DRIVERS AND IMPEDIMENTS OF INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS IN BRAZILIAN RETAILING SMES

Abstract

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) have been a growing object of study within marketing literature. IMC is understood as a necessary mechanism to improve knowledge about the consumer, brand awareness and performance and finally financial performance. However, there is an underexplored path of study concerning the occurrence of IMC processes in small and medium enterprises (SME). This is because marketing theories applied to SMEs are, somehow, limited as they are based in classical 'text-book' models of marketing theory, normally applicable to large organizations. Thus, this study seeks to develop a theoretical model that relates the characteristics of these organizations with the IMC process, noticing that there are both drivers and impediments for the development of IMC. Further, the study focuses in the retail industry as such organizations may behave differently, thus contributing to the literature about retail, as well as contributing to the IMC and SME literature concerning the development of IMC in such organizations.

Key-words: SME, IMC, retail

INTRODUCTION

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) has been a recurring theme of study in the literature about marketing. There has been an increased effort from authors to develop its concept and its implications (EINWILLER; BOENIGK, 2012; GABRIELLI; BALBONI, 2010; GURĂU, 2008; LUXTON; REID; MAVONDO, 2015; PORCU; DEL BARRIO-GARCÍA; KITCHEN, 2017; REID, 2005; SCHULTZ; SCHULTZ, 1998; KELLER, 2001). According to Kliatchko (2005) the first definition of IMC was developed at the Northwestern University in 1989, after a research made with communication agencies in the United States, and reported by Caywood and Ewing (1991). At the time IMC was defined as a comprehensive marketing planning that integrated a variety of marketing disciplines such as public relations, direct sales and promotions (CAYWOOD; EWING, 1991).

Since then, IMC has incorporated other characteristics, going through new definitions and conceptualizations, thus being updated. Tafesse and Kitchen (2017) mention the controversies about the concept of IMC, presenting two approaches in the IMC literature: a (1) tactical approach, in which the focus is to integrate communication mechanisms, generating a synergic effect between these mechanisms (NOWAK; PHELPS, 1994); and a (2) strategic approach, initiated by Schultz and Schultz (1998), in which the focus is to strategically consider all stakeholders, being an organization-wide process and long term expectations (DUNCAN; MORIARTY, 1998).

This study considers the strategic approach, defining IMC as an interactive, cross-functional, stakeholder-centered process of analysis, planning, alignment and communications organization-wide, enabling clear, consistent and convenient dialogue through all available media, aiming to nurture valuable long-term relationships (PORCU; DEL BARRIO-GARCÍA; KITCHEN, 2017).

It is accepted that IMC propitiates several improvements in organizations. Such improvements may refer to the increase in the knowledge about the consumer, increase of consumer's education regarding the brand and increased profitability (TAFESSE; KITCHEN, 2017). It is argued that IMC stimulates the dialogue with consumers, increasing brand appeal

(GURĂU, 2008). Other studies also positively relate IMC and brand performance (LUXTON; REID; MAVONDO, 2015, 2017), as well as with brand equity (ŠERIĆ, 2017).

Even though IMC can be considered a source of competitive advantage to organizations, there are still gaps in this understanding, especially regarding small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This is because marketing theories addressing SMEs are somehow limited, usually based in the application of classical models of marketing, better fitted for larger organizations. (GABRIELLI; BALBONI, 2010).

Thus, it may be of interest to scholars to consider the peculiarities of these organizations to extend the application of marketing theories. According to Bocconceli et al. (2008) SMEs are flexible, creative, innovative, willing to change when facing unstable scenarios and usually facing financial constraints and resource restrictions. In that sense, SMEs have both drivers and impediments for the implementation of IMC, being interesting to understand whether these organizations develop such processes, and how.

Considering that IMC is an ongoing process that requires the alignment of the communication through all the organization, strategic focus on the development of long-term relationships and responsiveness (PORCU; DEL BARRIO-GARCÍA; KITCHEN, 2017), there may be some contradictions regarding SMEs characteristics, such as lack of resources, focus on sales and short-term relationships and decreased technical knowledge (BOCCONCELLI et al., 2018). Despite these characteristics, SMES tend to be flexible, rapidly respond to changes and have a close relationship with consumers (GABRIELLI; BALBONI, 2010), important elements to the development of IMC in general.

The role SMEs play in the economy also justifies studies in this context. Tuan and Rajagopal (2018) posit that SMEs play an important part in the economic development, creating job positions, wealth, being sources of innovations and in reducing poverty in the countries they are located, which stimulates studies about such organizations.

The industry in which the SME is, also has influences on its characteristics (HILL, 2001), reason why this study considers SMEs within the retail industry, which presents its own characteristics. Retail SMEs are an important economical device, being the intermediaries between manufacturers and consumers (NOWAK; CAMERON; DELORME, 1996). The distance between theory and practice is not a novelty regarding retail, thus the importance of analyzing this sector and its relevance (BLACKLEY; RESNICK; CASSIDY, 2017).

Corroborating that, numbers related to the retail sector provide an even greater incentive to the theoretical understanding of the development and adoption of marketing strategies by organizations within this sector. A study made by the Brazilian society of retail and consumption (Sociedade brasileira de varejo e consumo, 2017) showed that the Brazilian retail sector had a revenue of R$2,68 trillion, value equivalent to 42.54% of Brazil's GDP, with 22% of all the formally employed workforce in the country. Such numbers determine the importance of better understanding the retail industry. In contrast to these numbers is the fact that the Brazilian retail industry, similar to other emerging countries, is technologically delayed with little investment dedicated to technology development, especially when considering SMEs.

That considered, this study seeks to clarify the relationship between these characteristics and the IMC process, aiming to extend the understandings about how retail SMEs may develop such process. Thus, we seek to contribute to the literature by developing a theoretical model that defines which retail SMEs characteristics stimulate the development of an IMC process and which ones hinder it.

This article is structured as follows: first we develop the theoretical background that supports our work. Then we establish the relationship between the characteristics of retailing SMES and IMC. Finally, we discuss the managerial and research implications of this paper.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section refers to the development of concepts and constructs used in this work, and the establishment of relationships between them.

INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

Hutton (1996) lectures about the aspects originating the IMC, alerting about communication changes in organizations. This, because initially, due to media fragmentation, new communication technologies, new segmentation techniques and the growing usage of data bases, there was a decrease in the efficiency of mass media communication. Simultaneously an exponential growth in the number of communication channels and diversification in the usage of media by consumers occurred. Such facts forced agencies to shift their perspectives regarding investments on a single media to an approach focused in the relationship with multiple audiences.

Following, Brown (1997) posited that the increasing use of IMC was related to: (1) financial gains, coming from cost efficiency in comparison to the older mass media communication model; (2) consumer sophistication, and the increase in their choice and bargain power; (3) disbelief in brands, caused by the lack of healthy relationships between brand and consumers; (4) distrust in advertising agencies. Thus, IMC emerged as a tool to secure coherence between marketing messages (PORCU; DEL BARRIO-GARCÍA; KITCHEN, 2017), in contrast to traditional and mass media communication, aiming to establish long-term relationships.

The IMC emerged at first as a tactical concept, exemplified by Schultz (1998) as a tool for integration of brand messages, with an effective instrument to effectively measure the return of the investments made.

Nonetheless, a strategic approach also emerged, defining IMC as the integration of messages in a dialogic and responsive way, developing marketing communications activities from the integration of the many functions of an organization, considering all brand touch points, originated from a deep understanding of needs and expectations from the stakeholders (DUNCAN; MORIARTY, 1998), considering not only the offer made available by the organization, but also its practices, attitudes, social activities and omissions (FINNE; STRANDVIK, 2012).

Therefore, by defining IMC as a stakeholder-centered process, Porcu et al. (2017) are in accord to what Kliatchko (2005) posits, as both works understand that communication activities should not be focused only on the organization's targeted consumers, but instead on all stakeholders that may have an interest in the organization. According to it, the organization must be able to spread the same message and values encompassing all their audience, thus developing long term relationships with key stakeholders.

That way, IMC encompasses the whole organization holistically, building on long-term relationships by conveying aligned and synergic messages. Consequently, an IMC process that is effectively implemented stimulates the building of a strong brand equity (KELLER, 2001), increasing efficiency and efficacy of marketing communications with consumers (GABRIELLI; BALBONI, 2010), as well as a greater dialogue between consumers and brand, creating a greater brand appeal for such consumers (GURĂU, 2008) and consequently, brand performance (LUXTON; REID; MAVONDO, 2015).

SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES

Defining SMEs is already a challenge in itself. Since there is no clear definition of SME, objective concepts are used to define them, like number of employees, profit and sales. It is important to mention that there is a great influence of the industry in which the organization is inserted to determine whether an organization fits the SME concept or not (HILL, 2001).

The Brazilian organization for supporting SMEs, Sebrae (2017), considers the number of employees and the difference between commerce/services and the industry to define SMEs objectively. Thus, for companies in the commerce/service sector, small enterprises are considered to be those which employ 10 to 49 workers, and medium enterprises are considered to be those employing between 50 to 99 workers. For the industrial sector, small enterprises are considered to be those employing 20 to 99 workers, and medium enterprises those employing 100 to 499 workers.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to go beyond these objective definitions to increase the understandings about the characteristics of such organizations. Thus, SMEs are defined as: (1) having limited resources (financial and human); (2) lack of expertise; (3) limited space in the market; and (4) great influence from the manager/owner (GILMORE; CARSON; GRANT, 2001). These organizations are flexible, creative, innovative, with a great willingness to change in the face of unstable environments, but at the same time having limited resources and budget constrains (BOCCONCELLI et al., 2018).

Regarding communication, Gabrielli e Balboni (2010), posit that SMEs emphasize personal communications and manager's social network contacts. Moreover, such organizations usually have limited resources and marketing knowledge, which makes them focus on a single communication tool and on interpersonal relationships (GABRIELLI; BALBONI, 2010). Hence, manager/owner's influence is strong in these organizations and develop a closer relationship with their customers.

Therefore, for this study, SMEs are defined as: (1) having limited resources; (2) lacking expertise; (3) having limited space in the market; (4) having a great influence from the manager/owner; (5) being flexible; (6) reactive; (7) innovative; (8) focusing on few marketing communication tools; and (9) making great use of interpersonal relationships.

RETAIL INDUSTRY

Retailing can be defined as the activities of distribution of products directly to the final consumer, for personal use instead of commercial (KOTLER, 2006). Retailers are usually the intermediaries between manufacturers and consumers, being the responsible for promotion and communications activities, being greatly involved with it (NOWAK; CAMERON; DELORME, 1996).

This sector is usually represented by small or medium sized companies, that intermediate the relationships between larger organizations and consumers, which means these organizations need to create a close and healthy relationship with their consumers, and other stakeholders, like their suppliers, for example (BLUT; TELLER; FLOH, 2018).

The establishment of this contact may represent a great challenge for managers in the retailing industry, as consumer behaviors and purchasing patterns have been increasingly modified by technological evolution and adoption of newer, more modern communication and information techniques (BLACKLEY; RESNICK; CASSIDY, 2017), which makes evident the need for these managers to be responsive and agile regarding dialogues and decisions concerning information originated from these conversations.

However, the characteristic structural underdevelopment of emerging markets is pervasive to Brazilian retail SMEs, being many of such organization's communication efforts focused on specific, punctual activities, short-term objectives, and on campaigns that promote the offers in

store (MIOTTO; PARENTE, 2015). Consonant to this, higher levels of informal institutions and inexistence of adequate processes and structures hinder the passing of knowledge and information from and through the entire organization (BOSO; DEBRAH; AMANKWAH-AMOAH, 2018).

Through the existing contact between retailers and stakeholders, it is expected that the gathering of information and the quickness in spreading throughout the organization leads to higher alignment of interests between manager/owner and stakeholders, by the customization of offers and messages to each targeted segment (DUNCAN; MORIARTY, 1998; LOW, 2000). Contrary to these expectations though, it is noticed that IMC is actually hindered in these organizations, especially due to the financial constraints and lack of knowledge and information (FAM, 2000; MORTIMER; LAURIE, 2017).

Therefore, Brazilian retailing organizations are characterized by: (1) being connected to their stakeholders; (2) focused on short-term results; (3) having inadequate processes; e (4) hiher levels of informality.

PROPOSITIONS

Small and medium sized and retailing organizations have a number of characteristics and market behaviors that inhibit implementation of strategies, tactics and processes that can result in positive performance for these organizations.

The limitation of resources of SMEs can be defined as the lack of financial and human resources, as well as the lack of time and knowledge. Such constraints influence, and indeed, define how marketing is done by these organizations. SMEs do not fit the classical 'text-book' marketing lessons and theories, thus compromising the marketing activities in these organizations. The way marketing activities are conducted, thus, is in an informal, unstructured, spontaneous and reactive manner, simply responding to norms and tendencies of the industry which the organization is part of (BOCCONCELI et al., 2018).

Resource constraints will also limit the range of activities and market share of a SME which limits the amount of people being influenced by the organization, thus being an impediment for the successful development of the IMC process.

IMC is considered to be and interactive, organization-wide process, which requires a strategic focus in all stakeholders (PORCU; DEL BARRIO-GARCÍA; KITCHEN, 2017). This way, IMC theory assumes that organizations will integrate messages, constantly spreading them to each stakeholder as required, so it can be observed the necessity to dedicate resources to the implementation of the IMC process.

Thus, it is proposed that:

P1a: Limitation of resources and the lack of market share and influence, pervasive to SMEs, is negatively related to the development of IMC processes.

Besides that, to correctly develop the IMC process, it is necessary the participation and collaboration throughout all the organizational functions and managers (LUXTON et. al., 2017). It is not uncommon that SME managers, especially those in emerging markets, present a great lack of specific marketing knowledge (BOCCONCELI et al., 2018), thus inhibiting the development of internal skills that lead to IMC.

Thus, it is proposed that:

P1b: The lack of formal knowledge from the SMEs managers is negatively related to the IMC process development.

These limitations also impede that managers explore and employ strategies resulting in performance improvement. In other words, the resource limitation can cause the inexistence of an adequate marketing communication strategy. This results in an underusage of marketing communications tools or even the complete absence of its usage, which weakens the integration of the messages produced in the SMEs and the possibility of a long-term relationship

We propose that:

P1c: The underutilization of marketing communication tools in SMEs is negatively related to the development of the IMC process.

If on one hand, some retailing SMEs characteristics can inhibit the IMC process, on the other hand, other characteristics can be drivers of this process, helping the organization achieve superior performance.

Flexibility is the ability to change direction quickly or to deviate from a previous course of action (LEVY; POWELL, 1998). SMEs are seen as more flexible than other companies, this happens because (1) the owner and the managers have a deep knowledge of the company's capacity, since these capacities are deeply associated with the owner/manager personality; (2) lack of bureaucratic structures that impede changes and reduce the quickness that an organization responds to it; and (3) close control exercised by the managers, that allows such quick changes (LEVY; POWELL, 1998).

According to Reid et. al. (2005), the implementation of the IMC process involves a general change of behavior, pulling people out of their comfort zone and threatening the *status quo*. Thus, the entire organization must be involved in the communication process, focusing on the multiple stakeholders that have an interest in the organization. IMC also involves the production of constant dialogues, that is, a two-way symmetrical communication (PORCU et. al., 2017).

Thus, it is proposed that:

P2a: The SMEs flexibility is positively related to the development of the IMC process

Consonant to that, creativity enables the organization to act proactively, commanding changes to the landscapes or even new usages to existing and well established resources and practices. In fact, it is the creative innovation which drives the activities of the organization, motivating activities, making people work in favor of better results.

The IMC process, is focused around multiple stakeholders, at the same time that seeks to align all the messages produced in the organization in both visual adequacy and in coherence with the organizational strategy (PORCU et al., 2017). Therefore, it is possible to observe that for managers dealing with it, IMC may represent a challenge, in which they must deal with different and diverse publics and at the same time keeping coherence and unity of conveyed messages. Creativity and innovation can be drivers of this process, as they enable the organization to be more open to dialogues that will result in new ideas and beneficial changes

Thus, it is proposed that:

P2b: Creativity and innovation of the SMEs are positively related with the development of IMC process

Due to the structure of such organizations, there may be a closer relationship between manager and stakeholders, and this relationship can generate a better understanding of the stakeholders' needs and expectations (BLUTT et al., 2018). That being, the level of informality in the relationship between managers and stakeholders may increase the dialogue and result in more

agile responses, meeting needs and expectations in a customized and mutual manner (ORAZI et. al., 2017).

Such conversations and characteristics have as consequence an increase in the interaction between managers/owners, consumers, providers and suppliers, through constant circular conversations (PORCU et. al., 2017). The development of this constant dialogue, characteristic of the IMC process, results in a constant process of adaptation by the organization.

Thus, it is proposed that:

P2c: the personal relationship between the SMEs manager and the stakeholders is positively related with the IMC process development

Some retailing organizations manage to employ their connectivity and informality in an efficient way. Through conversations and discussions they are able to bring their stakeholders closer to them than larger organizations are, allowing them to better comprehend needs, expectations and the specific nuances of each stakeholder, which can be transformed into competitive advantages. Such advantages are defined by the way the organization promote their brand in the market (LUXTON et. al, 2017)

To achieve this, agility and quickness in their responses to adverse situations are needed if they want to better communicate and promote their offers. Evidently, anticipating to adverse situations may reduce the operational costs and spreads the idea that the organization is aware of their stakeholders needs (YANNOPOULOS et al. 2012). However, when necessary the organization must be able to quickly react and change their course, aiming to survive and latter achieve a satisfactory performance.

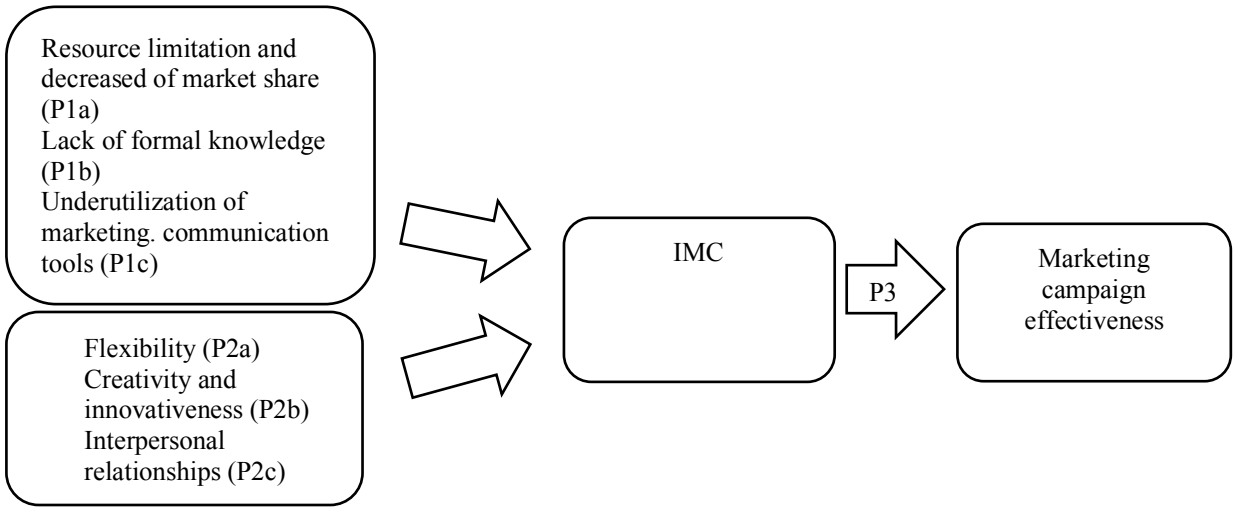
Finally, organizations that manage to use their internal resources in creative and innovative ways, based on knowledge and information acquired about their stakeholders, can increase their campaign and marketing communication effectiveness, creating long-term relationship and better performance.

Thus, it is proposed that:

P3: The IMC process in SMEs is positively related to the campaign and marketing effectiveness.

Bearing that in mind, we propose the following model:

FIGURE 1 – PROPOSED MODEL



Source: Authors (2018)

CONCLUSION

Through this discussion we attempted to make evident the importance of IMC in Brazilian retailing SMEs by demonstrating the associations and complementarities between the characteristics of such organizations and the studied construct. The scarcity of studies that specifically address SMEs most certainly represents a challenge in the theoretical development of this area of study. It is expected though, that by evidencing the positive associations of the characteristics this study provides some improvements to the literature.

This implication comes from the possibility that organizations may integrate and spread ideals throughout all their stakeholders. This may enable the nurturing of healthy long-lasting relationships and the ability to develop and implement long-term strategies.

However, it is also expected that organizations that do not succeed in beneficially putting such unique characteristics to good use, will face an underdevelopment of IMC, resulting in a less satisfactory performance of their marketing communications strategies.

This is due to their inability to spread ideals and beliefs that are consistent to the organization's mission and values, giving wrong impressions to consumers and other stakeholders, thus hindering the effectiveness of marketing communications and promotions activities and campaigns.

From a managerial perspective, it is expected that once tested, the results enlighten manager/owners in a way that marketing stops being a mere 'article of faith' (MASSIERA et al., 2017). It is understandable that IMC may be considered something difficult to be ideally achieved, given the many restrictions SMEs face, being limited to the realization of only some promotional activities and utilization of only a few marketing communication tools. Still, we hope that this study helps in the understanding that IMC is not only a 'promise of a false dawn' (HENNINGER et al., 2017), but a legit strategical process that brings about positive performance results.

Yet, some organizations are assumed by their existence to possess characteristics that favor or inhibit specific attitudes. On the one hand, comprehending which characteristics drive the development of IMC processes may help managers to explore such characteristics and perceive better results in their activities. On the other hand, knowing which characteristics impede the development of IMC processes may lead to mitigatory actions, thus resulting in improved performance.

We understand that the model here proposed is possible to be tested, and expect that this happens. We hope that well established measures may empirically confirm our propositions, demonstrating which factors drive or inhibit IMC in Brazilian retailing SMEs, by the operationalization of our proposed model, and contributing to the literature in these areas of study and informing practitioners about the business performance benefits of adopting IMC practices.

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