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Strategic Orientation, Integrated Marketing Communication, and Relational Performance in E-commerce Brands: Evidence from Japanese Consumers' Perception

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Objectives: The effect of integrated marketing communications (IMC) has not received sufficient attention in the e-commerce context. The objective of this research was to examine the effects of customer orientation and technology orientation on IMC and relational performance (i.e., trust, commitment, loyalty).

Methods: Three hundred valid responses were obtained via questionnaire from e-commerce shoppers (e.g., Amazon, Rakuten, and Yahoo Shopping) in Japan. The partial least squares structural equation modeling procedure was utilized to examine the measurement models and test the research hypotheses.

Results: IMC antecedents of strategic orientations, such as customer orientation and technology orientation, were found to positively influence IMC consistency. Technology orientation was found to exert a more significant role in the development of IMC consistency than customer orientation. In addition, all three factors of relational performance were found to be affected by IMC consistency, with the most significant impact found for brand trust. This study found that customer attitudes towards brand trust and commitment mediated the relationship between IMC and brand loyalty.

Conclusions: These findings suggest that marketing managers responsible for e-commerce brand promotion and other branding activities need to evaluate the relative contributions of IMC antecedents of strategic orientations. Furthermore, if consumers perceive a consistent message and image of e-commerce brands, they are more likely to learn more about them, develop positive feelings, and actively promote them to others. To improve brand loyalty, the establishment of brand trust and commitment appears to be crucial.

Key Words: Integrated Marketing Communications, Strategic Orientation, Brand Trust, Brand Commitment, Brand Loyalty

Introduction

One of the crucial topics examined in recent studies conducted on integrated marketing communications (IMC) is how companies engaged in IMC activities can measure and monitor consumer responses to those activities (Schultz, Kim, & Kang, 2014; Šerić, Gil-Saura, & Ruiz-Molina, 2014). Most academics and business practitioners would agree that IMC is a custom-

er-centric concept (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017). Accordingly, the effects of IMC should be evaluated not only from the perspective of business operators but also from the perspective of customers.

While this topic has mainly been researched from the perspective of business managers in the past, this study aimed to elucidate the relationship between companies' strategic orientations and their IMC campaigns (Butkouskaya, Llonch Andreu, & Alarcón del Amo, 2017; Schultz et al., 2014). Researchers who conducted prior studies on this topic have demonstrated the effects of companies' orientations (e.g., market and brand orientations) on their IMC and business results. However, the value of IMC as perceived by customers is significantly different from how business managers view it. In other words, integration of marketing communications results in the integration of messages and their intended meanings, which in turn positively influences consumer sentiment and behavior and also serves the important function of cultivating and maintaining relationships with customers (Kim & Ko, 2012; Mihart, 2012). While past research on corporate managers has been useful for understanding sales revenue, profit, and other financial outcomes as indicators of a manager's business performance, these criteria are not the optimal metrics for measuring the consumer psyche and other more subtle attributes, such as how emotionally committed and loyal consumers are to a given brand.

Little research has yet explored the causal relationship between strategic orientation and IMC from the customers' perspective, except for the study conducted by Butkouskaya et al. (2017), which focused on customer and technology orientation, examining how those two factors affected IMC. However, that study was insufficiently thorough since it sought to understand brand loyalty based only on behavioral variables, even though IMC performance could be affected by multiple other factors. Such a claim might be justified, given the general consensus that brand loyalty is a concept that should be assessed using both behavioral and attitudinal approaches (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). To accurately observe the extent and mechanism of IMC influencing the decision-making process by end users in their purchasing activities, it is crucial to develop a research framework that considers both the behavioral and attitudinal aspects of brand loyalty. Hence, this study aimed to analyze the effects of IMC on certain brands in terms of end users' commitment, the formation of trusting relationships with end users, and how those influence behavioral variables, while treating brand loyalty as a concept that encompasses both behavioral and psychological phenomena in consumers, to advance the previous research conducted on this particular topic.

With the aforementioned background and issues in mind, this study focused on the practice of customer orientation aimed at surveying and fulfilling customer needs and wants, as well as on the practice of technology orientation on innovation and R&D activities. The study then attempted to explain the effects of IMC on the consistency of marketing messages, communication channels, and brand image as perceived by consumers, along with the mechanism through which the aforementioned processes occur. More specifically, this study was designed to achieve the following objectives: (i) to show from the customer perspective the potential effects of a company's customer orientation and technology orientation on its IMC, (ii) to identify the effects of a company's IMC on its relational performance involving its brands and customers, (iii) to clarify the relationships between the various factors involved in the relational performance between brands and customers, and finally, (iv) to examine whether brand trust and commitment mediate the relationship between IMC and brand loyalty.

Theoretical Framework

Customer–Based IMC

In a customer-based IMC model, the importance of bilateral communication between business operators and their customers or consumers is emphasized (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017). The concept of IMC has evolved over the years, from the initial "one voice, one look" tactical approach to the more holistic strategic business process of managing entire companies (Kliatchko, 2008). While the former version of IMC is defined from the customers' perspective, the latter is designed from a corporate management's perspective, which is the key difference between the two. Viewed from the vantage point of customers, as this study intended to do, IMC is a concept that exists in a different dimension from where companies' strategic positions or various management and organizational issues arise. The customer-based IMC model is intended to integrate various marketing communications on a strategic level, as is the focal point of the "one-voice" approach, in terms of the perceptions of the customers targeted by IMC (Finne & Grönroos, 2009).

This is, however, a rather complex process for the customers involved. Under the relationship-based communication model, additional unwanted pieces of information in the external environment often interfere with corporate messages before they reach the customers (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). Furthermore, if inconsistent messages are transmitted through different communication channels in a marketing campaign, it could result in incoherent corporate and brand images, making it more difficult for the intended images to leave an impression on customers, possibly even leaving them with a sense of distrust (Buchanan-Oliver & Fitzgerald, 2016). Moreover, if inconsistent informa-

tion is communicated, it will be difficult to alter customer awareness or behavior as intended, even if the information reaches customers across multiple communication channels. If the brand qualities and imagery being communicated are kept unified and consistent, however, the perceived brand value will be enhanced, ensuring a positive evaluation from customers (Šerić et al., 2014). Hence, the unification of messages, communication channels, and projected brand images is a sound starting point for evaluating the effects of IMC from the customers' perspective and is also a crucial element for cultivating relationships with customers. This is the main focal point of this study.

IMC Antecedents

The term "customer orientation," as a constituent factor of market orientation, is defined as "an organization's culture to sufficiently understand its target customers to be able to create superior value for them continuously" (Narver & Slater, 1990, p. 21). Gatignon and Xuereb (1997), however, define customer orientation as "the ability to identify, analyze, understand, and answer customer needs" (p. 4). At any rate, a customer-oriented company always gathers market information, shares it among all concerned departments and decision-makers, and swiftly adapts to the ever-changing market (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). This corporate strategy to remain sensitive to market changes and pursue customer orientation to its fullest extent is also supported by the dynamic capabilities theory, which views IMC as an integral part of corporate strategy for gaining a competitive advantage. Furthermore, Butkouskaya et al. (2017) recently provided empirical evidence of the positive impact of customer orientation on IMC consistency.

For market-oriented businesses today, fast-paced technological innovations and other sources of pressure from the external environment are constantly in play and cannot be ignored. According to Gatignon and Xuereb (1997), the term "technology orientation" means "an organization's ability to invest in R&D and apply new technologies to develop new products and conduct marketing communication and other marketing activities" (Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997, p. 5). For example, social networks enable marketers to communicate with their target customers and engage them in interactive dialogues, obtain feedback, collect larger amounts of customer data, and access new digital channels to meet ever-changing customer needs (Peltier, Zahay, & Lehmann, 2013; Schultz, 2016). Likewise, since customers can obtain the latest information on brands from businesses, this positively influences their perception of brand communication (Ndubisi, Malhotra, & Wah, 2009). Considering the importance of having the latest information on customers and the market for conducting IMC successfully, it is surmised that

technology orientation positively affects the marketing communication activities of a business (Mulhern, 2009). As such, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- Hypothesis 1: Customer orientation is positively related to IMC.
- Hypothesis 2: Technology orientation is positively related to IMC.

IMC Consequences for Relationship Performance
IMC and Brand Trust

Since communication is positively related to brand trust, many researchers agree that strengthening communication is a viable first step toward both retaining existing customers and acquiring new ones. While "brand trust is conceptualized as a willingness of one party to rely on another in an exchange process" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23), if a business operator is able to communicate consistent messages throughout the exchange process, its trustworthiness as perceived by customers is expected to increase (Brownell & Reynolds, 2002; Sawaftah, 2020; Šerić, Ozretić-Došen, & Škare, 2020). For example, Alden, Basil, and Deshpande (2011) argue that consistent messages through brand promotion strategy have synergistic effects on communication and improve consumers' trust, loyalty, and commitment to the brand. Leeman and Reynolds (2012) reported that the quality of communication was one of the most crucial factors in developing and maintaining sound relationships between consumers and brands. Melewar, Foroudi, Gupta, Kitchen, and Foroudi (2017) also studied the effects of corporate communication on consumer trust, commitment, and loyalty in retail business and found that favorable perceptions of brand communication among customers positively affected these three variables regarding businesses promoting those brands. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- Hypothesis 3: IMC is positively related to brand trust.

IMC and Brand Commitment

Brand commitment can be defined as "the emotional or psychological attachment to a certain brand within a product category" (Lastovicka & Gardner, 1977, p. 68) or "the degree to which the brand is deeply embedded in the consumers' psyche as an acceptable choice within the product category" (Traylor, 1981, p. 51). While brand commitment can be classified into the three components of affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1996), this study treats brand commitment as a single unified concept. Thus, the term is used in this paper to mean affective commitment signifying an emotional or psychological attachment to, and maintenance of one's relationship with, a brand in the long-

term. Keller (2009, p. 146) emphasized that consumers tend to be more emotionally attached to strong brands, and that IMC is a powerful method for cultivating a positive attitude and emotion in consumers toward brands and for developing an emotional connection between consumers and brands. In addition, Melewar et al. (2017) and Šerić et al. (2020) demonstrated that maintaining consistency in brand messages positively affects brand commitment and loyalty from an IMC perspective. Based on these premises, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

- Hypothesis 4: IMC is positively related to brand commitment.

IMC and Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is one of the important components comprising brand equity, which determines brand value, defined as "the degree to which consumers are emotionally attached to specific brands" (Aaker, 1991, p. 39) and "the consumers' deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service of specific brands in the future despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior" (Oliver, 1999, p. 34). In particular, brand loyalty is used as a concept for understanding consumers' behavioral characteristics, and is applied in many instances as an index of their repeat purchase activities for the same brands over time (Dick & Basu, 1994). As for the relationship between IMC and brand loyalty, Keller (2009) argued that maintaining consistent brand messages and image has a strong effect on improving brand loyalty, while Šerić et al. (2014) claimed that an optimal combination of effective communication disciplines can help keep existing customers while reinforcing their loyalty. Zhang, Shabbir, Pitsaphol, and Hassan (2015) provided empirical evidence that IMC positively affects customer loyalty. Likewise, Šerić et al. (2020) recently demonstrated that communication consistency has a strong direct impact on brand loyalty with fast-food brands. Based on these arguments, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

- Hypothesis 5: IMC is positively related to brand loyalty.

Relationship between Brand Trust, Brand Commitment, and Brand Loyalty

Previous research has shown that brand trust promotes brand commitment and improves brand loyalty. For example, Kim, Han, and Lee (2001) demonstrated that trust is a key factor in measuring customer satisfaction and the quality of a brand's relationship with customers, and also positively affects commitment, the likelihood of repeat purchases, and word-of-mouth behavior. In addition, a study conducted by Wilkins, Merrilees, and Herington (2010) on key drivers of customer loyalty

showed that brand trust affects customer loyalty by influencing their attitudes toward brands. Tanford, Raab, and Kim (2011) also confirmed that affective commitment positively influences the constituent factors of brand loyalty, such as unwillingness to switch brands, willingness to pay more for a product or service, and willingness to recommend a brand to others. Further, Šerić et al. (2020) recently provided empirical evidence of a significant and positive relationship between brand trust and brand loyalty and between affective brand commitment and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry. Similarly, Shin, Amenuvor, Basilisco, and Owusu-Antwi (2019) found that brand trust and brand commitment is positively and significantly related to the brand loyalty of South Korean smartphone users. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- Hypothesis 6: Brand trust is positively related to brand commitment.
- Hypothesis 7: Brand trust is positively related to brand loyalty.
- Hypothesis 8: Brand commitment is positively related to brand loyalty.

Mediating Role of Brand Trust and Commitment

As stated by Mukherjee and Nath (2007), in the online environment, brand trust functions as a mediating variable in the relationship between relational dimensions such as communication and most of the consequences related to customers, such as brand loyalty. Additionally, Sawaftah (2020) stated that IMC has an impact on brand trust, and since brand trust has an impact on brand loyalty, brand trust plays a mediating role between IMC and brand loyalty.

Melewar et al. (2017) highlighted that future studies could focus on examining the effect of brand commitment on the link between IMC and brand loyalty. However, previous studies on the mediating role of brand commitment revealed inconsistent results (e.g., Melewar et al., 2017; Šerić et al., 2020). These inconsistencies indicate that the mediating role of brand commitment needs to be reinvestigated. Hence, this study examined brand commitment as a new mediator, since very few studies have investigated the effect of this variable in this context. All in all, it is important to examine whether brand commitment mediates the relationship between IMC and brand loyalty to build long-term relationships between customers and brands. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- Hypothesis 9: Brand trust mediates the relationship between IMC and brand loyalty.
- Hypothesis 10: Brand commitment mediates the relationship between IMC and brand loyalty.

Methods

Data Collection and Sample Profile

In this study, a web-based survey was used, as it would enable efficient data collection on statistical populations representing an e-commerce marketplace. The author delegated several steps of the research process to Rakuten Insight, which had approximately 2.2 million qualified panelists in 2019, including the recruitment of participants, construction of a web-based questionnaire and answer form, and data collection. Questionnaires were distributed to 10,000 panelists selected by sex and age using simple random sampling.

The participants in this study were selected from a pool of individuals who registered as study candidates on the Rakuten Insight website. Anyone willing to participate could enroll in the study on a first-come, first-served basis, unless they met the exclusion criteria. The distribution of questionnaires began on June 25, 2020, and ended on July 12, 2020, when the target numbers of respondents for each sex and age were met. The final sample size was 300 respondents, who were randomly chosen among e-commerce users over 20 years of age who had online shopping experience. Their demographic characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Measurement Tool

In this study, metrics proven to be reliable and suitable in previous research were adopted, and all data were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. As shown in Table 2 below, the six metrics used by Narver and Slater (1990) were applied as IMC antecedents for customer orientation. For technology orientation, this study used the four metrics adopted by Gatignon and Xuereb (1997). For IMC, the five metrics developed by Lee and Park (2007) and used by Porcu, Del Barrio-García, and Kitchen (2017) and Šerić et al. (2014) were also applied. This study made it a particular point to ask respondents whether they felt that the selected brands were communicating consistent brand messages (i.e., visual and linguistic factors) through various communication means and channels (e.g., advertising, sales promotion, public relations [PR], social networking service [SNS], etc.) and maintaining consistent brand images. To analyze IMC performance factors, the five metrics used by Delgado-Ballester (2004) on brand trust were applied, while the three metrics used by Mattila (2006) were applied for brand commitment. Lastly, for brand loyalty, five of the metrics proposed by Kim and Kim (2004) were used to obtains measurements for this study.

Data Analysis

This study used partial least squares structural equation mod-

Table 1. Participant demographic information

Classification	n (%)
Gender	
Male	171 (57)
Female	129 (43)
Age	
20–29 years	22 (7.3)
30–39 years	51 (17.0)
40–49 years	86 (28.7)
50–59 years	75 (25.0)
60–69 years	47 (15.7)
70 years and above	19 (6.3)
Education	
Junior high graduate	4 (1.3)
High school graduate	79 (26.3)
College graduate	62 (20.7)
University graduate	141 (47.0)
Master and higher	14 (4.7)
Job title	
Public official	13 (4.3)
Corporate officer	10 (3.3)
Full-time employee	89 (29.7)
Temporary workers	18 (6.0)
Self-employed and freelancers	41 (13.7)
Undergraduates and graduate students	6 (2.0)
Part-time jobs	31 (10.3)
Homemaker	34 (11.3)
Unemployment	51 (17.0)
Other	7 (2.3)
Recently used brands from e-commerce retailers	
Amazon Japan	80 (26.7)
Rakuten Market	179 (59.7)
Yahoo! Shopping	27 (9.0)
Mercari Corporation	7 (2.3)
ZOZOTOWN	4 (1.3)
Rakuma	1 (0.3)
Others	2 (0.7)
Total	300 (100)

elling (PLS-SEM) technique to measure the proposed study model. PLS is a component-based analysis that has been used as an alternative to covariance-based SEM such as LISREL and AMOS. PLS is most appropriate for data analysis when examining unexplored relationships and when the constructs being studied are relatively new or changing. In addition, PLS is suitable for estimating rather complex causal models and analyzing small samples, and is widely used in marketing research (Hair,

Table 2. Validity and reliability of the measurement tool

Variables and scale items	FL	t-value	α	CR	AVE
Customer orientation					
1.1 (Brand) is strongly committed to your needs.	0.846	31.806	0.902	0.925	0.673
1.2 (Brand) products/services create value for you.	0.821	26.190			
1.3 (Brand) is interested in what products/services you will need in the future.	0.822	37.298			
1.4 (Brand) satisfy your needs.	0.851	37.208			
1.5 (Brand) sends you surveys to assess the quality of their products and services.	0.754	23.559			
1.6 (Brand) supports you with after-sales service.	0.823	35.251			
Technological orientation					
2.1 (Brand) new products are always at the state of the art of the technology.	0.864	33.683	0.913	0.939	0.793
2.2 Relative to other brands, (Brand) new products are more ambitious.	0.883	42.467			
2.3 (Brand) is very proactive in the construction of new Technical solutions to answer my needs.	0.901	54.396			
2.4 (Brand) is always the first one to use a new technology for its new product development.	0.912	79.716			
Integrated marketing communications					
3.1 (Brand)'s intended message is consistently delivered through all communications channels (e.g., advertising, SNS, SP, Website).	0.782	24.403	0.885	0.915	0.683
3.2 (Brand) maintains consistency in all visual components of its communication (e.g., Trademarks, Logos, Models and Color).	0.830	29.380			
3.3 (Brand) maintains consistency in all linguistic components (e.g., Slogans) of communication in all media.	0.816	26.692			
3.4 (Brand) has a consistent brand image.	0.854	45.843			
3.5 (Brand) does not alter the brand image, even as its context changes, but maintains its consistency from the long-term perspective.	0.850	39.559			
Brand trust					
4.1 (Brand) are very reliable.	0.853	40.026	0.921	0.941	0.760
4.2 (Brand) is honest.	0.873	36.876			
4.3 (Brand) are reliable in terms of quality.	0.855	36.351			
4.4 (Brand) fulfils its promises.	0.875	45.256			
4.5 (Brand) provide reliable information.	0.901	53.504			
Brand commitment					
5.1 I am committed to (brand).	0.855	40.724	0.830	0.898	0.746
5.2 I feel a strong emotional attachment to (brand).	0.892	47.347			
5.3 (brand) has a great deal of personal meaning for me.	0.844	36.689			
Brand loyalty					
6.1 I am satisfied with my decision to purchase from (brand).	0.818	32.957	0.876	0.910	0.669
6.2 I intend to recommend the (brand) that I regularly use to people around me.	0.831	33.085			
6.3 I will make purchase again on the (brand).	0.840	35.497			
6.4 I consider (brand) to be my first choice to buy the kind of product.	0.843	39.063			
6.5 My preference for (brand) would not willingly change.	0.754	23.247			

Note. FL, factor loading; *t*-value; *t*-value bootstrap; α, Cronbach's α; CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted; SNS, social networking service; SP, sales promotion.
FL (> 0.70), CR (0.6–0.9), AVE (> 0.5), α (0.6–0.9).

Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017).

This study meets these criteria, as the relationships analyzed herein have been neglected in the e-commerce sector, and IMC is a continuously evolving paradigm. Furthermore, the model

of this study consisted of 10 hypotheses and the sample size was relatively small (N = 300), suggesting that PLS was a suitable technique for data analysis. In addition, this sample met the minimum sample size requirements suggested by Hair et al. (2017), corresponding to 10 times the largest number of structural paths directed at a particular construct in the inner path model.

For data analysis, SPSS version 24.0 was used for simple data tallying and descriptive statistics, after which SmartPLS 3 was used to examine the reliability and validity of the applied measurement scales and to test the hypotheses. PLS algorithms and bootstrapping (5,000 iterations at significance level of 5%) were used to examine whether the measurement and structural models met the criteria previously suggested by Hair et al. (2017).

Results

Reliability and Validity Assessment

First, SmartPLS 3 was used to evaluate the reliability and validity of the measurement scale. As shown in Table 2, the factor load of each construct applied surpassed the tolerance threshold of 0.7 (Carmines & Zeller, 1979) for both products, while Cronbach's α coefficient was in the 0.830–0.921 range, and composite reliability was in the 0.898–0.941 range (Hair et al., 2017; Nunnally, 1978), suggesting that the measurement scale was sufficiently reliable.

In addition, as average variance extracted (AVE) remained in the 0.669–0.793 range for all factors, surpassing the threshold of 0.5, convergent validity could be deduced (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Finally, as shown in Table 3, when discriminant validity was reviewed, the positive square root of each AVE was below the square root of each correlation coefficient for each pair of factors, and the scale was proven to possess sufficient discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As such, all measurements used in the measurement models met the threshold values, thereby demonstrating the validity of the measurement scale.

Table 3. Discriminant validity of the measurement tool

Construct	BC	BR	BT	CO	IMC	TO
BC	**0.864**					
BR	0.620	**0.818**				
BT	0.617	0.701	**0.872**			
CO	0.358	0.444	0.413	**0.820**		
IMC	0.463	0.485	0.490	0.486	**0.827**	
TO	0.392	0.468	0.434	0.598	0.608	**0.890**

Note. BC, brand commitment; BR, brand loyalty; BT, brand trust; CO, customer orientation; IMC, integrated marketing communications; TO, technological orientation.

Hypothesis Testing

In the next analysis, all the hypotheses were tested and verified. First, the values of R^2 (goodness of fit) and Q^2 (predictive ability) were estimated and applied in order to demonstrate the suitability and predictability of the proposed models. For R^2, Falk and Miller (1992) suggested using 0.10 as a reference value. As shown in Figure 1, the exogenous variables surpassed the recommended threshold of 0.10 with all structural models, demonstrating their suitability. Q^2, which is an index commonly used to verify the validity of predictions made by models, must be greater than 0 (Hair et al., 2017). As shown in Figure 1, Q^2 surpassed 0 for all endogenous variables, demonstrating the validity of predictions made using the proposed models.

As shown in Table 4, after all hypotheses were tested for their prediction validity, bootstrapping (5,000 times) was performed to examine the statistical significance and impact of the path coefficients. The analysis demonstrated that customer orientation (H1: β = .191, p = .045) and technology orientation (H2: β = .494, p = .000) had strong positive influences on IMC, and that IMC was more influenced by technology orientation than by customer orientation. The analysis also revealed that IMC positively affected relational performance in brand trust (H3: β = .490, p = .000), brand commitment (H4: β = .211, p < .001), and brand loyalty (H5: β = .130, p < .001). In particular, IMC had a strong influence on brand trust. In terms of the relationships between relational performance factors, a significant positive influence was observed. As for the extent of that influence, the path (H6: β = .514, p < .001) from hypothesis 6 (BT → BC) showed the largest impact, followed by the path (H7: β = .471, p < .001) from hypothesis 7 (BT → BR), and then the path (H8: β = .269, p < .001) from hypothesis 8 (BC → BR).

Mediation Analysis

To understand the mediating influence of brand trust and commitment in the relationship between IMC and brand loyalty, two mediation analyses were conducted using a bootstrapping procedure (MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004). Table 5 shows the indirect effects and the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals obtained after applying bootstrap estimation. The two indirect effects studied were statistically significant (i.e., different from 0 in the population), as the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval of their estimates did not contain 0. Thus, as the direct effect of IMC on brand loyalty was significant, it was concluded that brand trust and brand commitment partially mediated the impact of IMC on brand loyalty. In other words, hypothesis 9 and hypothesis 10 were partially supported.
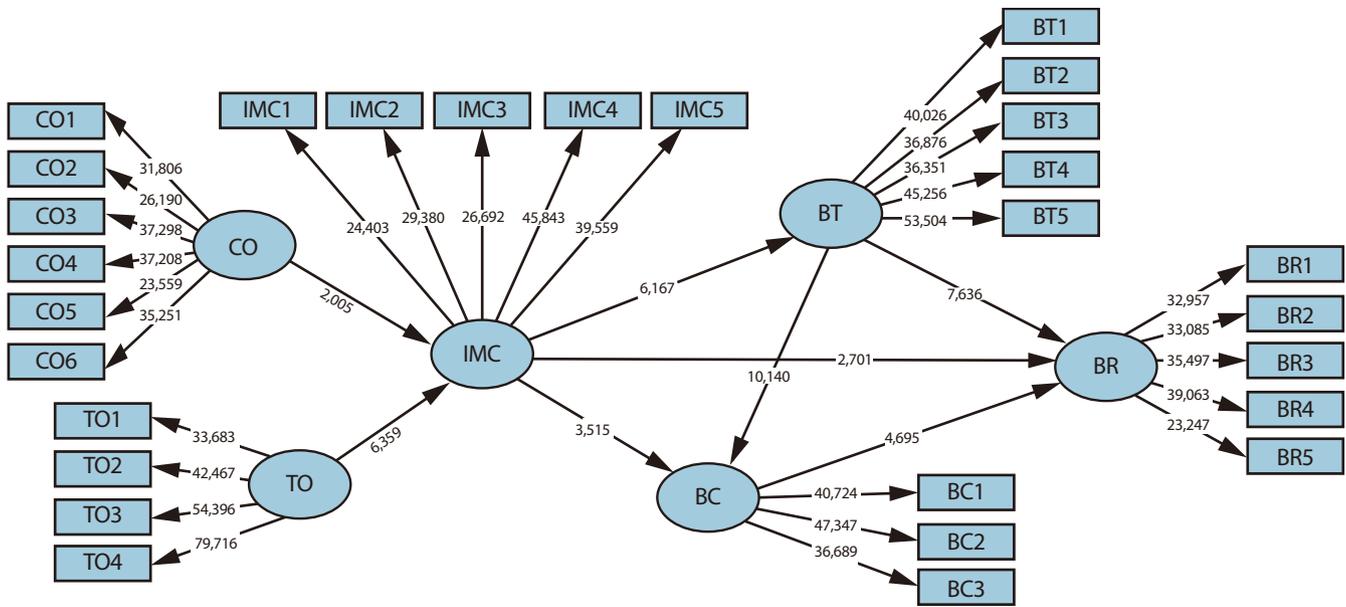
Figure 1. Results of the partial least squares structural model analysis. IMC, R^2 = .393; Q^2 = .257; BT, R^2 = .240; Q^2 = .178; BC, R^2 = .415; Q^2 = .298; BR, R^2 = .560; Q^2 = .363. R^2 > .1; Q^2 > 0. CO, customer orientation; TO, technological orientation; IMC, integrated marketing communications; BC, brand commitment; BT, brand trust; BR, brand loyalty.

Table 4. Results of hypothesis tests

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized β	t-value	Result
H1	CO → IMC	0.191	2.005*	Supported
H2	TO → IMC	0.494	6.359***	Supported
H3	IMC → BT	0.490	6.167***	Supported
H4	IMC → BC	0.211	3.515***	Supported
H5	IMC → BR	0.130	2.701**	Supported
H6	BT → BC	0.514	10.140***	Supported
H7	BT → BR	0.471	7.636***	Supported
H8	BC → BR	0.269	4.695***	Supported

Note. t-value; t-value bootstrap; CO, customer orientation; IMC, integrated marketing communications; TO, technological orientation; BT, brand trust; BC, brand commitment; BR, brand loyalty; β, standardized path coefficients.
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 5. Results of mediation tests

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized β (indirect effect)	p-value	Bias-corrected 95% confidence interval		Result
				Lower	Upper	
H9	IMC → BT → BR	0.231	0.000	0.153	0.324	Partial mediation
H10	IMC → BC → BR	0.057	0.005	0.024	0.110	Partial mediation

Note. IMC, integrated marketing communications; BT, brand trust; BR, brand loyalty; BC, brand commitment; Bootstrap results are based on 5,000 bootstrap samples.

Discussion

Discussion on the Findings

Based on the results presented above, the present section provides a summary of this study, examines its significance, and describes remaining issues that are yet to be addressed. First of all, this study provides evidence using a positive analysis of the effects of customer orientation and technology orientation on companies' IMC as perceived by customers. As in earlier findings from the perspective of managers (Luxton, Reid, & Mavondo, 2015, 2017; Reid, 2005), these results from the customer's point of view confirm the direct positive effect of customer orientation on IMC. This study also confirmed that companies' activities undertaken to meet their customers' needs positively influence the ability of companies to integrate and recognize the value of communication messages. Hence, if a company is intent on further improving the efficacy of its IMC, it might need to pay more attention to customers' behaviors and needs, integrate the insights derived from those observations internally, and focus more on delivering high value to customers. The findings of this study are supported by a former study that focused on other countries (Butkouskaya et al., 2017).

In addition, this study found that technology orientation, like customer orientation, affected IMC, though the impact of technology orientation on IMC was larger. This result, however, is not consistent with findings from previous research, which is likely due to differences that exist between the various countries and businesses that were surveyed (Butkouskaya et al., 2017). In particular, this finding indicates that if a business can cultivate a corporate image of itself as vigorously conducting R&D in e-commerce, actively putting new technology to use, and providing novel customer service, and successfully leaves its customers with this impression, it will positively influence a brand's value perceived by customers with respect to communication integration. In recent years, there has been a prominent trend in the e-commerce industry to offer seamless customer experiences by utilizing artificial intelligence and other cutting-edge technologies to strengthen bonds with customers. Thus, such efforts may be positively perceived by users of online shopping services in the e-commerce space.

Second, this study demonstrated the existence of a direct causal relationship between IMC and relational performance factors. That is, the hypothesis was confirmed that a company's ability to send consistent messages to its target customers through various communication channels results in customers correctly understanding and appreciating the value of a brand. In other words, if a company's customers are already experiencing information overload and lack sufficient processing ca-

pacity, the company sending excessive or inconsistent messages to customers likely leads to a situation where the customers' expectations of the company's brand are higher pre-purchase (Reid, 2005). Thus, companies should take necessary actions to avoid disparities between customers' expectations and experiences while taking into consideration customers' post-purchase evaluations (i.e., customer satisfaction, recommendation, and repurchase intentions) (Oliver, 1980). These findings support the results of previous research that consistent and unified communication with customers is crucial in improving the relational performance with customers through brands (Finne & Grönroos, 2009; Šerić et al., 2014, 2020).

Third, the strong influence of IMC on brand trust was found to be remarkable. This suggests that the diversification of communication channels has made it increasingly difficult for customers to assimilate and comprehend messages sent by businesses. Furthermore, as customers are constantly subjected to information overload and rendered incapable of filtering and receiving only the brand information they need, they might misunderstand brand messages that businesses provide, incorrectly perceive brand value, and ultimately make the wrong purchase decisions (Mihart, 2012). This means that a company's ability to engage in brand communication in a consistent and unified manner for the medium- to long-term enables strong psychological relationships with customers in terms of trust and emotional attachment toward the company's brands. Thus, it could be deduced that brand trust might be a crucial factor for maintaining sound relationships with customers in the e-commerce industry in Japan. This finding is supported by a former study that found the same result (Sawaftah, 2020; Šerić et al., 2020).

Fourth, this study found that customer attitudes toward brand trust and commitment mediated the relationship between IMC and brand loyalty in the e-commerce sector. This suggests that IMC not only has a direct positive impact on brand loyalty, but also indirectly improves it by raising end users' level of trust and commitment toward brands. One particularly noteworthy finding is that the indirect influence of IMC over brand loyalty is greater than the direct influence when it comes to consumers' trust in and commitment to e-commerce brands. Therefore, marketing managers should specifically focus on these factors in order to build a long-term and mutually profitable relationship with customers and cultivate brand loyalty for a competitive advantage in the e-commerce marketplace. This is consistent with previous research showing that brand trust and commitment mediate the relationship between IMC and brand loyalty (Melewar et al., 2017; Šerić et al., 2020).

Fifth, this study showed relationships between relational performance involving brands and customers and its driving

factors (i.e., trust, commitment, and loyalty). The findings from the study demonstrate strong correlations between trust and commitment, trust and loyalty, and commitment and loyalty. In other words, if a company wants to gauge how its communication activity is influencing its customers' brand loyalty, it could effectively do so by considering brand trust and commitment together as interrelated relational performance factors. The knowledge obtained from this study suggests that businesses hoping to improve their brand management should seek to understand brand loyalty not only by their customers' actual purchase activities, but also by understanding the relationship between brand trust and brand commitment that drives those activities. This finding supports previous research conducted by Šerić et al. (2020) and Shin et al. (2019), according to which brand trust and brand commitment influence brand loyalty.

Implications

First of all, the findings of this study suggest that businesses' utilization of state-of-the-art technology in communicating with their customers helps improve customer perception of corporate communications and positively influences the relational performance involving customers and brands (i.e., trust, commitment, loyalty). It is especially interesting to note that, in the e-commerce marketplace in Japan, IMC strongly affects not only customer orientation toward IMC, but also brand trust, commitment, and loyalty. Hence, it is crucial for e-commerce marketing managers to accurately understand and monitor customers' needs and priorities, and to engage in consistent and unified communication activities accordingly, in order to maintain and enhance the identity of their brands.

Secondly, in the e-commerce marketplace, where technology orientation is relatively more accepted, e-commerce marketing managers should put more effort into integrating messages. To this end, it is crucial not only to manage communication channels strategically (e.g., advertising, direct response, sales promotion, PR, and SNS), but also to evaluate the externally available information that can be used from within customers' ecosystems. There are many instances where word-of-mouth and messages transmitted by competitors cause undesirable noise, distortion, and confusion as to how brand concepts are perceived, which can result in defection by existing customers and loss of a brand's competitive advantage. As such, e-commerce marketing managers might need to more thoroughly analyze available customer data as to the 'what' (i.e., the message) and the 'how' (i.e., the channel) of their customer communications, and send messages that cater to customer needs with optimal timing in order to improve customers' perceptions of integrated communications.

Thirdly, the study demonstrates that IMC, if properly con-

ducted, positively affects customer trust, emotional attachment, and post-purchase behavior. Hence, if e-commerce marketing managers hope to improve brand loyalty among their customers through brand trust and commitment, they should manage all communication channels and messages used in their IMC campaigns in an integrated manner. In order for a company to achieve these objectives, various functional departments within the organization must work together in a well-coordinated manner to optimize sales activities, product packaging and design, advertisement, and sales promotion, while adjusting each department's communication output.

Limitations and Future Research

This study also has some limitations and remaining issues to be addressed. First, it is necessary to consider customers' personal financial situations (e.g., income level, average purchasing power, price sensitivity) and personal factors (e.g., motivations, lifestyle, personality), investigate them as moderating variables of IMC, and investigate their functions. It might also be useful to consider the estimated switching cost and other situational factors that affect customers' decision-making process and measure the extent of their influence on brand loyalty (Hellier, Geursen, Carr, & Rickard, 2003).

Second, it might be necessary to examine the effects of IMC in other industries as well. Since this study focused on analyzing customer data related to the rapidly growing e-commerce marketplace in Japan, the degree to which its conclusions could be generalized is limited. Hence, it might be necessary to expand the analysis beyond the retail industry to include the manufacturing and service industries in the future to comprehend the structural relationships between strategic orientations and IMC, as well as the relationship between IMC and relational performance, in order to improve the external applicability of the theoretical models proposed in this study.

Third, it might be necessary to analyze the proposed theoretical models in international contexts for comparison. To further advance the findings in this study, it is crucial to investigate how different cultural and economic factors in the global environment influence consumers' perception of IMC as well as their behavior. For example, it might be useful to evaluate how the cultural factors specific to each country function as third or moderator variables affecting the relationship between companies' orientations, IMC, and brand performance.

Conclusion

As indicated above, this study yielded new knowledge by focusing on two points that previous research overlooked: (1) the

influence of companies' customer orientation and technology orientation on their IMC, and (2) the effects of consumers' perceptions of companies' IMC on the relational performance between customers and brands. In particular, this study focused on the e-commerce marketplace in Japan and found positive evidence regarding how online retailers' customer orientation and technology orientation influenced their consistency across communication channels and the messages used by the retailers in their IMC, as well as a positive effect of the consistency of communication channels and messages as perceived by customers on the relational performance between customers and brands.

Another contribution of this study is its identification of companies' strategic orientations and the utilization and potential of IMC to provoke desired consumer behavior in the form of purchase activities and positive responses. In addition, while previous survey-based research on the topic mainly focused on analyzing the relationship between companies' IMC and performance factors from the perspective of corporate managers and management, the focal point of this study was companies' customer orientation and technology orientation, which are two of the orientations most visible to customers. By investigating the relationship between these orientations and IMC, this study aimed to expand the knowledge base obtained in previous research. We hope this study serves as a useful endeavor for improving the understanding of how IMC could be used to develop strong brands and provide a basis from which to advance future research on the topic.

Acknowledgements

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