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IMC as Theory and as a Poststructural Set of Practices and Discourses: A Continuously Evolving Paradigm Shift

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As evidenced in this issue, IMC remains a controversial theoretical concept in terms of generalizing what it is and what it does. However, if IMC is viewed from a different paradigmatic perspective on theory, namely that of poststructuralism, then we might consider it as a set of contingently framed practices and discourses where localized, particular practitioner interpretations are just as important as general theoretic ones. When viewed this way, IMC emerges as a powerful tool that guides practitioners in developing and implementing marketing communications programs even if they apply it in disparate ways according to their own specific understandings and circumstances.

THE STATUS OF Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) has been addressed numerous times, including in an issue of the *Journal of Advertising Research* in which a relatively skeptical viewpoint by Cornelissen and Lock (2000) was advanced and relatively supportive comments by Schultz and Kitchen (2000) and Gould (2000) addressing their points were offered. In the present issue, the status question continues to haunt us as evidenced in the survey work of Swain on varying views of IMC among various practitioners and academics, global issues as explored by Kim, Han, and Schultz, and a critical-theoretical perspective offered by Kitchen, Brignell, Li, and Jones. These articles and the latter in particular provide a useful discussion of the various definitions and uses of IMC that I will not repeat here. But the operative word is *various*. There do seem to be common elements in the various definitions and uses of IMC, which involve managing marketing communications in some holistic manner to achieve strategic objectives (cf. Kitchen, Brignell, Li, and Jones, 2004). But the ways these are construed is perhaps as numerous as there are those construing. Here, I will explore this situation, drawing on the other articles in this issue, as well as my own thought.

At the outset it is necessary to comment on the constant field-wide introspection on IMC as to whether it is useful and/or theoretical enough. It

strikes me that this introspection, while beneficial in some ways in pointing to very real flaws in the conceptualization and application of IMC and potential remedies for them, nonetheless may be misleading in terms of addressing the contributions of IMC, both historical and potential. Here, I suggest following the famous formulation of Thomas Kuhn (1962) that IMC represents a paradigm shift in our view of marketing communications. While that may seem to skeptics as over-the-top, consider this. Can you imagine the business and study of marketing communications without IMC? Many of you may remember the days before IMC emerged. Ask yourselves what has changed since that time.

One thing that has changed is the discourse, or if you prefer, the dialogue of advertising and marketing communications. We all now think in terms of "Integrated Marketing Communications" and all its attendant concepts and practices. Based on this, I want to suggest that IMC should be defined in terms of two complementary approaches: (1) as a set of practices and discourses that is employed by marketing communications practitioners, studied by academics researchers, and taught by many of the latter to their students (e.g., just look at all the textbooks espousing IMC), and (2) as a subject for theoretical analysis that may assess among other things conceptual issues, how IMC functions, and issues of effectiveness.

I believe as evidenced particularly in the first approach that a major paradigm shift has occurred in how various practitioners of the promotional disciplines have changed what they do and how they describe it. However, as has been noted (Kitchen, Brignell, Li, and Jones, 2004), the theoretical approach has apparently lagged behind. But this does not mean that IMC is a meaningless concept or lacking in usefulness. Indeed, I would suggest the contrary is true. It is just that we have ignored the theoretical force of the practices and discourses that are driving IMC and failed to consider their impact. People applying and/or studying IMC come from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines. It is no wonder then that they may have different perspectives on it. Here, we consider the impact of IMC in terms of both discursive and analytic approaches and suggest that the concept provides a robust perspective for framing and making prescriptive interventions in the managerial and consumer-communications processes involved. This viewpoint is informed by a poststructural perspective, which suggests that various practitioners of IMC are themselves creators of specific meaning who define and apply IMC from their own particular experience, knowledge, and understanding. Thus, we may conclude that oversimplistic reductionism is not the way to go in accessing the impact of IMC.

IMC AS A POSTSTRUCTURAL SET OF PRACTICES AND DISCOURSES

Viewing IMC as a set of practices and discourses seems to be a very apt way to frame it. Indeed, IMC is so embedded as a discursive frame, which marketing communications practitioners apply to construct meaning and drive strategic thinking, that it is a rather omnipresent concept. Commentators on it generally fail to appreciate this role of the IMC concept. As noted earlier, however, a view that has

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gained currency in social thought is that of poststructuralism, which suggests that people construct their views of things in their practices in particular situations at particular times, according to Holt (1997). This means they are inherently unstable and contingent, the very thing IMC theorists have sought to avoid. Yet, as Boje (1995) has shown, there may be a variety of discourses and meanings just in the strategic management of a single firm.

What perhaps we need to do is to step back and consider two points of view: the *emic*, the viewpoints of people under study, and the *etic*, a theoretical perspective on those emic viewpoints. What practitioners of IMC think about IMC is emic when seen from the etic view of commentators on it. This emic-etic gap can be a great source of misconception when trying to investigate the role and practice of IMC. What this suggests is that theoretical perspectives on IMC should not only focus on its structural components and their prescriptive applicability to the degree they can, but should also consider how practitioners conceive and apply it in terms of discursive understandings and practices. Indeed, as recounted here by Kitchen, Brignell, Li, and Jones (2004), IMC itself is a moving target undergoing stages of development from tactical coordination to financial and strategic integration. Their perspective serves to illustrate well why a poststructural view is useful; theorizing

about the later stages of IMC based on the shifting meanings and understandings of an earlier stage could lead to poor theories or misconceptions of the other stages and ironically limit the future development of the concept.

But the limitation in theorizing is not only a time-developmental one. It could also be shortsighted in accounting for the multiple meanings and sites of meanings (e.g., different agencies, clients, consumers) interpreting IMC differently. However, this is not to despair, but instead to suggest that research should focus on the various conceptions of practitioners, consider the range of meanings and practices among them, and attempt to work with their experiences as drivers of understanding and comparison. Such understanding is as likely to drive theoretical thought regarding IMC as other approaches not only because it both studies and becomes part of the development process itself, but also because it can bring out the best of traditional theoretical approaches by establishing that they should focus on differing meaning sites. Considering various media as sites of meaning, for instance, might lead to very different implementations of IMC. For example, one advertising agency, Eleven Inc., builds on media differences and suggests that the idea of integration is to have "the media work together as part of the overall brand strategy" (Warner, 2003, p. C7). If McLuhan's

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famous dictum, “the medium is the message”, has any traction, then the idea that the various media carry varying connotations and thereby kindle different effects cannot easily be ignored in assessing the effects of IMC. How do we coordinate the media when their meanings and effects are so varied? A poststructural viewpoint might lead us to consider triangulating discourses and meanings among various parties to marketing communications, including agencies and their various functionalities, clients, and, not least, consumers who are often forgotten in IMC research but who respond to these communications.

IMC as a Theoretical Construct from a Poststructural Discourse Viewpoint

Many of the issues, regarding the development of IMC as a theoretical construct, are discussed very aptly in this issue by Kitchen, Brignell, Li, and Jones (2004). However, just as they have noted the problems with theory in relation to IMC, we can find similar problems in many other areas in marketing, not to mention management and social science. Thus, some of the critiques aimed at IMC remind me of critiques aimed at various marketing constructs, such as the marketing concept and product lifecycle. Completely coherent theory based on the latter concepts is generally lacking, yet they have yielded useful heuristics for thinking about

and driving managerial practices. In this regard, they provide a discourse for schematically thinking about issues and a holistic framework for deriving applicable marketing practices in various situations.

For example, a marketing manager may have a product in the growth stage of the product life cycle. This may lead her to consider what sorts of strategies might apply. No one would ever presume to have all the answers or to say that there is only one theoretically sound way to apply life cycle theory. Theories and empirical testing might be useful to be sure, but as discussed in a similar vein by Kitchen, Brignell, Li, and Jones (2004) with regard to IMC, the contingent nature of market situations and the vast numbers of variables involved in them necessarily limit the extent of theoretical development or empirical testing. But does this mean that the product life cycle is useless and that marketing managers do not think in terms of it? Likewise, Sheth (2001) indicates that international marketing has remained largely a contextual practice in which much of it is ad hoc.

IMC is similarly a domain of contextual practices, but I would argue this is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, in a range of theoretically driven disciplines and streams of thought including contingency streams of management theory, ethnography, and poststructuralism, context is ev-

erything. On this basis, I want to move in a different though complementary direction to the more positivistic theoretical approaches. As Kitchen, Brignell, Li, and Jones (2004) suggest, there is a certain brand awareness of IMC and as discussed by both them and Kim, Han, and Schultz (2004), there is wide global diffusion of the IMC concept. At the same time, Swain (2004) indicated the differences among professional groups' viewpoints on IMC. The perspective I take here builds on this brand awareness, albeit one reflecting varying viewpoints. Thus, a complementary research approach would concern itself with developing theory about how practitioners themselves frame and apply IMC. What are their understandings, their issues? In this regard, I would emphasize that IMC should be considered as a set of practices and discourses that exist in the everyday life of marketing communications practitioners and that themselves are worthy of commentary, theoretical thought, and empirical study.

Integration of Discipline Discourses and Practices

As suggested by Swain (2004) in this issue, there are multiple viewpoints on IMC among practitioners and academics. This should not be too surprising because disciplines each have their own sets of practices and discourses. They generally view phenomena in their domain in their own terms and act accordingly. Thus, when researchers attempt to formulate a coherent theory of IMC, they are faced with a virtual Tower of Babel in describing it and the practices associated with it. Swain points us in a direction we need to pursue further, namely to consider the multiplicity of views on IMC.

These multiple views, however, should not be considered a negative thing just because they seem to make theory formulation more difficult. Instead, theory for-

mulation itself needs to be retheorized. More thought and research should be devoted to the discourse and thinking of practitioners in various areas, such as advertising and public relations, to map and triangulate their views. Likewise, their practices should be explored so that such IMC issues as degree of integration, effectiveness, and the like are framed in terms of what they actually do and think about what they are doing. Each discipline, each agency, each client is a site of meaning. They may all speak of IMC and apply it in some way, but most important for interpretation what they do is probably best understood from their own perspectives. This is a bottoms-up, inductive approach in that such understandings can be used to derive more general theoretical conclusions. But whether more general theoretical conclusions are even as useful as particular meanings is itself a theoretical issue. However, at a minimum, our understanding of IMC can hardly progress when we have not dug deep enough into the phenomenon, as it exists.

The Discourse of Globally Integrated Marketing Communications (GIMC)

When looking at IMC as a global issue in terms of Globally Integrated Marketing Communications (GIMC), a subject raised in this issue by Kim, Han, and Schultz (2004), we find another site of meaning where a poststructural discourse perspective can be very useful because the very topic of culture necessarily concerns itself with discourses and practices, and each culture is itself a site or locus of meaning. In their study of the diffusion of the IMC concept into Korea, Kim, Han, and Schultz (2004) find that culture as a locus of marketing communications operations is an important issue to consider in relation to GIMC especially in terms of target consumers but also with respect to clients and agencies. However, a different perspective on

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GIMC, developed by Grein and Gould (1996) and studied by Gould, Lerman, and Grein (1999), considers these cultural sites of meaning within a framework of a multinational agencies and clients. It should then be viewed as operating as a set of transnational discourses and practices in which marketing communications for a particular brand or set of brands are managed on a global basis. It includes a vertical dimension of various promotion-mix disciplines (advertising, public relations, sales promotion) and a horizontal dimension, which incorporates culture markets. From that perspective, national culture is but one variable to consider, and GIMC provides a holistic framework for the overall transnational management process.

When its theoretical status is considered, GIMC is an even more incipient concept than IMC, but the two are intimately tied together. Thus, the vertical dimension of GIMC is recognizable as the focus of IMC. However, the horizontal dimension has been little considered as an IMC issue; indeed, when we consider multiple target audiences for a brand whether domestically or globally, we may find that such issues of integration as choosing uniform media and applying one-voice messages may be problematic. A transnational GIMC framing would extend this perspective on IMC by considering how multinational agencies

from different cultures apply and coordinate GIMC across diverse country markets. Thus, GIMC adds another layer to the poststructural IMC docket.

CONCLUSION

The glass is either half empty or half full depending on your point of view when considering IMC. For those seeking some sort of magic pill of a theory that explains everything about IMC, the glass is at least half empty and I think will remain so forever. However, for those who see IMC as a living breathing set of practices and discourses that guides and comprises marketing communications programs and frames related educational processes, the glass is at least half full. Embracing the latter view is not to reject traditional theoretical research out of hand, but instead is to situate it in its proper place as a part of the picture, i.e., as an important but not necessarily dominant source of guidance and meaning. Moreover, firm-specific evaluation, such as at advertising agencies, while guided by general theory may often be more useful, not only because it addresses particular needs, but also because it represents the particular understandings at a specific site. Thus, if we want to understand IMC from a more theoretical perspective, we should look at these particular ways it is applied, iden-

tify practices and discourses, and attempt to derive a more polysemic, multimeaning view of it. Taking such a view, we could then move toward a more generalized theoretic perspective by comparing practices and perhaps deriving a set of best practices in varying situations. Still, the contribution to knowledge would be less a one size fits all situations than a theoretical mapping of these varying situations as they are understood at any one time. **JAR**

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