

INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS IN HIGH-QUALITY HOTELS OF CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN DALMATIA: A STUDY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MANAGERS AND GUESTS

INTEGRIRANA MARKETINŠKA KOMUNIKACIJA U VISOKO KATEGORIZIRANIM HOTELIMA DALMACIJE: ISTRAŽIVANJE IZ PERSPEKTIVA MENADŽERA I GOSTIJU

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SAŽETAK

Olako se primjena integrirane marketinške komunikacije (IMK) istražuje u različitim kontekstima i zemljama diljem svijeta, ipak su potrebni novi doprinosi za afirmaciju koncepta. Konkretno, u turističkom je sektoru provedeno vrlo malo istraživanja na temu integracije marketinških komunikacija. Osim toga, prethodne su se studije

ABSTRACT

Although the implementation of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) has been studied in different contexts and countries all over the world, further contributions are needed to consolidate the concept. Little research has been done on the integration of marketing communications in tourism-related sectors. Mo-

uglavnom usredotočile na mišljenja menadžera zanemarujući potrošačevu percepciju IMK. Cilj ovog istraživačkog rada jest podrobnije razraditi koncept IMK u turističkom sektoru, posebno u hotelima u Dalmaciji, iz dvojne perspektive menadžera i gostiju. U tu svrhu tijekom travnja i svibnja 2010. godine ispitani su menadžeri 15 visoko kategoriziranih hotela Dalmacije i njihovih 118 gostiju. Rezultati deskriptivne statističke analize otkrili su visok stupanj primjene IMK u hotelima i visok stupanj njezine percepcije od strane gostiju. Međutim, Mann-Whitney U test pokazao je male, ali statistički značajne razlike među procjenama menadžera i gostiju o primjeni IMK. Rezultati ovoga rada pružaju korisne informacije menadžerima hotela koji posluju na sve konkurentnijem tržištu, gdje tradicionalni marketinški pristupi više nisu dovoljni da bi se razlikovali od konkurencije. Prema tome, IMK treba biti razmotren kao novi pristup koji će hotelima omogućiti stjecanje konkurentne prednosti.

reover, previous studies have focused mainly on managers' opinions while overlooking consumers' perceptions of IMC. The purpose of this research is to study in greater detail the IMC concept in the tourism sector, specifically in the hotels of Central and Southern Dalmatia, from a double perspective: managers-guests. Therefore, managers of 15 high-quality hotels and 118 guests were interviewed during April and May 2010. The results of descriptive statistical analysis showed a high degree of IMC implementation in hotels and a high degree of guests' perceptions of IMC. However, the Mann-Whitney U test revealed small but significant differences between managers' and guests' perceptions of some of the IMC items. The findings of this study are expected to provide useful information to hotel managers, who deal with an increasingly competitive marketplace where traditional marketing approaches are no longer sufficient to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Thus, IMC should be considered as a new approach which might enable hotels to gain competitive advantages.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, the concept of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) has received considerable attention in the marketing literature.¹ IMC adopts a holistic view of marketing communications in order to achieve major impact through the integration of all elements of the promotional mix such as: advertising, sales promotion, events and experiences, public relations and publicity, direct marketing, interactive marketing, word of mouth marketing and personal selling.²

The implementation of IMC has been studied in different countries all over the world. However, there is little empirical evidence on IMC perception from the consumers' perspective.³ One of the basic principles of IMC is centered on consumer orientation,⁴ as consumers perform both message integration and meaning creation.⁵ Therefore, consumers' perceptions of the integration of communications should not be overlooked in further research on IMC.

This paper aims at studying in greater detail the IMC topic in high-quality hotels in the Dalmatia region from both managers' and consumers' perspectives. It should be noted that the hotel sector of Croatia is still for the most part managed by the personnel employed under the former economic and educational systems. Therefore, it is of crucial importance for its future development to hire new employees, who have the necessary expertise and are capable of managing the business activities according to international management standards and current market conditions.⁶

In the structure of the paper, the introduction presents an overview of IMC definitions and evaluation. Research questions are summarized, followed by methodology and results. Finally, findings, implications, limitations and future research possibilities are discussed in the Conclusion section.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. IMC definitions

The IMC concept can be considered as a field in continuous progress that has evolved from a "one voice" approach, based on coordination and consistency, to a more strategic, consumer-centered approach.⁷ As Shultz⁸ stated, "the IMC process starts with the customer or prospect and then works back to determine and define the forms and methods through which persuasive communications programs should be developed."

Some definitions of IMC are gathered in Table 1. For example, Duncan⁹ defined IMC as "a cross-functional process for creating and nourishing profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders by strategically controlling or influencing all messages sent to these groups and encouraging data-driven purposeful dialogue with them." According to Duncan and Moriarty,¹⁰ control should involve both the sending and the reception of messages. However, this consideration tends to overlook the fact that receivers are creative and can interpret and manipulate the message as they want, making the control and management of message reception difficult.¹¹

In his revision of seven IMC definitions examined by Kerr et al.,²⁷ Kliatchko²⁸ pointed out their following common hallmarks:

- o Coordination and synergy of marketing communication disciplines, channels and tools.
- o Consistency and coordination of marketing communication messages for maximum communication impact and effectiveness.
- o Understanding and building profitable relationships with multiple audiences/stakeholders and brands.
- o IMC measurement from communication effects to behavioral and financial results.
- o Strategic management of marketing communications planning.

Table 1: IMC definitions

<p>"A concept of marketing communications planning that recognizes the added value of a comprehensive plan that evaluates the strategic roles of a variety of communication disciplines – for example, general advertising, direct response, sales promotion and public relations – and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communication impact."¹² (proposed by the American Association of Advertising Agencies in 1989)</p>
<p>"The process of managing all sources of information about a product/service to which a customer or prospect is exposed which behaviorally moves the consumer toward a sale and maintains customer loyalty."¹³ (proposed by Schultz in 1991)</p>
<p>"The strategic coordination of all messages and media used to collectively influence its perceived brand value."¹⁴ (proposed by Duncan in 1992)</p>
<p>"IMC is the process of developing and implementing various forms of persuasive communications programs with customers and prospects over time."¹⁵</p>
<p>"The process of strategically controlling or influencing all messages and encouraging purposeful dialogue to create and nourish profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders."¹⁶ (proposed by Duncan in 1994)</p>
<p>"IMC is the strategic coordination of multiple communication voices. Its aim is to optimize the impact of persuasive communication on both consumer and nonconsumer (e.g., trade, professional) audiences by coordinating such elements of the marketing mix as advertising, public relations, promotions, direct marketing and package design."¹⁷</p>
<p>"The concept under which a company carefully integrates and coordinates its many communication channels – mass media advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, packaging and others – to deliver a clear, consistent and compelling message about the organization and its products."¹⁸</p>
<p>"IMC is a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute and evaluate coordinated measurable, persuasive brand communication programs over time with consumers, customers, prospects and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences."¹⁹</p>
<p>"Appears to be the natural evolution of traditional mass-media advertising, which has been changed, adjusted and refined as a result of new technologies."²⁰</p>
<p>"A cross-functional process for creating and nourishing profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders by strategically controlling or influencing all messages sent to these groups and encouraging data-driven purposeful dialogue with them."²¹</p>
<p>"Strategic communications planning and execution that recognizes the added values of a comprehensive and cohesive plan that evaluates the roles of a variety of internal and external marketing communications tools and coordinates these tools to provide measurable, maximum impact with respect to an identified target audience."²²</p>
<p>"An ongoing, interactive, cross-functional process of brand communication planning, execution and evaluation that integrates all parties in the exchange process in order to maximize mutual satisfaction of each other's wants and needs."²³</p>
<p>"IMC is the concept and process of strategically managing audience-focused, channel-centered and results driven brand communication programs over time."²⁴</p>
<p>"IMC is a dynamic, holistic approach, integrated into all strategic levels of an organisation. It manages and fuses every point of contact between the organisation and its stakeholders. Through this coordinated efforts it supports a targeted, integrated, consistent brand communication strategy for the purpose of building positive lifetime relationships through data-driven techniques, by customer-conscious employees ultimately giving an organisation a competitive advantage and brand equity."²⁵</p>
<p>"IMC is an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels and results of brand communication programs."²⁶</p>

2.2. IMC evaluation

Due to the current marketing communications landscape, the concept of measuring results continues to be a major challenge for companies.²⁹ Among limited proposals of IMC measurement instruments (Table 2), the scale of Duncan and Moriarty³⁰ is the most practiced in the literature.³¹ It consists of five IMC dimensions: "interactivity", "mission

marketing", "organizational infrastructure", "strategic consistency" and "planning and evaluation".

Reid³² reduced this scale into three normative constructs, collapsing the last three dimensions into one, named "cross-functional strategic planning". Subsequently, Hočevar et al.³³ combined "organizational infrastructure" and "strategic consistency" into one dimension, called "strategic organization".

Table 2: IMC measurement scales

AUTHORS	DIMENSIONS	ITEMS	METHOD	SAMPLE
Phelps & Johnson³⁴	1. Direct marketing	4	Factor analysis	101 publicly traded corporations
	2. One-voice	4		
	3. Coordinated marketing communication campaigns	3		
	4. Increased responsibilities	3		
	5. Response goals	2		
Duncan & Moriarty³⁵	1. Interactivity	4	N/A*	N/A*
	2. Mission marketing	3		
	3. Organizational infrastructure	4		
	4. Strategic consistency	3		
	5. Planning and evaluation	6		
Ewing et al.³⁶	1. Direct marketing	4	Bivariate correlation analysis. Stepwise regression.	80 leading Australian public companies
	2. One-voice	4		
	3. Increased responsibilities	3		
	4. Response goals	3		
Low³⁷	1. Integration	1	Bivariate correlation analysis. Stepwise multiple regression analysis.	421 U.S. companies practicing IMC
	2. Strategic consistency	1		
	3. Message consistency	1		
Reid³⁸	1. Interactivity	2	Confirmatory factor analysis. Path analysis. Stepwise multiple regression analysis.	169 consumer goods and consumer services organizations in Australia
	2. Mission marketing	2		
	3. Cross-functional strategic planning	11		
Lee & Park³⁹	1. Unified communications for consistent message and image	5	Exploratory factor analysis. Regression analysis.	155 companies from different sectors: 78 - manufacturing; 19 - financial services; 25 - physical distribution; 14 - information and communications; 19 - others
	2. Differentiated communications to multiple customer groups	5		
	3. Database-centered communications for tangible results	4		
	4. Relationship fostering communications with existing clients	4		
Wang et al.⁴⁰	1. Direct sale & Promotion	9	Descriptive statistics. Varimax rotation. ANOVA.	197 visitants of Lukang - a Taiwan heritage destination
	2. Public Relations	6		
	3. Advertisement	3		

Note: * N/A = Not applied

However, the IMC measurement instrument suggested by Lee and Park⁴¹ represents an improvement over the previous proposals because it was designed specifically for the development of an IMC scale and not for another purpose. Moreover, its procedures are more rigorous in methodology, and it is more comprehensive than other scales. However, as the same authors stated, this scale needs to be validated in a European context. Based on previous IMC studies and definitions, this scale identified the following IMC dimensions:

- o Unified communications for consistent message and image.
- o Differentiated communications to multiple customer groups.
- o Database-centered communications for tangible results.
- o Relationship fostering communications with existing customers.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper aims at exploring in greater detail the IMC concept in the tourism sector, specifically in four-star (upscale) and five-star (upper upscale) hotels located in Central and Southern Dalmatia.

The IMC approach has been widely accepted and implemented as a new paradigm all over the world.⁴² However, further contributions are needed to consolidate the concept.⁴³ This especially refers to tourism-related sectors, as there is little empirical evidence on IMC in this specific area. Therefore, the first research question is proposed:

Q1: Examine the implementation of IMC in high-quality hotels in Central and Southern Dalmatia, and observe whether there are significant differences between four-star and five-star hotels.

The theoretical framework and the results of previous studies have demonstrated that professionals must learn to participate in the consumers' world,⁴⁴ adopting an outside-in approach

that will allow them to define and refine the strategic objectives of communication campaigns.⁴⁵ Therefore, one of the basic principles of IMC is centered on consumer orientation, as consumers are the main driving force within the business strategy of the company.⁴⁶ In accordance with these considerations, the second research question is proposed:

Q2: Examine guests' perceptions of IMC and observe whether there are significant differences between those who stayed in four-star and those who stayed in five-star hotels in Central and Southern Dalmatia.

The literature review showed that integration is difficult to manage and control because the reception of the message is always a creative process. In other words, organizations which adopt the strategy of integration need to assume that the messages they send do not necessarily equal the messages that customers receive.⁴⁷ On the basis of these considerations, the third research question is proposed:

Q3: Compare managers' and guests' perceptions of IMC implementation in four-star and five-star hotels in Central and Southern Dalmatia.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Census, sample and data collection

The empirical study was conducted during April and May 2010 in Central and Southern Dalmatia, as the largest of the three tourist regions on the coast of Croatia. The census consisted of 15 high-quality hotels. Due to the characteristics of the Croatian hotel sector, a census for the study was selected on the basis of the hotels' connection to the Association of Hoteliers of Split and Dalmatia and a firm named Marcon, both innovators and globally relevant Croatian sources of know-how, focused on the promotion and development of

tourism in the area. Hotels in the Dubrovnik city area were also approached. In addition, the sample consisted of 118 guests of 12 hotels (three hotels did not allow their guests to be interviewed). While 50 guests stayed in five four-star hotels, 68 guests stayed in seven five-star hotels.

The data were collected through two structured questionnaires: one created for hotel managers and another created for guests. The initial version of the managers' questionnaire was pre-tested on two hotel managers and was reduced subsequently in order to shorten its duration. The final version was mainly administered through personal interviews (in two hotels it was administered through telephone interviews, whereas in one hotel it was self-administered). The initial version of the guests' questionnaire was also pre-tested on ten individuals who had recently stayed in a hotel. The final version of the questionnaire was partially self-administered and partially administered through personal interviews. Both questionnaires consisted of closed questions, measured by 5-point Likert type scales. Originally written in English, they were slightly adapted to the hotel context and translated to Spanish and Croatian by expert native speakers.

4.2. Construct measurement

The IMC implementation in hotels was measured by Lee and Park's⁴⁸ scale, which consisted of four dimensions, measured by 18 items (five items were employed to measure the first dimension, five the second, four the third and four the last dimension).

The first dimension, named "unified communications for consistent message and image", is considered a fundamental aspect of IMC and was identified at a very early stage of its evolution. It refers to the marketing communication activities meant to create a single positioning of a brand by delivering a consistent message through various communication channels. The respondents were

asked to evaluate whether the intended message is communicated consistently on all communication tools and channels and whether the consistency is maintained in all visual and linguistic components. Moreover, they were asked to evaluate whether the hotel's communication activities are conducted to insure a consistent brand image and maintain consistency from the long-term perspective.

The second dimension, called "differentiated communications to multiple customer groups", indicates that different marketing communication campaigns should be developed and implemented for multiple customer groups, which find themselves in different stages of the buying process. Accordingly, the respondents were asked to assess whether the hotel's marketing communication strategy differentiates between the buyer and the user, if the two are not the same. Furthermore, they were asked to determine whether the communication campaign identifies multiple customer groups in the target market and creates multiple brand images for such different customer groups. The last two items of this dimension assessed whether the marketing communication strategy of the hotel is based on a close scrutiny of the stages of the customer's buying process (e.g. awareness, knowledge, beliefs, preferences, conviction and action) and whether the hotel employs the most appropriate marketing communication tools for each stage of that process.

The third dimension, named "database-centered communications for tangible results", emphasizes the crucial role of databases in generating behavioral responses from the target market. Two items were used to assess whether the hotel's marketing communication activities are designed to induce customer's actions and whether the hotel follows up on consumer responses to these activities (e.g. mailing fliers and/or coupons to those who sent their inquiries). Two additional items examined the extent to which consumer information is compiled and integrated into a unified database.

Finally, the fourth dimension, called "relationship fostering communications with existing custom-

ers”, underlines the importance of developing a long-term relationship with existing customers throughout the marketing communication campaign. The managers were asked to evaluate whether the marketing communications are created to strengthen the relationship with customer and whether maintaining existing customers is as important as recruiting new ones. The last two items measured the hotel’s orientation on generating continuous business from the existing customers by enhancing their satisfaction level as well as a continuous flow of profits from customers and solidification of relationships with them.

In order to evaluate guests’ perceptions of the IMC implementation, the first dimension of the same scale was used (i.e. “unified communications for consistent message and image”). That dimension is considered easy for evaluation by consumers. As Lee and Park⁴⁹ noted, it is a basic aspect of IMC, which primarily focuses on influencing product recognition, image, consumer preferences and attitudes. Therefore, the guests were asked to assess whether they perceive message consistency on communication tools (e.g. website, advertising/promotional material, packaging) and whether the consistency is maintained in all visual (e.g. logos, models and colors) and linguistic (e.g. slogans and mottos) aspects of communication. In addition, they were asked to evaluate whether, in their opinion, the hotel has a consistent brand image and whether it maintains consistency over time. At the end of the questionnaire, the respondents’ socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. gender, age, education level, occupation and nationality) as well as data about their reason for travel and frequency of hotel visits were collected.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Census and sample profile

The census consisted of 15 high-quality hotels situated in Central and Southern Dalmatia, particularly in: the Split area (i.e. Split, Podstrana, Solin and Trogir) and the Dubrovnik area (i.e. Dubrovnik and Cavtat). Six of the hotels were four-star and nine were five-star hotels. The respondents were as follows: six hotel managers, seven marketing and sales managers, one PR manager, one manager assistant and one marketing manager assistant (two hotels had two respondents at the same time while two other hotels had only one respondent).

The sample consisted of 118 respondents, of whom 66 were male (55.9%) and 52 were female (44.1%). Two dominant age groups were 26-35 (24.6%) and 46-55 (24.6%) years of age. The major part of the respondents had college or higher degrees (89.0%). More than half of the respondents were employees (53.4%) while 33.1% were businessmen. With regard to their reason for travel, 65.2% of the respondents traveled for vacations and 31.4% for business. Their reported frequency of hotel visits showed that 62.7% of the guests visited the hotel once a year or less frequently, 25.4% from two to four times a year and 11.9% more than four times a year. Most of the respondents (80.5%) were from: Croatia (33.1%), Great Britain (18.6%), Spain (10.2%), Italy (6.8%), Germany (5.9%) and the United States (5.9%). The sample profile is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Sample profile

GUESTS	FREQUENCY	%
GENDER		
Male	66	55.9
Female	52	44.1
AGE		
18-25	7	5.9
26-35	29	24.6
36-45	23	19.5
46-55	29	24.6
56-65	22	18.6
> 65	8	6.8
EDUCATION LEVEL		
Primary education	3	2.5
Secondary education	8	6.8
Higher education (vocational school, college and university)	86	72.9
Postgraduate education (master and doctorate)	19	16.1
Others	2	1.7
OCCUPATION		
Employee	63	53.4
Businessman	39	33.1
Student	4	3.4
Housewife	1	0.8
Retired	11	9.3
REASON FOR TRAVEL		
Vacation	77	65.2
Business	37	31.4
Other	4	3.4
FREQUENCY OF HOTEL VISITS		
≤ once a year	74	62.7
2-4 times a year	30	25.4
>4 times a year	14	11.9
NATIONALITY		
Croatian	39	33.1
British	22	18.6
Spanish	12	10.2
Italian	8	6.8
German	7	5.9
U.S.	7	5.9
Others	23	19.5

5.2. Data analysis and discussion of results

Due to the small census of 15 hotels, descriptive statistics and nonparametric tests were carried out for data analysis, using the SPSS software – version 17 (Table 4, 5 & 6). When comparing the two hotel categories and hotels' vs. guests' perceptions, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was first performed in order to check the normal-

ity of data distribution. As a large portion of the items had critical values lower than .05, it was concluded that the data was not normally distributed.⁵⁰ Therefore, the Mann-Whitney U test was performed, comparing two independent samples, as this test is a nonparametric method that should be used when data do not show normal distribution.⁵¹

As depicted in Table 4, the results of descriptive statistical analysis showed a relatively high

Table 4: Managers' perceptions of IMC implementation: Descriptive statistics and Mann-Whitney U test

	ITEMS	Total N=15		Four-star N=6		Five-star N=9		U test	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	U	p
Unified com. for consistent message& image	Com. tools and channels consistency	4.60	.632	5.00	.000	4.33	.707	12.0	.033*
	Visual components consistency	4.67	.488	4.83	.408	4.56	.527	19.5	.280
	Linguistic components consistency	4.13	.915	4.33	.816	4.00	1.000	22.0	.528
	Brand image consistency	4.60	.828	5.00	.000	4.33	1.000	15.0	.068
	Long-term consistency	4.73	.458	5.00	.000	4.56	.527	15.0	.065
Differentiated com. to multiple customer groups	Differentiation between the buyer and the user	3.40	1.920	3.67	2.066	3.22	1.922	23.0	.601
	Creation of more than two target customer groups	4.80	.414	5.00	.000	4.67	.500	18.0	.127
	Single brand image vs. multiple brand images	4.00	1.134	4.33	.816	3.78	1.302	20.5	.418
	Close scrutiny of the customer's buying process	4.13	1.060	4.50	.837	3.89	1.167	19.0	.301
	Adjustment between marcom tools and each stage of the customer's buying process	4.20	1.014	4.67	.816	3.89	1.054	14.5	.107
Database-centered com. for tangible results	Inducement of customer's actions by marcom activities	4.80	.414	5.00	.000	4.67	.500	18.0	.127
	Following up on consumer responses to marcom activities	4.60	.507	4.50	.548	4.67	.500	22.5	.533
	Complying with consumer information in the course of marcom activities	4.73	.458	4.83	.408	4.67	.500	22.5	.490
	Integration of customer information into a unified database	4.33	.816	4.50	.837	4.22	.833	21.5	.475
Relationship fostering com. with existing customers	Marcom activities which strengthen the relationship with customers	4.47	.640	4.67	.516	4.33	.707	20.0	.353
	Maintaining existing customers as important as recruiting new ones	4.87	.352	5.00	.000	4.78	.441	21.0	.231
	Continuous business with customers and enhancement of their satisfaction	4.80	.414	4.83	.408	4.78	.441	25.5	.799
	Continuous flow of profits and solidification of relationships with customers	4.87	.352	5.00	.000	4.78	.441	21.0	.231

Note: com.= communications; marcom = marketing communications

degree of IMC adoption by high-quality hotels in Central and Southern Dalmatia. Specifically, means greater than 3.99 were related to all items except the one that measured the differentiation between the buyer and the user in the hotels' marketing communication strategy (M=3.40). According to the high mean values of several items, marketing communication activities of the hotels seem to focus particularly on the following aspects:

- o Generating a continuous flow of profits from individual customers in the long run by solidifying relationships with them (M=4.87).
- o Maintaining existing customers as important as recruiting new ones (M=4.87).
- o Generating continuous business with existing customers and enhancement of their satisfaction level (M=4.80).
- o Creation of more than two target customer groups (M=4.80).
- o Inducement of customer's actions (M=4.80).
- o Long-term consistency (M=4.73).
- o Complying with consumer information (M=4.73).

When comparing four-star and five-star hotels, the results showed that a degree of IMC implementation decreased the higher the hotel category: completely regarding the first, the second and the fourth IMC dimension (i.e. "unified communications for consistent message and image", "differentiated communications to multiple cus-

tomers groups" and "relationship fostering communications with existing customers") and partially regarding the third one (i.e. "database-centered communications for tangible results"). In fact, only one item performed better in five-star hotels (i.e. following up on consumer responses to marketing communications activities). However, the Mann-Whitney U test confirmed a statistically significant difference only for the communication tools and channels consistency item ($p=.033$). Other differences were not statistically significant, as all p values were greater than .05 (Table 4).

The same data analysis was used to assess guests' perceptions of IMC, specifically, of "unified communications for consistent message and image" (Table 5). The results of the descriptive statistical analysis showed a high degree of guests' perceptions of the IMC implementation (all items had mean values greater than 3.99). The guests who stayed in four-star and five-star hotels perceived the communication tools and channels consistency equally (M=4.24). However, the guests who stayed in four-star hotels were better at perceiving the consistency in all linguistic components of communication and brand image consistency while those who stayed in five-star hotels perceived more of the consistency in all visual components of communication and long-term consistency. Nevertheless, the Mann-Whitney U test showed no statistically significant differences between the two compared groups.

Table 5: Guests' perceptions of IMC implementation: Descriptive statistics and Mann-Whitney U test

ITEMS		Total N=118		Four-star N=50		Five-star N=68		U test	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	U	p
Unified com. for consistent message & image	Com. tools and channels consistency	4.24	.712	4.24	.744	4.24	.694	1688.0	.943
	Visual components consistency	4.18	.649	4.06	.712	4.26	.589	1465.5	.142
	Linguistic components consistency	4.08	.735	4.18	.661	4.01	.782	1523.5	.293
	Brand image consistency	4.21	.726	4.30	.678	4.15	.758	1512.5	.254
	Long-term consistency	4.05	.804	4.00	.948	4.09	.685	1664.5	.836

Note: com.= communications

Finally, when comparing managers' and guest' perceptions of IMC, it should be noted that the comparison involved only 12 hotels because interviewing the guests of three hotels was not possible. This permitted to analyze both perspectives in each hotel. According to the results, the level of managers' perceptions of IMC was higher than that of the hotel guests. In other words, hotel managers believed that the IMC implementation was greater than their guests actually perceived it to be. The Mann-Whitney U test revealed significant differences between managers' and guests' perceptions concerning the following three IMC items: consistency in all visual components of communication ($p=.009$), brand image consistency ($p=.023$) and long-term consistency ($p=.002$). In addition, descriptive statistics showed that one IMC item was perceived equally by managers and guests (i.e. consistency in all linguistic components of communication; $M=4.08$) (Table 6).

degree of IMC implementation in four-star and five-star hotels in Central and Southern Dalmatia. While the IMC implementation apparently decreased the higher the hotel category, the Mann-Whitney U test revealed that these differences were not statistically significant (except for the communication tools and channels consistency item). Furthermore, the results of the descriptive statistical analysis revealed a high degree of guests' perceptions of IMC. While the guests who stayed in four-star hotels reported a higher perception of linguistic and brand image consistency, those who stayed in five-star hotels assessed visual and long-term consistency better. However, the Mann-Whitney U test showed no statistically significant differences between the two compared groups. Finally, hotel managers seemed to perceive a higher degree of IMC implementation than guests did, especially in respect of three of the IMC items (i.e. visual consistency, brand image consistency and long-term consistency).

Table 6: IMC implementation: Managers' vs. guests' perceptions

ITEMS		Managers N=12		Guests N=118		U test	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	U	p
Unified com. for consistent message & image	Com. tools and channels consistency	4.58	.669	4.24	.712	511.5	.082
	Visual components consistency	4.67	.492	4.18	.649	422.0	.009*
	Linguistic components consistency	4.08	.996	4.08	.735	675.5	.776
	Brand image consistency	4.58	.900	4.21	.726	452.0	.023*
	Long-term consistency	4.75	.452	4.05	.804	357.0	.002*

Note: com.= communications

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1. Findings and implications

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the IMC research of the Dalmatian hotel industry, analyzing both managers' and guests' opinions regarding the extent of IMC adoption by high-quality hotels. Descriptive statistics showed a high

The findings of this study have important implications for hotel (marketing) managers. Previous research on hospitality industry demonstrated that service and product consistency are crucial to marketing strategy. This research reveals that communication consistency is another core management practice, and should not be ignored by managers. In order to respond efficiently to market requirements and integrate its communications at the same time, a company needs to embrace both flexibility and customization⁵² as well as va-

riety and diversity.⁵³ Furthermore, it has to try to balance its many voices with the efforts to assure clarity and consistency in its overall expression.⁵⁴ The managers of Dalmatian five-star hotels should consider these aspects as, according to the results of this study, four-star hotels showed a better IMC performance. Moreover, as previous studies have recently pointed out, marketers should learn to participate in the consumers' world,⁵⁵ where consumers often redefine corporate symbols and participate in the integration process.⁵⁶ Therefore, when implementing their communication strategies, hotel executives need to make sure that several communication aspects get perceived by consumers, such as: communication channels consistency, visual and linguistic message consistency, brand image consistency and long-term consistency. Although the level of guests' perceptions of IMC implementation in high-quality Dalmatian hotels did score high, it was still lower than those of the managers. Hotel managers should try to minimize this gap in the future.

6.2. Limitations and future research possibilities

This paper has some limitations, which should be considered as opportunities for future research. The small hotel census and the small sample size

are the main limitations. They impose caution when interpreting and generalizing the results with regard to all Dalmatian and Croatian high-quality hotels. It should be remembered that this study focused on the high-quality hotel segment in Dalmatia linked to the Association of Hoteliers of Dalmatia and Marcon, as these companies are characterized by more innovative management. It should also be noted that Croatia in general and Dalmatia in particular have a low number of four-star and five-star hotels. Furthermore, a large portion of the Croatian hotel management personnel (high-quality hotels inclusive) is still anchored in the former economic and educational system, which might have influenced the quality of the responses.

With respect to the small sample size, it can be justified by the limited access to hotel guests and a small number of tourist stays during the research period. Therefore, future studies should focus on the areas with a bigger hotel census, and that characterized by more innovative management. To obtain a more representative sample, a greater number of customers should be approached (preferably during the high season). In addition, an expert evaluation of IMC could be included as a third perspective. Finally, future research could reconsider the concept in other tourism companies, such as tour operators and travel agencies.

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