

## INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

Integrated Marketing communication is a blend of marketing tools to create awareness and to fill a preference gap in the target market. It can escalate business to new heights of growth. However, it also has an impact on how people understand life with regard to their values and their ways of choosing and behaving. This has led to an ethical debate on whether integrated marketing communications create desire, making consumers buy what they don't need and violate their rights and freedom of choice. The question whether IMC and manipulative marketing cross the ethical lines and affect cultural and social values is the focus of this study. The study is based on review of literature, discussion with experts, and an online survey probing respondents' feelings. Responses show serious concern on the need to balance the consumer rights with the legitimate needs of the business and to create an ethically healthy climate.

**KEY WORDS:** Consumer, Dignity, Dilemma, Diverse Culture, Ethical

### INTRODUCTION

Integrated Marketing Communication can make a difference to the image and reputation of an organisation. It can escalate business to new heights of progress. However, the society is crying 'foul' for lack of emphasis on ethical concerns and stressing on the need to re-orient and re-vitalise the IMC system to make it more ethical, socially responsible and beneficial to the society.

IMC is not just an instrument or a tool. It is a simple concept of bringing together all forms of marketing communications and messages to work together in harmony for increased sales and cost effectiveness. It is the 'voice' of the brand and a means to nurture customer relationships. The focus here is to achieve balanced IMC by carefully blending its elements or tools like Advertising, Sales Promotion, Public Relations & Publicity, Personal Selling, Direct Response Marketing, and Packaging.

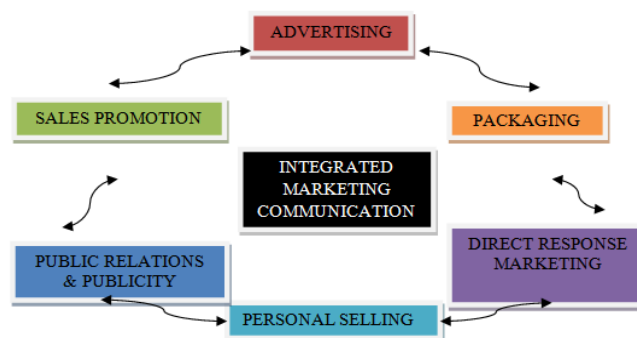


Figure 1: Elements of Integrated Marketing Communication Carefully Blended

This blending, developing and implementing is not easy. . According to Moriarty (1994) cross-disciplinary managerial skills are considerable obstacles to IMC. Eagle and Kitchen (2000) recognized four groups of possible obstacles to IMC success; these groups contain control issues, resources issues, cultural issues and flexibility issues. These obstacles lead to unethical practices of the promotional elements: Food and Drug manufacturers resorting to false advertising, false labelling, and inappropriate packing. Packaging usually has ethical issues like exaggerated or misleading 'Label information', 'Packaging graphics' not showing true pictures of the product contents, not adhering to 'Packaging safety' by making it unsafe for children or not making it tamper-proof, and suggesting 'Environmental benefits' which cannot be obtained. Ethical issues come up in sales promotions like giving coupons, free offers, rebates, contests etc.

Such ethical debate on IMC continues on manipulative advertising, public relations without sincerity, questionable sales promotions, misrepresenting product benefits in high-pressure personal selling, and misusing consumer data base information in Direct marketing.

IMC makes the consumers believe what they have is not good enough, and they should have something else. This envy can never be satisfied, as advertising is there to create needs, not to fulfil them (Pollay, 1986; Crane and Matten, 2007). Advertisements targeted at women put them under pressure with messages that they should look slim and fair for social acceptance. They suggest that success is related to physical appearance and such manipulation by distorting social values to favour business interests is a serious ethical challenge to IMC.

Similarly, advertising to children is said to be corrupting young minds. Research has demonstrated that children under the age of eight do not have the cognitive development to understand persuasive intent (Carroll and Buchholtz, 2006). Advertising would participate in making the children grow up too quickly, robbing their innocence, putting pressures on them, making them image-conscious, and finally sexualising them (Tylee, 2006). Advertising would also lead children to make unreasonable purchase demands on parents and hence foster parent-child conflicts (Kinsey, 1987; Smith, 1988; Singh and Vij, 2007). Indeed, by the age of three, most children formulate specific requests for branded products (Cohan, 2001).

Misleading can also be caused by concealing information. Whilst it cannot be expected from businesses to provide all the information about the products they advertise, ethical issues arise when facts are presented in such a selective way that a false belief is created (Carroll and Buchholtz, 2006). This needs to be safeguarded to create ethically healthy climate.

## **ISSUES AFFECTING THE DIGNITY OF IMC**

IMC promoting instant food, fast-food, junk food etc seem to be ethically insensitive to the harmful side-effects. Indeed, research has shown evidence of the relationship between food marketing and children obesity (Matthews, 2007).

The recent "Noodle Scandal" has opened up a Pandora's Box of questions on how the marketing communications and promotions of food products are tempting children to eat MSG with high lead content. The fruit juices of MNC food giants are adulterated with pesticides and synthetic colours while their advertisements claim nutrition and freshness in every sip.

The messages, images, and emotional appeals have a social flavour that influence the contemporary society. Women tend to compare themselves to images of others (Venkat and Ogden, 2002). A deeply rooted sense of inadequacy may result when the 'juxtaposition of opposites' between advertised perfection and lived reality leaves the consumer

feeling too fat, too ugly, too poor, too old, or the wrong colour” (Rumbo, 2002). Repetition forces messages into consumers’ heads (Brierley, 1995), stimulates latent desires, and establishes new needs by bypassing rational thinking (Cohan, 2001). Such manipulative marketing communication affect the emotional and psychological well being of people and society and the dignity of IMC.

## THE VIEWS OF OTHERS

Review of literature was done in the context of Integrated Marketing Communications and manipulative marketing:

Schultz (1993) defined IMC as concept of marketing communication planning that combine and evaluate strategic role of different communication discipline to get the clarity, consistency and greater impact. According to Percy et al. (2001) planning and execution of all marketing communications are required in a same way to meet the objective. Raman and Naik (2005) defined the IMC in following words, —an IMC program plans and executes various marketing activities with consistency so that its total impact exceeds the sum of each activity.

As per Vargas (2005) an effective IMC process is concerned with the identifications of target audience, determination of the communication objectives, designing of the message content, selecting the means for communication, defining the media mix, budget & priorities and measuring the effectiveness of effort. Kitchen et al. (2004) identified that IMC is not only a communication process, but also a process connected with management and brands. According to Kotler (2006) - IMC can contribute to the brand equity by crafting brand image and embedding the brand in the consumer’s memory. Some sectors are highly marketing sensitive, these ‘unmentionables’ are “products, services or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality or even fear tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offense, or outrage when mentioned or when openly presented” (Wilson and West, 1981: 92). The offensiveness of an advertising campaign can be very challenging to judge; in particular, the aspects of taste and decency are difficult to define on ethical grounds (Pickton and Broderick, 2005). Psychological appeals try to persuade on the basis of emotion rather than reason (Holbrook, 1987). These reviews provided valuable insights in identifying the gaps and the questions to be probed.

## THE GAPS IDENTIFIED

There are gaps to be explored in the following areas:

- Awareness of advertisers on diverse-culture in society while designing IMC strategies.
- Causes of ethical compromises in IMC
- ‘Gender discrimination’ of women in IMC
- IMC exploiting the ‘pester power’ of children on their parents

## QUESTIONS TO BE PROBED

- Some questions need to be asked with a clear purpose of fact-finding:
- Does IMC cross ethical lines and affect cultural & social values?
- In the world of business with pressure to do well, is ethical maintenance of IMC a problem?

- Do the impact of ethical dilemmas of IMC affect its dignity?

## SURVEY RESEARCH

In this study, expert survey was done as unstructured discussions with experts while online survey was with a structured questionnaire to assess the ethical well-being of socially responsible IMC.

## EXPERT SURVEYS

Expert surveys were done with marketing and advertising executives to assess the mood of the IMC environment. The interaction provided the following insights:

- The experts agreed that there are some unethical practices causing concern and there is need for ethically clean climate to restore the dignity of IMC.
- It is felt that lack of clarity on 'what is ethical and what is not' is one of the reasons for the ethical dilemmas in IMC.
- Pressure to survive in the competitive world of business was given as another reason for ethical compromises in IMC.

## ONLINE SURVEY

For online survey, a structured questionnaire was framed to check the importance of ethical conduct in IMC-based manipulative marketing. Respondents found advertising and marketing tactics often manipulative and offensive and strongly felt the need for ethical standards.

## ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE AND RESPONSES

Q1. Some unethical practices you have come to know in IMC are –

Advertising messages that create desire and make people buy items they don't need: 91%

Advertising/Promoting children's food items having harmful chemicals and excessive MSG: 100%

Using promotional elements of IMC for 'manipulative marketing' instead of 'informative marketing': 84%

Non-transparent and questionable Sales promotions: 75%



Figure 2: Views on Unethical IMC Practices

Q2. To what extent you agree with the statement given below?

Ethical norms are important to achieve socially responsible marketing communication:

Totally Agree: 43%, Agree to a large extent: 36%, Agree to some extent: 21%, Do not Agree: 0%



**Figure 3: Views on the Importance of Ethics in Socially Responsible IMC**

Q3. To what extent you agree with the statement given below?

Marketing is full of busy schedules, conflicts of interests, cut-throat competitions and misleading IMC and hence ethics in marketing communication is a mission impossible:

Totally Agree: 52%, Agree to a large extent: 27%, Agree to some extent: 21%, Do not Agree: 0%



**Figure 4: Views on Ethics in Marketing Communication against the Odds**

Q4. To what extent you agree with the statement given below?

IMC planners promoting instant food, fast-food and junk food are ethically insensitive to harmful side-effects like obesity in children:

Totally Agree: 41%, Agree to a large extent: 37%, Agree to some extent: 22%, Do not Agree: 0%



**Figure 5: Views on Junk Food and Its Side-Effects Like Obesity in Children**

Q5. To what extent you agree with the statement given below?

Recent 'noodle scandal' has opened up questions on how safe is children's food and how ethical is the IMC of MNC food giants:

Totally Agree: 52%, Agree to a large extent: 27%, Agree to some extent: 21%, Do not Agree: 0%



**Figure 6: Views on the 'Noodle Scandal' and Safety of Children's Food**

Q6. To what extent you agree with the statement given below?

Advertisements targeted at women give them a feeling of inadequacy of being too fat or having a dark colour as they compare their personal looks with the advertised images:

Totally Agree: 46%, Agree to a large extent: 33%, Agree to some extent: 21%, Do not Agree: 0%



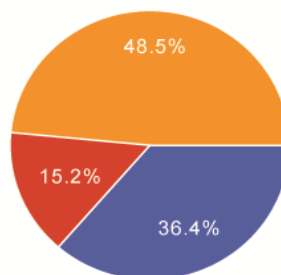
**Figure 7: Views on Advertisements Targeted at Women**

Q7. To reduce manipulation in IMC –

Establishing ethical codes can be very effective: 36%

Law is more effective than ethical codes: 15%

Manipulation in marketing communication cannot be completely controlled: 49%



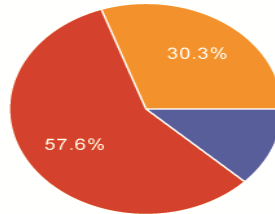
**Figure 8: Views on Reducing Manipulation in IMC**

Q8. Do you think acting ethically will decrease the competitive advantage of IMC?

Yes, acting ethically decreases competitive advantage: 12%

No, acting ethically, increases the competitive advantage: 58%

Can't say, it depends on the situation: 30%



**Figure 9: Views on Ethicality Resulting in Loss of Competitive Advantage**

Q9. Manipulative advertising and IMC in your opinion is:

IMC messages like “economy size”, “new and improved”, “clearance sales” etc which manipulate the customers into thinking that they are on to a good deal: 97%

Advertisements targeting children and making them pester their parents to have the advertised items at any cost, offending the rights of both children and parents and intruding upon the parent-child relationship: 88%

Marketing communications enticing people with images of “before and after”, like, ‘losing 20 kgs’ or ‘looking 20 years younger’ or ‘banishing that belly bulge’ in one week with miracle treatments: 85%



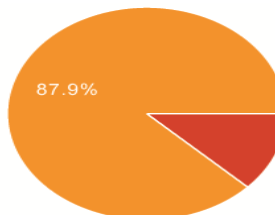
**Figure 10: Views on What is Manipulative Advertising and IMC**

Q10. To achieve targets, some deviations in procedures of IMC can be tolerated:

Yes, this is natural: 0%

Yes, but this can be avoided: 12%

Procedures are made keeping in mind the targets, so no deviation should be accepted: 88%



**Figure 11: Views on Procedural Compromises in Order to Achieve Targets**

Q11. Suggestions, if any, for ensuring ethicality and dignity in IMC – based marketing:

Some of the suggestions by the respondents are summarised below:

Ethical training, corporate ethical guide lines, Self censorship, Self regulation, social and ethical audit on IMC activities and educating IMC planners on cultural issues were suggested besides consumer awareness programs on the 'consumer protection act' for unreal IMC promises.

## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Society will complement and supplement conflict-free ethical strategy on marketing promotion tools and IMC. Companies should be made aware that their perceived risk to competitive advantage by acting ethically is not true and that IMC is a tool for informative marketing, not a weapon for cut-throat competitions and informational malpractices. IMC is needed for business. However, consumer rights are to be balanced with legitimate needs of the business by maintaining the 'dignity of commercial speech'. Ethical surveys and periodic ethical auditing ensuring zero-tolerance to misconduct in IMC can help in achieving socially responsible marketing communications.

## **DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The outcomes of this study shows scope for future research in several areas of IMC like the causes for ethical compromises, the ambiguity between ethicality and legality, exclusive ethical guidelines for marketing and making ethical codes achievable instead of idealistic. The global society needs socially responsible IMC and, the future research should provide solutions to the ethical challenges of manipulative marketing communication practices.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

One of the major challenges to socially responsible commercial speech is the ethical dilemmas of manipulative marketing through IMC. Advertisements targeting children and women have become topics of public criticism and the genuineness of IMC is being questioned. The answer can be ethical IMC which can play the role of a change agent by adding an ethical flavour to commercial speech and make the dream of socially responsible marketing come true.

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