

# A Review Of Integrated Marketing Communication Theory And Practice Research

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*Abstract:*

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) is mainly studied along the path of theory-practice. Initially focused on theoretical construction, subsequent research focused on two main themes: "theory" and "practice". With the decreasing attention paid to the research on integrated marketing communication theory in recent years, this article summarizes the origin of this theory, collects and organizes the main research results in the academic community, in order to clarify the characteristics and shortcomings of integrated marketing communication research, and provide certain academic references for further deepening IMC research.

Keywords: Integrated marketing communication; Review; Theory research; Practice research

## **Introduction**

The Integrated Marketing Communication theory, abbreviated as IMC, was born in the late 1980s. At that time, media communication channels and tools were greatly enriched. Nowadays, traditional marketing theories are difficult to adapt to the new marketing environment. The proposal of IMC conforms to the new trend of marketing theory development and also meets the new requirements of marketing practice, thus receiving widespread attention from both the theoretical and practical fields. In the 1990s, the concept of "integrated marketing" emerged and gradually became popular. Almost every marketing scholar has a unique perspective on this concept, but so far there is no recognized authoritative definition. Most users equate "integrated marketing" with "integrated marketing communication", or use it as a different

expression of the concept of "marketing mix". But in fact, they are not concepts at the same level, and their implementation also has different patterns<sup>[1]</sup>.

### **1. The Proposal and Development of the Concept of IMC**

In the early 1980s, the concept of "integrated marketing communication" did not yet emerge. But starting from the mid-1980s, the advertising industry in the United States began to expand the boundaries of its advertising business. The "Whole Eggs" plan was proposed by Jan Robbie & Company, and the "Symphony" plan was proposed by Ogilvy Company, all of which were "packaged" operations such as advertising, public relations, promotion, and publicization, laying the foundation for the introduction of "integrated marketing communication". The concept of "IMC" was born in the late 1980s, and some advertising companies pioneered the emergence of customer agency groups called "Integrated Marketing Communication". This concept was deeply ingrained in the current 4A' Keith Reinhard, the chairman of the American Federation of Advertising Agencies, and John O'Toole, the executive director, are in favor of promoting this concept in American advertising agencies. In 1988, they jointly implemented the first IMC research project with the Madell School of Journalism of Northwestern University. Three scholars, Clark Kewood, Don E. Schultz and Paul Wang, participated in the project and took the lead in defining IMC as: fully understand and comprehensively use various communication means that can bring added value, and provide information with good clarity and consistency. This concept starts from an inside out perspective and focuses on the integration of marketing communication strategies, marking the beginning of IMC research.

In 1993, Don Schultz and Stanley L. Tannenbaum, two scholars from the Medell School of Journalism, Northwestern University, cooperated with Robert F. Lauterborn of the University of North Carolina to publish a book: "Integrated Marketing Communications: Pulling It Together&Making It Work"<sup>[2]</sup>. This is the first monograph in the world that systematically discusses the theory of integrated marketing communication, and the publication of this book marks the formal birth of the theory of integrated marketing communication.

After Schultz and others, a large number of scholars have joined the ranks of researchers in integrated marketing communication theory and published a large number of distinctive works on integrated marketing communication theory. The publication of these works not only continuously expands the research results of integrated marketing communication theory, but also continuously enriches the content and connotation of this theory, and clearly presents a diversified theoretical development trend. Among them, the researches of George Belch, Michael Belch, Trencé Semp, Kenneth E. Crowe, Donald Buck, Tom Duncan and others are representative and influential, and has made great contributions to the follow-up development of integrated marketing communication theory. George Belch and Michael Belch divided the participants in the integrated marketing communication process into five groups: advertisers, advertising agencies, media organizations, professional communication service companies, and supporting service companies, believing that these five groups of participants "each bear unique responsibilities"<sup>[3]</sup>. To this end, they also conducted a detailed examination of the roles played by each group of participants in the integrated marketing communication process. George Belch and Michael Belch's research on the so-called "participants in the integrated marketing communication process" actually reflects their unique observation and profound understanding of the "multi agent communication" characteristic of marketing communication activities<sup>[4]</sup>. Senpu believes that as a new concept of marketing communication, integrated marketing communication has five basic characteristics: firstly, it should be based on customers or potential customers; The second is to be good at utilizing all relevant contacts (points); Thirdly, we should attach importance to collaboration; The fourth is to establish "relationships"; Fifth, it is necessary to be able to influence the customer's behavior<sup>[5]</sup>. Based on this understanding, he particularly emphasizes that integrated marketing communication is an important way to enhance brand equity, and the result or purpose of the entire integrated marketing communication activity is to enhance the brand equity of the enterprise while influencing consumer behavior. Among almost all integrated marketing communication theorists, what Kenneth E. Crowe and Donald

Barker call integrated marketing communication is basically synonymous with the independent and integrated operation of marketing communication tools<sup>[6]</sup>, which can be clearly seen from their so-called "integrated marketing communication plans". In their view, a complete integrated marketing communication plan should be composed of four levels: "foundation", "advertising tools", "promotional tools", and "integration tools". Among them, "corporate image and brand management", "buyer behavior" and "promotion opportunity analysis" constitute the "foundation" of the integrated marketing communication plan; The so-called "advertising tool" actually refers to the entire content of an enterprise's overall advertising activities; The so-called "promotion tool" is not limited to "promotion", a kind of marketing communication tool, but includes "trade promotion", "consumer promotion", "personnel promotion, Database marketing and customer relationship management", as well as "public relations and sponsorship plans" and other conventional marketing communication tools other than advertising; Finally, their so-called "integration tools" actually refer to almost unrelated content such as "online marketing", "IMC for small businesses and startups", and "evaluation of IMC plans" <sup>[7]</sup>.

## **2. The Development Course and Theme Division of IMC Research**

IMC was born in the advertising industry and has always been a hot topic of attention in the advertising industry. Therefore, selecting journals in the advertising field as research samples is representative. This article selects the three major international advertising academic journals: Journal of Advertising Research (JAR), International Journal of Advertising (IJA), and Journal of Advertising (JA), as the research objects. This article collects, organizes, and analyzes papers containing "Integrated Marketing Communication" in all the titles of the three major journals from 1990 to 2023, in order to discover the interests and themes of foreign IMC research.

In the EBSCO database, using "IMC" and "Integrated Marketing Communications" as search terms, we searched for papers with these two words in the title, removing duplicates. The results showed that there were a total of 67 papers titled "Integrated

Marketing Communications" in the three major advertising journals, including 23 for JAR, 11 for IJA, and 11 for JA (as shown in Table 1).

**Table 1: List of IMC papers published in the three major international advertising journals from 1993 to 2023**

Year	1993	1994	1995	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Total
JAR	1	0	0	1	1	3	0	2	4	0	0	0	6	2	1	2	1	
IJA	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	0	2	0	2	0	0	2	
JA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	1	0	
Annual statistics	1	0	0	1	1	3	1	3	4	3	0	2	6	14	1	3	3	
Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023			
JAR	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0			24
IJA	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	1	3	2	2	1	0	2	2			28
JA	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1			15
Annual statistics	0	1	0	0	0	1	4	2	3	2	2	2	0	2	3			67

Analyzing the research content of IMC papers in three major advertising journals, it can be found that 67 papers mainly focus on 12 aspects (as shown in Table 2).

**Table 2: Themes of IMC papers in the three major international advertising journals**

IMC research themes	Number of articles	Proportion
IMC theory construction and criticism	15	22.4%
IMC characteristic	9	13.4%
The relationship between IMC and brand	6	9.0%
IMC organizational structure	4	6.0%
IMC definition	4	6.0%
IMC effect measurement	3	4.5%

IMC practice development survey	14	20.9%
IMC education development	5	7.5%
IMC and communication tools	2	3.0%
IMC media application	2	3.0%
IMC communication audience	2	3.0%
IMC and law	1	1.5%
Total	67	100%

In 1996, scholars such as Lu Taihong and Li Shiding published a series of articles on integrated marketing communication in *International Advertising*, including "What is Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC)" and "How to Successfully Implement IMC". They systematically introduced the IMC theory and officially introduced it to the Chinese academic community for the first time. Afterwards, academic research and disciplinary construction on IMC theory gradually developed and strengthened. According to a search on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), as of April 2023, there were 2318 journal articles, 617 master's and doctoral papers, 49 conference literature, and 53 books indexed under the theme of "Integrated Marketing Communication". In so many literature, based on the analysis of the disciplinary distribution under the theme of "Integrated Marketing Communication" in the CNKI database, researches on IMC are mainly distributed in the fields of economics and news media. In addition, as a theoretical tool for implementing strategic communication management in enterprises, scholars in the field of management may also have research on IMC.

The author conducted a paper search in the core journals of the three major disciplines of journalism and communication, with the theme of "Integrated Marketing Communication" and the time frame from 1996 to 2023. Firstly, the author selected the five core journals of journalism and communication: *International Journalism*, *Modern Communication*, *Journalism and Communication Studies*, *Journalism University*, and *China Radio and Television Journal*. Only 28 papers were retrieved. In order to increase the sample size of the review research, the author also searched for 89 representative papers in key journals in the field of advertising marketing, such as "Advertising Outlook" (theoretical edition), "Advertising Outlook" (comprehensive edition), "Chinese Advertising", and "Modern

Marketing" (academic edition). Regarding the main types of IMC research, this article categorizes them according to the two main themes of "theory" and "practice", and lists 9 main types based on the specific situation of domestic research (as shown in Table 3).

**Table 3: Main Types of IMC Research**

IMC research themes	Number of articles	Proportion
Theory introduction	11	12.4%
Theoretical construction	18	20.2%
IMC literature review	5	5.6%
IMC organizational structure	2	2.2%
IMC media application	8	9.0%
IMC local application	31	34.8%
IMC communication audience	4	4.5%
IMC practice development survey	7	7.9%
IMC education development	3	3.4%
Total	89	100%

From the review of the development process and themes of IMC mentioned above, it can be concluded that the research topics of IMC are mainly divided into two categories: IMC theory and IMC practice. Theses on the theme of "theory" use logical reasoning and deductive methods, with strong speculative characteristics. Theses are often written through word analysis, propositional assumptions, fallacy criticism, and reasoning and argumentation. Papers on the theme of "practice" generally use empirical research, data obtained through questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, content analysis, and other methods, and are summarized through quantitative research.

In terms of IMC theoretical research: In the later stage of international research (after 2003), there has been a significant increase in articles on the theme of "theory", with the majority of articles focusing on the construction and criticism of the overall framework of IMC theory. For example, "the Emergence of IMC: A Theoretical Perspective, Rebuilding IMC", "New Definition of IMC", "Theoretical Concept or Management Fashion? Examining the Importance of IMC", "IMC and Brand Identity: Critical Elements as a Brand Equity Strategy" and so on all belong to this list. At the same

time, qualitative research has increased significantly in research methods, and the color of theoretical criticism has become significantly stronger. For Chinese scholars' research on IMC theory, early scholars focused on introducing the theory to China and providing explanations. Therefore, out of the 11 papers on "Theory Introduction and Introduction", 9 were published in 2004 and before. Out of the 18 papers on "Theoretical Construction and Reflection", 15 were published in 2006 and later, indicating that with feedback from practice, scholars' understanding of IMC theory has deepened. It was also during this period that the theoretical construction was based on reflection, further promoting the sustained development of IMC local application research.

In terms of IMC practice research: Previous papers in international research (before 2002) mainly focused on the theme of "IMC practice", such as "IMC in the eyes of customers", "Five methods of organizing an IMC agency", "IMC of American advertising companies: an empirical study", "Multinational comparison of IMC driving forces", "Global IMC agency perspectives and practices", "Measurement integration: qualitative evaluation of IMC", "IMC Views of New Zealand Marketers and Advertising Company Directors", "IMC marketing management Views". For the research on IMC practice by Chinese scholars, out of the 31 papers on "Local Application Research", 29 were published in 2003 and later, indicating that more and more scholars have combined IMC theory with domestic marketing practices since 2003. Among the 8 papers on "Media Integration Research", 6 were published in 2009 and later, reflecting the positive response of domestic IMC research to new marketing opportunities and challenges in the new media era.

### **3. Research results on the two main themes of IMC**

In terms of specific research results, this article will mainly review the 156 (67+89) papers mentioned above, and mainly review the theoretical construction<sup>[8]</sup>, IMC and organizational structure<sup>[9]</sup>, media integration research<sup>[10]</sup>, IMC and audience<sup>[11,12]</sup>, as well as IMC practice survey and summary<sup>[13,14]</sup> in the topic classification shown in Tables 2 and 3.



### (1) Research on IMC Theory

In terms of theoretical construction, since the birth of the first definition of IMC in 1989, many scholars have engaged in heated discussions about what IMC is, but there is still no widely recognized definition of IMC.

Nowak and Phelps proposed through a review of the definition of IMC in literature that the concept of "IMC" includes three elements: "a voice", "a combination of marketing communication tools", and "stimulating behavioral responses"<sup>[15]</sup>. Beard believes that IMC has two connotations: "informational activities that speak with one voice" and "informational activities that attempt to elicit measurable consumer behavioral responses"<sup>[16]</sup>. Tennessee Ben of Northwestern University in the United States pointed out that "we will find a definition of IMC that should go much deeper than just 'all communication is one sound'. Professor Jerry Kliatchko in 2005 sorted out six IMC definitions that exist in history, analyzed their respective advantages and disadvantages, and proposed a new definition: Integrated marketing communication is a strategic management audience oriented, channel centered, and long-term brand communication project driven concept and process<sup>[17]</sup>. Huang Li and He Xijun (2018) conducted a detailed analysis of the five main concepts of IMC, which is the core part of IMC theory construction. They summarized the specific connotation of IMC and proposed a new definition, that is, "Integrated marketing communication is an audience oriented, strategic integration of various marketing channels, focusing on performance measurement, in order to establish a long-term brand connection with customers and the management process"<sup>[18]</sup>. Zhong Yugan (2006) pointed out the shortcomings of the former two by analyzing the connotation of "integrated marketing communication", "marketing mix" and "integrated marketing", and emphasized the positive significance of "integrated marketing", including integrated marketing concept and integrated marketing behavior. His research criticized the insufficient attention paid by previous IMC research to issues such as coordination of marketing resources, coordination of marketing concepts and behaviors, and expanded the research perspective of IMC<sup>[19]</sup>. Du Guoqing and Chen Yi (2011) analyzed four new trends of IMC in the context of significant changes in consumers, media, and

technological media, including a shift towards a "detonation and driving" strategy, the Internet becoming an integrator, and communication demands becoming more approachable and experiential<sup>[20]</sup>. Their research, starting from individual successful marketing cases, provides important reference for adjusting the focus of IMC application research in the new marketing environment. However, it is not closely integrated with theory and has not summarized a systematic IMC plan. From this, it can be seen that there is currently no universally accepted definition of IMC, and the connotation of IMC is still being explored.

## (2) IMC Practice Research

The theme of "practice" research draws on Lasswell's "5W" model and divides it into five types, namely: Communicators - IMC and organizational structures; Media --research on media integration; Audience - IMC and Audience; Effectiveness - IMC practice investigation and summary, while "dissemination content" is replaced by local application research on how IMC can be effectively applied in specific practices<sup>[21,22]</sup>.

Regarding IMC and organizational structures, Shen Guanglong, Qu Feiyu, and Shang Rui (2004) explored the impact of IMC on the restructuring of enterprise organizational models and proposed that "IMC organizations should be virtual networked organizations centered around marketing and communication managers, with stakeholders as nodes, with social organization resources collaborating with each other as goals, and based on quickly reflecting stakeholder needs, and achieving synergy through IMC strategies"<sup>[23]</sup>. Their research emphasizes the high degree of IMC as a component of enterprise management strategy, and provides a relatively feasible model for enterprises to use IMC at the organizational and process levels. It also refines the theoretical framework for IMC organizational research.

Media integration research refers to the study of how IMC utilizes new media to achieve optimal results in the digital age. In this type, He Gaobo (2011) analyzed the challenges that the new media era brings to IMC, such as the distraction of audience attention, changes in information contact habits, and enhanced consumer dominance in choosing<sup>[24]</sup>. However, the meaning of IMC in the article is almost identical to that of "marketing strategy", and

the proposed strategy does not highlight the "integration" of IMC. Gao Hongmei (2013) analyzed IMC strategies in new media environments such as cross media combination communication strategies and touch point analysis strategies, and believed that enterprises should form a multi-dimensional communication system through cross media combination<sup>[25]</sup>. It emphasizes the importance of interactive communication with consumers and the goal orientation of maximizing communication value, rather than blindly advocating the combination of different marketing methods.

In terms of IMC and audience, Leng Yefu and Zhang Yaping (2003) explored the management of television in the context of information surplus and attention scarcity, and proposed attention integration marketing. By establishing an audience database, TV program service providers and advertisers can understand the deep needs of different users. In fact, this is exactly what today's online video service platforms are practicing<sup>[26]</sup>. Zhang Yidan (2012) used advertising and online marketing as examples to explore the impact of IMC on consumer psychology and purchasing behavior<sup>[27]</sup>. Although IMC emphasizes consumer orientation, there is a clear lack of research on the audience in academic research, and further exploration is urgently needed by researchers.

In terms of IMC practice survey and summary, scholars such as Chen Gang, Wang Yumei (2009)<sup>[28]</sup>, Huang Li, He Xijun (2010)<sup>[29]</sup> and Chu Guangzhi (2010)<sup>[30]</sup> conducted a questionnaire survey on domestic leading brand management personnel, advertising and public relations companies, as well as companies in various industries and types, exploring the understanding of Chinese enterprises on IMC, the actual implementation of IMC in the domestic market and the problems encountered. The overall results of the study suggest that IMC lacks a deep understanding among domestic enterprises, and there are issues with lack of user data mining, questionable execution results, and non-standard measurement methods in terms of execution. Unfortunately, due to the decline of IMC research in recent years and limitations in the selection of literature in this article, the 156 selected papers did not include any investigation and research on the latest practical situation of IMC.

#### **4. Conclusion**

From the development process, theme division, and research results of the IMC research mentioned above, it can be seen that IMC has attracted widespread attention in the fields of advertising and marketing from its inception to its present day. However, the number of papers in core journals of journalism and communication is very small and decreasing year by year, and the overall academic nature of the literature is not strong enough. At the same time, IMC research focuses on practical development, with an excessive emphasis on practical guidance and a neglect of theoretical construction, as well as a tendency to only use integrated marketing communication as an external concept and tempting banner, resulting in a weak theoretical foundation and insufficient theoretical depth. In addition, although the research topics are relatively diverse, there is a significant imbalance between different topics.

After 2014, there has been less and less research on IMC in the field of marketing. However, as a theory that emphasizes collaborative advantages and maximizes communication effectiveness, IMC provides an effective approach and method to cope with the increasingly complex marketing environment. With the advent of the era of intelligent communication, the importance of "integration" will inevitably become more prominent. Meanwhile, as a continuously developing theory, IMC research should also be further deepened and expanded in conjunction with new practices in the new era.

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