INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS IN FOOTBALL

Argyro Elisavet Manoli
This book takes an important step forward in showing how Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) have been applied within the English Premier League (EPL) – arguably the most commercialised and watched sport league in the world – and how it can and should be utilised in the context of other sports properties.

Drawing on cutting-edge empirical research, the book offers a detailed view into the marketing communications practices of EPL clubs (such as brand management and communications alignment), the football clubs’ practitioners’ perspectives of IMC and the integration processes taking place within the clubs. It examines the key marketing communications practices that strategic IMC entails, including marketing strategies and goals, cross-functional communication, external communication management and brand management, and helps researchers and practitioners to understand how IMC can have the maximum positive impact on the brand of an organisation, by managing their content, channels, stakeholders and results.

This book is fascinating reading for any researcher, advanced student or practitioner with an interest in sport management, the business of football, sport marketing or innovative approaches to marketing and business communications in other commercial spheres.

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Integrated Marketing Communications in Football

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research, while situating the topic within the pertinent literature, presenting the rationale for this book and relating it to the original contributions to knowledge that are addressed by the research. Following this section, the English Premier League (hereafter EPL), the sector examined in this book is presented, which can facilitate the appreciation of the overall research.

Research Aim

The purpose of this book is to gain understanding of Integrated Marketing Communications’ (hereafter IMC) appreciation and implementation in EPL clubs. Since this book intends to deepen our understanding of IMC by gaining a more holistic view of IMC’s appreciation and implementation, its aim is two-fold; first, to investigate practitioners’ perceptions of IMC, and second, to examine whether and to what extent IMC is implemented in the football clubs studied. Through this examination, a new theoretical framework can be developed that can illustrate IMC’s appreciation and application in the EPL. This book will investigate IMC’s appreciation and implementation through a qualitative research design which allows for rich information to be collected, enabling the author to gain deep insight to both the practices encountered and the views expressed. The framework and rationale for this book will be presented in the following sections in more detail.

Framework

Since this book aims at examining the appreciation and implementation of IMC in a spectrum of organisations within a particular industry, a case study approach is selected. In more detail, the EPL, the sector selected, comprises of multiple case studies that represent the companies – football clubs that operate within it. In this book the focus is drawn on the EPL, which consists of the multiple case studies / football clubs that participated in the league in any of the following five consecutive seasons: 2010/2011, 2011/2012, 2012/2013, 2013/2014 and 2014/2015.
This method chosen aligns with the author's critical realist perspective and the epistemological approach selected (retroduction), while allowing for rich and valuable information to be acquired, bearing in mind the complexity involved in examining phenomena related with organisations and relationships within them (Creswell, 2013). Taking into consideration the author's effort to conduct engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007) and study practitioners' perceptions and implementation of theory, this collective case study approach that allows for multiple case studies of EPL clubs to be examined would permit for a more holistic view of IMC's appreciation and implementation to be acquired.

Based on the complexity of the industry and on the disparities that exist both globally and within each country on aspects such as structure, finance and customer base and reach (Szymanski & Smith, 1997; Noll, 2002; McNamara et al., 2013), the focus of the research was limited to the clubs in the top level of English professional football, the EPL. Additionally, due to the promotion–relegation phenomenon, and in order for this research to be accurate in representing the industry sector, the EPL clubs of the following five consecutive seasons (2010/2011, 2011/2012, 2012/2013, 2013/2014 and 2014/2015) were chosen, 30 in total. Based on the fact that the clubs included in this research represent 66.66% of the total number of clubs that have participated in the league since it was created in 1992, while the majority of them have participated in the EPL for the greater part of its existence, it could be argued that increasing the number of seasons, and therefore increasing the number of clubs, would not have affected the findings of the research significantly (Belk, 2007).

In more detail, the clubs included in this research are: Arsenal, Aston Villa, Birmingham City, Blackburn Rovers, Blackpool, Bolton Wanderers, Burnley, Cardiff City, Chelsea, Crystal Palace, Everton, Fulham, Hull City, Leicester City, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United, Newcastle United, Norwich, Queens Park Rangers, Reading, Southampton, Stoke City, Sunderland, Swansea, Tottenham Hotspur, West Bromwich Albion, West Ham United, Wigan Athletic and Wolverhampton Wanderers.

In more detail, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the key individuals responsible for marketing and marketing communications activities in the 30 football clubs comprising the census of this research. The interviews took place between August 2014 and March 2015 and were conducted in-person in either the office or the training ground of each club, while following a coherent interview protocol.

Rationale for This Book

Jobber and Ellis-Chadwick (2012) argue that marketing is led by three forces: customer orientation, goals orientation and integrated efforts. These forces have in fact changed the traditionally perceived one-way communication process of an organisation to a two-way dialogue between an organisation and its stakeholders (Kotler, 2000) where value is co-created (De Chernatony, 2001), which has, in
marketing communications is the collection of all elements in an organisation’s marketing mix that facilitates exchanges by establishing shared meaning with the organisation’s customers or clients.

The significant changes in the marketplace mentioned above, paired with the shifting views in the way in which marketing is perceived and applied, made Webster (2002, p. 23) argue that ‘it’s patently clear that marketing management needs a new paradigm’. According to Kitchen and Schultz (1999, p. 21) the answer to this call was found in IMC, as the following quote demonstrates:

IMC is undoubtedly the major communications development of the last decade of the 20th century which can lead to ‘a key competitive advantage associated with marketing.

A number of definitions have been presented for IMC as it will be discussed in the following chapter, in an attempt to shed light on what it captures and the role it can play within modern corporations. These definitions also demonstrate the different perceptions of IMC, what it is and how it fits within marketing. From the early definitions that present IMC as a concept of alignment of communication messages in order for the advertising function to be facilitated (Keegan et al., 1992; Schultz, 1992, 1993a, 1993b), to the views that argue that IMC derives from relationship marketing (Schultz & Schultz, 1998, 2004; Duncan, 2002) or that it is synonymous with brand management (Kliatchko, 2005, 2008), IMC and the way in which it is located within marketing has been discussed extensively over the last 25 years. Porcu et al. (2012, p. 326) propose the latest definition of IMC, which presents it as:

The interactive and systemic process of cross-functional planning and optimization of messages to stakeholders with the aim of communicating with coherence and transparency to achieve synergies and encourage profitable relationships in the short, medium and long-term.

As it is argued through their work and the recent work of academics focusing on IMC such as Kliatchko (2008), Schultz and Patti (2009), Moriarty and Schultz (2012), Kliatchko and Schultz (2014), Gambetti and Schultz (2015) and Vernuccio and Ceccotti (2015), IMC is not a mere marketing communications concept or tool, but a strategic cross-functional process that exceeds the ‘boundaries’ of marketing and communications and ‘rants throughout an organisation’, while having:

the potential to lead to global restructuring of the marketing and communication roles, through the elimination of boundaries between the main areas of marketing communication and between the business units.

Porcu et al. (2012, p. 325)
Academics such as Baker and Hart (2008), Thorson and Moore (2013) and Armstrong et al. (2014) see IMC as an amalgam of relationship marketing, brand management and communications systems, with elements of strategy and planning. According to Thorson and Moore (2013) and Keller (2016), IMC is a strategic planning process that allows for marketing and communications programmes to have the maximum effects possible on the brand of an organisation, by managing their content, channels, stakeholders and results. In more detail, IMC includes the management of the exchange of meaningful messages (content), through the most relevant and preferred contact points of the stakeholders (channels), in order for a purposeful dialogue and potential relationship with the most profitable and relevant target aggregates (stakeholders) to be achieved, while analysing the return of investment (results) of the appropriate resources allocated on marketing communications (Schultz & Schultz, 1998; Duncan, 2002; Kliatchko, 2005, 2008; Kitchen, 2016).

Taking all the above into consideration, the author agrees with what is suggested through Kitchen's (2016) and Schultz et al.'s (2014, p. 455) work that 'IMC can be recast as the base for rethinking and replacing traditional marketing theory', while emphasising elements of strategic planning, holistic approaches, message synergy and brand and relationship management. As a result, the significance of studying, understanding and implementing IMC can be underlined. IMC’s importance and benefits have been researched and supported extensively by academics such as Ewing et al. (2001), Naik and Raman (2003), du Plessis (2005), Tsai (2005), Reinold and Tropp (2012) and Luxton et al. (2015). These benefits include a stronger behavioural and consumer impact, better control over marketing and communications budget, higher campaign effectiveness, and better market and financial performance of a brand.

A question can then be raised regarding the recent decline in academic publications on the topic and the overall scarcity of sources examining practitioners' appreciation and implementation of IMC (Manoli & Davies, 2014). This scarcity influenced the decision of the author to examine practitioners’ perceptions and implementation of the theory, as it will be discussed below, and informed her choice to focus on the EPL, an industry sector that has yet to be fully explored (Boyle & Haynes, 2014; Chadwick, 2015) and could benefit greatly from IMC’s application.

It could be argued that the lack of research on IMC's appreciation and application is in line with a broader lack of efforts to link theory with practice and address this knowledge translation and transfer problem, by practising what Van de Ven (2007, p. 17) calls 'engaged scholarship'. As it is argued in his work:

Social science today suffers from elaborating theories that are often based on insufficient grounding in concrete particulars. It also suffers from a lack of relevance as perceived by the intended audiences or users of the research. As a consequence, theories tend to be grounded in myths and superstitions.

As Van de Ven (2007) suggests, in order for a theory to be relevant and grounded on facts, its appreciation and implementation needs to be studied. Engaged scholarship, or the study of theory and practice, is
a form of research for obtaining the perspectives and advice of key stakeholders, to understand a complex social problem...that produces knowledge that is more penetrating and insightful.

(Van de Ven, 2007, p. 109)

By conducting engaged scholarship, the current knowledge translation and transfer problem often documented in management studies (King & Learmonth, 2014; Tucker & Lowe, 2014) can be addressed, the relevance of research for practice can be enhanced and the research knowledge in a discipline can be advanced (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006; Lukka, 2014). In other words, the knowledge produced within academia can be translated into knowledge understood by practitioners, which can then be transferred into practice. As it has been argued repeatedly, studies on areas such as marketing and management cannot exist in isolation, since what is in fact being studied in them is the empirically based knowledge about human-made objects and phenomena, which reflect the inherent influence of history and context, and function as dynamic and adaptive systems (Rynes et al., 2001, 2007; Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009). As a result, distancing a management study from the practical management itself would not only harm the future of management practices, but it would also decrease the relevance of the research, making its findings outdated and potentially invalid (Gelade, 2006; Latham, 2007). On the contrary, research informed by practice and well-grounded in organisational contexts can provide more informed theory building, where competing theories and diverse underlying mechanisms can be investigated, and decisions made about explanatory power as well as practical effects are brought into light (Pearce, 2006; Rousseau et al., 2008). This effort to bridge the gap between theory and practice can assist scholars to better appreciate the conditions under which theory can be implemented, while adding depth to their existing understanding of phenomena within organisations, and overall scientific constructs and theory. Interestingly, when engaged scholarship or research informed by practice has been conducted, it has been widely celebrated by academia1 (e.g. Lawler, 1994; Locke & Latham, 2002; Mohrman & Lawler, 2011).

In order for this to be achieved, and for the gulf between theory and practice to be bridged, practitioners, their understanding and practices have to become the focal point of research. As Pettigrew (2001) argued,

the dichotomy of theory and practice cannot be answered with the mere dissemination of information, since dissemination is too late if the wrong questions have been asked.

What Pettigrew (2001) suggests through his analysis of this ‘dichotomy’, and what Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) and Van de Ven (2007) have argued, is that any research on theory implementation would inevitably lead to a study more or less comparing theory with practice, or academics versus practitioners. Additionally, in his work (Pettigrew, 2001), it is supported that management research has yet to succeed in being truly engaged with users and other stakeholders, while
suggesting that more studies should be conducted on the perception and implementation of management research, in order for the existent knowledge transfer problem to be overcome. In other words, it could be argued that in order for knowledge on IMC to progress, there is a need to study practitioners’ perception and implementation of IMC, which might, in turn, include or lead to examining theory versus practice.

**Perception**

According to Barnes (2015, p. 89) perception can be defined as ‘a way of regarding or understanding or interpreting something, or an intuitive understanding and insight’ and is a multidimensional concept that has received extensive academic interest. Studies from numerous fields, such as neuroscience, psychology and sociology, have questioned the origins of perceptions and its aspects (George, 1992; Andereck et al., 2011). Hochberg (1956) argues that “perception frequently carries with it the various connotations of “awareness”, of a “discrimination” between stimuli and of a conviction of the “real” environmental presence of the perceived object / person /situation etc’, and as a result, it is a complex and ill-defined concept overall. According to Brunswik (1948) and Bruner et al. (1951) perceptions are determined by each individual, their age, sex, personality, experiences, memories, knowledge and education. The socio-cultural influences and the environment in which they are in, as well as the characteristics of the era in which they were raised, are also considered key aspects of how perceptions are formed. As a result, an individual’s perception is a subjective view, which defines the way in which they respond and behave towards a situation, idea, object or person. George (1992) separates the origins of perception in management studies into extrinsic and intrinsic, while arguing that the way in which management theory is perceived is directly linked with the way in which it is applied. According to McGregor (1960), Burns (1978) and Dean and Bowen (1994), theory appreciation can affect the overall quality of a number of key aspects within the organisation such as quality management, leadership, strategic planning, human resource management, interpersonal relations and interdepartmental communication, and as a result, it could also affect the future of an organisation and its potential success. Interestingly, a number of these key aspects affected by theory appreciation, such as strategic planning, interpersonal relations and interdepartmental communication, are closely linked with the implementation of IMC. Perception is believed to be a key issue in management studies, since, as Henry and Walker (1991) and Henry (1999, 2001) argue, the importance of soft data in managerial thought is often overlooked, while the critical role of unconscious learning, tacit knowledge and intuitive judgement in business decisions is also undermined. What is underlined through Henry’s (2001, p. 3) study is that individuals’ perceptions within an organisation dictate their behaviour and choices, and as a result influence the overall organisation’s course of actions, which might in fact ‘counter the traditional management focus on rationalism, predictability, planning and control’. In other words, it is argued that
theory perception in management can shape theory implementation and influence not only an individual's actions but also the overall course of actions of an organisation.

**Implementation**

Implementation is according to Hill (2014, p. 213) 'the translation of theory into action'. This simple and short definition is used to encapsulate a long, challenging and complex process that involves a number of internal and external factors that lead to implementing theory in practice. Psychology, sociology, organisational and operational studies have discussed implementation from various viewpoints, with particular areas such as change management, governance and policy, developing extensive literature on the topic (Jauch & Glueck, 1988; Davis et al., 1997; Mischen & Jackson, 2008). In management research, implementation is believed to be based upon individuals' psychological attributes and organisations' situational characteristics. According to Steers and Porter (1991), Steers and Black (1994) and Davis et al. (1997), the former include the extrinsic and intrinsic motivation of individuals, their identification with their role and with the overall organisation's mission, vision and objectives, the social comparison made between individuals, and the use of power as a user or a receiver. The latter comprises the management philosophy of an organisation, its overall culture and cultural differences within it and its risk orientation, time frame and overall objectives. As it is argued by Hogwood and Gunn (cited in Hill, 2014, p. 217), an individual's perception and understanding of a theory is directly and strongly linked with the way and the extent to which this theory can be implemented, since 'the circumstances external to the implementing agency do not impose crippling constraints'. The barriers and challenges that originate from the environment and are outside the control of the individuals can make the process of implementation more demanding and time and resource consuming; however, translating theory into practice originates and is led by the individual and their knowledge, appreciation and will (May et al., 2009). As a result, implementation is guided by subjective views, which lack a strict and well-defined approach. According to Hogwood and Gunn (cited in Hill, 2014, p. 217), since no universal prescriptive model of implementation exists, any attempts to translate theory into practice will be guided by subjectivity and could involve potential flaws, making 'perfect implementation unattainable'. What Mischen and Jackson (2008, p. 314) argue in their work is that implementation can be viewed as the process of 'connecting the dots in knowledge management', where theory perception can lead to theory implementation. It is underlined, however, that implementation uncertainty or the extent to which management theory will be successfully implemented (Rosenberg & Brault, 1993) is a factor that has to be taken into consideration when examining theory implementation in management. According to Rosenberg and Brault (1993) and Butterworth and Punt (1999) implementation uncertainty has been largely ignored by management procedures and their evaluation processes that tend to overlook the possibility of a
concept not being fully and successfully implemented. On the contrary, traditional management processes expect for perfect implementation to materialise, despite the above-mentioned argument that full and successful implementation is in fact unachievable (Hill, 2014). This rather myopic view of the potential and practicalities of theory implementation could be linked with the overall lack of understanding of how theory is perceived and implemented, which can once again lead to the argument that management studies would benefit greatly from additional engaged scholarship studies (Pettigrew, 2001).

Taking the above into consideration, in order for practitioners’ implementation of IMC to be studied, their perceptions of IMC have also to be examined. Analysing both aspects could then deepen the existing understanding of IMC, while making the knowledge produced more relevant, as engaged scholarship suggests.

IMC has been a platform for research for almost three decades (Kitchen & Tourky, 2015), with numerous academics expressing their appreciation of IMC and its potential, as the above quotes from Kitchen and Schultz (1999) and Porcu et al. (2012) have demonstrated. However, IMC’s implementation that could examine this potential in practice is still unclear and rarely reported. In fact, IMC’s implementation can be considered under-researched, with the majority of the available literature so far focusing on the theoretical and definitional aspects of the term (Kliatchko, 2005, 2008; Kitchen, 2016). Even though the term ‘integration’ was first introduced by Schultz in 1992 (p. 100) to refer to the practice of implementing IMC, it could be argued that today, more than two decades later, it still remains a rather under explored area.

In the few studies that research IMC’s implementation, practitioners’ perceptions are studied before the practice of IMC is examined (Dmitrijeva & Batraga, 2012; Kliatchko & Schultz, 2014; Schultz et al., 2016). The focus of these studies, however, appears to be misplaced on agencies, rather than client organisations, despite the widely accepted argument that clients drive integration (Caywood & Ewing, 1991; Eagle et al., 2007). The few studies that examine client marketers are centred around a narrow sample of successful and large organisations operating in a number of sectors, while neglecting less successful and smaller companies (Ewing et al., 2000; Han et al., 2004; Vantamay, 2011). This rather myopic and often methodologically questionable choice of IMC academics so far has created a significant research gap in the IMC and the overall marketing literature. This lack of research on IMC’s implementation has led to a shortage of information regarding practitioners’ knowledge and appreciation of IMC and their respective marketing communications practices.

Taking all the above into consideration and in an effort to address the literature gaps discussed above and deepen the understanding of IMC, the focus of this book was drawn on practitioners’ perceptions and implementation of IMC. Since a holistic view of IMC’s appreciation and application was intended, the focus was drawn on a wider spectrum of client organisations operating within the selected sector, the EPL. In other words, in this research, the EPL is the platform – sector that includes the instrumental case studies3 on which IMC’s implementation is
examined, in order for a detailed view to be offered on practitioners’ perceptions and whether and to what extent IMC is applied. The reasons behind the selection of EPL as the focus of this research will be presented below.

Being a rapidly developing industry that has been experiencing significant growth even through troubling financial times (Szymanski & Smith, 1997; Szymanski, 2010), the EPL is currently considered one of the fastest growing industry sectors in the UK, with a remarkable growth rate difference when compared to any other UK sports leagues (e.g. Football League, Rugby League, – Deloitte, 2016). The EPL is currently considered the most commercially advanced football league in Europe, collecting almost double the revenue of the second (in 2014/2015, EPL’s revenue was 4,400 million € compared to the Italian’s Serie A revenue of 2,392 million €), and being often referred to as the ‘world’s highest earning sports league’ (Deloitte, 2016, pp. 10, 14).

Aside from the financial success of the league, the EPL is considered to be one of the most popular sports leagues globally, attracting the interest of more than 60% of the global population (more than any other sports league – Sportfve, 2012). According to the same study, the EPL is also believed to be the ‘most-watched’ sport league in the world. The Premier League (2016) reports that its matches are broadcasted in 212 territories around the world, reaching 643 million homes and achieving a TV audience of 4.7 billion people for its games. This global appeal of the league is also enhanced by the multinational nature of clubs’ playing squads, managers, owners, sponsors and investors. Deloitte (2016) and UEFA (2015) argue that the EPL is the most competitively balanced sports league, which combined with the recently introduced financial fair play regulations could also make it the most financially balanced league in Europe. Fetchko et al. (2013) underline that, compared with other North American and Asian sports leagues, the EPL has minimum state intervention and limited dependence to the governing bodies of the sport, which allows the league to function like an independent industry sector.

In terms of its marketing and communications functions, academics such as McCarthy et al. (2014), Manoli (2016, 2020), Manoli and Kenyon (2018) and Manoli and Hodgkinson (2017, 2019, 2021) suggest that EPL clubs have invested extra effort, time and resources on developing them over time, possibly due to the need created by an increasing ‘hunger’ for news on behalf of the fans, the media and other stakeholders. This emphasis placed on marketing and communications can be seen through the early and widespread adoption of new and social media by football clubs, which has even led academics to argue that brand management and ‘fandom shaping’ is currently conducted predominantly through them (Nash, 2000; McCarthy et al., 2014). Boyle and Haynes (2014, p. 135) suggest that despite this emphasis on marketing and communications, the EPL’s brand ‘is not managed as successfully as it could, when compared to other established sports markets’, and as a result it is suggested that additional attention should be drawn on understanding the targeted audience and aiming for a more coherent brand management overall. Relationship marketing and management are also no strangers to EPL clubs,