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Online integrated marketing communication strategies of international brands: Standardization vs. adaptation approaches

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ABSTRACT

Reaching communication consistency across online channels like websites and social media is pivotal for international brands (IBs) in their effort to internationalize their recognition. This study investigates whether and how IBs integrate communication across two online channels in different countries in terms of adaptation and standardization approaches. We perform a content analysis of the websites and Instagram pages of 75 IBs to analyze their integrated marketing communication strategies deployed in two markets: Russia and Italy. This study reveals that IBs may adopt one of the four strategies when considering the design and content of the website and social media simultaneously: (1) standardized convergence, (2) adaptive convergence, (3) mixed convergence, and (4) cross-media divergence. Strategies are described across macro elements developed through a novel fine-grained framework. We discuss our results by exemplifying how communication consistency is reached across identified strategies. With this study that simultaneously analyzes the website and social media communication strategies of IBs, we contribute to the marketing communication literature by conceptualizing key global integrated online marketing communication strategies. In closing, we provide several managerial implications and recommendations for further research on this topic.

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Introduction

Nowadays, websites and social media embody crucial means by which international brands (IBs)¹ communicate internationally (Ashraf et al. 2017; Chang 2011; Porcu and Del Barrio-García 2022), hence creating multiple virtual touchpoints with customers and increasing their recognition. To better inform, persuade, and drive action of current and future customers, IBs particularly aim to attain communication consistency via Integrated Marketing Communications (hereafter IMCs) strategies, and, therefore, adopt the ‘same voice’ across multiple channels (Batra and Lane Keller 2016; Kliatchko 2008; Porcu and Del Barrio-García 2022). In this vein, communication, encompassing both visual and textual elements, is not viewed in isolation; rather, it is interactively integrated across multiple channels (Kitchen and Tourky 2015). Therefore, companies seek synergy among different

means of communication to effectively create a consistent marketing communication strategy and a strong brand image (Batra and Lane Keller 2016).

Previous literature on international marketing communications has highlighted that, when dealing with a wide and variegated business landscape, IBs not only need to ensure the consistency of the messages they transmit, but also should consider the cultural differences that exist across different countries around the world (Gould, Lerman, and Grein 1999; Melewar et al. 2009; Kitchen and Tourky 2012). Several studies have explored how firms manage this challenge when developing online communication strategies for a global audience (Agrawal 1995; Melewar et al. 2009; Marios and Leonidou 2003). Some researchers, for instance, provided empirical support that, when entering and serving foreign markets, IBs tend to adapt communications through online channels (e.g., Sinkovics, Yamin, and Hossinger 2007; Yalcin et al. 2011), especially where culturally sensitive communication is crucial for determining higher engagement and interactivity with diverse customers (Fernández-Cavia et al. 2017; Murthy 2012). On the other hand, scholars also recognized the benefits of standardizing communications, whereby IBs keep the same advertising messages and content across markets (e.g., Chang 2011; Rao-Nicholson and Khan 2017; Shin and Huh 2009), resulting in lower campaign development costs and stronger brand image (Marios and Leonidou 2003). Other studies suggested that to maintain a global image but also be responsive to the characteristics of local communities, IBs may opt for a more hybrid approach, wherein the company utilizes a standardized global approach while adopting at the same time specific localized details (e.g., use of visuals, copies, and appeals according to local needs) (Gould, Lerman, and Grein 1999; Kitchen and Tourky 2012; Zvobgo and Melewar 2011).

Despite the lively debate in international marketing literature on the importance of developing consistent online communication, we still lack an understanding on how IMCs strategies are implemented by IBs (Kitchen and Tourky 2012; Kitchen 2017) both across different channels and different countries (Almeida-Santana, Moreno-Gil, and Boza-Chirino 2018; Kitchen 2017; Lingling et al. 2022). Moreover, even though both the website and social media are jointly considered essential means of international communication (Chang 2011; Lingling et al. 2022), previous studies on IMCs did not address the combination of online channels (Batra and Lane Keller 2016; Payne, Peltier, and Barger 2017). Indeed, most studies on IMCs have dealt with traditional-new media, and online-offline media (Batra and Lane Keller 2016). As a result, it is still difficult to grasp whether and how IBs achieve communication consistency in terms of adaptation and standardization approaches among social media and websites (Almeida-Santana, Moreno-Gil, and Boza-Chirino 2018; Ryans, Griffith, and White 2003), where consistency means the use of the same patterns (e.g., features, meaning of information) across media (Dennis, Fuller, and Valacich 2008).

To fill this gap, our research investigates what online IMCs strategies IBs implement when communicating across different channels and countries. Do IBs standardize or adapt communication via websites and social media across countries? We question how communication consistency is reached in a global context. Coherent communication integration via a wide range of platforms is paramount for developing successful strategies for IMCs (Porcu and Del Barrio-García 2022). Moreover, as the use of different online channels contributes to the provision of value-added information to consumers, it is

important to understand how to develop integrated online international marketing strategies that enhance the satisfaction of different cultural customers' requests.

To respond to our research question, we choose to conduct a content analysis and examine the design and content of websites and social media (Instagram page) of 75 IBs operating in two distinct markets: Italy and Russia. By extending previous research (Harris and Attour 2003; Whitelock and Chung 1989), we develop a fine-grained framework that captures the different levels of online communication consistency in terms of adaptation and standardization. We analyze the online IMCs strategies of the selected IBs and discuss how communication consistency is reached.

Our findings show that the majority of the analyzed brands implement a contingency approach, which translates into using a standardized approach for websites, which strengthens brand image across countries, and an adaptation approach for social media, which accommodates different cultural differences. Moreover, we contribute to IMC literature by providing empirical support of three additional IMCs strategies (standardized convergence, adaptive convergence, mixed convergence) that IBs use when integrating communication across countries and channels. We further discuss our findings addressing the most salient issues in IMCs literature. With this study, we help managers and practitioners of IBs redefine the design and contents of their online communication strategies in different markets by offering a detailed description of the IMCs strategies, thereby supporting them in making more informed strategic and operational marketing decisions.

Theoretical background

The American Association of Advertising Agencies (Caywood and Ewing 1991) defines IMCs as a concept that emphasizes the need for synergy in marketing communications programs. IMCs attempt to combine, integrate, and synergize elements of the communications channel, as the strengths of one are used to offset the weaknesses of others (Kitchen et al. 2004). The goal of IMCs is to influence or directly affect the behavior of the selected audience by considering all sources companies use for communication (Kitchen et al. 2004; Kliatchko 2008). The research on IMCs is vast, and the concept itself is considered multidimensional as encompasses IMCs' outcomes, scope, strategy, modes, and supporting organizational processes (Tafesse and Kitchen 2017). Taking in this study a strategy lens, we notably discuss the main elements of online integration strategy: communication consistency and media synergy (Tafesse and Kitchen 2017).

With the fast pace of technological advances and social media marketing adoption (Ashraf et al. 2017; Lingling et al. 2022), there is growing evidence that online communication media have a strong impact on the overall effectiveness of marketing campaigns, and that one medium can improve the effectiveness of another (Kliatchko 2008; Tafesse and Korneliusson 2013). Furthermore, the literature acknowledges that to reach effectiveness in communication, the messages used across different media should attain communication consistency (Tafesse and Korneliusson 2013). Drawing on the logic of synergy, communication consistency means that a coherent message is delivered to the audience as a holistic unit (Šerić 2018). Indeed, consumers do not see marketing communications as separate and divisible components (Batra and Lane Keller 2016). One message from a media channel is built upon another channel's message, creating a media synergy of the

main communication a brand wants to transmit (Payne, Peltier, and Barger 2017; Porcu and Del Barrio-García 2022). Communication consistency can be pursued either in a cross-media context, where synergetic execution elements and cues are simultaneously deployed across multiple media channels (Dennis, Fuller, and Valacich 2008; McGrath 2005), or in a sequential media context, where synergetic execution elements and cues are deployed in a longitudinal media campaign (Tafesse and Korneliusen 2013).

Keeping communication consistent may be problematic for IBs, as they operate in many culturally distant countries all over the world (Kitchen and Tourky 2012). Within international marketing literature, the debate regarding marketing communication development is discussed within the standardization vs. adaptation stream of research (Agrawal 1995; Mandler et al. 2021; Marios and Leonidou 2003), as well as within the contingency perspective (Grein and Gould 1996). Below we expose the approaches implemented in different media (social media and website) and highlight recognized advantages and disadvantages. The synthesis of the literature overview is presented in Table 1.

The stream of studies following the standardization school of thought leverages the idea that, as long as technology evolves, cultural distance can be narrowed, leading to greater convergence of cultures toward one more homogenous and global (Agrawal 1995; Leonidas, Fotiadis, and Coudounaris 2016; Marios and Leonidou 2003). The standardization approach enables brands to strengthen their identity and products' global image and create a 'transferable experience', such as using the same marketing communication across different countries (Vrontis 2005). Moreover, it lowers design costs, campaign development, and managerial complexity, which may be compelling for many multinationals (Rao-Nicholson and Khan 2017; Marios and Leonidou 2003).

The standardization of marketing communication on websites concerns standardized online formats, such as screen layouts, navigation tools, and colors (Shin and Huh 2009). A standardized website approach uses uniform messages in international markets, with no modification of headings, illustrations, or copy, except for translation (Sinkovics, Yamin, and Hossinger 2007). This approach is frequently used in the Member States of the European Union, where the cross-market homogeneity of consumer characteristics, market structure, and media accessibility is especially noticeable (Okazaki and Skapa 2008).

On the other hand, the standardization of marketing communication on social media may occur through the use of standardized types of content published (i.e., images, texts, and videos). Particularly, when referring to social media, studies have shown standardized communication effectively increase brand recognition or 'brand recall', which leads to more considerable attention and greater engagement of customers towards the brand's posts (Copuš and Čarnogurský 2017). However, scholars acknowledge that standardizing social media communication is quite challenging due to the high level of customer engagement and interaction and the attention given to the specific features of the local markets that such a communication channel requires (Berthon et al. 2012).

According to the adaptation school of thought, the micro and macro differences across countries (e.g., in terms of languages, national attitudes and behaviors, political and legal systems, cultures, product usage conditions, industry characteristics, and economic development) have pushed international marketers toward more adaptive and tailored approaches in cross-cultural online communication (Vrontis 2005; Yalcin et al. 2011). IBs are sometimes 'forced' to adopt local or country-specific strategies to cater to those

Table 1. Overview of the literature on online global communication: standardization, adaptation, and contingency approaches.

Approach	Authors	Communication characteristics	Advantages	Disadvantages
Standardization	● (Berthon et al. 2012);	Uniformed messages in international markets, with no modification of headings, illustrations, or copy, except for translation	*Lowers design costs, campaign development, and managerial complexity *Strengthens global image	*Messages do not account for cultural differences *Lowers customer engagement
	● (Copuș and Carnogursky 2017);			
	● (Shin and Huh 2009);			
	● (Vrontis Sinkovics, Yamin, and Hossinger 2007)			
	● (Chang 2011;			
	Leonidas, Fotiadis, and Coudounaris 2016);			
	● (Khan, Dongping, and Wahab 2016);			
	● (Okazaki and Alonso 2003);			
	● (Singh and Matsuo 2004);			
	● (Yalcin et al. 2011)			
Contingency	● (Chung, Lu Wang, and Huang 2012);	Mixed implementation of standardization and adaptation approaches for content and design development	Helps to leverage cross-cultural communication according to the situational factors	Increases managerial complexity and performance tracking
	● (Copuș and Carnogursky 2017);			
	● (Copuș and Carnogursky 2017);			
	● (Ryans, Griffith, and Steven White 2003);			
	● (Marios and Leonidou 2003);			
	● (Vrontis et al. 2009)			

markets (Singh and Matsuo 2004), to achieve higher degrees of responsiveness to local needs and behaviors, and to increase their competitiveness (Agrawal 1995; Leonidas, Fotiadis, and Coudounaris 2016).

Many studies have revealed that adapted or country-specific website designs had better-seized customer behavior differences, leading to higher conversion rates (Chang 2011; Yalcin et al. 2011). Therefore, via adaptation, firms are inclined to customize their messages, web content, advertising visuals, and emotional/psychological appeals (Okazaki and Alonso 2003; Singh and Matsuo 2004) to meet different cultural expectations and thus increase purchase intention and customer satisfaction (i.e., more positive perceptions by customers) (Singh and Matsuo 2004).

For social media, adaptation translates into greater interactivity and engagement with the target audience (Fernández-Cavia et al. 2017). By learning customer preferences, social media facilitate greater personalization and adaptation of messages and closer connection of people, as well as 'virality' and human interaction through sharing texts, videos, and images (Murthy 2012).

According to previous literature, IBs may also implement a contingency approach (Chung, Lu Wang, and Huang 2012; Gould, Lerman, and Grein 1999; Zvobgo and Melewar 2011), which is neither complete standardization nor complete adaptation (Agrawal 1995). A contingency approach to global communication argues that there should be coordination of global communication programs, but that the level and nature of the coordination that occurs across countries may vary depending on a variety of underlying, non-uniform factors (Grein and Gould 1996). In this perspective, IBs may combine standardization and adaptation, potentially leading to standardized strategies (e.g., in the brand logo development) while leveraging adapted executions (e.g., use of visuals, copies, and appeals) according to local needs. In other words, firms may maintain a global marketing image while accounting for cultural differences and market dynamics (Chung, Lu Wang, and Huang 2012). The standardization or adaptation of marketing strategies may not be working separately but may be part of the same continuum in which proper approaches are chosen based on the evaluation of relevant marketing situations and cultural factors (Chung, Lu Wang, and Huang 2012; Ryans, Griffith, and Steven White 2003; Marios and Leonidou 2003; Vrontis et al. 2009). In other words, firms may keep a global marketing image while accounting for cultural differences and the dynamics of the markets served (Ford et al. 2011; Griffith et al. 2014).

Despite previous literature has addressed the variety of marketing communication approaches, it is still unclear how IBs integrate their online communication in terms of adaptation and standardization approaches while considering both different channels and different countries.

Methodology

To investigate how IBs implement IMCs strategies across different channels and countries, we chose to perform content analysis. Content analysis has been extensively used in social-sciences research, especially when conducting cross-country studies (Rice and Zaiming 1988). This approach seeks to systematically analyze and evaluate texts (e.g., documents, verbal communications, messages, graphics), converting qualitative data into

quantitative data. Furthermore, this technique allows us to make valid and replicable inferences by interpreting and coding textual materials (Krippendorff 2018).

Framework development

To understand whether and how communication consistency in terms of design and content of the website and social media is reached within IMCs strategy in different countries, we elaborated upon the model introduced by Harris and Attour (2003) and Whitelock and Chung (1989). Notably, we developed an extended version of the original framework that enabled us to capture the understanding of online communication through websites and social media. The variables were developed on the basis of previous literature on advertising (Jin 2010; Whitelock and Chung 1989), intercultural web communication (Reinecke and Bernstein 2013; Würtz 2005), and digital design (Chang 2011).

To ensure the content validity of the framework, five marketing managers from different sectors were involved (Sekaran and Bougie 2016). The experts were asked to rate the appropriateness of each dimension in the framework to assess communication consistency, as well as the representativeness of each item to the corresponding dimension. After the analysis of the frameworks, marketing experts expressed their judgments by computing a 4-point scale from 1 ('not relevant') to 4 ('highly relevant') (Lynn 1986). To assess the content validity, we computed the item-level content validity index (I-CVI), that is, the proportion of the experts who agreed on items' relevance by evaluating each item as relevant (3) or highly relevant (4) (Lynn 1986). When I-CVI value was lower than .78, items were removed (Lynn 1986; Polit, Tatano Beck, and Owen 2007).

The final version of the framework developed to perform the content analysis of online communication through websites incorporates 18 items that we grouped as follows: 7 items for *landing page design*, 3 items for *content*, 4 items for *product portrayal*, and 4 items for *other website elements*. Landing page design refers to all visible aspects related to the homepage of the website and its design. It encompasses subcategories like visual background, picture usage, person and product placement, interface color, menu bar, and the mobile page's appearance. Regarding the content category, it includes subcategories such as landing page headlines, about us page description, and the help section. The product portrayal category includes the product name, slogan, and meaning of product description for two products of the same brand. The other website category elements include search engine subcategories, chatbot, newsletter's call to action, and e-shop appearance. See Table 2 for a complete list of all the elements included in the website framework, which served as a coding manual.

To carry out the analysis of the design and content of online communication through social media, we choose to analyze the Instagram profiles of IBs. 2017 Although Facebook has been primarily considered the leading online communication means for years, we found that Instagram has become a very popular social media site reaching more than one billion active users per month and 500 million per day (Instagram 2019). Indeed, with the increasing importance gained by influencer marketing, most brands have cited Instagram as the primary social media channel (Evans et al. 2017).

The framework developed to perform the content analysis of online communication through social media incorporates 12 items: 3 items for page design, 3 items for content, 4 items for product portrayal, and 2 items for other elements. Page design refers to all

Table 2. Coding manual – website analysis.

1. Page design 30 points	Codification guidelines
1.1 Visual background(5 points)	Minor differences 2.5 points
1.2 Person placement (5 points)	Major differences 5 points Minor differences 2.5 points
1.3 Product placement (5 points)	Major differences 5 points Minor differences 2.5 points
1.4 Media format (5 points)	Major differences 5 points Minor differences 2.5 points
1.5 Menu design (3 points)	Major differences 5 points Minor differences 1 point
1.6 Mobile page (2 points)	Major differences 3 points Minor differences 1 point
1.7 Color of the interface (5 points)	Major differences 2 points Minor differences 2.5 points
2. Content 20 points	Major differences 5 points
2.1 Landing page headline (8 points)	Same language/different meaning 2 points
2.2 About us page (8 points)	Translated/same meaning 5 points Translated/different meaning 8 points Same language/different meaning 2 points
2.3 FAQ page 4 points	Translated/same meaning 5 points Translated/different meaning 8 points Same language/different meaning 1 point
3. Product portrayal 25 points	Translated/same meaning 2 points Translated/different meaning 4 points
3.1 Product name (6 points)	Same language/different meaning 2 points
3.2 Product description (7 points)	Translated/same meaning 4 points Translated/different meaning 6 points Same language/different meaning 2 points T
3.3 Product slogan (6 points)	Translated/same meaning 5 points Translated/different meaning 7 points Same language/different meaning 2 points
3.4 Picture usage (6 points)	Translated/same meaning 4 points Translated/different meaning 6 points Minor differences 3 points
4. Other elements 25 points	Major differences 6 points

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

4.1 Newsletter call to action (6 points)	Same language/different meaning 2 points
	Translated/same meaning 4 points
	Translated/different meaning 6 points
4.2 E-shop design (7 points)	Minor differences 3 points
	Major differences 7 points
4.3 Search engine (6 points)	Minor differences 3 points
	Major differences 6 points
4.4 Chatbot (6 points)	Minor differences 3 points
	Major differences 6 points

visible aspects of the Instagram account and its design; thus, avatar pictures, structure of story extensions, products, and celebrity placements. The content dimension includes posts' content and the company description section. Product portrayal concerns elements like product description, slogan, name, and the usage of pictures. Finally, the action buttons and the appearance of the e-shop were included as additional items. See [Table 3](#) for a complete list of all the elements included in the social media framework by which we were guided during the coding.

Following the logic of previous studies (Harris and Attour 2003), we distributed the scores in accordance with the coding schemes until reaching a maximum score of 100, which points out total adaptation. Notably, the weights assigned to each element of social media and website frameworks were based on the key relevance of some elements in the overall communication strategy. For instance, for the website, the landing page headline and the about us page weigh 8 points, whereas differences in the FAQ page weigh 4 points.

Sample selection

To study the IMC in a global context, we focused our research on two countries: Italy and Russia. Although this study does not aim to apply a cultural perspective, the fact that Russia and Italy significantly differ across several cultural dimensions, such as power distance, masculinity, and individualism (Hofstede 1984), gave us the possibility to examine communication consistency across online channels. Moreover, given the Russian authors' sophisticated linguistic capabilities, we also chose these countries for a pragmatic motive.

We began the sample selection by analyzing top brand valuation reports issued by Brand Finance 2021 (<https://brandfinance.com/>), a leading independent marketing consultancy that offers transparent and accessible brand valuation (Haigh 1999). Companies with Italian, Russian, and English websites and Instagram accounts were selected. If a company had an Italian Instagram account but did not provide a Russian version, it was excluded from our sample as these companies were out of our research target. In accordance with previous research (Capece and Di Pillo 2021), we used English as the benchmark because it is the favored language for international science, business, and

Table 3. Coding manual – social media (Instagram) analysis.

	Codification guidelines
1. Page design 25 points	
1.1 Avatar picture (9 points)	Minor differences 4 points Major differences 9 points
1.2 Design of stories extensions (7 points)	Minor differences 3 points Major differences 7 points
1.3 Celebrity placement (9 points)	Minor differences 4 points Major differences 9 points
2. Content 25 points	
2.1 Company description (8 points)	Same language/different meaning 2 points Translated/same meaning 5 points Translated/different meaning 8 points
2.2 Post description (9 points)	Same language/different meaning 3 points Translated/same meaning 6 points Translated/different meaning 9 points
2.3 Hashtag usage (8 points)	Same language/different meaning 2 points Translated/same meaning 5 points Translated/different meaning 8 points
3. Product portrayal 30 points	
3.1 Product name (8 points)	Same language/different meaning 2 points Translated/same meaning 5 points Translated/different meaning 8 points
3.2 Products description (8 points)	Same language/different meaning 2 points Translated/same meaning 5 points Translated/different meaning 8 points
3.3 Product slogan (6 points)	Same language/different meaning 2 points Translated/same meaning 4 points Translated/different meaning 6 points
3.4 Picture usage (8 points)	Minor differences 3 points Major differences 8 points
4 Other elements 20 points	
4.1 Action buttons (10 points)	Minor differences 5 points Major differences 10 points
4.2 E-shop function (10 points)	Minor differences 5 points Major differences 10 points

trade. The English versions of the websites and social media are directed at an international market, and therefore should be less influenced by country characteristics. To grasp cross-industry differences in developing online communications (Šerić 2018), we opted

for a more representative sample by including firms belonging to different industries (apparel, automobile, food and drink, cosmetics producers, and ICT). A final pool of 75 IBs was obtained.

Data analysis

Following the best practice of content analysis (Krippendorff 2018), we first run a pilot coding procedure on a random subsample to adjust the coding scheme and verify the initial inter-reliability across two coders. Two native speakers were selected within a research team to proceed with the text in Russian and Italian; the training took place to ensure the correct coding implementation. Subsequently, the actual coding was performed independently by each author on a comprehensive set of 150 websites and 150 social-media pages from April to June.

In performing content analysis, following the coding manuals, we proceeded as follows. For instance, if the color of a corporate website's interface was different across pages, we assigned a value of 5. Thus, if the interface's color slightly varied, we set a value of 2.5. However, if the interface's color did not change, we assigned a value of 0. The same logic of the scoring system used for the webpages was implemented for the Instagram pages. For example, if an avatar's picture differed across pages, we assigned a value of 9. If it was slightly varied, we assigned a value of 4. However, if the picture did not change, we gave a value of 0.

To ensure intra-coder reliability, i.e., consistency of coding over time, the comparison of both coders' coding took place. Notably, we calculated the reliability index proposed by Perreault and Leigh (1989) to assess the inter-coder reliability. Concerning website coding, all the reliability scores exceeded 0.90, far exceeding the widely accepted minimum of 0.80. Regarding the social media analysis, the reliability scores varied between 0.85 and 0.90.

We then computed a total score for website and social media separately for two countries. Following the guiding frameworks' logic, where 100 is the maximum, the total scores ranging from 0 to 49.99 were categorized as those implementing the standardization approach. In contrast, companies having total scores per country ranging from 50 (included) to 100 were categorized as those implementing the adaptation approach. This assignment was made for both website and social media values. Doing so allowed us to see the co-occurrence of the implemented strategies across channels and countries and capture the communication consistency (or inconsistency).

Results

Online integrated marketing communication strategies

Based on the performed co-occurrence analysis (see Table 4), we identified four common configurations of IBs integrating online communication across two different countries and online channels. Notably, what we called, (1) *cross-media divergence (contingency)*, represents a strategy where firms utilize a standardization approach for websites and an adaptation approach for social media in both countries; (2) *standardized convergence* employs the use of a standardization approach for both website and social media in



Table 4. Co-occurrence analysis of international brands communication across countries and channels.

Brand	Industry	Italy - Website score	Russia - Website score	Italy - Social Media score	Russia - Social Media score	Strategy
Toyota	auto	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptive convergence
Renault	auto	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptive convergence
Kia	auto	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptive convergence
Skoda	auto	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptive convergence
Lexus	auto	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptive convergence
Subaru	auto	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptive convergence
Coca Cola	food	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptive convergence
Hyundai	auto	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptive convergence
Isuzu	auto	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptive convergence
Suzuki	auto	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptation	adaptive convergence
Skechers	apparel	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Land Rover	auto	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Nivea	cosmetics	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Ford	auto	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Avon	cosmetics	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Microsoft	ICT	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
LG	ICT	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Volvo	auto	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Barilla	food	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
McDonald's	food	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Jeep	auto	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Starbucks	food	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Audi	auto	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Porsche	auto	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Schwarzkopf	cosmetics	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Samsung	ICT	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Harley-Davidson	auto	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Nespresso	food	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
L'Occitane	cosmetics	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued).

Brand	Industry	Italy - Website score	Russia - Website score	Italy - Social Media score	Russia - Social Media score	Strategy
Lavazza	food	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Philips	ICT	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Clarins	cosmetics	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Burger King	food	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
KFC	food	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Garnier	cosmetics	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Huawei	ICT	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Lays	food	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Kinder	food	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Panasonic	ICT	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Speedo	apparel	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Mini	auto	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Jaguar	auto	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Pringles	food	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Ferrero	food	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
M-A-C	cosmetics	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Benefit	cosmetics	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Gillette	cosmetics	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Pantene	cosmetics	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Siemens	ICT	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Canon	ICT	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
PlayStation	ICT	standardization	standardization	adaptation	adaptation	cross-media divergence
Mitsubishi	auto	standardization	adaptation	standardization	adaptation	mixed convergence
Fiat	auto	standardization	adaptation	standardization	adaptation	mixed convergence
Under Armour	apparel	standardization	adaptation	standardization	adaptation	mixed convergence
Uniqlo	apparel	standardization	adaptation	standardization	adaptation	mixed convergence
Clinique	cosmetics	standardization	adaptation	standardization	adaptation	mixed convergence
Peugeot	auto	standardization	adaptation	standardization	adaptation	mixed convergence
Sephora	cosmetics	standardization	adaptation	standardization	adaptation	mixed convergence

(Continued)



Table 4. (Continued).

Brand	Industry	Italy - Website score	Russia - Website score	Italy - Social Media score	Russia - Social Media score	Strategy
Adidas	apparel	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
The North Face	apparel	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
Lenovo	ICT	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
Sony	ICT	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
NYX	cosmetics	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
GAP	apparel	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
Mercedes	auto	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
Red Bull	food	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
Dolce Gusto	food	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
Levis	apparel	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
Swatch	apparel	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
Volkswagen	auto	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
Maserati	auto	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
BMW	auto	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
Bacardí	food	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
Heineken	food	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence
Xiaomi	ICT	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardization	standardized convergence

Table 5. Online integrated marketing communications strategies.

	Standardized convergence	Adaptive convergence	Mixed convergence	Cross-media divergence
Page design	Uniform across both channels	Country-customized across both channels	Standardized for Italy and adapted for Russia across both channels	Standardized for website and adapted for social media
Content	Translated and localized with the same meaning	Independently created and culturally adapted for both channels	Standardized for Italy and adapted for Russia across both channels	Translated with the same meaning for website and culturally adapted for social media
Product portrayal	Highly standardized for websites and more localized for social media	Highly localized for both channels	Standardized for Italy and adapted for Russia across both channels	Uniform for website and adaptive for social media
Other elements	Homogeneous	Heterogeneous	Standardized for Italy and adapted for Russia across both channels	Mixed

two countries; (3) *adaptive convergence*, which means that firms utilize adaptation approaches for website and social media in two countries; and (4) *mixed convergence*, where firms utilize standardization approach for one country across both channels and adaptation approach in another country across both channels. The descriptions of each strategy are synthesized in Table 5.

Cross-media divergence – contingency approach

The cross-media divergence strategy implemented by brands leads to a combination of both approaches: website standardization and social media adaptation. In this vein, social media is used as an informal channel for corporate communication. Thus, by localizing a social media strategy, companies are trying to create a more engaging environment for sharing information and communicating with customers. Website instead is developed as a means to strengthen brand image by following a standardization approach in developing communication and design.

Notably, webpages had the same appearance across both countries, copying the constructing design of the website, including navigating elements and menu. Pictures used did not vary greatly, as used interchangeably across both countries. Placement of the same models and celebrities across different countries greatly enhances the global image of brands, leading to greater recognition in foreign countries. On social media, instead, brands greatly adapt pictures and designs to reflect cultural differences. For instance, posting pictures in natural environments that reflect the landscape of the country may bring brands closer to the customers of a particular country.

Content strategy also leads to a mixed combination. On websites, IBs translate texts with the same meaning, while on social media, the content varies significantly from country to country. In social media, communication and storytelling are in no way intertwined between countries. The social media strategy is developed at the country level and guided by cultural differences. For example, on the Instagram pages of Pantene, we observed different company slogans. On the English profile, which is not influenced by cultural differences, we read, *'Always here to help you have a #GreatHairDay'*. On the Italian page, we read, *'No matter who you are, what hair you have, Pantene always supports you on your journey to achieve your ideal, your transformation. #HairHasNoGender'* (translated from Italian). On the Russian page, we read, *'In Russia, we are all different, as well as our hair'* (translated from Russian). The adaptation approach was also visible in the techniques used to increase user engagement. For instance, on Russian and Italian social media accounts, at the moment of data collection, Instagram users could participate in competitions. Still, the conditions of competitions and the hashtags used to track participants were different (e.g., *#myhairpantene* in Russia and *#ohmygold* in Italy).

The product portrayal followed the same approach. Brands implementing a contingency approach present, describe and promote their product in the same manner on their websites while adjusting these practices on social media. On social media, brands' products are intertwined with cultural differences and traditions. As in the case of Playstation, while strictly following the same line on websites, on Instagram, in Italy, the company posted an adapted picture of pasta imitating the console buttons. At the same time, on the Russian page, the joystick was placed close to the caviar and mandarins, typical food for Russians celebrating the New Year.

Standardized convergence

Brands that implement standardized convergence mainly adopt a standardization approach in media, unifying content, and design across countries. Standard webpage design ensures a consistent experience for Internet users regardless of the country of navigation and enhances the global image of international brands. In some cases, the same images and color design were used in both media, creating seamless navigation resulting from switching between social media and the website and nurturing a sense of 'familiarity' and consistent brand recognition among web users. Nevertheless, this approach does not greatly account for the cultural differences between both culturally distant countries. By creating uniform page designs across countries and channels, brands in this group may reach strong brand recognition and cost reduction. Still, they will struggle to create a sense of recognition and a high degree of responsiveness to local needs and behaviors by not considering cultural differences.

In terms of content strategy, we observed that brands implementing standardized convergence take a translation approach for the Italian market and a localization approach for Russian, always keeping the same meaning in both media. Here, translation means the literal duplication of meaning from one language to another, while localization means transferring meaning to meet both linguistic and cultural expectations (Batova and Clark 2015). However, when it comes to hashtags in social media, those are almost always written in English (for example, #ImpossibleIsNothing for Adidas). This choice may bring together customers from different countries, creating a sense of community and sharing.

The portrayal of products is highly standardized for both countries and the media. The description, slogan, and representation of products on websites follow the same line and, as a result, may be perceived in the same manner by users of analyzed countries. While using the same name across countries is common among multinationals to keep a consistent brand image and value (Liu et al. 2016), applying this technique for product description in social media may hinder user engagement as it does not reflect unique characteristics, useful for that country.

Adaptive convergence

Brands pursuing an adaptive convergence design strategy, that is, those that implement an adaptive approach in both media, adjust their content and design strategy in accordance with differences in countries. The implemented designs vary greatly across countries and communication channels as companies try to accommodate cultural differences to be more local. Cultural design adaptations translate into different visual backgrounds, interface colors, and celebrity endorsements. Considering the country's culture, firms try to create a sense of closeness with their customers.

The content strategy is unsynchronized and independently created across countries and communication channels. For instance, as depicted in Kia's landing pages, we observed that the messages seen by users differ from one country to another ('*Stop wandering. Start driving*' – the headline of the English version; '*Time to be electric*' – the headline of the Italian version; '*Wake up your feelings*' – the headline of the Russian

version). When communicating online in Russia and Italy, IBs produce content that aligns with local events, traditions, and habits.

The offer of products, as well as their appearance, differ from country to country. When describing the characteristics of a product, companies highlight different benefits and use different slogans to grab the attention of customers. For example, when describing a car model in Italy, Lexus emphasizes sophisticated technology and cutting-edge innovation, while in Russia, the same model is portrayed from an aesthetic point of view as having a unique design and superior style. The trend toward using adapted product names, slogans, and descriptions is observed in both media.

Mixed convergence

In our sample, brands adopting mixed convergence use a standardized approach for Italy across both channels and an adaptation approach in Russia. In this perspective, IBs differently perceive and treat users from different countries across both channels. For these companies, Russia represents a culturally diverse market in comparison with Italy, where adaptation of content and design is needed.

Contents for Italian websites pursue the standardization approach across both channels, which indicates unified content creation. We note global celebrity endorsements for Italian websites and social media profiles, which indicate endorsement of a belief that Italian culture converges toward the global one. Similarly, the design of the website and social media is unified, which gives the experience of synergy between the channels.

Conversely, on Russian webpages and social media profiles, there is a track of adaptation approach, translated into using different content and design communication approaches. Despite applying standardized approaches in Italy and Russia, the same IBs develop communication strategies to accommodate national cultural differences. For instance, IBs develop personalized and highly contextualized messages and localized value propositions through different image placements, calls to action, celebrity endorsements, and storytelling.

Discussion

Given the importance of integrated communications in international marketing, this work investigated how IBs reach communication consistency in terms of standardization and adaptation approaches between their websites and social media channels across different markets. The focus on brands from several industries operating in Russian and Italian markets enabled us to make some valuable contributions to the literature on IMCs and international marketing in general. While previous research has greatly enhanced the theoretical understanding of IMCs (Batra and Lane Keller 2016; Tafessea and Kitchen 2017), empirical investigation of how IBs implement IMCs strategies has been lacking (Kitchen 2017), especially from a global perspective (Payne, Peltier, and Barger 2017; Šerić 2018). Within our study, we revealed that IBs might adopt one of the four strategies when developing online IMCs when consider the website and social media simultaneously: (1) standardized convergence, where firms utilize a standardization approach for both website and social media; (2) adaptive convergence, where firms utilize adaptation

approaches for both media; (3) cross-media divergence, where firms utilize standardization approach for websites, and adaptation approach for social media and (4) mixed convergence, where firms utilize standardization approach for one country across both channels, and adaptation approach in another country across both channels.

Previous studies have argued that communication consistency can be reached in simultaneous or sequential ways (Dennis, Fuller, and Valacich 2008; McGrath 2005; Tafesse and Korneliussen 2013). Based on our results, we argued that by applying the standardized convergence, IBs reach total media synergy and strong communication consistency simultaneously, as developing the content and implementing the design in a uniformed manner across media in different countries. While it may help to reach cost optimization and decreases managerial complexity (Agrawal 1995; Leonidas, Fotiadis, and Coudounaris 2016; Marios and Leonidou 2003), standardizing social media channels may hinder user engagement as it does not create points of self-identification with cultural characteristics, unique for that country (Fernández-Cavia et al. 2017). On the other hand, by implementing the adaptive convergence strategy, IBs also reach media synergy and communication consistency. Nevertheless, the communication consistency is not transmitted across countries, as IBs develop communication strategies according to the cultural differences of a given country. This strategy perfectly reflects cultural characteristics which are simultaneously transmitted on websites and social media. While beneficial for customer loyalty and engagement (Singh and Matsuo 2004), this strategy is costly and may lead to non-consistency on the global arena. By implementing a different strategy, mixed convergence, IBs reach media and communication consistency in a given country, but not on a global level. As implementing different approaches in Italy and Russia, IBs may strengthen the focus of the message across countries but may transmit different meanings and brand values on a global level. Differently from previous strategies, where IBs simultaneously deploy communication across multiple media channels to reach synergetic execution elements, IBs implementing cross-media divergence don't reach media synergy in a straightforward way. Interestingly, they subsequently adopt the content and design to the cultural differences of a given country to strengthen the main message transmitted by the website in a standardized manner.

By responding to numerous calls to address international and cross-cultural perspectives in IMCs (Payne, Peltier, and Barger 2017; Šerić 2018), with our study, we advance research on IMCs from a global perspective. Previous research has suggested that multinationals use a contingency approach when integrating communication strategies, which is maintaining the global marketing image and accounting for cultural differences (Gould, Lerman, and Grein 1999; Okazaki 2012; Zvobgo and Melewar 2011). We complement previous studies by revealing that the implementation of a contingency approach is translated into using a standardized approach for websites, which strengthens brand image across countries, and an adaptation approach for social media, which accommodates different cultural differences. Moreover, despite the majority of the IBs implementing a contingency strategy, we have shown that there are three other strategies that IBs consistently use when developing their communications across countries and communication channels.

Furthermore, previous research has frequently mentioned the divergent perception of IMCs among practitioners and academics (Ford et al. 2011; Laurie and Mortimer 2011). With our study, we have extended previous literature on contingency approach showing

new IMCs strategies implemented by practitioners across different industries and not yet analyzed in the international marketing literature. Although previous research has suggested that multinationals use a contingency approach (Gould, Lerman, and Grein 1999; Zvobgo and Melewar 2011), our research has shown that besides the contingency approach, there are other strategies that IBs consistently use when developing their communications across countries and communication channels. This implies the presence of an undercovered by academia rationale of using different global IMCs strategies. This opens new perspectives into investigating what drives IBs to opt out for different strategies. On the other hand, our results have shown that IBs seek to reach media synergy that can have a strong impact on the overall effectiveness of the campaign and marketing communication, as has been argued by academics (Kliatchko 2008; Laurie and Mortimer 2011).

With the increasing role of digital technologies playing in developing, managing, and supporting customer relationships (Kitchen 2017), with this study, we contribute to IMCs from a digital perspective. Although previous research has analyzed several combinations of IMCs strategies, such as the combination of traditional and new media and online and offline channels (Batra and Lane Keller 2016; Šerić 2018), to the best of the authors' knowledge, this is pioneering research in terms of analyzing online integrated communication of IBs (online and online channels, website and social media). Making this initial effort, we provide evidence of how the synergy (or not) of social media and website occurs in practice. We notice that for the majority of IBs, websites represent a source for building a consistent and unique brand image across countries, which translates into using unified design and communication techniques. Social media channel, on the other hand, is used more unconditionally, trying to build a customer-tailored brand image, by accounting for different cultural differences and target groups.

Recognizing the controversy and difficulty in measuring IMCs (Tafessea and Kitchen 2017), we provide an example of how integrated marketing communication and design consistency may be measured across different online channels. Notably, we introduce a novel, fine-grained framework to understand online communication internationally. Previous studies propose frameworks that analyze communication strategies in other communication means (e.g., print media) (Harris and Attour 2003; Whitelock and Chung 1989). We extend previous works by introducing new elements (page design, content, product portrayal, and other elements) to understand communication strategies in an online context.

Practical implications

The present study offers interesting insights for managers, website designers, and practitioners considering developing fully integrated online marketing communication in the global arena. Notably, with this work, we enhance the attention that they should devote to the specific design and content of their communication when dealing with different countries while simultaneously using multiple online channels. Indeed, in this context, we recognize that their efforts in trying to satisfy customers' expectations are greater, as they are required to be increasingly responsive and flexible to changes in international markets' needs.

The findings of this study may help them make more informed marketing decisions, both from an operational and strategic perspective. From an operational perspective, our results may assist practitioners seeking to redefine their online communication by learning more about the key, specific elements that need to be considered when adapting or standardizing the design and content of marketing communication through websites and social media across different countries and media. Indeed, depending on the degree of adaptation vs. standardization approaches they want to achieve, there are different aspects to take into consideration.

Moreover, we advance the knowledge of practitioners and international marketers about how to develop more accurate, effective IMCs strategies, which ensure the successful transmission of the desired message while also leveraging cultural differences to satisfy customers' expectations and familiarity with the brand. Drawing on practical examples of the identified strategies, practitioners may get inspired for the development of content and design across media. Depending on the targeted markets and policies regarding the level of adaptation vs. standardization, managers may follow one of the identified strategies in this study.

Future research and limitations

Despite its contributions, we acknowledge that this work has some limitations. Our analysis focused on IBs' websites and social media pages during a limited period of analysis. Future research should extend the data collection period and observe how trends in the design and content of communication might have changed longitudinally. In this regard, we envision a future stream of research on IBs upon their return to the Russian market after the withdrawal due to recent geopolitical tensions. We call for future research to compare our pre-withdrawal results and the implication of strategies in Russia with strategies IBs will implement after the return. We envision differences in communication development that future research should address.

In our analysis, we chose to compare selected firms outlining online communications for Russian and Italian markets. Our findings did not address other languages; future studies could consider that. Moreover, previous research suggested several factors influencing the integration of global marketing communications (Gould, Lerman, and Grein 1999; Zvobgo and Melewar 2011). Notably, market-situation factors, such as culture, technology pervasiveness, and economic, legal, and political environment of a hosted country, influence the strategic coordination of globally integrated marketing communications strategies for a particular brand. Building upon our conceptualization of global online IMCs strategies, future research could investigate internal and external organizational factors influencing the choice of an IMCs strategy. Furthermore, we restricted our research to a single social media platform (i. e., Instagram). It would be interesting to include other online channels, such as Facebook or TikTok.

Finally, since the attitudes to online advertising vary across countries (Wang and Sun 2010), it would be essential to investigate how the discovered differences affect consumer perceptions and attitudes in different countries. A better understanding of consumers' perceptions of IMCs campaigns will provide useful practical implications.

Notes

1. In our study, we use international brands as a synonym of multinational enterprises that define the strategy and development of marketing communication.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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