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Research Article

Communication as a Marketing Strategy: Cross-cultural Analysis of Young People from Mexico and Colombia Based on Demographic Segmentation

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to rank and analyze the acceptance of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) from the perspective of young people. This comparative study was done with university students from the cities of Villavicencio, Colombia and Coatzacoalcos, Mexico. A quantitative research was conducted through the use of 1591 surveys done by subjects between 17 and 25 years of age. The results showed that there are no significant differences regarding the ranking of these IMC tools. All the participants coincided in deeming direct marketing as the most important tool and sales promotion as the least important one. However, the demographic analysis by nationalities showed that there are differences in those assessments. The conclusion is that young consumers prioritize personal selling because the seller seeks to understand and satisfy their needs in the consumption of goods and services.

Keywords: Communication, direct marketing, sales promotion, public relations, advertising, online marketing

1. Introduction

Companies must maintain effective communication with consumers in order to increase their loyalty and, thus, customer retention levels (Flores and Yapuchura, 2012) since this marketing strategy contributes to brand or product recall. According to Simões, Dibb, and Fisk (2005), the integration of communications between internal and external stakeholders is necessary to gain a competitive advantage from messages. Correspondingly, the identity management of the company and its communication must be based on the consumers response to messages; therefore, it is important to examine communication from a receiver's viewpoint (Melewar *et al.*, 2017).

In this regard, young consumers have become a very important segment in the marketing world among recipients. Phanthong and Settanaranon (2011) considered that, in terms of communication, marketing professionals should continually introduce creative media and promotional concepts to capture these audiences. This leads employers to cope with greater demands on the strategic level because they must know the perceptions and attitudes of young people towards the way in which they communicate their products.

Thus, the objectives of this research are focused on hierarchizing and analyzing the tools of

integrated marketing communications that young people accept as valid for the consumption of products. In order to reach these objectives, a quantitative methodology was followed by administering 1591 surveys that enabled the demographic characterization of the mentioned segment from their preferences in terms of marketing communications.

This paper is organized as follows. Section one reviews some contributions made around the concept of marketing communication taking into account other constructs such as direct marketing, sales promotion, public relations, advertising, and online marketing. Section 2 describes the methodology followed in this study. Section three shows the results of the hierarchical organization that these tools represent by establishing their degree of relevance; these results are also discussed based on the comparison with similar research. Finally, Section four discusses the conclusions and implications for commercial management.

2. Literatue Review

2.1 Marketing Communication

Currently, organizations require the implementation of communications management in order to achieve good brand positioning of their products and of the organization itself because a favorable perception by consumers makes it easy to remain in the market. Hence, communication encompasses not only the development of formal or informal messages (written and / or spoken), but also aspects of the organization such as symbols, behaviors, actions and values (Cardozo, 2007).

Some authors argue that marketing communication is used as a general term to cover advertising, sales promotions, direct marketing, sponsorship, personal selling, and other communication elements of the mix (Briceño, Mejías and Godoy, 2010). Due to the strategic significance for companies, other authors delve deeper into this concept by extending it to integrated brand communications to refer to the process of strategically managing audience-focused communication programs that lead to results over time, because they can influence or directly affect the behavior of the selected audience (Schultz, 1993; Kliatchko, 2005).

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) has attracted a considerable body of research in favor of its academic contribution (Schultz, 1991, Duncan and Everett, 1993, Nowak and Phelps, 1994, Schultz and Schultz, 2004) and some unavoidable criticisms of its contribution to marketing theory (Gould, 2000; Cornelissen and Lock, 2000). This term has undergone major changes that refer to the basic concept of integration of communication tools, as well as to functional integration, coordinated integration, consumer-based integration, stakeholder-based integration and relationship management integration (Panda, 2003).

As noted above, this concept is still under construction; however, for the purposes of this research we rely on the definition of Seric and Gil (2012) who refer to integrated marketing communications as:

> A tactical and strategic consumer-centric business process, boosted by Integrated Marketing Communications advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) which, on the basis of information obtained from customers' databases, delivers a clear and consistent message through the coordination and synergies of different communications tools and channels, in order to nourish long-lasting profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders and create and maintain brand equity (Seric and Gil, 2012).

On this matter, Shimp (2003) suggests that Integrated Marketing Communications are traditionally shaped by the following tools: direct marketing, sales promotion, public relations, advertising, and other channels through which organizations communicate with their audiences. Therefore, this study included online marketing because, according to Rehman and Ibrahim (2011), interactive marketing over the Internet plays an important role thanks to its contribution to a clear and consistent maximum impact on communication. Similarly, Saavedra, Criado, and Andreu (2013) argue that the rise of networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, LinkedIn or Pinterest in recent years has changed the way people communicate via the Internet.

2.1.1   Direct Marketing

Direct marketing is mainly an organization tool with a double objective: 1) To start creating a relationship, especially with potential clients, and 2) To maintain the relationship, mainly with current clients (Gázquez-Abad and De Cannière, 2008); its purpose is to obtain a measurable response or a transaction via one or multiple channels (Scovotti and Piller, 2006). The main forms of direct marketing include personal selling, telephone marketing, direct mail marketing, catalog marketing, direct-response television marketing and online marketing (Romero, Zúñiga and Suárez, 2016).

2.1.2   Sales Promotion

Sales promotion becomes the appropriate communication tool to deal with the loss of advertising effectiveness, with the great competition in consumer markets, and with the changes in the motivations of consumers (Buil, Martinez and Montaner, 2007). This concept has been defined as the coordination of all efforts initiated by the vendor to establish information and persuasion channels to sell products and services (Rehman and Ibrahim, 2011). Its purpose is to generate a quick or greater purchase of industrial goods and services in the short term (Blattberg and Neslin, 1990). Sales promotion through economic incentives or materials, or through the implementation of specific activities, tries to stimulate demand or to increase the effectiveness of the sellers or intermediaries (Santesmases, 1991).

2.1.3   Public Relations

Public relations are the characteristic management tool that helps to establish and maintain lines of mutual communication, acceptance, and cooperation between an organization and its audience; this includes research, strategy, planning, implementation, and evaluation. (Harlow, 1976, Grunig and Hunt, 1994, Ledingham and Bruning, 2000). This approach has evolved in the way it relates to society, for example, it is believed that from the social responsibility perspective, the natural or legal person will more easily and steadily arrive at an understanding with their audience, since the commitment of the organizations with their environment involves the obligation for these companies or institutions to support sustainability (Arceo, 2004, Bonilla, 2013). Public relations have also been considered as important contributing factors in the formulation of strategies aimed at solving problems between the administration and the audience from actions such as listening and reflecting the voices of those involved in the actions implemented (Kim and Kim, 2015; Soojin, 2016).

2.1.4   Advertising

It is an informative and persuasive communication tool, financed by an advertiser who uses mass media mainly to publicize his goods and services in order for consumers to purchase or hire them (Rodríguez, 2004). Among other objectives, advertising seeks to remedy the decrease of demand for a product, to reach inaccessible audiences, to announce new uses of a product, to introduce a new product, to increase sales, and to help the sales force (Degrado, 2005). Advertising has proved to have a positive influence on the attitude towards the brand, which in turn positively influences purchase intentions (Grigaliunaite and Pileliene, 2015), therefore, advertising is one of the most important means to boost sales and improve the brand of products or services in a market (Seongseo et al., 2016). Advertising has also evolved along with technological advances; therefore, new communication strategies use mobile advertising as a form of electronic marketing among advertisers and recipients (Ballesteros, Tavera and Castaño, 2014).

2.1.5   Online Marketing

The main objectives of online marketing communication generally include creating brand awareness, generating consumer demand, providing information, stimulating traffic, building

relationships, promoting two-way communication, providing service to the customer, establishing brand loyalty, increasing the voice to voice, generating leads, and increasing sales (Thomas, 2011; Stokes, 2013; Otero, Giraldo, Aguirre, Sainz, Sánchez and Martínez, 2017). The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has become a fundamental tool to attract consumers from different segments thanks to the information communicated through mobile applications, websites, and social networks, among others. Strategies that make use of these digital tools allow the company to improve the relationship with the customers as well as to perceive how customers interact with the brand (Andrade, 2016). Not only do consumers interact in an online environment with one another and with the brand, they also establish a relationship with the product itself and with the company (Palazón, Sicilia and Delgado, 2014).

2.2 Marketing communications in the young segment

Nowadays it is common for academic and non-academic publications to claim that organizations should focus on conquering the preference of a new generation of consumers. Accordingly, knowing young people in their student, pre-professional or early working years is key to designing communication strategies towards the near future (Anda-News, 2014). Hence, this question arises: What is the most effective tool to connect with this segment? The answer is that there is still no consensus since the behavior of young people varies depending on many factors. From the point of view of the influence of technological advances, Muñiz (2013) considers that the majority of young people show their preferences for new interactive media, against their lack of interest in traditional media; it has been proven that brands are adapting a path to digitalization in order to approach young audiences (Prieto, 2014).

Likewise, advertising in its information dissemination processes shows differences by gender in terms of acceptance, as pointed out by Palanisamy (2005), who indicates that gender influences the attitude of consumers towards advertising, which also happens with the use of the Internet to provide and obtain information about certain products and brands. A study conducted by Hayta (2013) reveals that consumer purchasing behaviors vary according to age groups and educational status.

Therefore, this research proposes the following hypotheses adapted from the study carried out by Duffett, (2017).

H1. Gender as a demographic variable has an effect on the attitudes of young consumers with regard to marketing communications.

H2. Age has an effect on the attitudes of young consumers with regard to marketing communications.

Additionally, since this study analyzes consumers from two countries, it relies on the postulate of Van Raaij (1978) who considers that cross-cultural research compares consumer behavior in different cultures and in different nations. Then, the third hypothesis is formulated.

H3. Nationality has an effect on the attitudes of young consumers with regard to marketing communications.

3. Methodology

This study used an intentional non-probabilistic sample with two inclusion criteria: 1) university students; 2) between 17 and 25 years of age. The subjects are university students from the cities of Villavicencio (Colombia) and Coatzacoalcos (Mexico), who have purchasing and decision power.

3.1 Data Collection

This research implemented a quantitative methodology by administering a structured questionnaire-based survey designed with Likert scale questions related to communication. The instrument went through a validation process in order to obtain a minimum indicator of 0.7 in Cronbach's Alpha, as recommended by Nunnally (1978), which guaranteed its validity.

In all cases the questions were measured with 4-point scales from (1) "Total disagreement" to

(4) "Total agreement". Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to the young university students in their classrooms so that they completed them immediately in the presence of the researcher.

Since a comparative vision of the value of communication as a marketing strategy was needed, the research demanded a shared work between the two cities, as follows:

3.1.1 Sample

Considering the statistical concepts of work with a confidence level of 95% and an error level of 2.5%, 1591 surveys were administered: 822 in Mexico and 769 in Colombia.

3.2 The instrument

The questionnaire had five parts: 1) Direct marketing; 2) Sales promotion; 3) Public relations; 4) Advertising; and 5) Online marketing.

The SPSS software, version 18, was used to process and analyze data by doing the Levene's hypothesis tests to determine the homogeneity of variances and the Student's t-test to make the comparison of the means of the two independent groups.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The ranking averages of the answers about the tools that facilitate communication, namely direct marketing, sales promotion, public relations, advertising, and online marketing are shown. The results are arranged in a hierarchical way; the datum closest to four (4) has greater relevance in the communication perceived by the young university segment; in contrast, the datum closest to zero (0) has lower relevance. Thus, the following rankings were set: Irrelevant (average between 0 and 2), Relevant (between 2.1 and 2.5), Important (between 2.6 and 3), and Priority (greater than 3). Table 1 shows the average results as follows:

Table 1. Ranking of marketing communication tools in all the sample

		Average
Integrated marketing communication tools	Direct Marketing	2.9
	Public Relations	2.7
	Online Marketing	2.5
	Advertising	2.4
	Sales Promotion	2.3

Source: Own elaboration, 2017

These results allow to infer that the most influential factors in young people are Direct marketing with an average of 2.9 / 4, and Public relations with an average of 2.7 / 4, which classifies them in the Important ranking. This means that for young people the supply of products must be accompanied by activities of a relational nature. On the other hand, this segment considers Online marketing to be relevant with an average of 2.5 / 4, the reason is that through social networks and other electronic media it is possible to quickly report on the characteristics of the goods and services that interest them. Likewise, it is possible to infer that these young people also consider Advertising as relevant with an average of 2.4 / 4; specifically, they demand techniques aimed at making goods or services more attractive, which could trigger a possible purchase. Finally, Sales promotion had an average of 2.3/4 demonstrating that a short-term strategy is not very effective to modify a purchasing behavior.
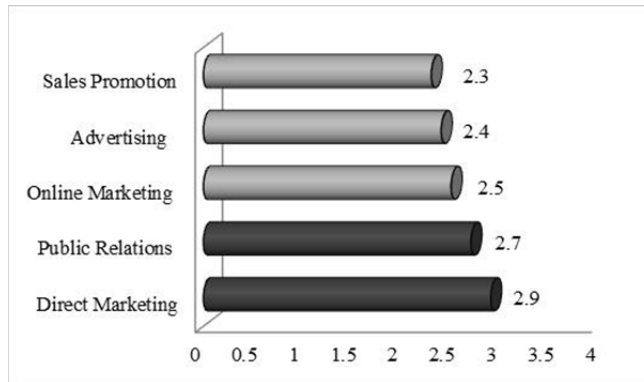
Figure 1. Ranking of marketing communication tools in young people
Source: Own elaboration, 2017

Figure 1 shows that none of the studied tools was located in the irrelevant categories or in the highest level of priority.

In Levene's hypothesis tests, the result of the contrast with the Snedecor's F statistical test demonstrated homogeneity of variance of the groups for all the studied cases. Tables 2, 3 and 4 show the results of the Student's t-test used to test the hypotheses by analyzing the differences in means. To segment the sample, a qualitative variable in each hypothesis and the CIM tools of the quantitative variables were considered.

Table 2. Testing of Hypothesis 1

Tool	Gender		Statistics	Levene's Test for homogeneity of variances		Student's t-test for equality of means			H1 testing through the analysis of differences in means
				F	sig value	t	gl	sig value	
Direct Marketing	Man	N	584	1.004	0.316	0.056	1589	0.956	Rejected
		Mean	3.01						
	Woman	N	1007						
		Mean	3.01						
Public Relations	Man	N	584	1.524	0.219	-1.030	1589	0.303	Rejected
		Mean	2.94						
	Woman	N	1007						
		Mean	2.98						
Online Marketing	Man	N	584	3.598	0.058	1.319	1589	0.187	Rejected
		Mean	2.65						
	Woman	N	1007						
		Mean	2.55						
Advertising	Man	N	584	0.134	0.715	0.624	1589	0.533	Rejected
		Mean	2.56						
	Woman	N	1007						
		Mean	2.60						
Sales Promotion	Man	N	584	2.228	0.136	1.899	1589	0.061	Rejected
		Mean	2.32						
	Woman	N	1007						
		Mean	2.25						

Source: Own elaboration, 2017

Both the sig value associated with the hypothesis contrast and the values of the Student's t-test do not allow to accept that the demographic variable "Gender" has an effect on the attitudes of the young people segment with respect to Integrated Marketing Communication tools; this result is different from the findings by Palanisamy (2005).

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Table 3. Testing of Hypothesis 2

Tool	Etary Group		Statistics	Levene's Test for homogeneity of variances		Student's t-test for equality of means			H2 testing through the analysis of differences in means
				F	sig value	t	gl	sig value	
Direct Marketing	Minor	N	714	0.516	0.473	0.199	1589	0.842	Rejected
		Mean	2.99						
	Legal age	N	877						
		Mean	2.98						
Public Relations	Minor	N	714	2.067	0.188	1.399	1589	0.162	Rejected
		Mean	3.04						
	Legal age	N	877						
		Mean	2.97						
Online Marketing	Minor	N	714	0.516	0.473	1.071	1589	0.285	Rejected
		Mean	2.62						
	Legal age	N	877						
		Mean	2.59						
Advertising	Minor	N	714	0.159	0.690	0.188	1589	0.851	Rejected
		Mean	2.43						
	Legal age	N	877						
		Mean	2.47						
Sales Promotion	Minor	N	714	0.573	0.449	0.150	1589	0.881	Rejected
		Mean	2.48						
	Legal age	N	877						
		Mean	2.52						

Source: Own elaboration, 2017

The table above shows that the sig value associated with the contrast of the hypothesis and the value of the Student's t-test reject the premise that age has an effect on the attitudes of the young people segment with respect to Integrated Marketing Communication tools; this result is contrary to the findings by Duffett, (2017).

Finally, Table 4 shows the results of H3 testing related to the effect of "Nationality" of the consumers in their attitudes towards Integrated Marketing Communication tools. These results show that H3 is accepted from the sig value, which were less than 0.05 in all cases.

Table 4. Testing of Hypothesis 3

Tool	Nationality		Statistics	Levene's Test for homogeneity of variances		Student's t-test for equality of means			H3 testing through the analysis of differences in means
				F	sig value	t	gl	sig value	
Direct Marketing	Mexico	N	822	0.360	0.549	-2.095	1589	0.001	Accepted
		Mean	2.98						
	Colombia	N	769						
		Mean	3.05						
Public Relations	Mexico	N	822	0.747	0.387	2.548	1589	0.000	Accepted
		Mean	3.02						
	Colombia	N	769						
		Mean	2.93						
Online Marketing	Mexico	N	822	0.077	0.781	3.022	1589	0.000	Accepted
		Mean	2.64						
	Colombia	N	769						
		Mean	2.54						
Advertising	Mexico	N	822	0.038	0.845	-1.993	1589	0.004	Accepted
		Mean	2.25						
	Colombia	N	769						
		Mean	2.29						
Sales Promotion	Mexico	N	822	0.045	0.832	-3.568	1589	0.001	Accepted
		Mean	2.61						
	Colombia	N	769						
		Mean	2.67						

Source: Own elaboration, 2017

The results of H3 testing show differences according to the country of origin. Young Mexicans place the Online marketing tool at the "Relevant" level with an average of 2.64, whereas Colombians consider it as "Relevant" with an average of 2.54. On the other hand, the tool with the least difference is "Advertising" with an average of 2.2 for both countries; in this category, Colombia had a few hundredths more. Therefore, these data suggest the absence of homogeneous behavior in consumers, and coincide with the results of Kuster, Aldas, Rodríguez and Vila (2010).

4.1 Discussion

The concept of "Segmentation" that complements the economic theory of perfect competition, which assumed the homogeneity between the components of supply and demand, arises since the 1950s. Smith (1956) stated that diversity or heterogeneity have become the rule rather than the exception; he also determined that segmentation is based on the market demand developments and represents a rational and more precise marketing effort adjustment to meet the requirements of the consumer. From this concept, and for more than 60 years, consumer heterogeneity has justified the development of market segmentation strategies in order to reach specific groups that share similar behaviors and consumption characteristics to choose a specific brand (Vargas, Cárdenas, Orozco and Ceniceros, 2017). One of the ways to segment corresponds to the grouping of individuals based on demographic criteria such as age, gender and education, among others (Park, Choi and Kim, 2012, Sharma, 2015) in such a way that those similar characteristics facilitate the implementation of marketing strategies.

Despite the benefits of demographic segmentation, the results of this study show that two of the criteria that allow this segmentation are not fully adequate. Hence, the first two hypotheses that relate to gender and age with the attitudes of young consumers regarding marketing communications are rejected. These results agree with the findings of Nunes and Céspedes (2003) and Durkin (2004) who affirm that out of all segmentation criteria, demographic ones have been the most criticized by previous literature on the subject, probably due to the impossibility of demographic variables to explain purchasing behaviors.

However, this research evidenced that the nationality criterion does allow to generate the segmentation process among the university students of Colombia and Mexico in relation to their attitude toward the Integrated Marketing Communication tools since there were differences in their evaluations. This may happen because young people respond to a national culture of consumption of goods and / services related to them; the consumption of the reference group is identified with "correct" consumption, therefore, it is the one that must be considered by anyone who wants to experience the happiness of being accepted as a socially "correct" person (Aparicio, 2009).

Consequently, only the use of the nationality criterion allowed this study to differentiate attitudes towards Integrated Marketing Communication tools among young people in Villavicencio and Coatzacoalcos. In contrast, gender and age criteria are indiscriminately accepted by all of them.

5. Conclusions

The results show that the scores given by the participants to the Integrated Marketing Communication tools are not unique or universal. From the strategic point of view, marketing managers must remain in constant communication with their target segment to know their particularities. This study showed that considering young people as subjects who are highly suggestible by the information obtained through the Internet is not at all certain. In fact, the participants gave Online marketing the third place in the level of acceptance, whereas the highest value was given to Direct marketing.

From this result, it is important to mention that the priority for young people is direct contact between the seller and the buyer, *i.e.*, personal selling, which allows the consumer to know the characteristics, benefits and attributes of the product through a personalized explanation. The strategies that companies use to get closer to their target segment strengthen the experiential process of buying because the client plays a leading role, which could trigger repurchase

processes. Thus, companies should strive to make personal selling a tool that promotes lasting relationships with their consumers.

In addition, young university students are inclined to purchase products that are friendly to the environment where they live, that is why the social performance of enterprises becomes their focus of interest. Consequently, public relations should be part of the integral communication strategy to serve this segment in order to create a positive perception of the brands targeted by commercialization.

The difference of the group studied in terms of the results of demographic segmentation by nationalities is key. The cultural, social, and economic elements of each country are deemed as crucial; therefore, companies should consider them during the design and execution of the strategies that involve the Integrated Marketing Communication tools.

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