgets are drastically reduced, and perhaps also a reversion to Stage 1 IMC is necessitated though it seems self-defeating. As shown in Table 3, communication budgets in the UK are forecast to drop sharply as a result of the pandemic. UK data is used as global data is not yet available at the time of writing.

TABLE 3: UK COMMUNICATION EXPENDITURES AND ISSUES RELATIVE TO COVID-19		
2020	+/- per cent	Financial Estimate £
Advertising	-33.8 %	- 1.8billion
Direct Mail	-62.4 %	
Social Media	-17 % in Q2	
Expenditure	Largest	Least
	UK Government	Travel & Tourism (almost nil)
Every economic sector shows decline		
Future Growth	Not expected to Q1 in 2022	
Source: Nielsen Ad Intel, AA/WARC, 2020.		

A related issue is that given expenditure on all forms of communication is in decline, this will be paralleled in other countries also affected by COVID-19. Notably, there is very little data available about market research, though there is expectation that similar marked declines in expenditure will be evidenced. Hence, before COVID, the majority of businesses had not adopted Stage 2 IMC (or much or marketing either). With COVID entering the picture, current research and expenditure on communications will also be in decline, hence reversion to an earlier stage of IMC development is probable.

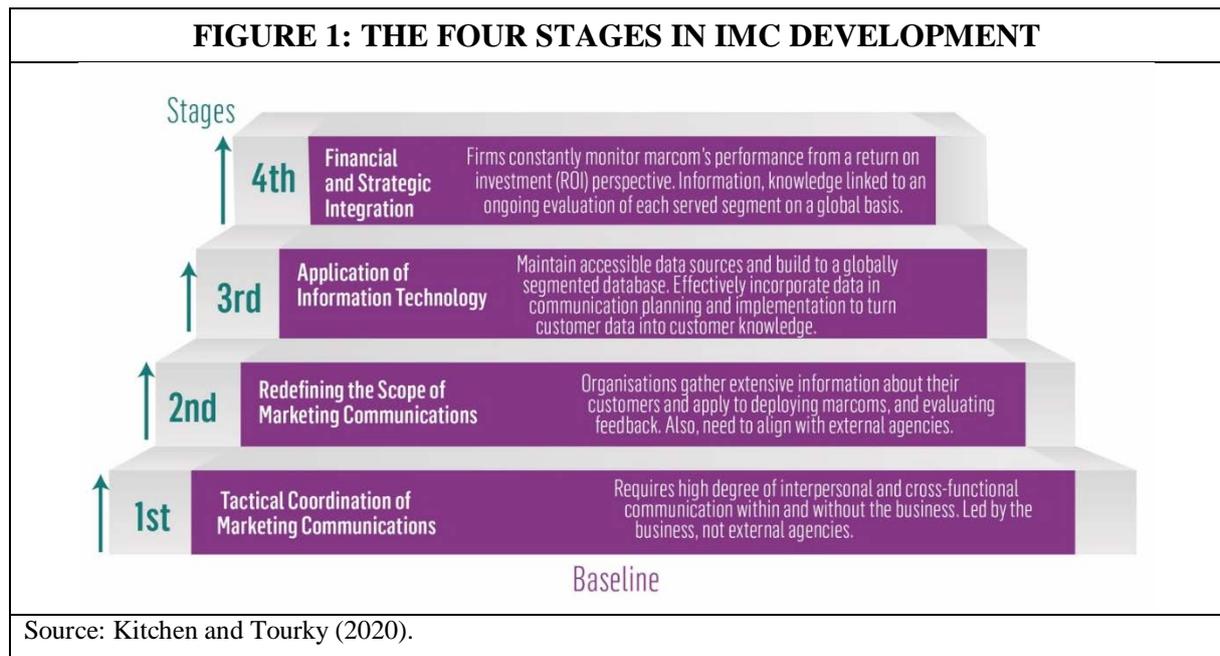
Stage 3: Application of Information Technology

In stage 3, a firm starts to use its existing data to identify, value and monitor the impact of integrated communication programs on key target markets or segments over time. These advanced techniques can turn raw data into vital customer and consumer knowledge. Stage 3 does not constitute the arrival of consumer and customer data as the driving force for marketing activity, since this information is normally available inside the organisation, but ensures it is being fully used. However, the use of advanced data analysis processes, along with the necessary hardware and managerial skills, often dwarfs the costs associated with Stage 2. Undoubtedly, information technology and infrastructure can stand in the way, prohibiting the flow of IMC-relevant information to decision makers, or even help alleviate implementation barriers. Given prevailing circumstances, relatively few businesses have arrived at this stage.

Stage 4: Financial and Strategic Integration

In stage 4, the emphasis moves to deploying the data derived from Stage 3, and the previous abilities derived from Stages 1 and 2, in order to drive communication planning based on customer information and insight. Very few firms may actually have reached this stage, and the current challenges may forestall further development. According to Kitchen and Tourky (2020) (see Figure 1), Stage 4 constitutes the highest level of integration, although there is debate about the existence of a Stage 5, as set out in the next sub-section. Firms using stage 4 reevaluate their financial information infrastructures to aid development of "closed-loop" planning and evaluation in order to determine and measure marketing expenditures based on return-on-investment customer and consumer measures. This means that - return on investment

- the ultimate aim of communication efforts - can be anticipated, in line with following the heretical view that asserts that marketing communicators should always state objectives/intended outcomes in terms of financial gains such as sales, market share, ROI, etc. It is important to note that this has been criticised by proponents of the traditional view given that financial gains are the consequence of a host of factors including the prevailing economic climate, competitive activity and all marketing mix variables used by a brand. In fact, a combination of both heretical and traditional views will always be inextricably intertwined. That said, very few firms may actually have reached this stage, and certain factors as discussed may forestall such development or achievement.



Stage 5: Integrated marketing

In addition to these four stages, there is discussion around the existence of a fifth stage of IMC which can be termed “integrated marketing”. This has been defined as: “combining all aspects of a brand into one seamless experience for the customer, from advertising to social media” made possible in the digital era since marketers can combine all aspects of their marketing into a multifaceted but unified strategy, improving effectiveness (Motley Fool, 2020). A discussion on this topic was conducted by Kitchen and de Pelsmacker as early as 2004: as they hypothesised then that ‘integrated marketing’ ‘did seem to it very neatly alongside Stage 1 of the four stages. It could be opined, however, that integrated marketing would, could potentially be the goal or pinnacle of IMC achievement and success. Instead, it is either alongside the first stage of IMC development, or... the fifth stage of such development which neatly manages to avoid stages 2, 3, and 4.

3.2. Other Flies in the IMC Ointment – a Denial of Customer Needs

It is not overstating the case to say that IMC provides a needful and meaningful solution to business communication needs in the 21st century, or has the potential so to do. IMC also provides a very sharp rebuke to the notion that mass or sledgehammer marketing (offline or online or indeed in any form) is something that consumers want or need. Stage 2, for example, shows absolute support for marketing and allows businesses to more clearly understand and

seek to satisfy consumer needs, and communicate more effectively with them. There is, however, at least one fly in the [marketing] ointment. Assuming the marketing works and exchanges take place. The product, service or brand is purchased and/or consumed in some way. This can be claimed as a marketing and marketing communication 'success'. What happens when or if, something goes wrong during consumption? i.e. a consumer durable for example. There is an alarming and rising trend for businesses and organisations – both in the public and private sector - to seek to keep customers away from interactions with company personnel, for example by using websites that make it difficult or impossible for consumers to interface with staff. The increasing difficulty that customers with problems face in speaking to staff in real time was addressed in detail by Taylor *et al.* (2020), who argue that future sales were predicated on current performance. Having persuaded consumers to buy a product or service in the first place, it seems a dangerous policy to ignore or seek to distance them when problems arise. Yet, wherever we turn in today's world, it is becoming more and more difficult to contact organisations to ask for help and guidance. After-sales service has become the 21st century stepchild of marketing. Therefore, it can be argued that, after-sales service must be integrated into IMC thinking: it is too important a subject to be left to chance or deliberately ignored.

A second area to be addressed is the sheer inescapability of online and offline marketing communications in in today's world. Just how many commercial messages do we see or are exposed to each day? SJ Insights (2014) suggested the consumers were exposed to 3,000 and 20,000 communications daily. While most are fleeting exposures that cannot be processed or remembered consciously, there is a general sense that the sheer number of these messages are increasing and that people going about their daily lives cannot avoid exposure to them, even if they wish to. It is perhaps less to do with integration and more to do with disintegration of what could be carefully targeted messages, rather than the booming crescendo of unwanted and unneeded nonsense which is becoming profoundly irritating.

3.3. A Critical Discussion?

This paper commenced by asking one overarching question, and a further supplementary question. These concerned the relevance and significance of IMC in the context of 2020 and further asked which model or stage of IMC seemed to offer the most promise for the future? The paper was intended as an opening gambit for the special issue, and – as such – does not follow the usual rubric of detailed literature review, and does not seek to apply a systematic well-structured research methodology. These can be taken up later on and we feel assured these will be the content for most papers in this special issue. What this paper does is set the scene for these subsequent papers in a way that reflects nearly three decades of critical review and multiple empirical studies with companies and agencies that service their needs in about 20 of the world's best and most expansive economies.

The above said, there does indeed seem to be evidence from the literature, from business adoption and practice, and from the universal adoption of IMC in learned texts, that the subject is now the dominant paradigm theoretically and in business. There are also weaknesses. For example, to stay in Stage 1 of IMC is an absolute denial of all the sterling developmental work that has taken place in marketing and its spearheading of communication since 1960. To fall back into the slough of sales orientation is also a retrenchment to the old worn-out sledgehammer marketing associated with the mass rather than the micro. Stage 2 – at its very least does serve to take on board marketing itself. All marketing has as its inexorable core the absolute necessity to build the marketing mix around customers and consumers who literally are the life blood of any company, product, service or brand. Stage 3 and 4 contain the success traits of current and future businesses. Knowledge, understanding and capabilities rely upon a

continuous stream of data, which cannot be managed on the back of an envelope. The data revolution, and the information generated has become part of the warp and the weft of the essence or substance of marketing, and – *inter alia* of the communications that underpin modern consumer behaviour.

4. TOWARD A CONCLUSION

It is not overstating the case to say that IMC provides a necessary and meaningful solution to business communication needs in the 21st century, or has the potential to do so. IMC also firmly rebuts the notion that consumers want or need mass marketing, whether online or offline, although frequently this is the effect of poorly executed Stage 1 communications. Stage 2, for example, shows absolute support for marketing and allows businesses to more clearly understand and seek to satisfy consumer needs, and communicate more effectively with them, while Stages 3, 4 and 5 offer the potential for targeted, information-led exchanges with consumers and fully integrated marketing. However, the exceptionally challenging environment of the COVID-19 era have only exacerbated existing issues with the way in which IMC is being deployed. Unless these multifaceted, diverse challenges are tackled robustly, the outcome may be a reversion to former stages of communication, offsetting or negating the progress that had been made in developing IMC. The trend towards ignoring post-sales issues and customer retention should also be urgently addressed. Brands which survive and thrive in the harsh new business landscape may be those that fully grasp the potential of IMC and leave neither consumer attraction nor customer retention to chance.

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