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# Inter-Country Customer-Perspective Analysis of Strategic Antecedents and Consequences for Post-Purchase Behaviour in Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC)

Vera Butkouskaya<sup>a</sup> , Joan Llonch-Andreu<sup>a</sup> , and María-del-Carmen Alarcón-del-Amo<sup>b</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>Business Department, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain; <sup>b</sup>Marketing Department, University of Murcia, Murcia, Spain

## ABSTRACT

The lack of understanding of cross-national integrated marketing communications (IMC) implementation and consumer behavior is an obstacle for international companies. In this inter-country comparison, we analyze IMC antecedents and consequences from the customers' perspective in a developed and a developing economy. The results show that customer orientation, but not technology orientation, positively influenced IMC and, indirectly, post-purchase behavior, in both economies. Cross-economy differences were also evident, specifically, that the positive effect of IMC on post-purchase evaluation and behavior was stronger in the developing economy. However, customer satisfaction more strongly mediated the relationship between IMC and post-purchase behavior (word-of-mouth and repurchase intention) in the developed economy.

## KEYWORDS

customer-centred IMC;  
inter-country comparison;  
post-purchase behavior;  
strategic orientation

## Introduction

Developing markets represent a potential for international growth and the growing interest in those markets opens up a new research interest and opportunity (Wagner Mainardes, de Almeida, and de-Oliveira 2019). In recent years, it has become increasingly apparent that many marketing communication concepts developed and applied in established (developed markets) are not relevant to many of today's emerging (developing) markets (Schultz and Malthouse 2017). Even so, a significant number of recent studies on integrated marketing communications (IMC) analysis still focus on developed economies (Butkouskaya, Llonch-Andreu, and Alarcón-Del-Amo 2019; Schultz and Patti 2009). Developing markets will become essential for business in this century (Wagner Mainardes, de Almeida, and de-Oliveira 2019), so it is important to take account of the fact that IMC planning and implementation may vary significantly by market and country (Schultz, Chu, and Zhao 2016).

This research aims to test IMC implementation effectiveness in an inter-country context by comparatively analyzing customer perceptions of IMC in a developed economy (Spain) and a developing economy (Belarus). Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in Spain is higher than in Belarus, and also spending on innovation and marketing. Spending on marketing, including on IMC tools, as a share of GDP is 0.49% in Spain compared to 0.17% in Belarus (Marketing.by 2017; Statista 2017). However, average annual growth in marketing expenditure is significantly higher in Belarus (15%) than in Spain (5.8%) (Santander 2020; WebExpert.By 2019). This reflects a usual pattern in developing economies compared to developing economies of a lower marketing activity, and, as a consequence, less spending on marketing. Apart from those differences, the two countries are good candidates for comparison, as both are located in Europe, both have experienced significant economic growth in recent years, and information and communication technology (ICT) development and acceptance among their populations are high.

While it is widely accepted by theorists and marketers that IMC is a customer-centred concept (Schultz 2016; Kliatchko and Schultz 2014), previous studies have primarily focused on empirical analyses of managers' opinions of IMC, neglecting the customer perspective (Schultz 2016; Šerić 2018). The lack of customer-centred IMC analyses overlooks the two-way nature of communications as well as participation in the integration process by both companies and customers (Lee and Park 2007; Schultz 2016). Nevertheless, while full IMC construct measurement from the customer perspective is challenging, some recent publications analyze customer perceptions of IMC by measuring message and channel consistency (e.g., Šerić, Gil-Saura, and Ozretić-Došen 2015; Šerić 2017; Von Freymann 2010). Following a similar approach, our research addresses the need for empirical analysis of IMC antecedents and consequences from the customer perspective (Bruhn and Schnebelen 2017; Finne and Grönroos 2017; Kitchen 2017).

While strategic orientation activities positively affect IMC implementation (Peltier, Schibrowsky, and Schultz 2003; Mihart 2012), previous empirical studies adopt the company's point of view, and studies from the customer perspective are absent. From the company's perspective, collecting and implementing dynamic market information for customer-oriented (CO) and technology-oriented (TO) decision-making positively affects IMC implementation (Peltier, Schibrowsky, and Schultz 2003; Mihart 2012). However, great information pressure on customers or the use of too many communication channels can complicate or damage integrated message perception for the customer by creating confusion (Finne and Grönroos 2017; Shinkle, Kriauciunas, and Hundley 2013). Our research analyses customer opinions of the impact of the company's CO and TO activity levels on IMC effectiveness.

Empirical research is also needed on IMC outcomes from the customer's perspective. From the manager's perspective, complementary relationships between the company's strategic orientation and IMC, as an organizational capability, enhance firm performance (Kliatchko and Schultz 2014). However, for customers the value of

communication integration is different (Finne and Grönroos 2009). More specifically, communication integration may facilitate message perception and meaning integration, which, as suggested by several authors, may have a positive impact on customer satisfaction with their purchase (Finne and Grönroos 2017; Mihart 2012). Furthermore, post-purchase evaluation plays a significant role in building relationships and customer retention. However, most recent studies on the impact of marketing communications on customer behavior analyzes purchase intention (e.g., Kim and Ko 2012). This overlooks the real impact of a company's marketing capabilities on post-purchase evaluation and behavior, such as word-of-mouth (WOM) and repurchase intention (RPI) (Moon, Costello, and Koo 2017; Schultz 2016). This article aims to close this gap by analyzing in-depth the IMC impact on customer post-purchase evaluation and behavior.

Several authors (e.g., Darley, Blankson, and Luethge 2010; Voss, Godfrey, and Seiders 2010) suggest that the components of post-purchase behavior are correlated, which would in turn suggest that correlations between post-purchase elements may influence IMC behavioral outcomes. For example, customer satisfaction (CS) with a purchase may reduce the positive effect of IMC on WOM. It is also critical to understand the role of consistent communication messages in transferring positive CO and TO effects to post-purchase customer behavior (Duncan and Moriarty 1998; Finne and Grönroos 2017). Zhang, Liang, and Wang (2016), for instance, demonstrated that marketing communications have a positive impact on the relationships between product innovation and customer equity. This study analyses in a greater depth the potential indirect and mediating effects of IMC antecedents and consequences.

In summary, based on the literature mentioned above, the main objective of this research is to make an inter-country comparison of CO and TO as two key strategic antecedents of IMC and to analyze the main consequences of IMC for post-purchase evaluation and behavior from a customer's perspective. We seek to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the effects of CO or TO on IMC from a customer

point of view? (2) What are the consequences of IMC for post-purchase evaluation and behavior? (3) Does economy type have a moderating effect on the IMC antecedents and consequences model?

This research makes an incremental contribution to cross-national marketing studies by analyzing differences in IMC implementation in developed versus developing economies. This is especially important in view of two factors: the growing interest in emerging markets (Wagner Mainardes, de Almeida, and de-Oliveira 2019), and the lack of knowledge regarding application of IMC practices in developing markets (Schultz and Malthouse 2017). Furthermore, our inter-country approach makes a significant contribution toward generalizing results under the requirements of cross-cultural marketing and management research (Steenkamp 2001). Our study also contributes to IMC research by analyzing the customer perspective on IMC strategic antecedents and behavioral outcomes, the indirect role of message and channel consistency, and the mediating role of CS in these relationships. It also contributes to customer behavior theory by focusing on the post-purchase stage and analyzing the relationship between the corresponding elements.

From a managerial perspective, a comparative analysis of IMC implementation in developed and developing economies may be useful for decision-making about marketing budget allocations and marketing tactics in different types of economies. It can also bring deeper understanding on the role of available market data and overall marketing activity on IMC effectiveness. Furthermore, understanding the customer perspective on IMC and studying post-purchase behavior also contributes to managerial practices. This is especially valuable, considering that IMC implementation effectiveness in building customer relationships will depend on both the company and the customer. This article analyzes whether practices aimed at a better understanding and satisfying customers' needs and wants, as well as innovation and research and development (R&D) activities, can improve the perceived message and channel consistency. More specifically, it studies whether the company's

market intelligence activity may not have the adverse effect of overloading and confusing customers. It also analyses whether the integration of communication channels and message consistency strengthens a company's ability to enhance positive WOM and strengthens relationships with customers (by enhancing RPI). In particular, the article examines the role of customer purchase evaluation, which can limit the application of IMC to building customer relationships.

The paper starts with a brief literature review of the main antecedents and consequences of IMC for post-purchase evaluation and behavior. It then describes the cross-national context and hypothesizes about possible differences in IMS implementation between developed and developing economies. A further chapter describes data collection, data analysis and the main results, and the article concludes with a discussion and some recommendations for future research.

## Literature review and hypotheses

### *Customer-centred IMC*

Both academics and marketers accept that IMC is a customer-centred concept (Bruhn and Schnebelen 2017; Kliatchko 2008; Kliatchko and Schultz 2014). A customer-centred IMC framework aims to underline the two-way nature of the communication integration process between firms as the sender and customers as the receiver (Bruhn and Schnebelen 2017; Finne and Grönroos 2009).

From the managerial perspective, the IMC concept has evolved from a "narrower" to a "broader" definition (Šerić 2018). While the original narrow definition viewed IMC as a simple instrument for tactical coordination of promotional tools, the broad approach explains IMC as a complex strategic business process from the integrative, strategic, communication, and performance-oriented perspectives (Nowak and Phelps 1994; Tafesse and Kitchen 2017).

However, from the customer perspective, IMC is not so much about strategic positioning or administrative or organizational issues as about personnel issues and relationships (Finne and Grönroos 2009; Kliatchko 2008). In the

customer-centred IMC framework, the customer interpretation of IMC is as a simple integration of marketing communication elements speaking in one voice (Finne and Grönroos 2009; Nowak and Phelps 1994; Schultz 1993). However, this process is complex for the customer. Specifically, the communication-based model for managing relationships suggests that a communication message from a company as sender, before reaching a customer as receiver, will also encounter informational noise in the external environment (Duncan and Moriarty 1998). Integrating previous research, Finne and Grönroos (2017) provided an up-to-date conceptual framework for a customer-centred IMC approach as a new starting point for customer ecosystem analysis. It is suggested that the final value of the message perceived by customers will depend on their ability to integrate various messages received from various channels (“communication-in-use”) and to make sense of them (“value-in-use”).

The communication-in-use concept reflects the fact that communication messages from the company may come to the customer in a variety of formats (as planned advertisement, product packaging, or post-sale service) (Finne and Grönroos 2009). The customer’s ability to perceive the meaning of an integrated message will depend not only on the quality of the company’s efforts in message and channel integration. Internal and external environments (such as social influence, WOM and competitors’ communications) will affect message meaning perception by customers (Sandes and Urdan 2013). Additionally, the number of messages registered by customers depends on several temporal and situational factors (e.g., their experience, attitudes, needs, or interests) (Duncan and Moriarty 1998). As for the “value-in-use” concept, this suggests that IMC is complicated because not all messages received by customers will be registered. To form the correct perceived value, therefore, the customer should be able to integrate all the necessary messages (Ballantyne and Varey 2006).

Some recent publications that have analyzed customer perceptions of marketing communications indicate that full IMC construct measurement from a customer perspective is challenging (e.g., Šerić, Gil-Saura, and Ozretić-Došen 2015;

Šerić 2017; Von Freymann 2010), with Von Freymann (2010) suggesting that message and channel integration may be the starting point for IMC measurement from the customer perspective. In more recent years, more researchers have used the survey methodology to assess IMC from the customer point of view, focusing on the message, channel and brand consistency, thereby demonstrating the initial stage of obtaining insights into the customer’s point of view (Šerić, Gil-Saura, and Ozretić-Došen 2015; Šerić 2017).

### ***IMC Antecedents***

The communication concept underlines the importance of being relevant to the customer needs and interests (Bruhn and Schnebelen 2017; Finne and Grönroos 2009; Kliatchko 2008; Mihart 2012). CO as a component of market orientation provides firms with up-to-date customer information that will better satisfy customer needs and interests, in the form of “what” (the message); additionally, CO facilitates understanding of the way communication should be managed and addressed to customers, in the form of “how” (through which channels) (Narver and Slater 1990). Answering the “what” and “how” questions is very relevant for building two-way relationship-oriented dialogue with customers (Bruhn and Schnebelen 2017). Not promoting, but involving the customer in communications, may have a positive effect on customer experiences of communications (Kliatchko and Schultz 2014; Schultz 2016). We accordingly propose the following hypothesis:

**H1:** CO has a positive influence on IMC.

Market-oriented companies nowadays cannot ignore the exogenous pressure of technological change and the speed of innovation (Schultz 2016). TO represents the firm’s ability to identify developing technologies, invest in R&D, and apply new technologies to the firm’s marketing activities, including new product development and marketing communications (Gatignon and Xuereb 1997). For example, social networks give marketers new digital channels for communicating with target customers, obtaining interactive dialogue/feedback, collecting more customer data

and adapting faster to changing customer needs (Bruhn and Schnebelen 2017; Mulhern 2009; Schultz 2016). Likewise, customers can receive relevant and up-to-date information from the company, which may positively influence their perceptions of communications value (Ndubisi, Malhotra, and Wah 2008). Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H2:** Technology orientation has a positive influence on IMC.

### **IMC Consequences for post-purchase behavior**

The IMC process of integrating, making sense of, and forming the value of communication messages is complex for the customers (Finne and Grönroos 2009). Customers register numerous variations of communication formats (e.g., advertisements, product packaging or post-sale service) from diverse market players (e.g., a company, its competitors, society in general or even government) and media sources (e.g., from the company or social media) (Finne and Grönroos 2017). It may happen that not all messages received will be registered or, as a result, integrated by customers. Missing information on the stage of message integration affects the perceived sense of the message and may form a wrong perceived value (in this case, the sender may misunderstand the message). Thus, even more than a company's activities in integrating communications, the process of customers integrating, making sense of, and forming value for messages received affects IMC outcomes (Lee and Park 2007; Finne and Grönroos 2009).

CS, reflected in contentment with the purchase experience, can be presented as a three-stage process. First, customers create pre-purchase expectations; second, consumption reveals a perceived quality; and, third, perceived quality will confirm or disconfirm pre-purchase expectations (Anderson and Sullivan 1993). By applying IMC, the firm focuses on controlling message and channel consistency to facilitate customer understanding of communication messages, building, as a result, more realistic pre-purchase expectations. Consequently, the lower level of disconfirmation between expectations and perceived quality should have a positive impact on the

cognitive component of CS (Anderson and Sullivan 1993; Moon, Costello, and Koo 2017; Šerić, Gil-Saura, and Ozretić-Došen 2015). Accordingly, we hypothesize as follows:

**H3:** IMC has a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

Marketing communication is the primary source of information for the customer directly from the company. This information may take different forms, such as advertising messages or product packaging (Finne and Grönroos 2017). With the growth of database marketing and interactive communications based on digital communications tools, marketing specialists can obtain more data on customer needs and preferences (Mulhern 2009; Zahay, Mason, and Schibrowsky 2009). This further helps to improve communication message integration and can even reduce the possibility of confusion for the customer. As a result, integrated communications, based on more data, build more realistic expectations, which, in turn, facilitates more positive evaluations of purchases, and positively influences WOM recommendations (Moon, Costello, and Koo 2017). We thus propose the following hypothesis:

**H4:** IMC has a positive influence on word-of-mouth.

Since the literature accepts that intention can predict behavior, the customer's RPI is an integral part of customer behavior research (Hellier *et al.* 2003; Schultz 2016). RPI, which reflects an individual's judgment about repurchasing a product or service from the same company, depends on various factors, including the evaluation of communications with that company (Hellier *et al.* 2003; Mittal and Kamakura 2001; Lee and Park 2007). As confusion arising from the marketing message may create distrust, integrated communications play a vital role in building trustful customer relationship-oriented communications (Bruhn and Schnebelen 2017; Moon, Costello, and Koo 2017). Based on the above, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H5:** IMC has a positive influence on repurchase intention.

Additionally, some studies suggest that the different components of post-purchase evaluation

and behavior are correlated (e.g., Mihart 2012). Specifically, a positive evaluation of the buying decision – in other words, CS – can have a further positive impact on post-purchase behavior, such as WOM and RPI (Hellier *et al.* 2003; Moon, Costello, and Koo 2017; Ndubisi, Malhotra, and Wah 2008). We thus posit as follows:

**H6:** Customer satisfaction has a positive influence on word-of-mouth.

**H7:** Customer satisfaction has a positive influence on repurchase intention.

### **The mediating role of customer satisfaction**

It is necessary to bear in mind that, while forming post-purchase decisions, customers mainly rely on the evaluation of purchase decisions (Ndubisi, Malhotra, and Wah 2008). In this evaluation, they focus on the fit between the company's promises as perceived from communications and the reality experienced (Anderson and Sullivan 1993; Hellier *et al.* 2003). CS mediates the relationship between IMC and customer behavioral outcomes (such as WOM and RPI) (Ndubisi, Malhotra, and Wah 2008). Accordingly, we propose hypotheses as follows:

**H8:** Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between IMC and word-of-mouth.

**H9:** Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between IMC and repurchase intention.

### **The moderating effect of economy type**

Recent studies suggest that IMC planning and implementation may vary by market and country (Schultz, Chu, and Zhao 2016). Su and Si (2015) pointed out that organizational objectives, processes, and behavior vary according to the level of economic freedom of the market (ranging from free to centrally planned markets). In economies with a lower level of economic freedom, companies try to avoid risks and so, for example, earmark less investment in innovation activities (Shinkle, Kriauciunas, and Hundley 2013; Su and Si 2015). Additionally, the level of competitive intensity is lower in most developing economies

compared to developed economies, resulting in minor environmental changes (Estrin 2002; Su and Si 2015; Wagner Mainardes, de Almeida, and de-Oliveira 2019). A lower level of rivalry results in less effort needed to attract new customers. Low market dynamism and technological turbulence reduces market dynamics, which means less market data are available (Shinkle, Kriauciunas, and Hundley 2013). In contrast, in an environment with a high level of competition, as is typical in developed economies, more market data – critical for IMC effectiveness – is available for companies (Butkouskaya, Llonch-Andreu, and Alarcón-Del-Amo 2019). Additionally, for companies in developed economies, the implementation of new ICTs is critical in gaining additional competitive advantage (Mulhern 2009; Shinkle, Kriauciunas, and Hundley 2013). Given that up-to-date market information is critical for successful IMC implementation (Mihart 2012), a lack of market information can negatively affect firms' decision-making processes and the effectiveness of IMC in addressing customer's needs and wants in relation to “what” (message) and “how” (channel) to communicate (Zhou and Li 2010). Thus, we posit as follows:

**H1a:** The economy type moderates the relationship between customer orientation and IMC.

**H2a:** The economy type moderates the relationship between technology orientation and IMC.

Some empirical studies have demonstrated the moderating effect of market dynamism on the relationship between a firm's capabilities and organizational performance, showing that this effect is weaker in the less dynamic environments typical of developing economies (Butkouskaya, Llonch-Andreu, and Alarcón-Del-Amo 2019; Li and Liu 2014). On the other hand, in more dynamic environments, with a higher number of competitive threats, environmental turbulence reduces the competitive position and the potential value of current ordinary capabilities. This forces companies to apply frequent and complex changes and reinforces the importance of effective dynamic capabilities (Li and Liu 2014). Thus, IMC outcomes are significantly stronger in a developed economy compared to a

developing economy. In such environments, even knowing the possibilities that may be brought by the implementation of new technologies, firms prefer to avoid the risky investments related to their implementation (Schreyögg and Kliesch-Eberl 2007; Su and Si 2015). In developing economies, therefore, the relationship between IMC and organizational performance may become weaker or even harmful compared to in more developed economies (Li and Liu 2014). Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H3a:** The economy type moderates the relationship between IMC and customer satisfaction.

**H4a:** The economy type moderates the relationship between IMC and word-of-mouth.

**H5a:** The economy type moderates the relationship between IMC and repurchase intention.

**H6a:** The economy type moderates the relationship between customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth.

**H7a:** The economy type moderates the relationship between customer satisfaction and repurchase intention.

## Data collection and analysis

### Context

Primary data from customers in two different economies – Spain and Belarus – were collected to obtain insights into the moderating effects of economy type. Spain represents a developed economy (González-Benito et al. 2014), whereas Belarus is a developing economy still in transition from a central-planning system (Estrin 2002; Marples 2013). Thus, in Belarus, as in most developing economies, the levels of competitive intensity, market dynamism, and technological turbulence are lower than in developed economies, such as Spain (Shinkle, Kriauciunas, and Hundley 2013).

Belarus has much lower levels of investment and financial freedom than Spain (30 and 10 for Belarus and 85 and 70 for Spain, respectively) and is a less open market (The Heritage Foundation 2018). On the basis of average data for 2018, the media market in Belarus is significantly smaller than in Spain, at 99.1 million USD

versus 6.92 billion USD (Marketing.by 2017; Statista 2018; WebExpert.By 2019). The Belarusian economy is significantly smaller than the Spanish economy, at 59.662 billion USD versus 1.419 trillion USD (The World Bank 2018). Belarus has a distinctively lower level of innovation than Spain, ranked 88th and 28th in the Global Innovation Index Report, respectively (Dutta et al. 2018). While spending on marketing, including on IMC tools, as a share of GDP is much higher in Spain (0.49%) than in Belarus (0.17%), average annual growth in marketing expenditure is much higher in Belarus (15%) than in Spain (5.8%) (Santander 2020; WebExpert.By 2019), confirming the developmental dynamics of the Belarusian market.

However, the two countries also have some similarities, firstly that both are located in Europe and that both have shown significant economic growth in recent years (The World Bank 2018). Both have a high level of ICT development, with scores of 27 for Spain and 32 for Belarus according to the ICT Development Index, indicating full availability and acceptance of technologies by the corresponding populations (United Nations International Telecommunication Union 2017).

### Methodology

Data were collected in personal interviews in Belarus and Spain from a customer survey based on a written questionnaire (382 and 369 responses, respectively) administered in January and February 2017. The profile parameters for the customer sample focused on age, gender, education and employment status to avoid any moderating influence other than economy type in the model.

The original questionnaire in English was translated and back-translated to/from Russian and Spanish (with no wording issues identified) and was pretested using cognitive interviewing and focus groups. At the beginning of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to choose a branded product they had purchased in the previous 12 months from a proposed industry (products of everyday use), suggested to the respondents randomly (producers, with the focus on the product; retailers, with the focus on the



**Table 1.** Structural model results and hypotheses testing for the multi-group country analysis.

H	Path	$\beta$	t value	Multigroup Model <sup>‡</sup>												
				Belarus		Spain		Country moderator effect								
				$\beta$	t value	$\beta$	t value	$\Delta \Delta S-B\chi^2$ ( $\Delta g.l.=2$ )	$p$							
H1	CO→IMC	0.937	***	5.684	S	0.929	***	5.912	0.984	***	5.951	H1a	0.091	0.812	ns	R
H2	TO→IMC	-0.060	ns	-0.663	R	-0.093	ns	-0.858	0.011	ns	0.110	H2a	0.212	0.687	ns	R
H3	IMC→CS	0.867	***	8.794	S	0.933	***	9.559	0.776	***	7.535	H3a	1.353	0.063	*	S
H4	IMC→WOM	0.155	*	1.931	S	0.168	**	1.961	0.127	*	1.721	H4a	1.251	0.078	*	S
H5	IMC→RPI	0.475	***	3.275	S	0.480	***	3.251	0.333	***	3.590	H5a	1.050	0.070	*	S
H6	CS→WOM	0.801	***	3.275	S	0.724	***	3.245	0.972	***	7.497	H6a	3.052	0.042	**	S
H7	CS→RPI	0.413	***	3.824	S	0.275	***	2.669	0.680	***	5.787	H7a	4.108	0.012	**	S

Notes: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; ns = non-significant. S = supported; R = rejected.  $\beta$  - standardized path coefficients, t value - robust t value.

CO = Customer Orientation; TO = Technological Orientation; IMC = Integrated Marketing Communications; CS = Customer Satisfaction; WOM = Word-of-Mouth recommendations; RPI = Repurchase Intention.

Model fit: <sup>‡</sup>S-B $\chi^2$  ( $df = 402$ ) = 916.17;  $\chi^2 = 1251.12$ ; RMSEA = 0.06; SRMR = 0.07; CFI = 0.92; NNFI = 0.90; NFI = 0.87.

sale support service; and service companies, with a service focus). An industry effect analysis showed no significant differences between the two countries. From this point, all the remaining questions in the questionnaire were related to the chosen brand.

To measure the main components of the model, existing and widely used five-point Likert scales from the literature were used (Appendix A.1). Some scales were adapted to the conduct of a customer survey, as the original scales were oriented to the gathering of data from managers/companies. Used to measure IMC with the focus on the perceived consistency of communication tools and media channels was the first component of Lee and Park (2007) scale, called “unified communications for consistent messages and images”.

The causal hypotheses were tested using covariance-based structural equation modeling (SEM) and EQS 6.1 software. The reliability and validity of the measurement model was assessed, the structural model was assessed, hypothesis testing was conducted, multi-group analysis (MGA) of samples from the two countries (Belarus and Spain) was conducted and, finally, mediating effects were analyzed using the Sobel test.

In the assessment of the reliability and validity of the measurement model, items with standardized coefficients of less than 0.5 were eliminated to improve the scale (Hildebrandt, 1987). Results of the convergent validity and discriminant validity assessments were satisfactory for both countries (Hair 2006). The prespecified measurement model provided a good fit to the data based on

the number of fit statistics in Spain and Belarus (Appendix A.1).

### SEM analysis

The results of the SEM are summarized in Table 1 and Figure 1.

The results show that while CO has a positive influence on IMC ( $p < 0.01$ ), the impact of TO on IMC is not significant. Thus, the results support H1 and reject H2. IMC has a positive effect on CS and RPI ( $p < 0.01$ ) and also on WOM ( $p < 0.1$ ), so the results support H3, H4, and H5. Additionally, CS positively influences WOM and RPI ( $p < 0.01$ ), confirming H6 and H7.

### Multi-country analysis

Before the MGA was run, the measurement invariance of the measurement instrument was ensured using a three-step analysis (Hair 2006). The results showed no significant differences in the path relationships between Belarus and Spain (Table 2).

The MGA was performed for samples from the two countries (Belarus and Spain) to check whether there was an economy-type moderating effect (Table 1). The results of the MGA show that the effects of IMC on the different elements of post-purchase evaluation and behavior were significantly different in the two countries, which means a moderating effect existed, with those relationships stronger in Belarus than in Spain: IMC and CS (H3a: 1.353,  $p < 0.1$ ; H3<sub>Belarus</sub>: 0.933,  $p < 0.01$ ; H3<sub>Spain</sub>: 0.776,  $p < 0.01$ ), IMC and WOM (H4a: 1.251,  $p < 0.1$ ; H4<sub>Belarus</sub>: 0.168,

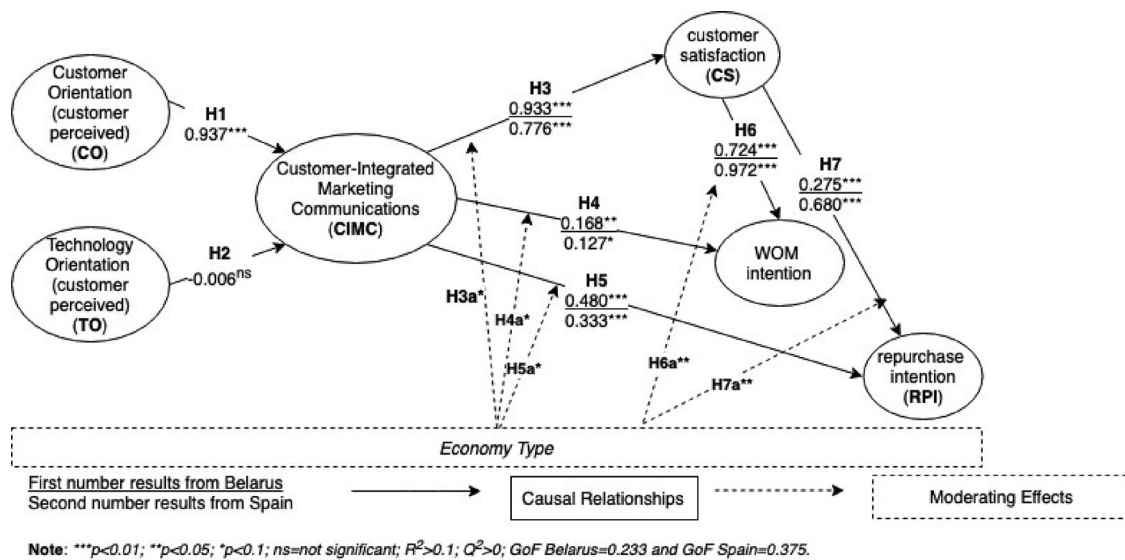


Figure 1. Hypotheses testing and inter-country analysis.

Table 2. Measurement invariance test.

Model	S-B $\chi^2$	$\chi^2$ <sup>†</sup>	g.l.	Dif.		p	RMSEA	SRMR <sup>†</sup>	CFI	NNFI
				S-B $\chi^2$ <sup>‡</sup>	$\Delta$ g.l.					
Single group solution (Belarus n = 382; Spain n = 369)										
Belarus	229.24	340.38	120				0.05	0.05	0.91	0.91
Spain	209.06	288.63	120				0.05	0.05	0.91	0.93
Measurement invariance (n = 751)										
Equal form	438.95	629.05	240				0.05	0.05	0.91	0.93
Equal factor loadings	454.73	655.51	258	17.03	18	0.52	0.05	0.07	0.92	0.93

Notes: S-B $\chi^2$  - Satorra-Bentler chi-squared,  $\chi^2$  - chi-squared. <sup>†</sup>No robusts. <sup>‡</sup>Calculate with the SBDIFF software.

$p < 0.05$ ;  $H4_{Spain}$ : 0.127,  $p < 0.1$ ), and IMC and RPI (**H5a**: 1.050,  $p < 0.1$ ;  $H5_{Belarus}$ : 0.480,  $p < 0.01$ ;  $H5a_{Spain}$ : 0.333,  $p < 0.01$ ). In addition, there were significant differences in the relationship between the various elements of post-purchase evaluation and behavior across the two countries, with those relationships stronger in Spain than in Belarus: CS and WOM (**H6a**: 3.052,  $p < 0.05$ ;  $H6_{Belarus}$ : 0.724,  $p < 0.01$ ;  $H6_{Spain}$ : 0.972,  $p < 0.01$ ), and between CS and RPI (**H7a**: 4.108,  $p < 0.05$ ;  $H7_{Belarus}$ : 0.275,  $p < 0.01$ ;  $H7_{Spain}$ : 0.680,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, hypotheses **H3a** to **H7a** are supported. There were no significant differences in the relationships between CO and IMC (**H1a**: 0.091, ns) or TO and IMC (**H2a**: 0.212, ns) in the two countries, so hypotheses **H1a** and **H2a** are rejected.

**Analysis of mediation and indirect effects**

To analyze the indirect effects, the suggestion from Santos-Vijande *et al.* (2013) was used to

follow the procedures described by Preacher and Hayes (2008) and Shrout and Bolger (2002). The Sobel test (Sobel 1986) was used to measure the statistical significance of the mediating effects.

CS had a partial mediation effect on the relationships between IMC and post-purchase behavior (WOM and RPI) in both countries, confirming **H8** and **H9**, while CO had an indirect effect on the components of post-purchase behavior through IMC in the two economies (Table 3).

**Conclusions, discussions and implications**

This study contributes in many ways to academic research and managerial practice. From a theoretical perspective, the significant contribution is in closing the gap between IMC studies in developed and developing economies. The inter-country comparative analysis is an initial attempt to generalize the results of IMC research and contribute toward cross-national marketing research. The study also contributes to IMC concept

**Table 3.** Indirect, total and mediation effects in the casual model.

Model Path	Direct effect (DE)	Indirect effects (IE)	Sobel z value	Total effects (DE + IE)	Sign. Level (two-tailed)	Mediation/ Indirect effect
<i>Indirect effects</i>						
<i>Belarus</i>						
<i>through IMC</i>						
CO-CS				0.867	***	IE
	H1*H3	0.867	2.125			
CO-WOM				0.155	**	IE
	H1*H4	0.155	1.685			
CO-RPI	<i>through IMC and CS</i>			0.576	***	IE
	H1*H5; H1*H3*H7	0.450; 0.126	2.029			
<i>Spain</i>						
<i>through IMC</i>						
CO-CS				0.764	***	IE
	H1*H3	0.764	3.963			
CO-WOM				0.125	**	IE
	H1*H4	0.125	1.663			
CO-RPI	<i>through IMC and CS</i>			0.847	***	IE
	H1*H5; H1*H3*H7	0.328; 0.519	2.893			
<i>Mediating effect of satisfaction</i>						
<i>Belarus</i>						
<i>through CS</i>						
IMC-WOM		0.168**		0.325	**	PM
	H3*H4		1.457			
IMC-RPI		0.480***		0.615	**	PM
	H3*H7		1.313			
<i>Spain</i>						
<i>through CS</i>						
IMC-WOM		0.127*		0.226	***	PM
	H3*H4		3.915			
IMC-RPI		0.333***		0.861	***	PM
	H3*H7		4.771			

Note: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

ns = non-significant. CO = Customer Orientation; TO = Technological Orientation; IMC = Integrated Marketing Communications; CS = Customer Satisfaction; WOM = Word-of-Mouth recommendations; RPI = Repurchase Intention. IE = Indirect Effect; PM = partial mediation.

research from the customer point of view. It makes an initial attempt to demonstrate the role of IMC in translating company's strategic efforts into improving customer satisfaction, enhancing WOM and RPI. Finally, the study adds to customer behavior theory, specifically to the less studied post-purchase stage.

Specifically, the implementation of an inter-country analysis provides an opportunity to generalize the research results. MGA reveals some similarities and significant differences between two economy types (developed and developing) as an essential contribution to cross-national marketing analysis. The similarities are that CO positively influences IMC, and, indirectly, post-purchase behavior – but not TO. Like earlier findings from the managers' perspective, our results from the customer's point of view confirm the direct positive effect of CO on IMC. As expected, a company's commitment to customer needs has a strong positive influence on the customer's ability to integrate and perceive the value of communication messages. Thus, the focus on a better understanding of customer needs and wants and on integrating all this knowledge into

providing a better value to customers improves IMC effectiveness. However, contrary to expectations, our findings do not support the influence of TO on IMC; this implies that customers' perceptions of a firm's proactiveness in R&D and new ICT implementation does not affect IMC. In other words, customer integration of the various communication messages received from different channels cannot be improved merely by higher-level implementation of new technologies in the company. Even more, technology turbulence and fast innovation may complicate message consistency control over all the communication channels used by the company, with the result that inconsistency may create confusion for the customer. On the other hand, it is also difficult for customers to integrate many forms of new and fast-changing market information (Finne and Grönroos 2017). They may even become overloaded, leading to the meaning of integrated messages being misunderstood (Shinkle, Kriauciunas, and Hundley 2013).

The study of indirect effects in the IMC theoretical model provides more profound insights into the suggestion that IMC can be a source of

competitive advantage. The analysis supports earlier findings from the managerial point of view (Butkouskaya, Llonch-Andreu, and Alarcón-Del-Amo 2019). From the customer perspective, IMC plays an indirect role in transferring the positive effect of CO to post-purchase evaluation and behavior (CS, WOM, and RPI). Thus, IMC can translate CO assets toward positively influencing post-purchase customer evaluation and WOM recommendations and increasing RPI.

As expected, the results from both developed and developing economies support a positive effect of IMC on post-purchase evaluation and behavior. It confirms that positive communication experiences provided by perceived message consistency in various media channels is positively and strongly related to CS. The results also corroborate the positive effect of IMC on RPI. This means that integration and long-term consistency of communications have a positive effect on the probability that customers will purchase the brand again. However, the positive effect of IMC on WOM recommendations is weak, due to a significant partial mediation effect of CS reducing the strength of the relationship.

However, MGA confirms differences in the strength of relationship between IMC and the elements of post-purchase evaluation and behavior in a cross-national environment. Unexpectedly, IMC behavioral outcomes are significantly stronger in a developing economy, like Belarus, than in a developed economy, like Spain. This means that in an environment with a lower level of marketing activities and a less technology implementation, IMC has a stronger impact on customer post-purchase evaluation and behavior. It may be that the integration of communication messages is easier for customers in a developing economy because of the lower volume of information that customers are required to integrate and understand. Also, less external noise from competitors results in less misunderstanding. It seems to be more comfortable for customers to integrate the meaning of communications when they receive fewer messages. Also, more correct perceived value creates more adequate expectations. The fit between expectations and experiences positively affects post-purchase evaluation and, as a result, leads to a higher satisfaction.

The inter-country analysis also suggests differences in developed and developing economies in the strength of CS effects on WOM and RPI, which are significantly stronger in the developed economy (Spain). This implies that an increasing amount of marketing communications and media channels makes it increasingly difficult for customers to integrate and make sense of firms' communication messages. Customers from developed economies, being overloaded with market information, may misunderstand the messages, form an incorrect perceived value and, as a result, make incorrect purchase decisions (Mihart 2012). Thus, in economies with high levels of market and technology turbulence, customers, in making post-purchase decisions, rely more on their own experience rather than on a firm's communication messages.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is pioneering research in terms of making an initial effort to close the gap in the analysis of IMC strategic antecedents and behavioral outcomes from the customer perspective. It contributes to IMC concept research by considering the two-way nature of communications, with both company and customer participating in the message integration process (Lee and Park 2007; Schultz 2016).

This research also contributes toward a deeper understanding of the impact of post-purchase evaluation on IMC behavioral outcomes. It confirms previous suggestions on the significant role of CS in customer behavior (Voss, Godfrey, and Seiders 2010). Specifically, CS reduces the positive effect of IMC on RPI. This suggests that CS decreases IMC effectiveness as an instrument for enhancing positive WOM and RPI, because CS itself has a powerful effect on WOM and RPI.

From a *practical perspective*, the cross-national comparative analysis of IMC implementation in developed and developing economies may be useful in decision-making about marketing budget allocations and marketing tactics in different types of markets. Interestingly, in a developing economy, compared to a developed one, message consistency has a stronger positive effect on CS and on building RPI. Due to the lower number of messages received, the process of message integration and sense-making is easier for

customers. In a market with moderate dynamics, the amount of communications received does not overload customers, so they can register all messages that the firm sends and do not miss out on information. Customers also will understand more clearly the company's communications, more easily separate those messages from other external information available, form a more correct perceived value of interactions, and build more realistic per-purchase expectations – all of which create a positive communication experience. In turn, in a developed economy, companies need to pay much more attention to integrating communication messages. It is essential to control communication inside the company but also to check the external information available in the customer ecosystem. WOM communications or communications from the company's competitors may generate noise and lead to potential customer confusion.

Interestingly, in the market with more intense market and technology turbulence, CS plays a more critical role in building RPI. This would suggest that, in dynamic markets, communications have a lower impact on customers because these have a lower level of institutional trust and rely more on their personal experience (Ndubisi, Malhotra, and Wah 2008). In developing economies with lower marketing activity, customers still tend to trust the communication messages even after having their own consumption experience.

In both developed and developing markets, in order to improve customers' perceptions of the integration of communication messages, firms need to focus on collecting customer data about "what" (message) and "how" (channel) to communicate. However, a company image of being proactive in R&D and technology innovation has no impact on the customer perceived value of communication integration; indeed, it may happen that technological innovation induces the opposite effect. The increased volume of up-to-date information that the company communicates to customers through an increased number of channels complicates control over message consistency (Zhou and Li 2010). For the customer, an excessive amount of fast-changing information communicated through numerous

channels can produce difficulties in integrating messages, resulting in overload and confusion (Shinkle, Kriauciunas, and Hundley 2013; Finne and Grönroos 2017). In both developed and developing markets, the implementation of IMC to provide extra value to customers has a positive effect on IMC outcomes. Firms, if aiming to improve CS, should pay much attention to message and channel consistency. More specifically, CS with the purchase will depend greatly on correctly formed pre-purchase expectations. Purchase evaluation will be positive when perceived quality as revealed from consumption confirms pre-purchase expectations. Thus, given the two-way nature of communications, a company's activities, as message sender, in communication integration will facilitate message integration and sense-making by the customer, as message receiver. It helps to avoid misunderstandings when forming the value of the communication message and to create more realistic pre-purchase expectations. Even more, maintaining message and channel consistency over time will help the company increase RPI and, as a consequence, increase customer retention.

However, the effects of communication message consistency on WOM and RPI are weakened by a strong CS mediation effect. Thus, aiming to influence WOM and RPI, companies should pay extra attention to CS levels. A decrease in CS may reduce the effects of the company's communication activities aimed at motivating customers to post reviews and recommendations, and to repeat purchases.

Additionally, as has been found elsewhere (Zhang, Liang, and Wang 2016), the results for both market types confirm that the company can apply IMC as a capability which transfers an additional positive effect from marketing assets toward customer performance. More specifically, IMC can transfer an additional positive effect of CO to post-purchase behavior, possibly bringing an additional competitive advantage. Through consistent messages, customers better perceive efforts by the company aimed at understanding and satisfying their interests and needs. This creates trust, and indirectly, affects satisfaction and helps build customer relationships, enhancing intentions to make recommendations or to

repurchase (Finne and Grönroos 2017; Ndubisi, Malhotra, and Wah 2008)

### Limitations and future research


This study, like most pioneering research, has some limitations that represent several opportunities for future research. The parameters characterizing customers' current financial situation/income, average buying ability, and price sensitivity could, for instance, be fixed in future research, bearing in mind also, that parameters related to customers' characteristics, such as motives, values, lifestyle, and personality, may influence IMC (Darley, Blankson, and Luethge 2010). Moreover, as specific product/service attributes may influence customer choices (Phau and Meng Poon 2000), brand characteristics as controlled parameters could be applied in modeling. It would also be useful to analyze various groups of products/services based on frequency of use, period of use, cost, level of differentiation, and other characteristics.

To measure IMC, 5 of the 18 items in the original Lee and Park (2007) scale were used, considering communication consistency as the only part of the IMC concept that could be evaluated by customers. Thus, the scale to measure IMC from the customer's point of view needs to be further improved. RPI may vary depending on time and other factors, such as the customer's current situation. Thus, in further research, different settings for the timeframe of the study could be applied (Mittal and Kamakura 2001). Also, future research could further analyze the influence of economic and cultural differences in the theoretical model for other countries and other economy types. Finally, the unexpected finding regarding the lack of a direct relationship between TO and IMC would suggest that this relationship and the nature of the unexpected finding both need to be further analyzed.

### ORCID

Vera Butkouskaya  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6963-3872>

Joan Llonch-Andreu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1624-3133>

María-del-Carmen Alarcón-del-Amo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5195-3923>

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Appendix A.1. The assessment of the reliability and validity of the measurement model

Items	Belarus		Spain	
	Factor loading	t	Factor loading	t
<b>Customer orientation (customer-perceived)</b> = CO (Narver and Slater 1990) (α: CR; AVE: Belarus 0.81; 0.89; 0.86 and Spain 0.83; 0.75; 0.51)				
CO1. (Brand) is strongly committed to your needs.	0.79	19.96	0.79	13.48
CO2. (Brand's) products/services create value for you.	0.74	16.14	0.57	8.55
CO3. (Brand) is interested in what products/services you will need in the future.	0.77	14.23	0.75	12.23
CO4. (Brand) satisfies your needs. *				
CO5. (Brand) sends you surveys to assess the quality of their products and services. *	0.69	12.31	0.71	11.45
CO6. (Brand) supports you with after-sales service. *				
<b>Technology orientation (customer-perceived)</b> = TO (Gatignon and Xueeb 1997) (α: CR; AVE: Belarus 0.81; 0.77; 0.53, and, Spain 0.82; 0.79; 0.55)				
TO1. (Brand's) new products/services/communications are always has up-to-date technology.	0.71	18.81	0.72	11.29
TO2. Relative to other brands, (Brand's) new products/services are more ambitious.	0.71	14.45	0.76	11.99
TO3. (Brand) is very proactive in the construction of new technical solutions to answer my needs. *				
TO4. (Brand) is always the first one to use a new technology for its new product/service development.	0.76	16.44	0.76	11.13
<b>Customer-Integrated Marketing Communications = IMC</b> (Lee and Park 2007) (α: CR; AVE: Belarus 0.81; 0.80; 0.50, and, Spain 0.80; 0.79; 0.50)				
IMC1. (Brand's) intended message is consistently delivered through all communication channels (e.g., advertising, packaging, direct mail, etc.).	0.72	14.63	0.60	6.61
IMC2. (Brand) maintains consistency in all visual components of its communication (e.g., trademarks, logos, models and color).	0.73	15.11	0.69	7.16
IMC3. (Brand) maintains consistency in all linguistic components (e.g., slogans) of communication in all media. *				
IMC4. (Brand) has a consistent brand image.	0.70	11.79	0.75	9.97
IMC5. (Brand) does not alter the brand image, even as its context changes, but maintains its consistency from the long-term perspective.	0.65	10.95	0.78	13.25
<b>Long-term consistency</b>				
CS1. My decision to purchase product/service from (Brand) was a wise one.	0.79	17.95	0.85	12.80
CS2. I feel good about my decision to purchase (Brand)'s product/service.	0.84	19.01	0.89	13.73
CS3. I am pleased that I purchased product/service exactly from the (Brand).	0.79	21.36	0.84	13.01
CS4. If someone asks me, I would positively respond about the (Brand). *				
<b>Word-of-mouth recommendations = WOM</b> (Moon, Costello, and Koo 2017) (α: CR; AVE: Belarus 0.81; 0.81; 0.58 and Spain 0.90; 0.91; 0.76)				
WOM1. I say positive things about (Brand).	0.78	16.32	0.83	12.30
WOM2. I recommend buying (Brand) to my friends and relatives.	0.76	17.35	0.87	12.87
WOM3. I recommend (Brand) to someone who seeks my advice.	0.75	22.39	0.92	15.78
<b>Repeat purchase intention</b>				
RP11. I will purchase the (Brand) again.	0.79	19.76	0.80	11.96
RP12. There is a high probability that I will purchase again the (Brand).	0.83	21.16	0.87	15.38
RP13. I intend to purchase more of the (Brand). *				
<b>Repurchase probability</b>				
RP1. I intend to purchase more of the (Brand). *				
RP2. There is a high probability that I will purchase again the (Brand).				
RP3. I intend to purchase more of the (Brand). *				
<b>Notes:</b> * - items are eliminated from the scales. t - Robust t value*; α - Cronbach's Alpha; CR - Composite Reliability; AVE - Average Variance Extracted. Robust goodness of fit index: Belarus: Satorra-Bentler $\chi^2$ (120 degrees of freedom, df) = 229.24; $\chi^2/df$ = 1.91; NFI = 0.88; NNFI = 0.91; CFI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.05. Spain: Satorra-Bentler $\chi^2$ (120 degrees of freedom, df) = 209.05; $\chi^2/df$ = 1.74; NFI = 0.89; NNFI = 0.93; CFI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.05.				
<b>Discriminant validity</b>				
<b>Belarus</b>				
CO	0.59			
TO	0.43	[0.58, 0.73]		
IMC	0.18	0.21	[0.52, 0.69]	
CS	0.47	0.36	[0.61, 0.77]	
WOM	0.37	0.48	[0.49, 0.70]	
RPI	0.44	0.39	0.65	[0.45, 0.68]
<b>Spain</b>				
CO	0.51			
TO	0.45	[0.55, 0.79]		
IMC	0.50	0.55	[0.57, 0.77]	
CS	0.24	0.41	[0.46, 0.71]	
WOM	0.33	0.37	[0.50, 0.72]	
RPI	0.34	0.43	[0.46, 0.69]	[0.58, 0.76]

Notes: The diagonal represents the AVE, while above the diagonal the 95 percent confidence interval for the estimated factor correlations is provided; below the diagonal, the shared variance (squared correlations) is represented.