

THE INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION IN CROATIAN COMPANIES

Mario Fraculj^{1,*}, Sara Brkanić¹ and Diana Plantić Tadić²

¹Algebra University
Zagreb, Croatia

²VERN' University
Zagreb, Croatia

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ABSTRACT

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) represents a pivotal approach in contemporary business, emphasising the coordination and integration of various communication tools to achieve a coherent and consistent message. This research investigates how Croatian companies have integrated IMC into their marketing strategies within the Croatian business environment. The findings indicate a growing trend of adopting this integrated approach, with a primary focus on consistency, personalisation and effectiveness of IMC activities. A synergy between marketing communication channels and an emphasis on adaptable, innovative IMC strategies has been recognised. However, challenges such as inter-departmental coordination within companies and optimisation of IMC strategies are pointed out as areas that require further attention. Despite these challenges, Croatian companies recognise the importance and potential of IMC as a strategic tool to enhance their market visibility and competitive advantage. Considering the dynamism of the market environment, continuous innovation, education, and adaptation are crucial for achieving the long-term success of IMC strategies.

KEY WORDS

integrated marketing communication, IMC, communication channels, IMC strategies, Croatian companies

CLASSIFICATION

JEL: M31, M37, M39

*Corresponding author, η: Mario.Fraculj@algebra.hr; -;
Algebra University, Gradišćanska ul. 24, HR – 10 000, Zagreb, Croatia

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary business world is experiencing swift changes in technology and the ways companies communicate with consumers. This dynamic environment underscores the significance of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) as an indispensable strategy for businesses striving to maintain a unified and impactful market presence [1].

This article aims to investigate the IMC among Croatian companies. Employing a blend of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, this study aims to create a clear picture of the current state and practices in Croatian companies through an analysis of accessible corporate materials, including the companies' websites and social media platforms. The qualitative analysis aims to decipher the implementation degrees of IMC, assessing the coherence and collaborative effectiveness of various communication tools. The quantitative analysis is conducted through a survey research, focusing on the perception of marketing professionals regarding the application of IMC.

The study aims to not only map out the current state of IMC application in Croatia but also to provide valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of marketing practitioners in the field, bearing in mind that the development of the Internet and new technologies makes marketing and communication experts aware of new market opportunities.

The article is structured as follows: After the introduction, the literature review aims to provide an overview of the notion of IMC and the current research on IMC in Croatia. In the third chapter, the methodology is outlined, consisting of content analysis, survey research, and integrated analysis. The results follow the methodological approach in the fourth chapter. The last two chapters are devoted to discussion and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION

Many authors have provided various definitions of marketing communications from an IMC perspective, such as a process of development and application of diverse forms of persuasive communication with customers and prospects [2] or, more enhanced, a process of creating and implementing various forms of communication with potential and existing consumers within a defined timeframe, aiming to influence the behaviour of the selected audience [3]. Kotler and Keller explain IMC as harmonious planning of marketing communications through different communication channels, uniting the brand image and company message to achieve maximum effectiveness [4]. Those IMC forms include advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, direct marketing communication, public relations, and publicity [5]. Nevertheless, Kotler et al. [6] extend the list by adding the following forms: events and experiences, interactive marketing, and word-of-mouth marketing. All the forms above are in line with the basic functions of marketing communication, which involve attracting consumers' attention, generating interest in the offer conveyed through marketing communication, and encouraging the purchase of products [7]. Therefore, it is obvious that marketing communications are means by which a company establishes a dialogue and builds relationships with consumers [8]. Kesić [2] also emphasises the focus on customers and states that a company seeks to influence consumer behaviour by implementing integrated marketing communication activities, whether it aims to encourage new behaviour, strengthen existing behaviour, or change the current behaviour.

In addition, the author declares that marketing communications will be successful and effective only if a company has a good understanding of its customers and creates and implements IMC activities based on their characteristics [2]. Namely, in order to reach its target audience, the author further explains that a company needs to use more marketing communication channels that produce a synergistic effect and encourage customers to engage in the desired behaviour.

According to Batra and Keller [9], significant changes in the consumer decision journey call for much more carefully planned and executed integrated marketing communication programs to guarantee maximum results. These programs should involve the deployment of stage-appropriate media and messages in the ideal order. The authors present an extensive framework with two conceptual models intended to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of integrated marketing communication campaigns, drawing on this deeper understanding of the communication processing and consumer path to purchase.

As Kraljević and Perkov [10] claim, the result of integrated marketing communications should manifest through a better market position and higher profits. They also state that the comprehensive application of integrated marketing communications in practice helps companies achieve competitive advantages. Pirić [11] strongly supports the latter opinion, explaining that integrated marketing communications play a significant role in market competitiveness, profitability, and the lifespan of a company, as well as in creating a company's image and the overall success of the company. This requires marketing professionals to use various tools and methodologies. Namely, the challenge lies in identifying the most applicable and beneficial tools, as each one has its own set of pros and cons, and no single method can fully capture the entire scenario [12]. Nevertheless, today's imperative of digital platform usage emphasises the role of digital marketing, which has been identified as an important tool for predicting a brand position [13].

In times of accelerated development of ICT technology, when traditional marketing communication tools are more and more substituted by modern digital ones [14], it is obvious that the increasing trend of investing in digital marketing will continue to grow, as stated by Sesar, Martinčević and Hunjet [15].

Regarding the goal of integrated marketing communication, Ihzaturrahma and Kusumawati claim that it is to inspire and improve consumers' attitudes so that they are interested in the benefits of the product or service brand [16]. However, it is believed that the major role of IMC is to convey consistent messages and build long-term healthy relationships with customers [17]. In other words, IMC does not limit a company to a single message or brand. Instead, it allows companies to target various audiences and integrate multiple brands and messages within a single organisation [18]. According to Ang [19], marketing professionals ideally aim for interactions that create positive synergy, meaning that the combined effect of using multiple communication channels and tools in a campaign is greater than using any single channel on its own. The author agrees that a unified campaign theme is valuable, but he also claims that it's often necessary to blend various tactics and messages aimed at diverse audiences. When creating marketing communications, it's crucial to weigh the choice between a single message or multiple yet cohesive messages. Namely, marketing professionals must grasp the benefits of different marketing communication strategies and tools for their successful integration to enhance their marketing campaigns [20]. Rogić et al. [21] claim that effective marketing campaigns are especially relevant for social media platforms as they play a significant role in brand development. As for branding, Widjaja [22] agrees that an integrated communication strategy is essential in building a company's brand image.

Percy [23] argues that despite widespread agreement on the benefits of IMC, its adoption remains limited by challenges, such as organisational structure or resistance to change. Egan [24] supports the argument of the resistance to change and further elaborates that it all begins with the coordination of IMC activities. Also, Vernuccio et al. [25] offer IMC practitioners some interesting insights suggesting that they should give maximum attention to both strategic and organisational aspects. De Pelsmacker et al. [5] agree that IMC is far from reality in most companies and suggest that functional specialisation, both in companies and in external marketing agencies, is the main reason for this. Traditionally, distinct organisational

units have been in charge of managing the various components of the communications mix as separate operations. In case a company's communications operations are not consolidated into a single department, at the very least, information exchange, interdepartmental communications, and coordination of all communications efforts must be planned for. Therefore, the same authors conclude that deficiency in internal communication and the perception of planning and coordination are difficult and act as further barriers to the organisation of IMC.

Dewhirst and Davis [26] state that IMC is relatively new as an academic subject and highlights the necessity for more robust theoretical frameworks and evidence of its effectiveness, including additional case studies. The authors argue that case studies are particularly relevant and valuable for generating theories that can be tested. Moreover, they suggest that case studies focusing on unusual or extreme scenarios could be especially beneficial for creating well-founded theories. Furthermore, measuring the effectiveness of IMC still stands as one of the most intricate aspects of the field, with numerous unresolved questions despite significant progress in evaluating marketing efforts, including IMC initiatives. The emergence of new technologies in today's digitally driven, consumer-centric environment introduces additional complexities in gauging the success of IMC strategies [27]. Through the adoption of a customer-centric viewpoint and the consideration of both qualitative and quantitative assessments of message content and channels, Reinold and Tropp [28] introduced an innovative approach to measuring the IMC effectiveness of a company and its competitors.

CURRENT RESEARCH OF INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION IN CROATIA

In exploring the multifaceted landscape of IMC within different geographical contexts, attention is drawn to previous research findings from various regions, including Northern Macedonia [29], Slovenia [30], and the Republic of Serbia [31]. A comparison of this research reveals a consistent theme: the strategic integration of communication tools enhances business performance and consumer engagement. These studies collectively underscore the importance of consistency, targeted communication, and data-driven decision-making in IMC strategies. Challenges such as inter-departmental coordination and personalisation are identified, resonating with the findings from the Croatian environment. This literature not only provides a comparative backdrop but also enriches the understanding of IMC's role in achieving competitive advantage in dynamically evolving markets.

In the process of analysing the application of IMC in Croatian companies, several key criteria have been defined to reflect the fundamental principles and objectives of IMC and compiled based on the study of relevant literature, including an analytical piece on the effectiveness of marketing communications within the Slovenian marketplace [30] and literature with IMC principles [2, 32]. The criteria above serve as the basis for evaluating and comparing the effectiveness and consistency of IMC among the analysed companies. Those evaluation criteria are provided later in the methodology chapter of this paper.

The literature selected for this research serves as a foundational framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of IMC. Works like Blakeman's [33] comprehensive exploration of IMC and Clow and Baack's [34] detailed insights into integrated marketing strategies provide a modern context for advertising and other forms of marketing communications. De Pelsmacker and co-authors [35] offer a European perspective on marketing communications, which is particularly relevant given the geographic focus of the research. Fill and Turnbull's [36] work contributes to the understanding of the creation and execution of marketing communications, and Krajinović [37] further elaborates on marketing communication performance in the modern environment, i.e. on digital platforms.

Namely, the empirical studies by Jerman and Završnik [30], along with Kesić's [2] insights into IMC, give a holistic approach to the topic consisting of both empirical and theoretical frameworks. This blend of international and regional sources ensures a comprehensive theoretical backing, facilitating a robust analysis of IMC application in the Croatian business context.

In conclusion, and following the former study of available literature, it was observed that there is a growing recognition of integrated marketing communication as one of the most crucial constructs in marketing in general, which importance becomes greater with today's dominant role of digital channels and social media in marketing communication. As a result, substantial research interest has been generated in the area of IMC and its application in Croatian businesses, particularly in leading Croatian retail companies. Therefore, the conducted research aimed to gain a better understanding of the integration of IMC activities into company marketing strategies and the acceptance of an integrated approach to marketing communication in the Croatian market, for which there is still a lack of appropriate literature. This study sought to overcome the research gap above with new findings and better insight relating to the Croatian market.

METHODOLOGY

The research is designed to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure a comprehensive insight into the application of IMC in Croatian companies. This allows for the measurement and understanding of various aspects of IMC, thereby providing a wider set of data.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

The content analyses focus on available corporate materials, including marketing content, websites, and social networks, from a selection of notable companies to evaluate their IMC execution. The analysed companies include Kraš, Croatian Telecom, Rimac Automobiles, Algebra University, Bagatin Clinic, Valamar Riviera, Infobip, Studio Moderna, Privredna Banka Zagreb, and Gligora.

The selection of companies for this study was guided by the objective of encompassing a broad spectrum of industries, ensuring the representativeness of the sample. By including companies from various sectors, the research aimed to capture a wide range of IMC practices and strategies, thus providing a more holistic view.

The qualitative part of this research focuses on a deeper understanding of how Croatian companies use different marketing communication channels and tools in their operations. Aiming to provide an objective and comprehensive analysis, and based on the criteria mentioned, specific guidelines have been designed to help evaluate various aspects of IMC. After reviewing general information about the company, the first step is to analyse the website, which includes checking the consistency of messages on the website with those used on other communication channels. The coherence of visual identity also plays a vital role in terms of checking whether brand colours, typography, logo, and other visual elements are consistently used. The analysis also covers aspects such as user experience, search engine optimisation (SEO), analytics, and content marketing, examining how user-friendly the website is and how content and analytical tools are tailored according to the target audience.

Namely, by analysing social media channels, selected companies are evaluated on message consistency, visual identity coherence and user engagement criteria. This includes assessing how social media profiles use brand visual elements and how regularly each brand communicates with users. The analysis of advertising, email marketing, PR, sponsorship, and sales promotion follows similar guidelines. Consistency of messages and coherence of visual identity remain key criteria, with a particular focus on personalisation in marketing communication activities. Sponsorships are further examined in terms of brand relevance and relevance to the target group, while sales promotion is evaluated regarding the target group.

Digital tools like Semrush's SEO and online advertising performance tools were used to evaluate the marketing communication strategies of the selected companies successfully. This tool offered insights into website traffic and advertising strategies on Google's search network. It allowed for an evaluation of keyword effectiveness and the visibility of paid ads, providing a comprehensive look at how companies optimise their search engine presence and attract potential customers. Social media advertising effectiveness was examined using Meta's Ads Library, displaying active campaigns across Facebook and Instagram. For display ads, Google's Ad Transparency Centre provided data on active advertisements from specific marketers. These analytical tools were instrumental in evaluating the digital marketing communication strategies of the selected companies.

SURVEY RESEARCH

In the quantitative part of the research, the topic is approached from a different perspective, focusing on the perception and attitudes of marketing professionals within Croatian companies regarding the application of IMC. The survey method was selected, utilising Microsoft Office Forms to collect the data. The survey was primarily distributed via LinkedIn to the marketing professionals who listed their employment in the marketing departments of their respective companies. This platform was chosen for its professional relevance and direct access to individuals engaged in marketing roles. To capture a broader audience, the survey was also sent directly to marketing departments using email addresses collected from the companies' official websites. This dual-channel distribution was intended to cover a broader spectrum of marketing professionals, including those who may not be active on LinkedIn. This increased the overall response rate and diversity of insights. Furthermore, this approach ensured that the survey reached professionals actively engaged in marketing roles. Their insights ensure the data collected is relevant and reflective of the latest trends and challenges in marketing communications.

The anonymity of the survey was emphasised in the invitation to encourage honest and unbiased responses, which is crucial for gathering authentic insights into the application of IMC strategies. This method aims to achieve the most authentic and objective responses that will contribute to understanding the real-world application of IMC within Croatian companies. The survey responses were collected in July and August 2023, and a total of 37 responses were gathered, providing a fresh perspective focused on how marketing experts within Croatian companies perceive and apply IMC strategies.

INTEGRATED ANALYSIS

Accordingly, the research objectives have been defined as follows: (i) to identify approaches and tactics that Croatian companies use in applying IMC; (ii) to analyse the consistency and coherence of IMC application in selected Croatian companies; (iii) to investigate the importance of adaptability and innovation of IMC strategies in selected Croatian companies.

Furthermore, to achieve the stated objectives and to obtain a comprehensive picture of the application of IMC in Croatian companies, the following research propositions (RP) have been set: (i) RP1: The IMC strategies of Croatian companies are consistent and aligned in their application; (ii) RP2: Marketing experts in Croatian companies generally recognise the importance of adaptability and innovation for the effectiveness of their IMC strategies.

A set of fundamental benchmarks reflecting IMC's core tenets and aims has been established to explore how Croatian companies apply IMC. These benchmarks, derived from a comprehensive review of existing literature [2, 29, 31], form the framework for appraising and contrasting IMC effectiveness and coherence across the companies in focus (Figure 1):

- *Message and tone consistency*: Consistency in communication refers to the uniformity of messages that a brand sends through various marketing channels, including advertising, social media, email marketing, content marketing, and public relations.
- *Visual identity coherence*: Evaluates the coherence of brand visual elements such as colours, logos, typography, and photography styles. Visual coherence is vital for maintaining brand recognition and affirming credibility in the eyes of consumers.
- *Channel synergy*: Refers to the alignment and integration of different marketing communication channels to create a unified customer experience.
- *Alignment of objectives and measurable key performance indicators (KPIs)*: Evaluate whether there is a clear connection between brand marketing objectives and measurable KPIs. This includes setting specific, measurable goals that are directly linked to business outcomes, such as sales, lead generation, or user engagement.
- *Integration of online and offline activities*: This refers to a brand's ability to link its online and offline marketing efforts. Integration allows companies to provide a consistent user experience across all platforms, whether through online ads, promotional events, point of sale, or customer support.
- *Department coordination*: Evaluates how well departments within a company are coordinated in terms of marketing communication and other marketing activities. Effective coordination among departments such as sales, marketing, customer support, and management is key to ensuring consistency and effectiveness of marketing efforts.
- *Segmentation and personalisation*: Enable brands to target and tailor their marketing activities to different user groups. Personalisation can help create more relevant and effective campaigns, while segmentation allows for the focus of resources on specific target groups.
- *Use of data and analytics*: Evaluate how a company uses data to monitor, measure, and optimise its marketing activities.
- *Adaptability and innovation*: Assesses how willing a company is to adapt to changes and how innovative its approach is. Adaptability and innovation are key to maintaining a competitive edge and responding to the changing needs of the market.

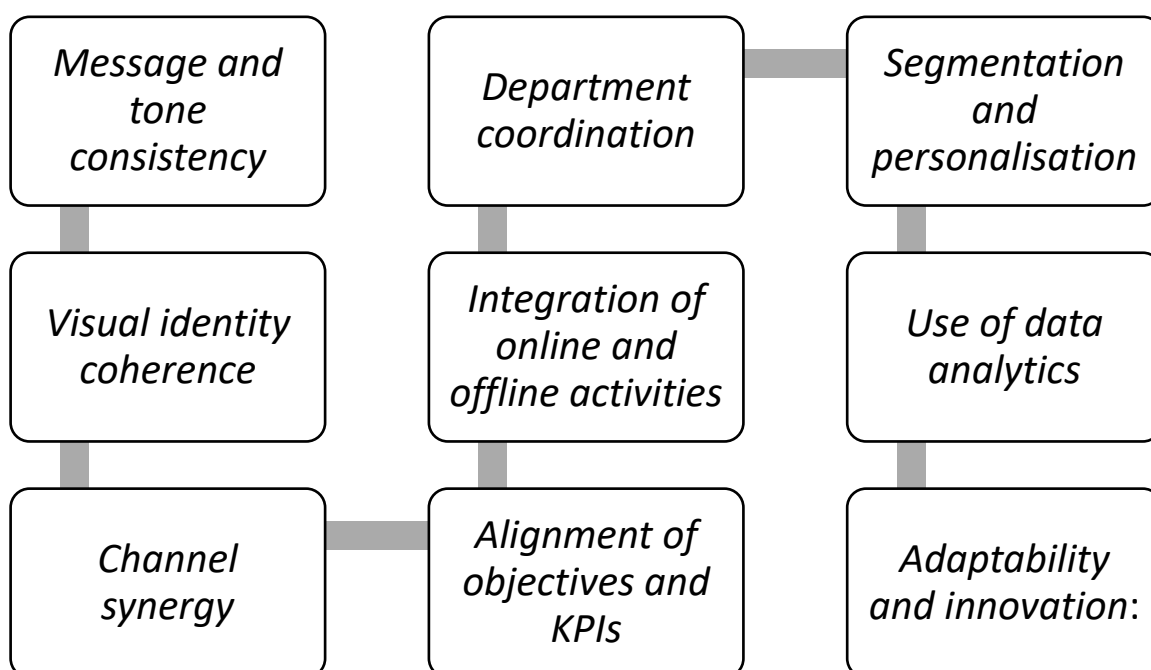


Figure 1. Research framework.

These criteria provide a holistic view of IMC, assessing not only technical aspects such as message consistency or channel synergy but also strategic components like adaptability and innovation. By applying them, it is possible to gain deeper insights into how IMC is applied in practice and identify areas for potential improvement within each selected company.

RESULTS

Delving into the effectiveness of communication strategies within Croatian companies, the analysis summarises how varied media channels and marketing tools are employed to achieve cohesive brand messaging. The insights gathered from a comprehensive review of the integration and adaptability of these strategies reflect the broader context of market engagement and the pursuit of synergy in corporate communications.

CONTENT ANALYSIS RESULTS

The research analysed the integration of marketing communications among Croatian companies, focusing on how ten distinct companies – Kraš, Hrvatski Telekom, Rimac Automobili, Algebra, Poliklinika Bagatin, Valamar Riviera, Infobip, Studio Moderna, Privredna banka Zagreb, and Gligora – implemented IMC strategies.

A variety of channels and tools were used to gather insights into these companies. The sources included company websites, social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and LinkedIn, PR articles, and emails from company newsletter subscriptions. Additionally, analytical tools such as Meta, Google, and Semrush were crucial in examining advertising strategies. This approach provided a detailed overview of each company's communication efforts and strategies for engaging with the audiences.

Each company was evaluated based on criteria such as message and tone consistency, visual identity coherence, channel synergy, integration of online and offline activities, segmentation and personalisation, and adaptability and innovation.

It is important to note that this analysis could not fully evaluate certain IMC criteria due to the nature of the research. Specifically, the alignment of objectives with KPIs, coordination between departments, and the use of data and analytics were not assessable from an external viewpoint. These aspects, crucial for a comprehensive IMC strategy, were instead analysed anonymously in the survey part of the research, highlighting the limitations of external analysis in fully capturing the intricacies of IMC integration.

Despite these limitations, the analysis highlighted a general trend among the companies towards maintaining strong message and tone consistency, visual identity coherence, and, in some cases, channel synergy. However, the integration of online and offline activities emerged as a significant area for improvement across the board. This gap points to a potential underusage of integrated marketing strategies, underscoring the need for a more holistic approach to IMC that encompasses both digital and traditional mediums.

Companies like Kraš and Croatian Telecom serve as excellent examples in their approach, demonstrating message consistency and visual identity coherence across multiple platforms. They effectively integrated online and offline marketing efforts, aligning their campaigns closely with business objectives, which is indicative of a mature IMC strategy. Rimac Automobili stood out with its targeted communication strategies, reflecting a deep understanding of its niche markets. Their consistent branding and focused messaging resonate well with their specific audience segments, underscoring the importance of a tailored IMC approach.

Insights from Semrush, Meta Ad Library and Google's Ads Transparency Center provide a perspective into how these companies manage their digital advertising strategies. Kraš has

opted not to advertise on the Google network, focusing instead on social media advertising campaigns. Meanwhile, Hrvatski Telekom implements a comprehensive digital strategy that includes search and display advertising on Google, including video ads through the Google Display Network. This approach ensures a high level of visual consistency and strong brand recognition across multiple platforms. In contrast, Rimac Automobili has focused entirely on organic traffic without the support of advertisements.

Companies like Algebra and Poliklinika Bagatin also illustrate effective IMC strategies. Algebra's use of search and display ads, along with active social media campaigns, ensures consistent messaging that aligns with its educational offerings. Poliklinika Bagatin, similarly, maintains coherence in messaging across both Google and social media platforms, effectively communicating their healthcare services. On the other hand, Valamar Riviera integrates ads seamlessly across Google Ads and social media, maintaining message and visual identity consistency, while Infobip focuses on Google search ads and Facebook.

In terms of adaptability and innovation, most companies, with the exception of Gligora, received positive ratings, indicating a general willingness to embrace market changes and innovate within their marketing strategies. This adaptability is key in today's fast-paced market environment, where the ability to respond to new trends and consumer demands swiftly can significantly impact a company's competitive edge.

SURVEY RESEARCH RESULTS

The survey questionnaire responses were collected from a sample of 37 marketing professionals employed within Croatian companies. The retail industry is the most represented industry, with as many as 13 companies responding. This is followed by the marketing and advertising industry, with responses from 4 companies. Each of the three responses was collected from the production, education, wholesale distribution, technology, and construction sectors.

In the study, most companies had between 11 to 50 participants, representing 49%. Companies with over 50 employees followed at 32%, while those with up to 10 employees constituted 19% of responses. The founding years of the companies varied, with most of them established in the early 2000s and the oldest participating company founded in 1968. 70% of the companies primarily operate in the domestic market, 22% in international markets, and 8% equally in both. 78% of respondents represented companies in the B2C market, 16% in the B2B market, and 6% in both markets.

Companies with 11 to 50 employees were the most represented at 49%. The majority operate in the domestic market, and a significant 78% serve the B2C segment. Nearly half of the companies have fully integrated IMC into their strategies, with 60% of marketing professionals affirming its effectiveness. However, opinions on IMC's role in overall marketing strategy varied, with 43% of respondents attributing significant importance and 27% of respondents considering it highly significant.

Within the survey, the majority of the questioned marketing experts, around 48.6%, perceive high consistency in their brand's messaging across various channels, while 21.6% rate it as very high. In terms of synergy, 45.9% rate it as high, and 21.6% as very high. Regarding the use of analytics, 59.5% of respondents use it very frequently. When it comes to market segmentation, 78% implement it within their strategies, and over half utilise personalisation in communications. In assessing adaptability, opinions were mixed, with 45.9% finding their strategies neither highly nor lowly adaptable. Coordination within companies also received varied responses, with 21.6% rating it as good. Lastly, 78% of participants anticipate that IMC will grow in importance in the future.

INTEGRATED ANALYSIS RESULTS

After a detailed analysis of different companies' communication strategies, a recapitulation table (Table 1) was created. The criteria defined in Figure 1, as well as ratings, were assigned in three gradations: -, +, and ++.

The “-” sign indicates areas where the company shows significant deficiencies or room for improvement, but also areas that the research of company communication could not cover. Some criteria were rated low because there was not enough information in the analysis that would directly speak about them (coordination between departments, the connection of goals and KPIs, and the use of data and analytics). “+” indicates aspects where the company performs well, but there is also some room for optimisation. Sign “++” indicates areas where the company achieves excellent results.

Table 1. Criteria for assessing IMC strategies of selected Croatian companies.

Criteria	Kraš	Croatian Telecom	Rimac Automobiles	Algebra	Bagatin Clinic	Valamar Riviera	Infobip	Studio Moderna	Privredna banka Zagreb	Gligora
Consistency of messages and tones	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	+
Coherence of visual identity	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	+
Synergy between channels	++	++	++	+	++	++	++	++	++	-
Alignment of goals and KPIs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Integration of online and offline activities	++	++	+	++	+	+	+	++	+	+
Coordination between departments	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Segmentation and personalisation	+	++	-	++	+	++	-	+	++	+
Use of data and analytics	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Adaptability and innovation	++	++	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-

After a detailed analysis of the companies according to the set criteria, we can observe several significant facts. Most companies, including Kraš, Croatian Telecom, Rimac Automobiles, Algebra, Bagatin Clinic, Valamar Riviera, Infobip, Studio Moderna, and Privredna Banka Zagreb, achieve impressive consistency in clearly and coherently conveying their messages, establishing a strong connection with customers.

On the other hand, Gligora achieves a medium score in some categories but faces certain challenges, especially when it comes to the synergy between different communication channels. Innovation and adaptability are key to success in a dynamic market environment, and while most companies show the ability to adapt and innovate, some, like Gligora, may put more effort into this segment to remain competitive.

The research results indicate that an integrated approach to marketing communications is increasingly at the centre of Croatian companies' marketing strategies. Given the significantly high percentage of respondents – 84% – who already use or plan to use such an approach, it becomes clear that the surveyed companies recognise the benefits of consistent and integrated communication with their target groups. It can be concluded that IMC has become a relevant component in Croatian marketing strategies.

DISCUSSION

All research objectives were achieved based on the qualitative and quantitative research conducted. The qualitative research clearly shows that companies use an integrated approach to marketing communications. Quantitative conclusions provide information about the perception of IMC and challenges such as departmental coordination and personalisation, which help us understand some of the challenges.

Regarding the research proposition, RP1, “The IMC strategies of Croatian companies are significantly consistent and aligned in their application”, was confirmed through qualitative research. The second research proposition, RP2, “Marketing experts in Croatian companies generally recognise the importance of adaptability and innovation for the effectiveness of their IMC strategies”, was confirmed through survey research where the responses indicate that the marketing professionals within the selected companies are aware of the need for adaptability and innovation in their IMC approaches.

Regarding the perception of IMC effectiveness, most respondents believe that the integration of marketing communication channels is not a mere trend but a strategy that brings concrete business results. Although generally rated good, the synergy between different marketing communication channels provides room for improvement. Regarding the level of synergy, the respondents' answers significantly showed a lack of confidence. Hence, the research results indicate a need for further education and guidance on integrated marketing communication within the sampled companies.

Furthermore, the particularly impressive finding pointed out the increasing emphasis on data-driven decision-making. The widespread use of analytics among marketing professionals indicates recognition of the importance of quantifying and measuring marketing activities, which can lead to a better understanding of consumers and a more efficient approach to the market. While most respondents believe that their companies maintain a high consistency of brand messages, there is, however, room for improvement in the synergy between different marketing channels.

Similarly, while most companies believe their strategies are moderately adaptable, there is room for improvement given the dynamic market and constantly changing consumer habits. Moreover, coordination between departments is essential for achieving coherent marketing campaigns. According to the majority of the respondents, the coordination above is considered average, indicating a need for better communication and synergy within the companies.

CONCLUSION

In the contemporary marketing environment, IMC becomes a key element of a successful marketing strategy. It is important that different marketing channels are not viewed in isolation but that their activities are aligned to achieve a synergistic effect. When communication channels operate in harmony, brands can build a stronger and more consistent connection with their target audience, thereby increasing consumer trust and loyalty.

Based on the combined quantitative and qualitative research conducted, we can conclude that, although Croatian organisations largely recognise the significance of IMC, there is still much room for improvement in their application. While the quantitative analysis provides a broader picture of the perceptions and approaches of marketing professionals, the qualitative analysis, which covered ten companies from different sectors, allowed for a deeper understanding of specific challenges and opportunities. Some have already adopted best practices, while others are still searching for optimal methods to integrate their marketing communication efforts.

The qualitative nature of this study presents certain limitations that warrant discussion. One significant constraint is the inability to evaluate internal company metrics directly, such as the alignment of objectives with KPIs, coordination between departments, and the use of data and analytics. These elements are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of IMC efficacy but require access to private company data or in-depth interviews with company personnel, which were beyond the scope of this external analysis. Consequently, these criteria were explored through an anonymous survey in the second part of the research, which, while insightful, may not fully capture the intricate internal dynamics of IMC practices. It is also important to note that qualitative assessments can be inherently subjective, relying on the interpretation of publicly available data, which may not always provide a complete picture of a company's IMC strategy. Eventually, the last identified limitation, which should be highlighted, refers to the study focus and results relating exclusively to the Croatian market and Croatian companies. Therefore, the research that was conducted leaves room for expansion into other similar markets in the future.

As a recommendation for future research, a more detailed analysis of each element of IMC is suggested. It would be particularly useful to direct research to specific industries, studying how they adjust their marketing approaches to achieve synergy and consistency. In this context, analysing good and bad examples within the selected industry could provide deeper insights into the best practices and challenges faced. It would also be beneficial to deepen the understanding of Croatian companies' adaptive strategies considering rapid market changes. Furthermore, future analyses could focus on the tools, technologies, and practices that companies use in their efforts to achieve harmony in their marketing communications. Finally, research focusing on technological limitations, resources, and regulations could provide a deeper understanding of how these variables affect the application of IMC.

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