

## **Abstract**

This paper analyses integrated marketing communications (IMC) research from its inception in 1991, up to 2012 (included). A bibliometric approach has been applied for the first time to detect and visualize conceptual sub-domains and identify the most salient themes within IMC research via combining co-word analysis and science mapping. The quantitative analysis of a corpus of IMC manuscripts contributes to complement the previous qualitative reviews by using the Wakita and Tsurumi agglomeration algorithm and two-dimensional graphs. The results enable the authors to provide a structure for the conceptual sub-domains, classification of the themes showing internal associations into four groups, and identification of the main research trends. This paper seeks to respond to the calls for greater theoretical clarification of the IMC discipline providing a snapshot of the thematic evolution of IMC research over time enabling researchers to better understand the current state of the art and suggesting future research directions.

## **Keywords**

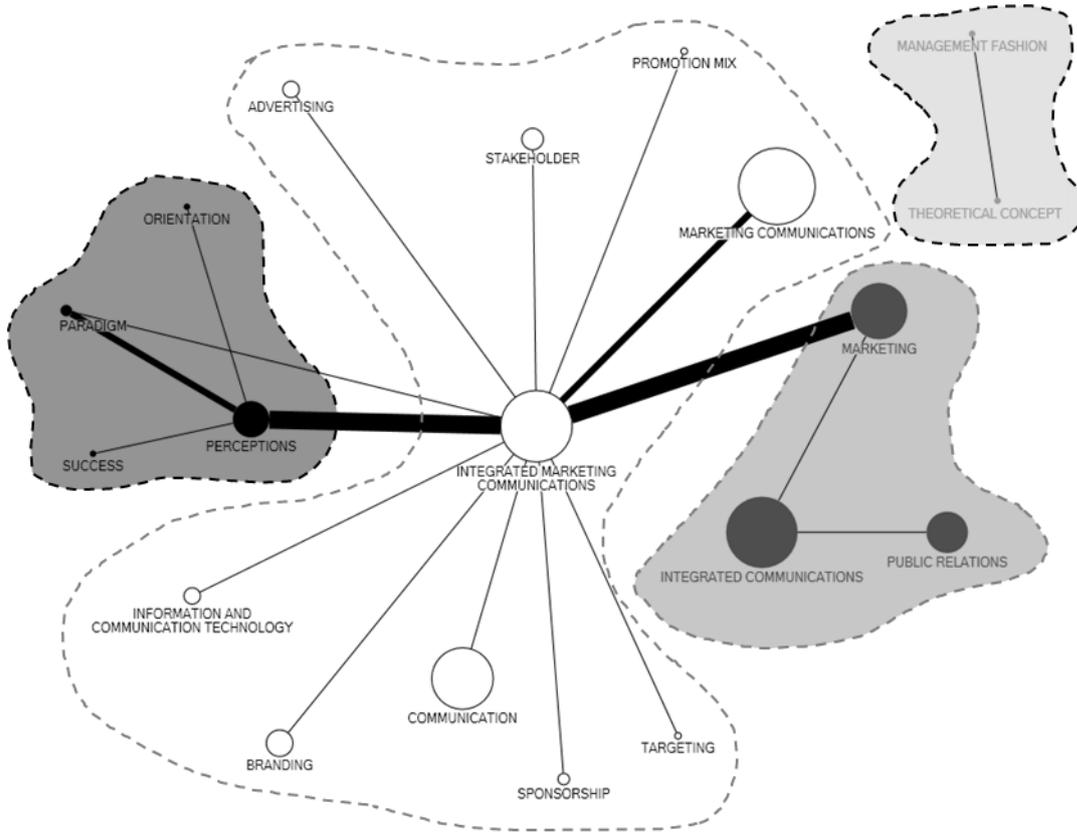
Integrated marketing communications, IMC, bibliometric study, co-word analysis, conceptual evolution

## **Results**

The thematic network the authors extracted with the most frequent terms highlights that the theme INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS (IMC) and the term MARKETING appear to be closely related and a strong relation occurs between IMC and PERCEPTIONS of several agents, and between PERCEPTIONS and PARADIGM, while there is a weaker relationship between PERCEPTIONS and ORIENTATION and SUCCESS.

Moreover, IMC appears to be closely related to ADVERTISING, INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY, PARADIGM, STAKEHOLDER, TARGETING, BRANDING, COMMUNICATION policies, PROMOTION MIX, PUBLIC RELATIONS and SPONSORSHIP. Finally, the analysis shows a relevant relationship between THEORETICAL CONCEPT and MANAGEMENT FASHION (although these themes are not connected to the main network) and a relationship between INTEGRATED COMMUNICATIONS and PUBLIC RELATIONS, albeit this is still quite weak.

Figure: Thematic network with the most important themes and Wakita and Tsurumi's agglomeration algorithm.



In the structure of the conceptual sub-domains of IMC, the authors discover four groups of themes showing internal associations between them: a) studies on **INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS** and its core issues; b) earlier studies on theoretical aspects such as **PERCEPTIONS**, **PARADIGM**, **SUCCESS** and **ORIENTATION**; c) recent studies on **PUBLIC RELATIONS** and **IMC**; and d) studies on the **THEORETICAL CONCEPT** and criticisms considering **IMC** as a **MANAGEMENT FASHION**.

The analysis of streams of research shows that **IMC** and **INTEGRATED COMMUNICATIONS** appear as themes that are very close to each other, representing a clear stream of research; however the number of citations is still fairly low. This finding suggests that **IMC** and **INTEGRATED COMMUNICATIONS** represent two schools of thought currently under development, the latter being an extension of **IMC** to a more corporate and organizational level (Smith, 2012; Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011). In fact, **IMC** is strongly related to **MARKETING**, while the linkage between **INTEGRATED COMMUNICATIONS** and **MARKETING** is fairly weak. Moreover, it is worth noting that **INTEGRATED COMMUNICATIONS** appears to be strongly related to **PUBLIC RELATIONS**, while **IMC** does not display a connection with **PUBLIC RELATIONS**.

A more comprehensive picture of how some themes impact on **IMC** shows that **SUCCESS**, **ORIENTATION** or **PROMOTION MIX** have had, and will continue to have, a strong impact on **IMC**. The group of theoretical aspects (such as the

THEORETICAL CONCEPT of IMC and IMC as a MANAGEMENT FASHION) achieves a relatively high level of impact, while SPONSORSHIP, MARKETING, TARGETING, STAKEHOLDER or INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES have recently attracted the attention of scientific literature, albeit their impact is still very poor.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that theoretical and empirical studies should analyze the successful implementation of IMC in organizations (in the sense of how IMC ought to be, in principle), while other studies should conduct empirical analyses on the concept of communication mix, emphasizing public relations, promotions and the perceptions and perspectives of potential and actual customers within the IMC context (in the sense of how IMC actually is, in practice). Such studies would contribute to the knowledge base and the current and future direction of research in these fields.