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European Journal
of Marketing

IMC, social media, and UK fashion micro-organisations

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IMC, social media, and UK fashion micro-organisations

Abstract

Purpose – This paper analyses the practical applicability of integrated marketing communications (IMC) to micro-organisations operating in the UK's fashion industry, focusing specifically on the use of online platforms.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative methodological tools including semi-structured interviews, semiotics, Twitterfeed, and Facebook analysis are used to examine to what extent micro-organisations apply IMC.

Findings – The findings suggest that these micro-organisations have a limited understanding of IMC. Although they utilise various channels, including social media, there is a disconnect between reaching the audience, understanding their needs, and linking these aspects. External factors influence the use of various communication channels, leading to further fragmentation of sent messages.

Research limitations/implications – This research focuses on five micro-organisations within the fashion industry and thus may be seen as limited in nature. Whilst implications of the findings are discussed in terms of their impact to the wider industry and other sectors, this needs to be further researched.

Practical implications – Micro-organisations are underdeveloped in terms of both IMC and social media and require practical advice.

Originality/value – This study investigates two under-researched areas; IMC in micro-organisations and the use of social media within IMC, thereby moving forward our understanding of IMC in practice.

Keywords Integrated marketing communications, IMC, social media, micro-organisations, fashion industry

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) has been a focus for debate since the 1980s (Kitchen & Burgmann 2015) when it emerged as a ‘buzzword’ that was described as a managerial fad (Schultz *et al* 2011). The origins of the concept are linked to globalisation, a market demassification, and an increased fragmentation of communication channels (Beard 1996) that is further enhanced through technological advancements and the creation of diverse and new forms of media. Although IMC has a longstanding history, extant research lacks contributions to the practical implementation of IMC in micro-organisations (Kitchen & Burgmann 2015). This article addresses this gap by focusing specifically on IMC, social media, and micro-organisations operating in the creative and cultural industries, more specifically the fashion industry. This context was chosen purposefully as the fashion industry is not only a global economic contributor, but is also a volatile environment in which a competitive advantage - that can be achieved through IMC - is vital (Henninger 2015).

The literature suggests that opinions about IMC remain twofold. It is either seen as a new horizon that allows companies to create a dialogue with their consumers, whilst at the same time linking multiple channels to broadcast a coherent message (Mulhern 2009), which reflects the basic “one sight, one sound” (Kitchen & Schultz 2009: 198) catch phrase, or as a false dawn that provides a complex strategy, which cannot be easily implemented and understood (Niemann-Struweg 2014). IMC has no single accepted definition, which implies that after three decades of research it remains elusive, with gaps in both theory and practice (Kitchen & Schultz 2009; Kitchen & Burgmann 2015).

Research in the field of IMC mainly centres on large organisations and only more recently explores its applicability to small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which still excludes micro-companies (Gabrielli & Balboni 2010; Esposito 2013). Given the economic importance of small businesses within the UK economy this is surprising, as micro-organisations account for 32% of employment (Ward & Rhodes 2014) and the creative and cultural industry sector, which includes fashion businesses, provides one in every 12 jobs in the UK (DCMS 2014). Micro-organisations employ fewer than 10 workers, depend on their owner-manager, are sensitive to competition, and have a limited financial budget (Chironga *et al* 2012). Limited finances encourage the use of free social media platforms, such as Twitter

and Facebook to broadcast company messages to a wider audience. To create a competitive advantage and follow the “one sight, one sound” approach (Kitchen & Schultz 2009: 198) IMC could be seen as a vital tool for micro-organisations in developing effective communication strategies that further incorporate social media as part of their IMC strategy. “A simple argument for IMC is that there are financial, competitive and effective benefits to be achieved through the synergy afforded by the process of integration” (Joseph 2011: 64). This is key for micro-organisations, as adopting IMC could lead both to a competitive edge even with limited finances, and the establishment of relationships, facilitating the building of networks through dialogue. This article contributes to knowledge by investigating IMC, social media, and micro-companies, using an exploratory design that is longitudinal in nature to enable analysis of the practical implementation of IMC in micro-organisations.

Three questions are addressed: First, to what extent - if at all - is IMC implemented in micro-organisations? Second, if it is implemented, what does IMC look like in micro-organisations? Third, how are social media such as Twitter and Facebook integrated into this IMC?

2. IMC – overview of debates

2.1. IMC

2.1.1 Definitions of IMC

IMC is widespread and varied in nature and its emergence and development are well documented (Kitchen *et al* 2008; Kitchen & Burgmann 2015). Although IMC does not have one single definition, it can be described as “the notion and the practice of aligning symbols, messages, procedures and behaviours in order for an organisation to communicate with clarity, consistency and continuity within and across formal organisational boundaries” (Christensen *et al* 2008: 424). Table 1 summarises the most commonly cited definitions of IMC (Kitchen & Burgmann 2010).

Table 1: Summary of IMC definitions

| Author | Date | Definition of IMC |
|--|------|---|
| American Association of Advertising Agencies (cited in Kliatchko 2005) | 1989 | - Synergy between various communication disciplines (e.g. general advertising, sales promotion, public relations) to form coherent marketing plans - Focus on homogenisation of marketing communications |
| Schultz | 1991 | - Importance of consumers and prospects - Implicitly emphasises relationship building |

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|--------------------------------|------|---|
| Nowak & Phelps | 1994 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conceptualisation of IMC - Key aspects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Integration and coordination of marketing communications · One voice |
| Schultz & Schultz | 1999 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - IMC as strategic business process - Multiple audiences - Focus on brand communications |
| Schultz & Kitchen | 2000 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - IMC pyramid - 4 stages <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Tactical co-ordination of marketing communications ○ Redefining scope ○ Application of information technology ○ Financial & strategic integration |
| Kliatchko | 2005 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - IMC as process and concept - IMC is result driven - Audience focused |
| Pickton & Broderick | 2005 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Planning model - Focuses on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Market evaluation ○ Market & company internal analysis ○ Budgeting ○ Target & objective setting ○ Channel selection ○ Campaign implementation ○ Campaign evaluation |

These definitions share common criticisms, such as a lack of measurability, a sense of being too simplistic, or a lack of content (e.g. Kliatchko 2005, 2008), and also share five key components that highlight what IMC is (Kitchen & Burgmann 2015). First, the elements of the marketing mix need to harmonise in order to influence consumer behaviour and buying attitude. Second, the communication process should start with the consumer rather than the organisation, in order to meet consumer needs more effectively. Third, dialogic communication implies a conversation between the organisation and their customers, which needs to be established and maintained over time. Fourth, messages broadcast to the audience should incorporate customer contact points in the overall strategy. Last, all communication needs to be co-ordinated and monitored carefully (ibid). In this manner, IMC complements the management style in micro-organisations, which is informal and based on building networks and interacting on an individual and social level with stakeholders (Lussier & Sonfield 2015). Rather than simply communicating messages in an ad-hoc way, which may lead to inconsistencies, following an IMC approach would allow these owner-managers to harmonise their activities and co-ordinate their messages more effectively. By incorporating social media into the IMC

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3 strategy, social media could be utilised as a tool that further facilitates dialogic
4 communication and carefully guides users to consumer contact points. The dialogue
5 created through harmonised channels could allow owner-managers to identify their
6 consumers' needs (Christensen *et al* 2008; Lussier & Sonfield 2015).
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11 The early literature on IMC is influenced by practitioner oriented writing and
12 centres on benefits associated with the concept (Eagle *et al* 2007), such as better
13 interdepartmental working relations, cost savings, and greater efficiencies in terms of
14 broadcasting a coherent message. Thus, IMC is seen as a strategic approach that
15 allows for the integration of various communication channels to convey a consistent
16 message (Niemann-Struweg 2014). The strategic benefits that come with IMC are
17 vital for micro-organisations, as they often lack marketing expertise and the resources
18 to allocate to marketing strategies such as IMC. Micro-organisations tend to seek
19 employees with transferable skills who can perform multiple roles within the
20 manufacturing process and thus have a design or production background, rather than
21 one in management/marketing (Armstrong & Page 2015).
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32 **2.2.1 IMC in the era of social media**

33 The emergence of social media provides a variety of new technologies and interactive
34 platforms that have changed the traditional communication landscape (Kietzmann *et*
35 *al* 2011). Rather than simply providing a means to broadcast messages, social media
36 enables active interaction between an organisation and its stakeholders. Social media
37 can be seen as consistent with traditional IMC tools that allow a company to facilitate
38 and enhance dialogic communication with their stakeholders (Mangold & Faulds
39 2009). Additionally, social media enables users to share content on multiple
40 platforms, which not only enhances the reach of the message initially communicated,
41 but also enhances opportunities for co-creation and user-generated content (e.g.
42 Nieman-Struweg 2014). Thus, dialogic communication can be observed between
43 stakeholders and the organisation, as well as between multiple stakeholders. This
44 intensifies traditional word-of-mouth as individuals can reach a larger audience within
45 seconds (Kietzmann *et al* 2011). Social media has increased the 'power' of the
46 consumer to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas, making the outside-in approach,
47 which is key to IMC, more important than ever (Christensen *et al* 2008; Lussier &
48 Sonfield 2015). With increased media fragmentation and more social media platforms
49 emerging it is vital for companies to not only identify the channels that are most
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4 dominantly used by their stakeholders, but also clearly communicate the ‘one sight,
5 one sound’ approach across all channels in order to avoid confusion among
6 stakeholders (e.g. Kitchen & Schultz 2009).
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10 2.2. IMC modelling

11 There are two models that dominate the practical implementation of IMC in large
12 businesses, with little attention paid specifically to other kinds of organisations (e.g.
13 Kitchen & Burgmann 2015). Our focus on micro-organisations addresses this gap,
14 and draws upon these existing models to evaluate to what extent they are useful for
15 understanding contemporary IMC implementation, thereby extending our knowledge
16 of both IMC and the role of social media within IMC.
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23 One of the most cited IMC models is Schultz and Kitchen’s (2000) IMC
24 pyramid, which is based on four levels that a company needs to run through to
25 develop a fully integrated marketing communication strategy. The first stage focuses
26 on creating and tactically co-ordinating the company’s communication strategy.
27 Rather than having advertising agencies involved as suggested in the initial
28 development of IMC (e.g. Beard 1996), it is proposed that the messages sent are
29 company-led. The second stage evaluates the company’s current communication
30 practices, evaluates consumer feedback, and (ideally) adapts company strategy
31 according to their audiences’ needs and wants (Kitchen *et al* 2004). The third stage is
32 concerned with a continuous information flow thereby incorporating hardware and
33 software to generate content (Schultz & Kitchen 2000). The fourth stage implements
34 IMC at a strategic organisational level to ensure that all departments work together to
35 broadcast a coherent company image. It is essential in the last stage to focus on the
36 relationship building process between the company and its clients, which can be
37 measured through the return on investment (ROI) (Kitchen *et al* 2004; Kitchen &
38 Burgmann 2015). A criticism of this theoretical model is that it is not easily accessible
39 to practitioners, who may not have a marketing background. Nevertheless, this model
40 provides a basis for IMC investigations in micro-organisations by exploring whether
41 these micro-companies go through similar stages or at least have some commonalities
42 with large businesses.
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58 Pickton and Broderick (2005) developed a more practical oriented multi-stage
59 planning model based upon extant research and empirical data, which consists of the
60 following stages: marketplace evaluation, market and company internal data analysis,

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3 budgeting, target and objective setting, channel selection, campaign implementation,
4 and campaign evaluation. A key challenge for practitioners is to move away from an
5 internal or inside-out perspective that is strongly associated with traditional marketing
6 communication strategies and predominantly focuses on linear or one-way
7 communication, and move towards an outside-in approach, which centres on creating
8 a dialogue between the company and its stakeholders. Organisations actively seek to
9 understand their target audiences, thereby developing an approach that sees the
10 customer and/or target audience as the starting point. Thus, these target groups have a
11 strong influence on the outside-in communication strategies of a company (Eagle *et al*
12 2007; Kitchen & Burgmann 2015). Although Pickton and Broderick's (2005) model
13 is detailed, it can be argued that it still lacks explanatory power and may not be
14 applicable to micro-organisations. The various steps described in the framework
15 imply the ability to invest not only money in market research, but also time and
16 expertise, which may not always be feasible for micro-companies. However, as past
17 research has not explicitly focused on micro-organisations, this model provides a
18 basis for investigation in that the owner-manager can be observed and communication
19 channels analysed according to the framework (ibid).

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A key underpinning of IMC is that it is a long-term process that sees
organisations continuously evolving and moving through four stages before achieving
full integration. Moreover, the models suggest that company buy-in is vital and all
communication strategies need to be supported not only by the owner-manager, but
also by the employees. It is suggested that dialogic communication forms the core of
the implementation process, whereby stakeholders have the opportunity to voice their
preference, which will then, ideally, be considered. Although these models have
dominated the IMC literature they lack validation (Kitchen & Burgmann 2015).

In summary, IMC models and implementation processes incorporate various
fundamental steps, which are cyclical in nature. In terms of the five key components
of IMC the common ground is a strategy formulation, which takes into account the
market environment, the marketing mix, and the various communication tools that
enable a move towards an outside-in customer-focused approach. Key phrases, such
as *message integration*, *coordination*, *dialogic communication*, and *monitoring* form
the basis of various IMC definitions (e.g. Kitchen & Schultz 1999; Kitchen &
Burgmann 2015). This implies that IMC involves more than integrating

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3 communication tools, but rather extends to continuously monitoring, fostering, and
4 establishing dialogues between the organisation and its stakeholders.
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8 9 2.3. *Barriers to implementing IMC*

10 Use of IMC allows potential benefits, such as monetary savings, higher ROI, and a
11 competitive advantage. Yet, various barriers to a successful implementation of IMC
12 are reported throughout the literature, such as ‘turf battles’, the specialisation of
13 marketing communication managers, and the resistance to change from an inside-out
14 to an outside-in approach (Christensen *et al* 2008; Kitchen & Burgmann 2015). As
15 indicated previously, the latter implies a move away from the traditional one-way
16 communication process, towards creating communication strategies that not only see
17 stakeholders as the core, but also start developing from the consumer by facilitating a
18 two-way communication process. Managing a consistent outside-in approach is
19 further impeded by the continuous fragmentation of media in which the consumer
20 plays an increasingly important role (Christensen *et al* 2005). Moreover, extant
21 research indicates that the idea of IMC relies on aspects of power and control,
22 whereby organisations are able to co-ordinate their various communication channels
23 to broadcast coherent messages to their target audiences. This however may seem to
24 be questionable as contemporary organisations and brands no longer have the power
25 to control entirely what information is publicly available, due to consumers
26 generating their own content and sharing their thoughts and feelings through online
27 platforms (Kietzmann *et al* 2011). In such a dynamic context where there is
28 continuous fragmentation of media channels and the emergence of social media
29 platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, IMC can be seen as a possible way to try to
30 bring order to a ‘chaotic world’ (Mangold & Faulds 2009), although issues of control
31 remain.
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49 We propose that the literature on IMC can be represented on three levels that
50 we label operational, conceptual organisational, and strategic. These levels provide an
51 overview of where organisations are with their IMC planning process and application
52 and what may be done in the future to enhance their communications. These levels are
53 not proposed as a new framework that guides companies through the process of
54 achieving IMC, but highlights where their current focus lies. Table 2 summarises the
55 three levels, which provide the foundation for this article.
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Table 2: Summary of literature

| Level | Characteristics |
|---------------------------|---|
| Operational | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Company focused • 4Ps • Homogenisation of marketing communications • Centres predominantly on inside-out approach with partial outside-in attempts • IMC not fully realised (e.g. Kitchen & Schultz 2009) |
| Conceptual organisational | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural shift • From firm-centric to customer focused approach • Predominantly outside-in approach, some lapses to inside-out (e.g. Christensen <i>et al</i> 2008; Kitchen & Burgmann 2015) |
| Strategic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realised IMC • Long-term orientation and planning • Considers external environment (Schultz & Kitchen 2000; Pickton & Broderick 2005; Kitchen & Burgmann 2015) |

2.4. Social media

Organisations have recognised the potential of social media platforms, which allow better facilitation of information, whilst at the same time empowering the customer, linking to the outside-in approach favoured by IMC (e.g. Kimmel & Kitchen 2014). Due to these platforms being free to use they provide the perfect opportunity for micro-organisations to not only broadcast their message to their target audiences, but also respond to stakeholders in real time thereby enhancing and fostering relationships. However, extant research indicates that this emerging real time communication process requires a new way of thinking and new approaches to implement these strategies (Smith 2012), which organisations are interested in exploring further (Li & Bernoff 2011). Although social media has received increased attention, academic knowledge has not yet caught up, especially in terms of IMC and micro-organisations (e.g. Schultz & Peltier 2013).

A common consensus within the literature is that social media as a tool that facilitates dialogic communication is essential within IMC (Kietzmann *et al* 2011), yet it can have both negative and positive impacts on the communication process (Cheney & Christensen 2001). Negative comments can damage an organisation's

image and reputation, as one Tweet or blog post can reach millions of users within seconds (Qu *et al* 2013). On the other hand, those companies that manage customer-generated content successfully are able to build long-term relationships with their customers, which is vital in a highly competitive environment such as the fashion industry (Mangold & Faulds 2009; Kitchen & Burgmann 2015). A challenge is that organisations not only need to keep up with technology, but also have to decide which of the various media platforms best suit their customers' needs and wants (Pozza 2014). This raises the question of whether an organisation should engage with all forms of new media or whether a targeted approach would be more beneficial to ensure that their marketing communications are integrated. Whilst authors such as Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012) have suggested that relevance is more important than the quantity of communication channels, this has not been investigated within the IMC context. In other words, although social media and digital marketing have received increased attention extant research provides little guidance on how to implement these in IMC (e.g. Mangold & Faulds 2009). Moreover, research into a multi-channel environment in terms of social media platforms is scarce (Pozza 2014). Thus, this article contributes to knowledge by investigating the practical implementation of social media within IMC in micro-organisations.

3. Methodology

Given the lack of research in IMC, social media, and micro-organisations, this research took an overall exploratory and longitudinal approach within an interpretive research design. To gain an understanding of how IMC is practically implemented in micro-organisations, several qualitative methods were used, including interviews (Is), semiotics (SE), and Twitterfeed (TF) and Facebook (FB) analysis (Table 3). This research design enabled us to immerse ourselves within the micro-organisations' activities and outputs for up to three months with each organisation.

Table 3: Data summary

| | Case 1 | Case 2 | Case 3 | Case 4 | Case 5 |
|------------------------|---|---------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Type of company | Non-customer facing | Non-customer facing | Co-operative | Co-operative | Customer facing |
| No. of interviews (Is) | 5 | 8 | 6 | 4 | 2 |
| Duration of interviews | 13:33-57:22 min | 10-60 min | 7:51-45:35 min | 10:52-34:10 min | 45:03-52:16 min |
| Semiotics (SE) | Website; Blog; Newsletter; Print material | | | | |

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|------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Twitterfeed (TF) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Facebook (FB) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

The research questions were open-ended, based on themes from the IMC literature, such as communication strategies and activities, evaluation of communication strategies, audience considerations, day-to-day implementation of communications, stakeholder communications, communication planning, and the use of social media within these organisations.

Convenience and judgement sampling were combined to select five micro-organisations operating in the fashion industry that helped best to answer the research questions (Marshall 1996). Interviews were conducted with the owner-managers and employees; print material, where available, was collected; and social media accounts were monitored for a period of three months each. Utilising these qualitative methodological tools resulted in rich data sets, which were coded and re-coded up to five times. The overall process took several months and was carefully executed in order to guarantee continuity, coherence, and clarity. Due to multiple researchers dealing with the same data sets, Easterby-Smith *et al*'s (2008) seven-step framework was implemented, which allowed for familiarisation with the data, reflection on the initial findings, conceptualisation of the data, cataloguing emerging themes, re-coding data sets to ensure no information was missed, linking emerging patterns, themes and clusters, and re-evaluating the findings. The loose guiding principles allowed themes, patterns, and clusters to emerge naturally from the data, whilst at the same time enabling the researchers to compare and contrast the data sets from the individual companies (*ibid*).

The relatively small sample size of this research could be seen as a limitation, as it focuses on five micro-organisations within the fashion industry. However, this allowed us the time to go into great depth with each organisation, providing an opportunity to investigate to what extent these companies implement IMC with social media. The findings brought forward in this article provide a stimulating discussion that both contributes to knowledge and sets a basis for further research.

4. Findings

4.1 Communication channel selection

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3 An essential element of IMC, at its most basic level, is the use and coordination of
4 communications. Our analysis indicates that the individual organisations utilise a
5 variety of different media to communicate with their stakeholders. These range from
6 print materials, such as catalogues and leaflets, to ‘traditional’ online tools (websites,
7 emails, newsletters), and social media platforms, such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest,
8 and Facebook (SE). This section investigates the type of media utilised within each
9 organisation and the information these platforms broadcast to the respective audiences
10 targeted.
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18 Key for selecting these individual channels is to inform stakeholders “*not only*
19 *about buying clothes, but also for information, ideas*” (Is). An owner-manager
20 indicates that whilst selecting an appropriate channel is important, it is also vital to
21 understand what is needed of these channels, which is why “*we actually ran the*
22 *business for a year on a really awful basic website, just to see what we really wanted*
23 *out of this site*” (Is). From the interview it becomes apparent that the website is seen
24 as an initial starting point, which the owner-manager uses to gain an insight into their
25 consumers’ needs and wants. Although the websites of these micro-organisations are
26 very basic, they provide an opportunity for consumers and other stakeholders to leave
27 comments and feedback on dedicated sections throughout the platforms (SE). This
28 links to the IMC concept, which seeks to establish relationships and actively
29 encourages dialogic communication that is focused on the consumer needs and wants
30 (Kitchen & Burgmann 2015). However, the extent to which the organisations respond
31 to such audience comments is uncertain, a point to which we return later.
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43 Traditional media, such as print advertising, are distributed at tradeshows and
44 pop-up events, which mainly attract buyers or agents, who sell the products on to end-
45 consumers. Print media is utilised in combination with event marketing (SE). In this
46 manner, print media is a one-way communication method that does not allow for
47 further engagement on the spot, but provides the opportunity for contact at a later
48 stage. Data suggest that these micro-organisations utilise print media within a
49 business-to-business rather than a business-to-consumer context. A further
50 observation is that both websites and print media are used for similar reasons, which
51 are to communicate basic information and provide an initial point of contact (SE).
52 Thus, it can be said that these two channels communicate similar messages in an
53 integrated manner (Christensen *et al* 2008) and serve overlapping audiences.
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3 Findings highlight that social media goes beyond transmitting basic
4 information **within these micro-organisations**. It focuses on providing audiences with
5 real time 'goings on' and 'newsworthy' posts (SE, TF). Aspects communicated
6 through social media include, but are not limited to, sales and pop-up events, industry
7 trends, 'studio snoops' (TF), and company projects. Overall, social media was
8 described as *"a great way to get in touch with your people who are interested in your
9 brand and people from all walks of life and all different backgrounds can sort of
10 share ideas, inspirations, styles, tips, ideas and I think that that's really great"* (Is).
11 These channels are utilised to enhance the dialogue between anyone interested in the
12 brand and the company. Data indicate that most of the organisations seek to facilitate
13 discussions and are actively responding to queries via social media (TF, FB). The
14 majority of messages posted by the micro-organisations either focus on their
15 collections; polls that allow consumers to vote for their favourite garments; or current
16 events. Contrarily, consumers seek to gain information on stock availability, size
17 guides, and order information (SE, TF), illustrating a potential disconnect here.
18 Throughout the analysis it became apparent that owner-managers distinguish their
19 audiences according to the communication channels used by selecting different
20 information for different platforms. For example, social media is seen to be used only
21 by consumers, whilst the website is viewed by consumers and other stakeholders and
22 print media is predominantly used for business contacts rather than everyday
23 consumers. Although data do not support that only the identified stakeholder groups
24 use the allocated channels, the owner-managers generally keep the channels separate
25 and only provide information that they consider may be of interest to the individual
26 groupings.
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46 It was apparent that several of the organisations aim to have a presence on
47 every free digital platform to ensure exposure to all available audiences (Is). One
48 owner-manager highlights that *"we do a lot online. [...] We do social media and that
49 kind of thing and we have a blog on the website, which is something we always try to
50 develop. [...] They are quite integrated online and then we do a lot of, you know,
51 online platforms"* (Is). Another owner-manager concurs: *"we focus more on online
52 presence and we've been trying to streamline that a lot more and get people involved
53 through the blog and through Facebook, Twitter that kind of thing"* (Is). The owner-
54 managers are confident that they make good use of their online platforms and keep
55 them updated regularly by copying and pasting the same posts on each platform (Is,
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FB, TF). This finding is not only contradictory, as owner-managers insist that they keep the platforms separate, but also raises various challenges: first, each of the individual platforms has a specific purpose, for example LinkedIn is a professional network whilst Twitter provides a micro-blog environment that is informal and limited to 140 characters. Second, in order to maintain an online presence and high visibility the accounts should be updated on a regular basis, without ‘spamming’ newsfeeds. Although participants indicate that they update their accounts “*at least twice a day*” (Is) data suggest that not all platforms are well maintained and various channels are ghosts (SE), which implies that no interactions are made for long periods of time. A question that emerges is whether it is necessary to have a presence on all platforms and whether it is possible for micro-organisations to maintain these on a regular basis without having to sacrifice manufacturing time. This finding also agrees with past research that proposes *relevance* to be more important than the quantity of channels used (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012). Third, as previously indicated the findings suggest that the owner-managers in essence guess which platforms are most beneficial for their purpose and what information individual stakeholders want to see. Data did not provide any indication that feedback provided by stakeholders is incorporated into the communication strategy used.

In summary, the initial findings indicate that these micro-organisations may be partially on the first level of IMC (Schultz & Kitchen 2000). Each of the individual channels (except the generic website) is geared towards different audiences, which the owner-manager specifies, and conveys particular information and so could be seen as ‘customised’. The findings suggest that these micro-organisations utilise partially an inside-out approach with messages being directed at consumers through a predominantly one-way communication strategy, whilst at the same time partially fostering an outside-in approach. The various platforms allow for comments to be made and dialogues to emerge, but these do not seem to be developed to their full potential. Consumers are targeted with specific messages; they are not the drivers of these communication channels, as would be the case for a pure outside-in approach (Kitchen & Burgmann 2015). Overall, it could be said that the websites and the print material are interlinked, whilst there seems to be a disconnect with social media. A question that emerges is how social media, as a tool within IMC can be implemented more effectively.

4.2 Communication channel purpose

This section focuses on social media as part of IMC and explores how far social media is implemented in these micro-organisations. The purpose of the various communication channels in these organisations is *“to disseminate our message, to make sure that people can hear about what we are doing”* (Is). It was emphasised that *“our priority is really in reaching the international community of people interested in what we are doing so we use the online platforms”* (Is). Interviews suggest that the owner-managers believe online channels such as their websites and social media accounts can best fulfil their aim of disseminating their message to a wider audience, as these are far reaching and not restricted by a physical presence, although the idea of ‘international’ is a generic one, not divided by region or country. It became apparent that these micro-organisations’ financial resources are based on the owner-managers’ personal funds (Is). Thus, social media platforms are seen as ideal channels that not only enable the companies to broadcast their messages, but also are free of charge. These social media platforms provide an opportunity for IMC, as they are designed to facilitate a dialogic communication process. It is due to these (negative) financial constraints and the (positive) ability to talk to stakeholders that owner-managers repeatedly emphasised that they did not want to invest more money than necessary in any kind of communication channel, before gaining feedback from their stakeholders and knowing that their investment would be worthwhile (Is). How the owner-managers determine this is discussed below.

Social media accounts are used to *“always post about our goings on”* (Is) and *“it’s less about self-promotion and more about actual engagement”* (Is). Interviewees remark that they use social media for research purposes by facilitating discussions and posting polls in which users and followers can participate and express their opinions on current collections or ideas for potential new lines. All participants agree that the use of social media platforms is *“extremely important”* (Is) as it is *“massive”* (Is). One owner-manager further states that *“I can just put my own rumblings on there and it’s really nice, because there’s like 800 people who listen to what I say and I could put a picture of, I don’t know, fluff up there and I have 24 people who like it. It’s marvellous because I can actually speak to people who like the brand”* (Is). Although the interview data indicate that the owner-managers regularly engage with social media and post *“at least twice a day”* (Is), the Facebook and Twitter analysis show different results. The majority of tweets and posts are of a promotional nature to

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3 inform people about offers or to update them about upcoming events. Several of the
4 accounts are updated once or twice a week, with others only posting updates once a
5 month. In extreme cases several of these **micro-**organisations have also spammed
6 newsfeeds by posting up to ten tweets an hour over a period of two weeks, which
7 coincided with one of their events (TF, FB). Any questions and polls posted on these
8 social media platforms receive little attention, in that they are neither re-tweeted, nor
9 starred, nor responded to directly. The only direct conversations that utilise an @-sign
10 and are popular due to continued interactions in the form of retweets and replies are
11 actually conversations of a private nature between the owner-managers and their
12 friends (FB, SE, TF). One participant admits that for them online and social media
13 channels are *“really difficult, but I have to do it. It’s not what I particularly like*
14 *doing. I don’t really understand Twitter. [...] Facebook is hard enough you know. I*
15 *don’t do change particularly well, but Twitter is beyond me, I’ve got to say, it’s*
16 *beyond me”* (Is), which might explain the limited posts and the fact that they lack
17 punctuation. This has potential negative implications: first, the posts on these social
18 media platforms are hard to read and do not get any interactions, and second, people
19 who may have followed the micro-organisation at first may decide to unfollow them,
20 as the information provided is limited and not necessarily informative. Third, the
21 inability to use social media could affect the reach the micro-organisation has in terms
22 of its audience. The posts on these social media accounts are hard to understand,
23 which may have a negative impact on the brand itself **and the effectiveness of the**
24 **social media channel**. Such questions are beyond the scope of this research, but could
25 be investigated in a future study.
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44 The interviewees see digital channels in particular as a way to create closer
45 links with nationally and internationally based stakeholders and inform them about
46 the companies’ products and services (SE). The individual company websites provide
47 a brief overview of the values, philosophy, and history of the micro-organisations, as
48 well as highlighting product attributes and collections available for purchase (SE).
49 Although the websites give some information on the collections, not all **micro-**
50 **organisations** equally capitalise on the materials used within their production process,
51 but rather omit some information – whether intentionally or unintentionally is not for
52 this article to judge. For example, in the interviews one owner-manager repeats that
53 they use genuine leather in their production process and carefully source raw
54 materials within the European Union (Is), whilst another company acquires their
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3 vintage silk scarves from second-hand vendors in close proximity to their studio (Is).
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5 Neither of these two aspects is mentioned explicitly on the respective websites (SE).
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7 An explanation is that *“even though vintage has become more fashionable, I think a*
8 *lot of people don’t really understand what it is, they don’t understand that it is*
9 *actually a fine art commodity. You know, there are only so many 1950s scarves in the*
10 *world. You cannot make more 1950s scarves. And you know they don’t understand the*
11 *preciousness of what they’re getting. We are a luxury brand. I think sometimes people*
12 *get confused, and this is something I would like to try work on. They think our clothes*
13 *are reworked, are upcycled. They’re not. We use the fabrics as if they were on the*
14 *roll”* (Is). The owner-manager explains that promoting the vintage aspect of the
15 material can have a negative connotation, as it is seen as second-hand clothing and not
16 part of a luxury brand image, thus, they are not explicitly including this fact on the
17 website (Is). The owner-manager only addresses the vintage aspect in one of their
18 blog posts, but otherwise circumvents the description by emphasising the fact that
19 they *“create sustainable couture for girls aged 4-12. Our brand ethos is built around*
20 *fair trade and eco-friendly production with an emphasis on luxury, heritage fabrics”*
21 (SE). This links to a previous finding, in that the owner-managers follow a selective
22 approach to providing information. The owner-managers create assumptions about
23 their target audiences and only provide information they feel their stakeholders may
24 want to know. Whether these assumptions are correct, or based on insights, or
25 personal feelings, is unclear.

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41 The information provided on the co-operatives’ websites is limited. The actual
42 webpages are extremely basic and simply provide a company address, and a very
43 brief background to the co-operatives. It was found that the only reason these
44 websites were set up is due to the fact that in today’s world *“everything needs an*
45 *online presence”* (Is). The sole purpose of these websites is to provide information
46 about the store locations and enable designers that are interested in exhibiting with
47 these co-operatives to get in touch. Neither of the co-operatives’ websites includes
48 values or a mission statement, possibly because individual designers have their own
49 philosophy and ways of doing things that may not be exactly the same as those of the
50 umbrella organisation. Designers within the co-operatives change on a frequent basis,
51 thus featuring them on the umbrella website would be time intensive and *“not worth*
52 *all the trouble”* (Is). A question that emerges is whether having a basic website is
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better than not having one at all – given that IMC is all about consistency and synergy, such a website seems to offer little in the way of IMC benefits.

Four out of the five case companies utilise print media, especially “*when we do trade shows. [...] So they [(customers)] can sort of get the whole vibe of the clothes*” (Is). Information provided within the catalogues includes the companies’ philosophy, address, and contact email, sizing information, prices, and ordering instructions. The leaflets feature images, which can vary from product shoots to scenery to abstract working accessories, such as tailors’ mannequins (SE). The majority of leaflets are kept neutral in that they are not dated and can be used on multiple occasions (SE). Only one leaflet in our sample featured the company’s social media accounts. The owner-managers admit they are “*a bit stingy on printed materials*” (Is) and only want to have information on them that is easily maintained, such as the basic website, that will not change in the near future.

Table 4 provides a summary of the findings in this section. In terms of IMC the implication is that print materials and online channels may not always be identified as coming from the same source, as the images utilised on the print advertising differ from the company’s logo. In some cases the leaflets do not even feature any products made by the organisation, possibly due to financial limitations and the inability to produce new promotional material regularly.

Table 4: Summary of communication channel purpose

| Category | Sub Category | Case 1 | Case 2 | Case 3 | Case 4 | Case 5 |
|----------|--------------|---|--|-------------------------------------|--------------|--|
| | | Non-customer facing | Non-customer facing | Co-operative | Co-operative | Customer facing |
| Print | Catalogue | N/A | Contact details Collections Images Order instructions Present vibe of clothing | N/A | N/A | Contact details Collections Images Order instructions Present vibe of clothing Emphasise material |
| | Leaflet | Philosophy Values Unrelated image Website address Email | Philosophy Values Product images, premises, production Website/social media link Email | Unrelated image Mission Email | N/A | N/A |

| | | | | | | |
|--------------|------------|--|---|--|--------------------------------|--|
| Online | Website | Values Collections, including product information Production techniques History Contact information | Values Collections, including product information History Contact information | Mission Contact information | Mission Contact information | Values Collections, including product information Look book History Contact information |
| | Newsletter | Sales promotion Recap on events Collection launch Event updates | Sales promotion Collection launch | N/A | N/A | Sales promotion |
| Social media | Twitter | Sales promotion Discussions Event updates | Sales promotions Discussions | Sales promotions Store update | Event reminder | N/A |
| | Facebook | Polls Event reminder | Discussions | Sales promotions Store update | Event reminder | Polls Discussions |
| | Linked In | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | Sales promotion Event updates |
| | Pinterest | Collections Behind the scenes Top tips Accessories Trends | N/A | Designers Sale Collections Events | N/A | Sale Collections Top tips Archive Shows |
| | Google+ | N/A | Tagline Introduction Contact information | N/A | N/A | Tagline Contact information |
| | Blog | Industry news Company news Behind the scenes | Company news | N/A | N/A | Company news Collection news |

In summary, the various communication channels have different purposes: print material is used for business-to-business customers to reinforce messages after a face-to-face meeting at tradeshows, the website features generic information that provides stakeholders with a brief overview of the companies' values, mission, and philosophy, whilst social media channels inform consumers about upcoming events, sales offers, and industry events. Although there is some information overlap on the channels in terms of the basic information provided (e.g. company name, contact email) the individual channels have a different focus, depending on the audience for which the owner-managers intend them. Although the organisations seek to involve

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3 their stakeholders in conversation, the majority of communication channels do not
4 facilitate discussion. Rather, these companies seem to utilise their communication
5 channels as one-way avenues that allow them to promote their messages without
6 taking their stakeholders' needs and wants into account. The owner-managers,
7 although claiming that they are keen on dialogic communication, dictate which
8 channels are meant for which audience, thereby potentially omitting information that
9 might be of interest to other stakeholders than those intended. This aspect is further
10 elaborated in the discussion section.
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18 19 *4.3 Integration of channels*

20 The previous two sections provided an analysis of whom these organisations target
21 and what information they provide in their individual channels, which allows for an
22 in-depth analysis of how these channels are linked according to tenets of IMC and
23 what messages are shared. The following section focuses on aspects of integration
24 within these channels.
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30 All five case micro-organisations provide links to their social media accounts
31 and blogs on their website, allowing homepage visitors to access these channels
32 easily. By clicking on the respective icons the user is re-directed to the social media
33 platforms and has the opportunity to like or follow them. All social media accounts
34 have 'open' accessibility, which means that the user does not necessarily have to like
35 or follow the company in order to look at the information provided on these
36 platforms, but rather can gain the data immediately. This suggests that the individual
37 companies include their various communication channels on the website. However,
38 this does not necessarily mean that the companies integrate these channels.
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46 The two non-customer facing **micro-organisations** and one of the co-
47 operatives feature their company website on their Facebook account homepage,
48 directing users from their Facebook page to their umbrella website, actively
49 integrating these channels. Data does not provide obvious reasons on why the other
50 two companies – purposefully or not – decided not to guide their audience to the
51 companies' websites. A possible reason in the case of the co-operative may be the fact
52 that designers continuously change and the owner-manager is uncomfortable with
53 using online tools (Is). Data suggest that in the case of this co-operative their website
54 has an alibi function, in that it only displays the company's store address and does not
55 feature any further information or online shopping opportunities. It is a shell that was
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3 simply established to have an online presence “*as you really need to just have one*”
4 (Is). On the other hand, data was inconsistent in terms of why the customer facing
5 company did not embed the website link on Facebook. The customer facing company
6 does sell their majority of products online through their own website. Not guiding
7 users to the company’s homepage implies that they are not fully exploiting this
8 potential. The Twitterfeed analysis showed similar results. Whilst some **micro-**
9 **organisations** actively post sales messages that also feature a link to the companies’
10 websites, others utilise Twitter to make general statements, which may not be linked
11 to anything the company is doing. On the other hand, the same three companies that
12 have showcased their website on Facebook also embed the link to their homepage in
13 the description section underneath the company name on Twitter.
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23 The two non-customer facing companies also link Facebook and Twitter with
24 one another by sharing picture links and blog posts on both platforms. Anyone
25 looking at these social media accounts neither has to like nor follow the pages,
26 meaning they do not receive updates, which could reinforce brand awareness, by
27 being reminded of the brands’ existence. Thus, potential customers may miss special
28 offers that could encourage purchasing behaviour.
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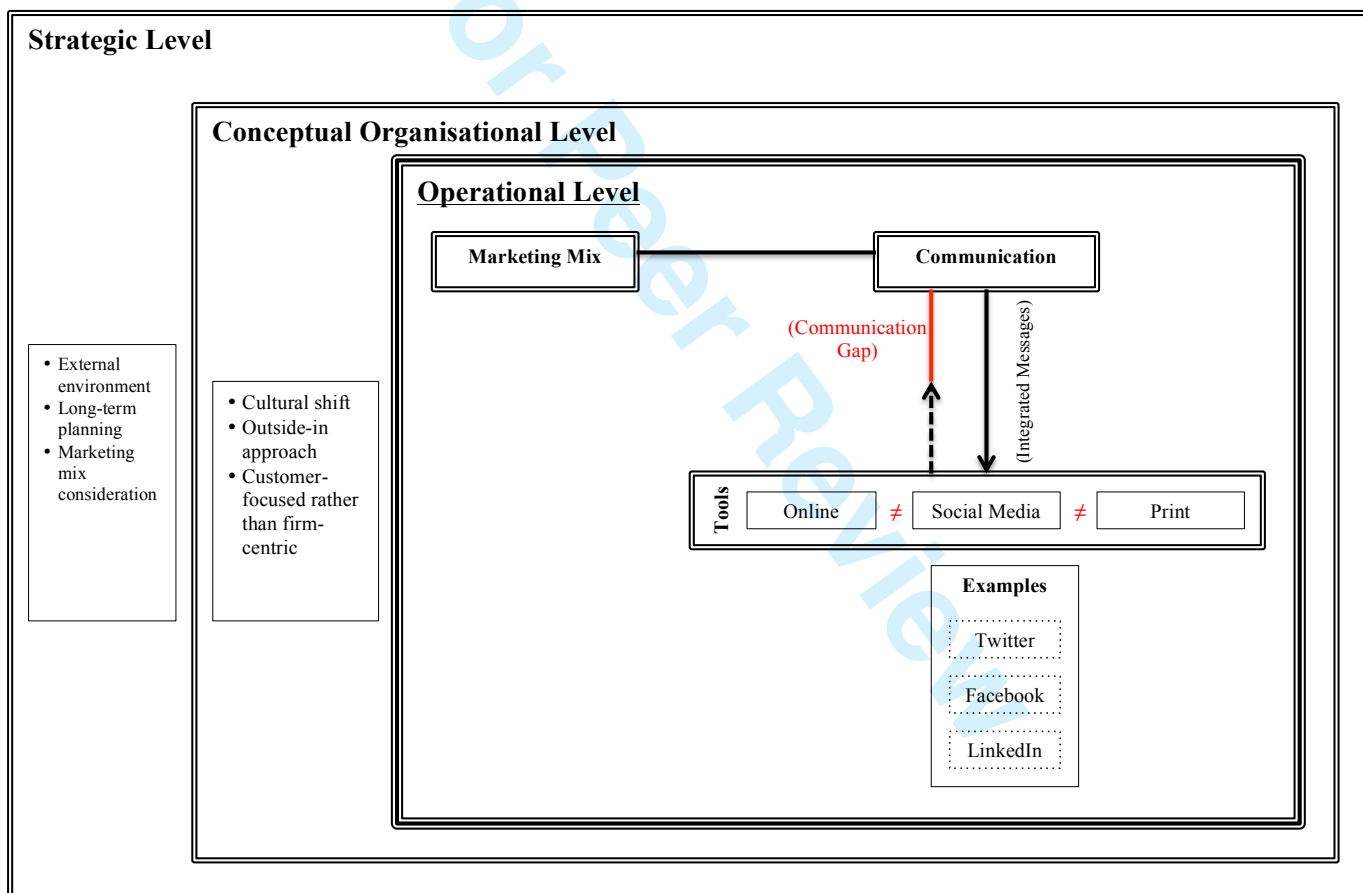
33 It is clear that the micro-organisations do not take advantage of encouraging a
34 two-way communication process. Although owner-managers repeatedly emphasise
35 the importance of creating a dialogue with their stakeholders, they are not
36 encouraging a dialogue, as users are not asked to be part of these social media
37 platforms. None of the websites feature a live Twitterfeed, which could highlight
38 what the company is posting and might spark interest on the consumer side to engage
39 with the company through this platform.
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46 The micro-organisations share Facebook pictures on Twitter and vice versa.
47 The analysis suggests that the overall use of these platforms differs in that polls,
48 which allow consumers to vote for new designs or favourite collections, are only
49 posted on Facebook whilst discussion topics and questions are predominantly
50 ‘facilitated’ on Twitter. Thus, whilst some content may be integrated, the social media
51 accounts are also separated in terms of their actual use and content. This illustrates a
52 previous point, i.e. that owner-managers follow a selective yet unclear approach to
53 distributing information.
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60 Three out of the five companies produce print media, which in the majority of
cases is distributed to potential buyers at tradeshows. The non-customer facing

companies clearly feature the companies' websites and social media accounts allowing anyone picking up leaflets or brochures to connect with the organisation. The co-operative's leaflet on the other hand simply displays the company's name and physical store address, but does not provide information of the website and/or social media account. This implies that the latter does not actively integrate all of its channels and thus, does not take advantage of consumers to link with their brand. Figure 1 provides a summary of the findings section, which indicates at what level these micro-organisations are working, with a clear communications gap emerging.

Figure 1: Summary of Findings



In summary, although attempts are made to link various channels, integration activities - where they exist - are not necessarily underpinned by an understanding of IMC, as we would recognise it from the literature (e.g. Schultz & Kitchen 2000; Kliatchko 2005; Pickton & Broderick 2005). The non-customer facing companies link their individual channels more than, for example, the customer facing organisation

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3 and the co-operatives. It appears that these micro-organisations do not embrace the
4 full IMC concept. From the findings it becomes apparent that social media is seen as a
5 tool within IMC and allows the owner-managers to fulfil their daily operations by
6 promoting their products to an audience (Mangold & Faulds 2009). Although IMC
7 offers several benefits (Kitchen & Burgmann 2015) these are not utilised within these
8 micro-organisations. It could be said that these micro-organisations barely scratch the
9 surface of IMC, but rather establish a communication strategy that is based on a trial
10 and error run, messy in nature, and emerging in an ad-hoc manner. Their selective
11 approach to distributing information and posting sporadic updates indicates that IMC
12 is seen as a short-term strategy and within it social media fulfils the dialogic
13 communication function. These micro-organisations seem to be at the operational
14 level of IMC implementation (Figure 1), which focuses on the 4Ps and
15 homogenisation of marketing communication channels. At this level we found that
16 social media plays a key role in IMC, as it provides opportunities for a dialogic
17 communication process. However, these micro-organisations currently do not fully
18 capitalise on this potential.

33 **5. Discussion: the emerging picture of IMC**

34 *5.1 IMC and micro-organisations*

35 This research contributes to knowledge by investigating the practical implementation
36 of social media within IMC in micro-companies. A key distinction that emerged from
37 our data when compared to IMC in larger organisations is the fact that all marketing
38 communications are managed by the owner-manager, with no department dedicated to
39 co-ordinating and maintaining messages broadcast to the various target audiences.
40 This differs from both large companies and SMEs as these often have dedicated
41 departments and/or marketing managers (Gabrielli & Balboni 2010). This finding has
42 several implications for IMC implementation: first, the owner-manager is solely
43 responsible for setting up, maintaining, and continuously updating the various
44 channels used. What kind of information is presented in which channel also depends
45 on the owner-manager, who guesses what stakeholders want to know. This suggests
46 that IMC within these micro-organisations is situation specific and context dependent
47 and thus, the use of IMC depends on not only what stakeholders want, but also what,
48 in this case, micro-organisations can offer in terms of communication. Owner-
49 managers utilise a selective approach to information distribution that follows a
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4 predominantly inside-out approach. This further leads to a one-way communication
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6 process in that messages are sent to various audiences, but the response to these
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8 messages is not accounted for, which is highlighted as the communication gap in
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10 Figure 1. Second, the overall communication process and the selection of channels
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12 emerge rather organically with new technologies being added and others left as
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14 ghosts. In this sense, these micro-organisations seem to participate almost
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16 accidentally in the most basic form of IMC by using social media as dialogic tools.
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18 Reflecting on the various models established in the field of IMC it seems that these
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20 **micro-organisations** are in a pre-stage or possibly first stage **of IMC** and have not yet
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22 fully understood the beneficial outcomes of having an integrated marketing approach,
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24 but rather incorporate a variety of communication channels on a tactical level. In this
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26 manner, these micro-organisations seem to be stagnated at simple and uneven
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28 integration of communication rather than more developed notions of IMC. A further
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30 implication of this observation is that social media seems to be fundamental for these
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32 micro-organisations and a cost effective route to utilise. Social media provides an
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34 opportunity for IMC and is of great value to these organisations, as more traditional
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36 channels such as print media are too costly to maintain on a regular basis. Thus, social
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38 media are part of a new marketing landscape that changes the overall look of IMC.

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36 The literature indicated that IMC can be seen as either a philosophy or a
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38 strategic tool (e.g. Pickton & Broderick 2005), which reinforces the concept itself as
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40 vague and open to interpretation. Our data suggest that none of the communication
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42 channels were chosen strategically, but rather seem to be selected at random by
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44 following trends in the market and new advancements in technology. This organic and
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46 accidental approach indicates that the owner-managers of these micro-organisations
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48 may not be aware of IMC and its benefits, but rather trial communication channels
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50 that might work best for their situation. This may also provide an explanation as to
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52 why some channels were abandoned: once a trend has passed and a specific platform
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54 is no longer popular, it may be discarded without deleting the actual account. Data
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56 thus indicate that these micro-organisations may lack an understanding of these new
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58 digital platforms and their benefits as part of IMC. Although the owner-managers are
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60 trying to facilitate dialogue with their users, this does not seem to be followed through
to the end. Social media platforms play a vital role for micro-organisations that have a
limited budget (Chironga *et al* 2012), but if they are not well maintained and carefully
looked after they are broadcasting an inconsistent and incoherent image of the

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3 company (Kitchen & Schultz 2009). Moreover, if the various channels are only
4 embedded through links but not integrated through providing similar information and
5 signals, the overall message might be fuzzy and confuse the target audiences
6 (Buchanan-Oliver & Fitzgerald 2014). Our findings suggest that these micro-
7 organisations seem to miss some of the basic elements of the various IMC models
8 (e.g. Schultz & Kitchen 2000), which propose that a company should tactically
9 develop their communication strategy and then gain consumer feedback. Data
10 however demonstrate that these micro-organisations create an accidental version of
11 IMC that looks messy in nature, with no clear indications on how owner-managers
12 decide which channel has the most impact, which could be an area of future research.
13 This raises the question of whether these micro-organisations understand their target
14 audience and marketing in more general terms.
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25 The analysis reveals a difference between non-customer facing companies,
26 and the co-operatives and the customer facing companies in that the former are taking
27 more care to actively link their websites to all communication channels (online and
28 print). In the case of the co-operatives and the customer facing organisation these
29 links are missing. This raises the question of whether these organisations even
30 implement the 'one sight, one sound' approach, which is seen as the first step towards
31 developing IMC (Kitchen & Schultz 2009). The semiotic analysis indicates that
32 although the individual communication channels include pictures and visuals they are
33 neither coherent nor necessarily related to the companies' logos, values, and mission.
34 This suggests that these particular micro-organisations do not utilise an IMC strategy
35 (Christensen *et al* 2008). Differences were also surfaced between business-to-business
36 and business-to-consumer activities, as the findings indicate that there are greater
37 efforts to link online and offline communications in the former's promotional material
38 compared to the latter, where some micro-organisations intentionally or
39 unintentionally do not link their accounts. This further indicates that these micro-
40 organisations follow a predominantly inside-out approach, whereby the owner-
41 manager broadcasts company messages to their target audiences in a linear, one-way
42 communication process.
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56 Extant research emphasises various benefits associated with IMC, such as
57 better interdepartmental working relations, cost savings, and greater efficiencies in
58 terms of broadcasting a coherent message (Eagle *et al* 2007). This however could not
59 be verified within our research findings. Due to their characteristics micro-
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organisations have limited financial resources (Chironga *et al* 2012), which justifies the use of predominantly social media platforms within their marketing communications. At the same time, it could be argued that utilising these free platforms has a cost as setting up these accounts and continuously updating and maintaining them is labour intensive (Kietzmann *et al* 2011). The time spent on social media platforms is lost on production time and designing patterns, which for fashion micro-organisations is vital for survival. Moreover, these micro-organisations are unable to maintain consistent times to broadcast messages, thus either tweet and message randomly throughout the day, spam newsfeeds by putting up multiple tweets at a time, or create a ghost account that is inactive.

In summary, these micro-organisations do not show consistent integration of marketing communications. Although some accounts are linked, which makes it easier for consumers to navigate from one digital page to another, the underpinning attributes of creating a communication strategy that clearly broadcasts messages in a coherent, consistent, and clear manner is lacking. The companies' size and financial budget, as well as the type of organisation (non-customer facing, customer facing, co-operative) play a key role in the success of the integration of communication channels. The non-customer facing organisations seem to be creating stronger links between their channels possibly due to the fact that their sales are totally dependent on the virtual customer.

5.2 Social media in IMC

The literature suggests that keeping up-to-date with new technological advancements and social media platforms is vital, as this not only creates greater exposure due to reaching a broader audience, but also is key for electronic word-of-mouth publicity. The integration of social media platforms fits well with the third stage of the IMC pyramid (Schultz & Kitchen 2000), which focuses on the application of information technology to foster and ideally reach a financial and strategic integration of IMC. What emerged from our data is that social media are seen as 'must haves' rather than as potential ways of communicating with target audiences and developing IMC. These micro-organisations add social media accounts to their repertoire without fully considering how these channels impact on their organisation and their overall communications strategy. It could be said that social media for these organisations are

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3 not only communication tools, but epitomise what IMC is in these companies – an
4 organic, messy process of intended dialogic communication.
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7 Social media provides an opportunity for IMC, as it is designed to further the
8 two-way communication process between the organisation and its stakeholders by
9 being able to facilitate discussions, provide feedback and suggestions, and make
10 general comments (ibid). Thus, these communication tools could enable companies to
11 establish and further develop an outside-in approach and move away from the inside-
12 out model (e.g. Christensen *et al* 2008). Although data indicate that attempts are made
13 to communicate with stakeholders, these micro-organisations are struggling to
14 facilitate and engage their audience. This links back to a previous statement made:
15 rather than clearly understanding their target audiences' needs and wants, these
16 companies incorporate social media out of a self-imposed compulsion to be up-to-date
17 with new advancements. In other words, they still utilise a predominantly inside-out
18 approach, which is counter productive to a basic objective of IMC, which seeks to
19 encourage the opposite.
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30 In summary, there is a clear, if weak, link between the implementation of
31 social media and the opportunity for IMC in micro-organisations, which needs to be
32 further examined. There are also many challenges associated with integrating
33 communication channels, such as the failure to identify whether chosen platforms
34 meet the needs of the target audience and how to enable an outside-in approach using
35 such channels.
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41 **6. Conclusions and implications**

42 This article began by posing three questions: First, to what extent - if at all - is IMC
43 implemented in micro-organisations? Second, if it is implemented, what does IMC
44 look like in micro-organisations? Third, how are social media such as Twitter and
45 Facebook integrated into this IMC?
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50 In answering the first question, a contribution of this article is the fact that
51 partial IMC occurs accidentally in these micro-organisations and seems to be limited
52 to a basic tactical level rather than being fully utilised to its strategic potential.
53 Various different channels are implemented and dropped at the same time, which
54 implies an ad-hoc approach to IMC. Thus, the extent to which IMC is understood and
55 implemented in these micro-organisations is limited by the basic knowledge exhibited
56 by their owner-managers. In terms of the second question, the overall view of IMC in
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3 these micro-organisations is short-term, with the focus being on the 'here and now'
4 rather than future directives and long-term strategic plans (e.g. Kitchen & Burgmann
5 2015). Owner-managers follow a selective approach to distributing information based
6 on their perception of what stakeholders are interested in, lack market research, and
7 guess relevant content for each stakeholder group. In response to the third question, it
8 can be concluded that within these micro-organisations social media is integrated with
9 other communications at a tactical level that emerges haphazardly rather than in
10 strategic, clear-cut stages as suggested in the literature (e.g. Schultz & Kitchen 2000).
11 Rather than developing a communication strategy these micro-organisations seem to
12 miss the first level and directly move onto evaluating their practices by partially
13 attempting to gain feedback from their customers, a measure that is never completed.
14 Although some of these micro-organisations utilise online and offline
15 communications, these are not always well integrated. This implies that these micro-
16 organisations seem to lack basic marketing knowledge on how to create an IMC
17 strategy.
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21 This article confirms that social media as part of IMC can provide an
22 opportunity for integration as it is dialogic in nature and offers stakeholders the means
23 to provide feedback. Ideally, a feedback loop should emerge that allows owner-
24 managers continuously to improve their communications and move further through
25 the various steps of IMC (ibid), yet, within these micro-organisations the feedback
26 loops are lacking, as the tools are used in a predominantly inside-out manner that
27 dictates and selects information that should be broadcast to stakeholders, rather than
28 the other way around. Social media is a vital communication tool for these micro-
29 organisations, yet its full potential and reach seem to be unexplored by the companies.
30 Social media platforms are simply seen as channels that allow broadcasting a message
31 and enabling dialogic communication, rather than tools that provide an opportunity to
32 reach an audience further afield (Kietzmann *et al* 2011). With increasing
33 fragmentation of media and the ability of stakeholders to share messages about an
34 organisation and co-create content, incorporating social media in IMC becomes
35 inevitable. The fact that IMC is seen as a short-term strategy within these
36 organisations rather than a long-term perspective reflects that these micro-
37 organisations operate in a highly competitive environment that focuses strongly on
38 daily survival.
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4 Theoretically, existing planning and conceptual models of IMC may not
5 reflect what micro-organisations are doing. Extant literature emphasises that market
6 research is key in creating successful IMC strategies, this however is not always
7 feasible for micro-organisations. Rather than seeing IMC as a series of stages, within
8 these micro-organisations it is an untidy process that emerges in an ad-hoc manner
9 and is based on a trial and error approach. Further research is necessary to clearly
10 theorise how such micro-organisations create this accidental IMC and how it can be
11 channelled into more coherent strategies. A comparative study between micro-
12 organisations and those that have grown into SMEs could provide an insight into how
13 accidental IMC develops, if at all, into a more strategic approach.

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21 Practically, it is vital for the owner-managers to review carefully their current
22 communication activities and how to utilise social media channels to reach their target
23 audiences. Data indicate that an online presence is seen as valuable, as it provides
24 exposure to an international audience. Nevertheless it needs to be carefully
25 maintained and posts need to be legible. Whilst the integration and use of multiple
26 channels is beneficial within the wider concept of IMC, poorly executed social media
27 may have unforeseen and undesirable consequences. Thus, it is recommended that
28 owner-managers utilise tools such as Hootsuite or TweetDeck, which would enable
29 efficient management of multiple social media platforms, by regularly posting
30 updates. As these tools are freely available they fulfil the budget requirements of
31 these micro-organisations, and once set up can save time and enhance brand
32 awareness. **These tools further allow owner-managers to control, regulate, and review**
33 **posts on a regular basis, to ensure they are coherent with changing circumstances.** Our
34 findings point to the need for micro-organisations to be offered practical skills to
35 increase their marketing proficiency, and thus allow them to capitalise on all the
36 benefits associated with the successful implementation of IMC.

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