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Integrated Marketing Communications in Nicaragua. Comparative analysis of women's entrepreneurship in the fashion sector

Comunicación Integrada de Marketing en Nicaragua. Análisis comparativo de los emprendimientos femeninos del sector moda

Abstract

The article analyses the Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) process of enterprises in Nicaragua's fashion sector, which is the mainstay of the country's creative industries. The level of implementation of IMC in the different categories of enterprises is compared, according to their formality, gender in ownership, age and level of employment, in order to identify the communicative strengths and weaknesses of each group. To this end, a questionnaire based on the Lee & Park (2007) scale was adapted and applied to members of the Nicaraguan Network of Women Entrepreneurs (REN), who lead enterprises in the fashion, footwear and accessories sector. The results reveal significant differences in the degree of CIM implementation between groups, by age and size of enterprise, but show that formality and gender are not determinants in this comparison. Based on these results, the main weaknesses and strengths of each group and a series of recommendations are presented, aiming to contribute to strengthening of the sector and the empowerment of women entrepreneurs in the country.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el proceso de Comunicación Integrada de Marketing (CIM) de los emprendimientos del sector moda de Nicaragua, que se erige como sustento de las industrias creativas en el país. Se establece una comparativa en el nivel de implementación de la CIM entre las diferentes categorías de emprendimientos, según su formalidad, género en la propiedad, antigüedad y nivel de empleo, con el fin de identificar las fortalezas y debilidades comunicativas de cada grupo. Para ello, se adaptó el cuestionario basado en la escala de Lee y Park (2007) y se aplicó a las socias de la Red de Mujeres Empresarias de Nicaragua (REN) que dirigen emprendimientos del sector moda, calzado y complementos. Los resultados revelan diferencias significativas en el grado de implementación de la CIM entre grupos, por antigüedad y tamaño de la empresa, pero demuestra que la formalidad y el género no son determinantes en esta comparativa. A partir de estos resultados, se presentan las principales debilidades y fortalezas de cada grupo y una serie de recomendaciones derivadas, que pretenden contribuir al fortalecimiento del sector y al empoderamiento de la mujer emprendedora en el país

1. Introduction

In today´s business world where businesses must rethink the way they communicate to their customers, and embrace a more interactive "*stakeholder approach*" (Díaz Soloaga, 2014) , the role of *marketing* has become highly important. There is a focus on developing strategies that enable a two-way reciprocal relationship with customers, by means of the new media, resources and multiplatforms in the media convergence era (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008). All of this as well as the development of new information and communication technologies has given consumers, who are ever more participative and better informed, greater protagonism and has made them into prosumers (Toffler, 1994). This growing trend towards using multiplatform strategies and *transmedia* (Scolari, 2013), means traditional concepts of marketing must evolve. This is true for the traditional marketing mix, which now according to (Lamb, Hair and McDaniel, 2019) encompasses the areas of advertising, public relations, sales promotion, personal sales and social media. To these must be added events and experiences, direct *marketing* and mobile marketing (Kotler and Keller, 2016), thereby creating a mixture of eight variables which make up the communication mix.

In this setting, Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) is significant as a process for coordinating and integrating channels, resources and communication tools in order to deliver a clear, coherent and persuasive message that has maximum impact (Kliatchko, 2009), in order to work on brand value (Duncan and Everett, 1993). However, although this is a broadly debated and accepted concept (Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014; Batra and Keller, 2016; Tafesse and Kitchen, 2017), research on how it applies within the company ecosystem has been limited to the specialised press which have analysed the marketing strategies of small and medium sized companies (Hansen, Deacon, Pascal and Sethna, 2020; Knight, 2000). In the fashion sector, research has just focused on consolidated brands (Chen and Lifang, 2020) or highly specific markets (Shin and Jang, 2007).

The current business panorama for developing countries in Latin America, spurred on by factors such as globalisation, increased competition from Asia or access to new technologies (Brenes and Haar, 2012), has consolidated an economic model based on strengthening the micro, small and medium-sized company. This has resulted in providing incentives for local businesses as a key objective in national strategies. It is carried out by means of a range of different training instruments and policies (Alvarez and Grazzi, 2018; Saavedra and Flores, 2019) whose aim is to improve productivity (Amorós, Fernández and Tapia, 2012). All of this is an attempt at tackling the high levels of poverty (Cordova and Cancino, 2020), unemployment (Álvarez-Sousa, 2019; Puente, Espitia and Cervilla, 2019) and informality (Caruso, Galiani and Weinschelbaum, 2019), and to help develop the regional economy.

In Nicaragua, where 96% of companies are family-run micro companies, according to the Central Bank, in (Urcuyo, 2012), these training policies have been reflected in an increase in female-run enterprises with almost 50% of these being independent working women (National Institute for Development Information, 2020; International Labour Office, 2015). The fashion sector reflects this trend, with 5% of companies in the country dedicated to designing and making garments and footwear, and another 5% accounts for trade in local or foreign brands, among which most remarkable are second hand and collectively run shops (Central Bank of Nicaragua, 2012). However, there are significant limitations to growth for these enterprises: high rates of informality , difficulties in access to finance (Nicaraguan Foundation for Economic and Social Development, 2017; Narváez and Rivera, 2016) or the uncertainty at present (Zahra, 2020), which hinders its long-term consolidation. Therefore, the survival of these companies largely depends on their capacity to take advantage of the synergies derived from coordinating their communication by means of a consolidated and joint strategy.

The aim of this project is to measure to what degree this integrated marketing communication has been implemented in fashion companies run by women in Nicaragua, by analysing the differences in the level of implementing the four dimensions of IMC, between the categories of female-run enterprises, grouped according to their formality, gender of owner, age and number of employees.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualisation and measure of Integrated Marketing Communication

The concept of Integrated Marketing Communication arose at the end of the eighties, when the American Advertising Agencies Association defined it as planning marketing messages by means of an integrated plan which strategically joined a variety of disciplines and combined them to provide clarity, consistency and impact in communication (Caywood, Schultz and Wang, 1991; Schultz,1993; Schultz and Schultz, 1998). This is still one of the most accepted and widely used definitions, despite the criticism it has received (Schultz, 1992; Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Kliatchko, 2009), which is considered as a a process aimed at the customer and target audiences.

The notion of integrating communications was already sensed before the concept was defined, just

as suggested by (Kitchen, Brignell and Jones, 2004), but after the first studies (Caywood et al., 1991; Schultz,1991) the term became truly popular, and it has managed to keep the interest of sector professionals in the specialised literature. At present, the IMC model is still debated in terms of its theoretical and empirical definition. Recent literature has become ever more focused on the figure of the consumer (Manser, Peltier and Barger, 2017; Finne and Grönroos, 2017; Bruhn and Schnebelen, 2017; Laurie and Mortimer, 2019), with an attempt to theorise business practices (Ots and Nyilasy, 2017; Porcu, Del Barrio and Kitchen, 2017), and apply them to a range of sectors (Pearson and Perera, 2018; Porcu, del Barrio, Alcántara and Crespo, 2019).

Table 1: Main definitions of IMC

Author	Definition
(Schultz,1991)	The process of managing all the information sources about a product/ service a customer or prospect is exposed to, which leads him or her to make a purchase and remain loyal.
(Keegan, Moriarty and Duncan, 1992)	Strategic coordination of all messages and resources used by an organisation to have a collective influence on how they value the brand.
(Duncan and Caywood, 1996; Duncan & Moriarty, 1998)	The process of strategically controlling or influencing all the messages and encouraging dialogue in order to create and nurture a profitable relationship with customers and other stakeholders.
(Kotler, Armstrong, Saunders and Wong, 1999)	It is the concept by which a company integrates and coordinates their communication channels in order to deliver a clear, consistent and convincing message about the organisation and their products.
(Duncan, 2002)	Strategic planning and execution which recognised the added value in a comprehensive and global plan which evaluates the role of all communication and marketing tools, both internal and external ones. It also coordinates these tools to gain the maximum impact which may be measured in terms of the target audience identified.
(Broderick and Pickton, 2005)	Joining all marketing communication activities, the process of integrating all elements in the promotional mix.
(Kliatchko, 2008)	A process of managing the strategy of the interest groups, the contents of the message, communication channels and the results of the communication programmes from the brand.
(Percy, 2018)	Planning and executing all kinds of advertising and promotional messages chosen for a brand, service or company in order to fulfil a common set of communication goals or, more specifically to support a sole position.

Source: Produced by the author

These main definitions as summarised in table 1 arose from its recent history. An attempt has been made to come up with a consolidated theory which replaces the traditional theory of marketing (Schultz, Kim and Kang, 2014). Despite some discrepancies, they all agree about its role as a strategic tool (Cornelissen, 2001) and state the benefits of integrating this communication mix in order to deliver a clear, coherent and consistent message (Lee and Park, 2007; Kotler and Keller, 2016). In this paper a definition has been proposed which adopts the holistic approach by (Kotler and Keller, 2016) and (Belch and Belch, 2003), who adapted the definition given by the American Marketing Association (AMA), and present it as the process for planning, integrating and coordinating all the communication disciplines for the company so that it can provide clear consistent messages with maximum impact.

Although it seems obvious that this concept as well as the corporate strategic process has been widely accepted in academic and empirical circles, there are still a few difficulties in implementing it adequately in practice (Holm, 2006). This is due to factors such as lack of business communication or decontextualisation (Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). This makes it difficult to apply in a commercial context and, in turn, to develop efficient measurement tools, which have been unable to show how IMC has contributed to organisational performance (Ewing, 2009).

The dearth of measuring proposals have been enriched in the last decade with the proliferation of new

alternative models(Reinold and Tropp, 2012; Patti, Hartley, van Dessel and Baack, 2017; Porcu et al., 2017; Luxton, Reid and Mavondo, 2017), who stressed the multidimensional side of the construct (Pickton and Hartley, 1998; Kliatchko, 2008). However, more consolidated scales predominate, which there have been many adaptations of. One of the first models proposed was the scale from (Phelps and Johnson, 1996), with five dimensions that were subsequently adapted by (Ewing, Bussy and Caruana, 2000). The most used is still that by (Duncan and Moriarty, 1997), with five dimensions, adapted by (Reid, 2005), and that by (Lee and Park, 2007), with four dimensions. Most outstanding are those by (Low, 2000) and that by (Wang, Wu and Yuan, 2009), both of which have three dimensions.

However, most have received criticisms about their empirical validity, whjch have made it difficult to implement them (Kliatchko, 2008; Ewing, 2009). Therefore, in this analysis it was deemed appropriate to use the scale by (Lee and Park, 2007), which is more solid and rigourous in terms of methodology and statistics, given the procedures used. One advantage is it is research specifically designed to develop a measuring scale for IMC. Moreover, there is a better understanding of it than with its predecessors. Its only drawback is the need to validate it in contexts outside South Korea.

2.2. Importance of the fashion sector in the domestic and international panorama

The fashion industry has become one of the most dynamic activities in the world economy with a turnover of over 400 billion dollars (Fashion United, 2021). It is "considered as an industry" (Díaz Soloaga, 2014) which can be placed "within the category of industrial and creative industries" (Brydges and Pugh, 2017). The international panorama is dominated by the phenomena of fast fashion and the hegemony of large fashion retail chains (Modaes, 2019), despite the growing concern for sustainability and the slow fashion movement (Rodríguez, Mcquillan and Segarra-Saaavedra, 2021). In the post-pandemic world the main driver of growth has been digital channels, which have softened the impact of the crisis in the sector from the global fall in consumption (Mc Kinsey & Company, 2020).

There is a geographically fragmented and disperse value chain (Hodges and Link, 2018) where Asia is most outstanding. However, Latin America, an important regional producer, by means of its consolidated *maquiladora* industry[1], in recent years has become the market with the greatest potential for growth in the worldwide fashion industry (Modaes, 2017).

There are two sides to production in the fashion industry in Nicaragua: firstly, there is an extensive industrial *maquiladora* network, whose textile manufacturers represent more than 50% of total exports, mainly to the US market (Central Bank of Nicaragua, 2021), and , secondly, is the small size of the national fabric of production, which is mainly composed of craftspeople, who make and design garments and footwear. This accounts for 5% of companies in the country. Companies dedicated to trading mainly with foreign brands, make up another 5%, where second hand clothes shops (BCN, 2012) and collective shops are the most salient features. Likewise, consumption is based on foreign brands with a growth rate of almost 40% of that for imports of garments this first trimester (BCN, 2021). However, in recent years institutions and the private sector have striven to provide boosts to local small businesses by means of fairs, events and funding programmes from the Ministry of Family Economy.

2.3. Profile of female fashion enterprises in Nicaragua

Studies on the figure of the female entrepreneur need to "broaden the subject matter, taking into account contextual and historical variables" (Jennings and Brush, 2013). They have fundamentally focused on motivations for starting businesses (Brush, de Bruin and Welter, 2009; Minniti and Naudé, 2010; Jha, Makkad and Mittal, 2018; Nguyen, Phuong, Le and Vo, 2020), in gender differences (Verheul, Stel and Thurik, 2006; Cetindamar, Gupta, Karadeniz and Egrican, 2012) and in the sociocultural context and characteristics (Ahmad, 2011; Bullough, Guelich, Welter, Manolova and Schjoedt, 2021).

At 19.9%, Latin America has the highest rate of entreprenuership in the world (Kelley, Singer and Herrington, 2016). There, rates of female entrepreneurship have significantly improved, to above 20%, according to (Bosma, Ionescu, Kelley, Levie and Tarnawa, 2020). The same has happened with the percentage of female employers and individuals traders, which is the most typical profile in the region (International Labour Office, 2017). However, this concerns micro or small companies largely self-employed persons, mainly in the retail sector or services (Terjesen and Amorós, 2010; Alecchi, 2020). They have a low level of technological innovation and a high degree of informality (Rueda and Ruiz, 2019). Entrepreneurs tend to start a business late on in life, when they have a family to take care of (International Labour Office, 2017) and at their own home (Pisani, 2016). Moreover, they are limited due to their poor level of education and professionalism, access to sources of finance or home responsibilities (Rueda and Ruiz, 2019; Alecchi, 2020).

This is the profile of the female entrepreneur registered in Nicaragua (Pisani, 2018), where 77% of businesses are not registered at all and 66% are home-based (Nicaragua National Institute of Information Development, 2011). This is especially patent in the fashion industry which is aimed at female

entrepreneurship (BCN, 2012). However, the remarkable degree of entrepreneurship in the country, with 38.4% of self-employed workers (Nicaragua National Institute of Information Development, 2020), has not resulted in any significant long-term benefits in terms of financial and business development. This is due to their poor competitivity and the negligible added value of the businesses (López and Álvarez, 2018). 90% do not export (International Labour Office, 2020a), as they are restricted by their informality. This is more latent in female entrepreneurship (Pisani, 2018), in the commercial sector (Higher Council for Private Companies, 2015; FUNIDES, 2016) and in the manufacture and sale of garments (BCN, 2012).

Although there is a lower rate of female unemployment, the statistics show a high level of inactivity (International Labour Office, 2020b), which suggests there is a high level of home-based employment(FUNIDES, 2019), as well as informal employment of women. This is situated at 83.2% (Narváez and Rivera, 2016), which provides the motive for setting up a business. Female entrepreneurship has grown considerably in recent years, helped by specific programmes for women [1] (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019). At present, in Nicaragua over 45% of workers are independent (ILO, 2015; INIDE, 2020), and a third of formal trading companies are owned by women (Pisani, 2018). However, the survival and growth of these business initiatives are limited. It is therefore essential to create mechanisms to drive commercial development, by providing tools which enable profitable, solid and long-lasting businesses to be established.

3. Methodology

The aim of this research is to make a comparative analysis in terms of implementing integrated marketing communication between different categories of enterprises run by women in the fashion sector in Nicaragua, grouped according to the variables: formality, gender of owner, company age and number of employees. There is an analysis of the extent to which the four IMC dimensions differ significantly between the four entrepreneurship categories:

    1. Formality:
        a. Formal businesses
        b. Informal businesses
    2. Gender:
        a. Companies directed by a woman
        b. By a man
        c. By various women
        d. By both genders
    3. Company age:
        a. Companies under two years old
        b. Over two years old
    4. Number of employees
        a. From 1 to 2 employees
        b. From 3 to 5
        c. From 6 to 10
        d. Over 10 employees

For this purpose, the following hypothesis was set for each variable in comparison to the entrepreneurship category:

    1. Formality

H0: Formal and informal businesses have developed integrated marketing communication to a similar degree.

H1: Formal and informal businesses have developed integrated marketing communication to different degrees.

    2. Company age

H0: Older companies have developed integrated marketing communication to a similar extent as younger companies.

H1: Older companies have developed integrated marketing communication to a different degree as younger companies.

    3. Gender

H0: Companies directed by a woman have developed integrated marketing communication to a similar degree as those directed by men, several *women or by a man and woman.*

H1: Companies directed by a woman have developed integrated marketing communication to a different degree as those directed by a man, several *women or by a man and woman*.

4. Employment

H0: Companies with more employees have developed integrated marketing communication to a similar extent as those with fewer employees.

H1: Companies with more employees have developed integrated marketing communication to a different extent as those with fewer employees.

This is a quantitative analysis of the data gathered by means of using an instrument based on the questionnaire from the (Lee and Park, 2007) scale which is the best in terms of statistics and methodologies in its field.

The sample population in the study is made up of enterprises directed by women in the fashion sector in Nicaragua. According to the latest report on entrepreneurship from the Central Bank of Nicaragua, (Vanegas and Davila, 2020), and data from the official platform, Red Emprende Nicaragua, there was a total of 5476 enterprises in the country, belonging to different chambers of commerce, associations, centres and networks of Nicaraguan entrepreneurs. The only association of female entrepreneurs, which is registered is the Red de Mujeres Empresarias/Network of Female Entrepreneurs (REN), which has 355 enterprises associated with it[2].

The criteria choice in the sample are:

1. Membership of REN as the only official platform for female entrepreneurs.

2. That the business activity belongs to one of the four categories in the directory of REN members related to fashion: fashion and textile, leather and footwear, crafts, jewellery and imitation jewellery.

Those enterprises which fulfilled these two criteria, but whose activity was not directly related to the fashion industry were excluded. This was true for those companies in the crafts category whose activity is based on products for the home, hammocks or decoration. In this selection there was a sample of 50 enterprises, out of which there was a total of 36 responses, as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Enterprises selected by sector

Sector	Fashion and textiles	Leather and footwear	Crafts	Jewellery and imitation jewellery	TOTAL
Nº ents.	26	8	11	5	50
%	52	16	22	10	100
Response	19	6	9	2	36
%	52.78	16.67	25	5.56	72

Source: Produced by the author

The instrument used is an adaptation of the original questionnaire from Lee and Park (2007) to the specific circumstances in Nicaragua and to the type of companies selected: fashion-related female-run enterprises as shown in table 3. The original dimensions and items were maintained. It was adapted by means of inverse translation (Epstein, Santo and Guillemin, 2015), and validated by a judgement from experts and a pilot test with an initial sample of 10 companies. Subsequently, internal consistency was measured with Cronbach´s Alpha coefficient, with the accepted value being over 0.8 (Soriano, 2014). The field work took place in February 2021 in Nicaragua, by means of a questionnaire for the managers of the companies analysed and was carried out *online* with the *Google Forms* platform, due to the current health situation and because the companies were widely dispersed, located in different regions of the country. A 5-point Likert scale was used, just as seen by the authors in the original scale in which " 1" means "completely disagree" and "5" "completely agree".

Table 3: Dimensions, indicators and adaptations from the original questionnaire

DIMENSION	INDICATORS
1. Communications joined by a message and coherent images	1.1. Coherence of tools and channels
	1.2. Visual coherence
	1.3. Linguistic coherence
	1.4. Coherent image of company
	1.5. Coherent long-term image of company
2. Communications differentiated by multiple groups of customers	2.1. Difference buyer-user
	2.2. Over two groups of target-customer
	2.3. Creating one or several brand images
	2.4. Analysis of stages of purchasing process
	2.5. Tools for each purchasing stage
3. Communications focused on databases for tangible results	3.1. Induction to consumer action
	3.2. Monitoring consumer responses
	3.3. Consumer information
	3.4. Unified database
4. Relationships which nurture communications with existing customers	4.1. Strengthening relationships with customers
	4.2. Maintaining relationships and attracting new clients
	4.3. Continuous business and customer satisfaction
	4.4. Benefits of long-term relationships
TYPES OF ADAPTATION	DESCRIPTION
By type of company	Original sample: different sized companies and sectors.
	Current sample: Micro and small enterprises directed by one or two people.
	Amendment: Name change of "company" to " business" and from the plural "our " to the singular "my".
By context	Original sample: Korean companies
	Current sample: Nicaraguan microcompanies
	Amendment: in technical concepts of communication and marketing most used in the country , deleting or adding examples.
Sections added	Identification questions
	Introductory questions about knowledge of IMC
	Final question, open-ended for adding further comments.

Source: Produced by the author

A descriptive statistical study was carried out from the data collected by means of a non parametetric comparison test, bearing in mind the limited size of the study sample, by SPSS software, version 26. A non parametric test was selected due to the lack of normality in the population. The normality hypothesis of the sample was contrasted with the Shapiro-Wilk test, recommended for small samples (<50), and that by Kolmogorov-Smirnov. In both cases, the significance levels were under 0.05 in most variables, especially in the Shapiro-Wilk test. In this way it was determined that distribution was not normal and therefore it did not fulfil the supposition of normality (Berlanga and Rubio, 2012).

Therefore, in order to analyse the contrast in two independent samples, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used for the informality variables (sample of formal and informal companies) and company age (less than or equal to 2 years old and over 2 years old). For the samples according to owner gender and the number of employees, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used, as various groups were addressed (Berlanga and Rubio, 2012). As for informality, (FUNIDES, 2016), in keeping with Hamann and Mejía (2012) four degrees of informality were distinguished in Nicaragua: they had no formal accounting procedures (Grade I, which is equivalent to total informality) not listed in the Companies´Register (Grade II), not registered in the DGI (General Directorate of Entries) (Grade III), they do not pay social security (grade IV). Therefore, the lack of formal accounting registries is deemed as total informality.

4. Results

The results of the descriptive and inferential analysis show a comparison with the degree of implementation of marketing between different groups of female-run enterprises in the fashion, textiles, footwear and accessories sectors according to the degree of formality the company has and its age. This was carried out by comparing averages with the Mann Whitney U test, which contrasts the null hypothesis in which the starting hypothesis of both groups is the same, with the alternative hypothesis with which the values of one of the samples tends to surpass those of the other. In order to compare the gender of the owners and the number of workers, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used for several independent tests.

In general, the descriptive statistics show, by means of the averages for each indicator and dimension, scores which tend to be neutral for most items, which are slightly above the neutral intermediate value (3) and only in a few cases are they below them, while for certain indicators they surpass 4 which indicates a positive score. It is therefore evidence of a remarkable degree of implementation of IMC in this factor under assessment.

The results displayed on the tables show there are no substantial differences when comparing the groups, where most indicators and dimensions show close values between averages. They maintain typical digression values which show there is little dispersion in the responses. This shows there is little difference between the enterprise categories analysed. Among these the only outstanding point is the comparison with company age and the number of employees where there are marked differences in several indicators and dimensions.

Table 4: Implementing CLM according to the degree of formality of the companies

IMC dimensions and indicators	FORMAL N=12		INFORMAL N=24		Test	
	Average	DT	Average	DT	Sig	H [3]
1. Communications joined by a message and coherent images	3.68	0.98	3.82	0.94	#655	2C
1.1 Coherence of tools and channels	3.50	1.17	3.83	1,308	#344	C
1.2 Visual coherence	3.58	1.24	3.88	1,116	#518	C
1.3 Linguistic coherence	3.83	1.27	3.67	1,129	#608	C
1.4 Coherent image of company	3.67	1.44	4.04	1,233	#476	C
1.5 Coherent long-term image of company	3.83	1.19	3.67	1,404	#882	C
2. Communications differentiated by multiple groups of customers	3.25	1.12	3.31	1.00	#908	C
2.1 Difference buyer-user	2.83	1.03	3.42	1.35	#166	C

IMC dimensions and indicators	Average	DT	Average	DT	Sig	
2.2 Over two groups of target-customer	3.50	1.51	3.33	1.27	#655	C
2.3 Creating one or several brand images	3.08	1.68	3.17	1.63	#960	C
2.4 Analysis of stages of purchasing process	3.25	1.36	3.21	1.32	#987	C
2.5 Tools for each purchasing stage	3.58	1.24	3.42	1.41	#779	C
3. Communications focused on databases for tangible results	3.56	0.91	3.28	0.99	#398	C
3.1 Induction to consumer action	4.08	1.00	4.21	1.14	#562	C
3.2 Monitoring consumer responses	3.00	1.48	2.79	1.29	#679	C
3.3 Consumer information	3.58	1.38	3.63	1.28	1.00	C
3.4 Unified database	3.58	1.08	2.5	1.62	#062	C
4. Relationships which nurture communications with existing customers	3.75	0.97	3.44	0.99	#327	C
4.1 Strengthening relationships with customers	2.75	1.36	2.13	1.36	#177	C
4.2 Maintaining relationships and attracting new clients	4.08	1.17	3.96	1.33	#908	C
4.3 Continuous business and customer satisfaction	4.00	1.21	3.96	1.20	#934	C
4.4 Benefits of long-term relationships	4.17	1.03	3.71	1.27	#344	C

Source: Produced by the author

Table 4 shows the differences between the average scores for the enterprises considered as formal. That is, they have formal accounting procedures and those which are informal lack any accounting registries. No substantial differences were found in any dimensions as a whole. Neither were there in any of the indicators they were made up of. The averages for the indicators for dimensions 3 and 4 were slighly higher in formal businesses while dimensions 1 and 2 were slightly higher for informal companies. However, results from the Man Whitney U test for a significance level of 0.050 (out of 95%) indicate that the null hypothesis was not rejected in any of them. Therefore, there were no statistically significant differences for any item.

Table 5: Implementation of IMC according to company age

IMC dimensions and indicators	≤2 años N=17		>2 años N=19		Test	
	Average	DT	Average	DT	Sig	
1. ommunications joined by a message and coherent images	4.14	0.77	3.44	0.98	#023	R
1.1 Coherence of tools and channels	4.06	1.20	3.42	1.26	#107	C
1.2 Visual coherence	4.29	0.99	3.32	1.11	#009	R
1.3 Linguistic coherence	3.76	1.09	3.68	1.25	#950	C
1.4 Coherent image of company	4.47	0.80	3.42	1.47	#035	R
1.5 Coherent long-term image of company	4.12	1.27	3.37	1.30	#066	C
2. Communications differentiated by multiple groups of customers	3.60	0.87	3.01	1.08	#093	C

2.1 Difference buyer-user	3.71	1.31	2.79	1.08	#028	R
2.2 Over two groups of target-customer	3.71	1.21	3.11	1.41	#208	C
2.3 Creating one or several brand images	3.53	1.74	2.79	1.48	#165	C
2.4 Analysis of stages of purchasing process	3.53	1.18	2.95	1.39	#219	C
2.5 Tools for each purchasing stage	3.53	1.42	3.42	1.31	#731	C
3. Communications focused on databases for tangible results	3.47	0.89	3.29	1.04	#876	C
3.1 Induction to consumer action	4.47	0.80	3.89	1.24	#186	C
3.2 Monitoring consumer responses	2.88	1.27	2.84	1.43	#900	C
3.3 Consumer information	3.88	1.17	3.37	1.38	#271	C
3.4 Unified database	2.65	1.66	3.05	1.43	#433	C
4. Relationships which nurture communications with existing customers	3.60	0.88	3.49	1.08	#975	C
4.1 Strengthening relationships with customers	2.12	1.41	2.53	1.35	#330	C
4.2 Maintaining relationships and attracting new clients	4.29	1.11	3.74	1.37	#244	C
4.3 Continuous business and customer satisfaction	4.12	1.11	3.84	1.26	#552	C
4.4 Benefits of long-term relationships	3.88	1.27	3.84	1.17	#851	C

Source: Produced by the author

Comparisons by company age between companies which were under two years old and those which surpassed this threshold showed statistically significant differences in the first dimension, communications joined by a coherent message and image where the youngest enterprises had greater levels of integration and coherence in implementing IMC. Also, note when the scores surpassed 4 points, especially for visual coherence and brands. With both indicators the null hypothesis was rejected. The remaining dimensions showed no substantial differences except for the indicator on buyer-user differentiation which had a lower score for the older companies.

Table 6: Implementation of IMC according to the gender of the company owners

IMC dimensions and indicators	Female N= 29		Shared (women) N=4		Man and woman N=3		Test	
	Average	DT	Average	DT	Average	DT	Sig	M
1. Communications joined by a message and coherent images	3.83	0.93	3.85	0.93	3.13	1.22	0,569	C
1.1 Coherence of tools and channels	3.62	1.32	4.00	0.82	4.33	1.16	0,618	C
1.2 Visual coherence	3.86	1.09	3.75	0.96	3.00	2.00	0,670	C
1.3 Linguistic coherence	3.83	1.14	3.75	0.96	2.67	1.53	0,368	C
1.4 Coherent image of company	3.97	1.27	4.00	1.16	3.33	2.08	0,811	C

1.5 Coherent long-term image of company	3.86	1.33	3.75	0.96	2.33	1.16	0,157	C
2. Communications differentiated by multiple groups of customers	3.37	1.06	2.50	0.60	3.60	0.72	0,203	C
2.1 Difference buyer-user	3.21	1.26	3.50	1.00	3.00	2.00	0,951	C
2.2 Over two groups of target-customer	3.38	1.37	3.25	1.26	3.67	1.53	0,890	C
2.3 Creating one or several brand images	3.31	1.56	1.50	0.58	3.67	2.31	0,117	C
2.4 Analysis of stages of purchasing process	3.28	1.28	2.00	0.82	4.33	1.16	0,053	C
2.5 Tools for each purchasing stage	3.66	1.34	2.25	0.50	3.33	1.53	0,132	C
3. Communications focused on databases for tangible results	3.33	0.98	3.25	1.17	4.00	0.00	0,218	C
3.1 Induction to consumer action	4.14	1.13	3.75	0.96	5.00	0.00	0,176	C
3.2 Monitoring consumer responses	2.93	1.31	3.00	1.41	2.00	1.73	0,426	C
3.3 Consumer information	3.59	1.35	3.00	0.82	4.67	0.58	0,153	C
3.4 Unified database	2.66	1.50	3.25	1.71	4.33	1.16	0,174	C
4. Relationships which nurture communications with existing customers	3.62	1.02	3.06	0.77	3.42	0.80	0,309	C
4.1 Strengthening relationships with customers	2.45	1.45	2.00	0.82	1.67	1.16	0,628	C
4.2 Maintaining relationships and attracting new clients	4.07	1.25	4.00	0.82	3.33	2.08	0,646	C
4.3 Continuous business and customer satisfaction	4.03	1.21	3.00	0.82	4.67	0.58	0,106	C
4.4 Benefits of long-term relationships	3.93	1.25	3.25	0.96	4.00	1.00	0,413	C

Source: Produced by the author

As regards the difference between the gender of the owners statistically significant differences between enterprises directed by a woman, several women or by a man and a woman were not found. In all events the null hypothesis remained. However, the indicator concerning the analysis of the stages of the purchasing process, was where the greatest differences were found, which was almost at the limits of statistical significance (0.05), with positive scores (M=4.33) for companies directed by a man and woman, and negative values (M=2) for those directed by several women.

Table 7: Implementation of IMC according to the number of the company employees

IMC dimensions and indicators	0-1 N=10		2-5 N=23		6-10 N=2		+ 10 N=1	Test	
	Av	DT	Av	DT	Av	DT	Av	Sig	H
1. Communications joined by a message and coherent images	3.72	0.80	3.89	0.97	2.50	0.99	4.20	0,328	C
1.1 Coherence of tools and channels	3.2	1.14	4.22	0.95	1.00	0.00	3.00	0,008	R
1.2 Visual coherence	3.7	1.06	3.83	1.27	4.00	0.00	3.00	0,808	C
1.3 Linguistic coherence	4	0.94	3.61	1.23	3.00	1.41	5.00	0,422	C
1.4 Coherent image of company	4	0.94	4.04	1.30	1.50	0.71	5.00	0,105	C
1.5 Coherent long-term image of company	3.7	1.16	3.74	1.32	3.00	2.83	5.00	0,707	C
2. Communications differentiated by multiple groups of customers	3.26	1.01	3.41	0.87	1.30	0.14	4.80	0,048	R
2.1 Difference buyer-user	3.1	1.20	3.43	1.20	1.00	0.00	4.00	0,125	C
2.2 Over two groups of target-customer	3.8	1.14	3.30	1.33	1.50	0.71	5.00	0,105	C
2.3 Creating one or several brand images	3.2	1.55	3.22	1.62	1.00	0.00	5.00	0,168	C
2.4 Analysis of stages of purchasing process	3	1.16	3.43	1.24	1.00	0.00	5.00	0,057	C
2.5 Tools for each purchasing stage	3.2	1.55	3.65	1.19	2.00	1.41	5.00	0,225	C
3. Communications focused on databases for tangible results	3.05	0.90	3.66	0.74	1.25	0.35	4.25	0,011	R
3.1 Induction to consumer action	3.8	0.92	4.61	0.72	2.00	1.41	2.00	0,003	R
3.2 Monitoring consumer responses	2.7	1.06	3.00	1.35	1.00	0.00	5.00	0,068	C
3.3 Consumer information	3.3	1.25	3.91	1.08	1.00	0.00	5.00	0,038	R
3.4 Unified database	2.4	1.51	3.13	1.46	1.00	0.00	5.00	0.09	C
4. Relationships which nurture communications with existing customers	3.43	0.91	3.74	0.84	1.50	0.71	4.25	0.09	C
4.1 Strengthening relationships with customers	2.5	1.18	2.26	1.39	1.00	0.00	5.00	0.15	C
4.2 Maintaining relationships and attracting new clients	4.2	1.14	4.22	1.09	1.50	0.71	2.00	0,052	C
4.3 Continuous business and customer satisfaction	3.7	1.25	4.26	0.92	1.50	0.71	5.00	0.05	R
4.4 Benefits of long-term relationships	3.3	1.25	4.22	0.95	2.00	1.41	5.00	0,036	R

Source: Produced by the author

The comparison between companies by number of employees is that which showed the greatest differences between groups. Statistically significant differences were found in two dimensions: the second, communications differentiated by multiple groups of customers where differences per item were not shown, and the third, communications focused on databases for tangible results, where there were differences between the indicators it was made up of: induction to action and information about the consumer. There were significant differences in other indicators in dimension 1 and 4 such as coherence of tools and channel, continuous business and benefits of long-term relationships.

5. Discussion

The analysis of results shows that Integrated Marketing Communication is in a pending phase for implementing it by enterprising women in the fashion, footwear and accessories industries in Nicaragua. Entrepreneurs understand the benefits of integrating the tools, channels and communication resources they have at their disposal and have begun using them for creating coordinated messages which consolidate a coherent brand image. However, as yet they have not obtained all the benefits they might have from this synergy in terms of building and maintaining relationships with *stakeholders* (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Kitchen and Burgmann, 2015) and in turn, how the brand performs (Luxton et al., 2017).

The results from comparing the enterprise groups show a lack of significant differences in the degree of implementation of IMC between the different categories of enterprises in the sector, except for the comparison by company age and number of employees where the greatest discrepancies can be found between categories and the null hypothesis is rejected in several dimensions and indicators. This indicates that the most consolidated businesses are those which are older and if their tools and communication channels were more integrated, they would be more competitive than start-up enterprises. The latter have strived to integrate their communication in order to improve the image of their brands which as yet have not gained a position on the market.

The degree of formality in the company, determined by whether there is an accounting registry (Hamann and Mejía, 2012), is not a determining factor in the degree of implementation of IMC in female-run fashion enterprises, as the null hypothesis remains in all indicators and dimensions. There are no significant differences between formal and informal companies, even though informality is one of the main obstacles for reinforcing micro companies in Nicaragua (Narváez and Rivera, 2016). This contrasts with previous studies which show that informality is one of the determining factors which explains lack of competitivity and added value in companies in Latin America (Acs and Amorós, 2008; López and Álvarez, 2018). Clearly, formality is not a determining factor behind integrated communications in female-run fashion enterprises, which can be explained by the scant levels of implementing IMC generally and due to the high level of informal businesses in the sample, which is twice that of formal ones.

The most salient discrepancy is shown in the creation of a unified database of customers where, conversely, formal companies show more shortcomings. Even so, it may be easier for formal companies to create these databases, as they have a formal accounting registry. This way they may reinforce their relationships with their existing customers. In line with (Zahay, Peltier, Krishen and Schultz, 2014), this lack of a customer database is why IMC does not always reach its potential, which is what may be happening in this type of businesses.

Similarly, there were no significant differences by gender in company ownership, where the null hypothesis was maintained in all dimensions. Similar levels of implementing IMC were found between the enterprises directed by a woman, several of them, or by both sexes. The most marked discrepancy was seen in the analysis indicator for the stages of the purchasing process between businesses directed by several women, with negative scores and those directed by a man and woman, which had a positive score. As these are female-directed enterprises, the sample does not contain male-owned companies, which could provide a more exhaustive comparison for future research. This would be in line with the findings about the gender gap in enterprising (Noguera, Alvarez and Urbano, 2013) and its relationship with IMC (Butkouskaya, Llonch-Andreu and Alarcón-del-Amo, 2020). This correlation is moderate in developing countries, due to the aversion to risk both sexes have (Einwiller and Boenigk, 2012). This is true in Nicaragua, where economic instability in recent years has caused certain insecurity and precaution over investing (FUNIDES, 2020). This may explain the lack of differences in the levels of implementing IMC between male and female enterprises.

As for company age, HO was rejected for the first dimension: there were significant differences in the level of implementing unified communication to give a coherent message and image. These differences are patent between the enterprises which are under two years old, considered as fledgling or young (Berger and Udell, 1998), and older ones. The youngest ones stand out in terms of their level of integration in implementing IMC with greater coherence in visual elements and a more consistent long-term brand image. These results concur with the findings on brand image as being the key factor which is inherent to creating a fashion brand (Fionda and Moore, 2009; Khan, Rahmani, Hoe and Chen, 2015),

and its impact on consumer behaviour in luxury brands (Lin and Ku, 2018; Akbar, Mahsud, Afzal, Cancan and Riaz, 2020). Female-run fashion enterprises in Nicaragua display a greater degree of integration in their communications when they concern young or recently set up companies, as these strive to coordinate their communication in order to position their brand on the market.

The greatest discrepancies were found when comparing the number of employees, where smaller enterprises (from 2 to 5) displayed positive scores (>4) in coherence of tools and channels, while larger companies (6-10) showed very negative ones. However, the small enterprises showed remarkably negative scores in the remaining dimensions, where enterprises with over 10 employees stand out, especially in terms of continuous business, customer satisfaction and long-term relationships. The largest enterprises use communication integration as a strategy for consolidating relationships with existing customers. As these are larger companies, they have more resources and staff for creating customer databases, monitoring and gathering information and implementing customer loyalty strategies. Meanwhile, smaller enterprises have more limited resources, and usually focus on boosting direct sales. Indeed, smaller companies better implement activities to induce the consumer to action, given the work carried out in digital marketing and on the social networks to raise their sales. These efforts have a positive effect on brand value (Godey et al., 2016), and are an appropriate resource for attracting consumers in the luxury range and the fashion sector (Kim and Ko, 2012). Therefore, according to the findings, small businesses follow a strategy adapted to the fashion industry, although they could improve their performance by reinforcing relationships with existing customers. This is the strategy adopted by larger companies and it has enabled them to raise customer satisfaction, as brand images and messages are more cohesive. These results support the findings of Šeric (2017) and Ahmed (2020) on customer satisfaction in terms of a coherent brand image.

In general, larger companies, those which have employ more people, have integrated their tools and communication channels more. This has made them more competitive than small enterprises or sole traders.

In a similar vein, previous research in the area demonstrated the need in Latin American countries to transform their self-employed small businesses with scant added value into consolidated companies which internationalise (Amorós et al., 2012). Indeed, according to the BCN (2012) larger companies in Nicaragua are those which export most, an almost non-existent activity for micro companies. Therefore, integrating their communications could provide an opportunity for larger and more consolidated businesses to reinforce their brand image and enable them to grow beyond the domestic market in order to improve their performance and competitivity.

There are a few limitations to this research, such as the small size of the sample, due to the lack of official data. Therefore, it aimed to carry out a preliminary analysis of the topic which could provide the springboard for future more extensive research. Moreover, this is a sample which just includes the opinions of entrepreneurs. Therefore, in future research customer perspectives could be included, as well as those from other sectors.

6. Conclusions

This research aimed to compare the degree to which integrated marketing communication has been implemented between the different categories of female-run enterprises in the fashion industry in Nicaragua, grouped according to the variables: formality, gender of owner, company age and number of employees. It was seen that the degree to which this was implemented in female-run enterprises in the fashion industry was scant and at an early stage. Although general scores tended to be positive, there was a marked neutrality in the responses given by the entrepreneurs. This means there is a patent need to make more effort to coordinate their communication activities by means of implementing IMC as the fundamental process for growing their businesses and making them sustainable in the long-term.

Comparisons by enterprise groups showed that formality and gender are not determining factors in terms of implementing IMC in female-run fashion companies. There were no significant differences between formal and informal companies, nor between those directed by a woman, a man or both. However, company age and the amount of employees in the company showed they were key factors to be considered when implementing IMC, as they showed significant differences between different categories of enterprises.

The youngest companies showed strengths in using unified communications to make a coherent message and image, with a more consistent visual identity and brand. Moreover, companies with fewer employees reflected greater coherence when using communication tools and channels, whereas those with over 10 employees showed strengths in differentiating their communications according to different groups of customers, including attributes such as creating multiple brands for different segments or considering the stages of the purchasing process in their communication activities. Likewise, they showed

greater performance in communications based on databases, highlighting factors such as monitoring consumer responses to their activities, gathering information and creating a unified database from the data collected. However, enterprises with over 6 but under 10 workers showed more weaknesses in all four dimensions.

Company size, determined by the number of employees, ranked as the factor which most affected the degree to which communication was integrated at these enterprises. Larger size enterprises, which are those with over ten employees, generally integrated their communications to a greater extent. This means they had a competitive advantage over smaller companies. The latter may have been set up as microcompanies, sole-traders or family-run businesses and might have had more limited resources.

Just as the entrepreneurs stated, the distribution of activities fell to the owners themselves, who acted as administrator, manager, salesperson, designer and, in turn, they carried out marketing and managed communications for their businesses. As a result, small businesses had greater difficulty in integrating their communications and in implementing IMC. However, the advantages to this process may offset the initial costs of implementing them (which mainly stem from hiring more staff in order to perform marketing activities and increasing their advertising investment).

As we have seen, the effect the contribution integrated marketing communication has on brand performance was demonstrated by means of reinforcing customer relationships, improving brand image, ranking and customer satisfaction, especially in the fashion and luxury sectors. As a result, these businesses, especially sole traders or family-run businesses should focus their communications on integrating tools and channels to make the most of these synergies. In this way, they can reinforce their brand image which will help them gain a better position on the market, and in turn, help their chances of survival and the profitability of their businesses.

Also, more consolidated companies, which had a longer track record on the market, were unable to take full advantage of integrating their communications. Although, unlike emerging enterprises, they had experience, they were more reticent to innovation and new communication practices and had stuck to more traditional practices, in which fully integrating processes is not envisaged. Emerging companies, however, tackled the need to implement more innovative practices and made greater efforts in terms of marketing and communication in order to position their brands on the market. Nevertheless, integrating communication has not been fully consolidated in practice and has not been reflected as total coherence of their brand messages and image.

The need for Latin American micro and small companies to innovate at their company and to overcome national barriers means they must adapt them to new communication practices. This will enable them to improve their image, position and public relations in order to raise sales, profitability, and in turn, their chances of survival on the market. Therefore, it is essential for female-run enterprises in the fashion sector, especially the smallest ones, to embrace a holistic approach in order to develop their communication processes, by integrating all the tools and channels at their disposal to create a consistent message and image.

From these conclusions, it is recommended that older companies focus on making their image and visual identity cohesive and on differentiating the buyer-user, while younger companies must work on reinforcing their relationships with existing customers, monitoring their responses and using their information to create a unified database. It has been suggested that larger companies should focus on attracting new customers and developing activities to induce the customer to action, such as call to action buttons on social networks, enquiries via Whatsapp or Messenger and online orders, amongst other things. Lastly, for enterprises which have greater weaknesses over the four dimensions, they need to develop an integrated communication strategy which is reflected in a coordinated marketing plan and which could be used in the short-term.

In short, a plan should be designed with integrated marketing communications aimed at coordinating all tools and communication channels at their disposal, in order to create a coherent message and image, which enables IMC to be implemented as a strategy for reinforcing brand image and relationships with existing customers, as well as attracting new ones.

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9. Notes

1. *Maquiladoras* are companies that allow factories to be duty-free or tariff-free. These factories take raw materials, process them and export the finished product. They can found in Nicaragua, Mexico, El Salvador and Paraguay.

2. Usura Cero Microcredits programme, Reinforcing Craftswomen from Tuno in the Sakalwas community, Mayangna Sauni As territory, Nicaragua North Coast(TUNO), Support for the Entrance of Small Producers in the Value Chain and Access to Markets (PROCAVAL), among others.

3. H=Hypothesis. C=Null hypothesis is maintained: /R=Null hypothesis is rejected.