Analyzing the influence of firm-wide IMC on market performance in the hospitality industry

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, scholars have recently emphasized the need for tourism marketers to orchestrate the wide range communication activities and forms via the adoption of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC). However, prior research has almost neglected the role of IMC in hospitality management. This paper adopts a broad organizational approach conceiving IMC as a concept that involves the whole organizational entity and aims to analyze the effects of IMC on market performance, in terms of superior sales and financial results, greater brand advantage and customer-related outcomes for those businesses providing lodging services. To pursue this research purpose, a survey has been conducted among corporate-level senior managers of lodging businesses operating in Spain. The findings provided further and more compelling empirical proof of the positive influence of IMC on market performance, responding to the call for more rigorous empirical research to demonstrate the beneficial effects of firm-wide IMC on market performance.

KEYWORDS: Hospitality management, IMC, market performance, sales-related performance, brand advantage, customer satisfaction, supply-side approach.

1. Introduction

After six decades of sustained development and diversification, tourism is currently considered as one of the more relevant and fastest-growing sectors worldwide and *"a key driver of socio-economic progress through the creation of jobs and enterprises, export revenues and infrastructure development"* (UNWTO, 2016). More specifically, hospitality businesses are currenlty facing unprecedented challenges worldwide due to the sector's maturity and the evolving technological environment. In this regard, while the Internet has provided managers with business opportunities and a valuable branding and management tool, most businesses are still seeking for effective and efficient strategies and tactics to build and strengthen their relationships with customers, consumers and other stakeholders via online channels.

Over the last decade, several authors have examined a number of interrelated factors that have led to the emergence of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) as the new paradigm needed to manage communication: technological turbulence (e.g. Schultz, 1996; Schultz and Schultz, 1998; Zahay et al., 2014), competitive intensity (e.g., Low, 2000; Reid, 2005), the reduced reliance on mass marketing communications (e.g. Schultz and Schultz, 1998; Duncan and Mulhern, 2004; Reid, 2005), the increasing relevance of customized comunications needed to adopt the relationship-marketing orientation (e.g. Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Kitchen, Kim and Schultz, 2008) and the fragmentation of media and audiences (e.g. Pilotta et al., 2004; Schultz et al., 2014), which is one of the most prominent drivers of IMC. In fact, due to the increasingly greater fragmention of media, consumers (and tourists) are likely to receive confusing and often contradictory messages (Hudson and Hudson, 2017) from a wide range of sources (i.e. social networking sites, the hotel website, blogs, etc.). In line with this, McCabe (2009) highlighted that a critical issue affecting

marketing communications in hospitality is media platform changes through audience fragmentation.

To address this situation, several scholars of the field (i.e. Pike, 2008; Šerić, Gil-Saura, 2011; Šerić et al., 2014; Hudson and Hudson, 2017) have recently highlighted the need for tourism marketers to make efforts to coordinate all communication messages and sources of an organization via the adoption of IMC.

Undoubtedly, given the current fast evolving and dynamic marketing and communication environments, the role of IMC is more important than ever before (Taylor, 2010; Vernuccio and Ceccotti, 2015) and its relevance in both academia and the professional arena is *in crescendo* (Muñoz-Leiva et al., 2015). Therefore, a number of scholars called for more rigorous empirical research to foster the IMC theoretical development and enhance its acceptance in boardrooms and practice (e.g. Tafesse and Kitchen, 2017; Porcu et al., 2017). In particular, the research on the role played by IMC within hospitality management has been fairly neglected (Šerić et al., 2014).

Moreover, in his call for more empirical and solid research in this field, Reid (2005) highlighted that studies focusing on a specific sector should aim to determine whethere those businesses in the industry that implement a higher level of integration have achieved some form of superior performance.

Therefore, the present paper addresses such research gap by inquiring into whether IMC has a positive influence on market performance in the hospitality industry. More specifically, the contribution of this study to the hospitality management literature is twofold. Firstly, while prior studies have examined the role of some antecedents of IMC (e.g. Porcu et al. 2017) and specific brand outcomes (e.g. Šerić et al., 2013, 2014), this study pioneers the examination of the effect of the adoption of IMC by lodging businesses on overall market performance, the latter being measured as a higher second-order construct composed of three

dimensiosn (namely, sales and financial results, brand advantage and customer outcomes). Secondly, it must be noticed that the review of the tourism and hospitality management literature suggests that this study is the first measuring IMC taking the broader firm-wide IMC approach in the hospitality industry, conceiving IMC as a concept that involves the whole organizational entity. In this regard, previous studies addressing the role of IMC in the tourism sector, and especially in the hospitality industry, were performed using extant IMC measurement tools based on a narrow-approach focusing exclusively on the coordination of the marketing mix. Accordingly, our study seeks to respond to this call for a more holistic perspective to analize IMC and its impact on performance by taking a supply-side approach.

With these premises in mind, this study formulates a theoretical model aiming to demonstrate that firm-wide IMC represents a key antecedent of market performance within the hospitality sector. To validate the proposed model, the Spanish lodging sector has been selected as a suitable context, given the fact that Spain is among the top 3 tourist destinations at a global scale, with a strong hospitality infrastructure, thus providing researchers with a good sphere of study in terms of the generalizability of the results.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC)

As an academic field, IMC attracted marketing and management scholars' interest and is considered as "*one of the most influential marketing management frameworks during the last twenty years*" (Kitchen, 2015). A significant evidence of such scholarly attention results from the fact that, since the emergence of this concept in the early nineties, several special issues and editorials have been devoted to the IMC research in top marketing and management journals, such as the *Journal of Advertising* (in 2005), and, more recently, the *European Journal of Marketing* (in 2017).

The IMC research area has long been characterized by a vivid theoretical debate and most extant research has focused on definitional issues. Both the academia and the professional arena suggest that IMC research moved from a narrow-focus approach centered on marketing communications to a broader organizational perspective. Likewise, while early conceptualizations (Caywood, Schultz and Wang, 1991; Schultz, 1992, 1996; Raman and Naik, 2004) clearly confine IMC to marketing communications mix and planning, most recent publications (Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014; Vernuccio and Ceccotti, 2015; Tafesse and Kitchen, 2017; Porcu et al., 2017; Luxton et al., 2017) point out that a firm-wide approach should be taken to conceptualize IMC to highlight that IMC involves the whole organization. In this regard, for Luxton et al. (2017) IMC is positioned as *"a firm-wide market relating deployment mechanism that enables the optimization of communication approaches to achieve superior communication effectiveness"*.

The above-mentioned broader approach has also been taken by other authors. Duncan and Moriarty (1998) theoretically modeled the key-role of communication and interactivity in establishing and nourishing relationships with the brand, recognizing that IMC involves the whole organization (more specifically, corporate, marketing and communication levels) and highlighting that organizations should be stakeholder-oriented. Accordingly, other scholars have suggested that Integrated Communication (IC) allows for clear, consistent and continuous communication *"within and across formal organizational boundaries"* (Christensen et al., 2008, p. 424), while Kerr and Patti (2015) called for a more holistic approach and conceptualized the construct of Strategic Integration (SI). Nevertheless, this 'holistic' organizational perspective enable managers to enhance the integration of the whole set of communications and messages generated all the departments, units and divisions of the organization, thus reducing the effect of the potential silos and 'turf battles'. In this regard, a recent survey revealed that practitioners identify *"the involvement of overall business*

process, not just marketing communications" (Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014, p. 382) among the top four IMC notions, thus highlighting the need to understand IMC not only as the integration of marketing and sales, *"but also of all the functions within the organization, encompassing both horizontal and vertical integration across business platforms within the firm"* (Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014, p. 382).

Following a comprehensive review of prior IMC theories, definitions and conceptual models, we define IMC as *"the stakeholder-centered interactive process of cross-functional planning and alignment of organizational, analytical and communication processes that allows for the possibility of continuous dialogue by conveying consistent and transparent messages via all media in order to foster long-term profitable relationships that create value"*.

This definition highlights the multidimensionality of this concept, with four dimensions being identified: message consistency (i.e. Caywood et al., 1991); interactivity (i.e. Duncan and Mulhern, 2004); stakeholder-centered strategic focus (i.e. Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014); and organizational alignment (Christensen et al., 2008; Porcu et al., 2012).

The 'message consistency' dimension represents the first step for the integration of communication and reflects the communication of consistent and transparent positioning through the organization's contact points. Since the emergence of the concept several authors have highlighted the key-role of this dimension (Schultz and Schultz, 1998; Porcu et al., 2012; Šerić, Gil-Saura and Ozretic-Dosen, 2015).

The 'interactivity' dimension is the core element of a dialogue involving the organization and a wide range of stakeholders (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998). Interactivity is intended as a general human social experience composed of three facets, namely (interlocutors') "reciprocity", "speed of response" and "responsiveness" (Johnson, Bruner and Kumar, 2006).

The 'stakeholder-centered strategic focus' dimension regards the fact that the whole organization (including all the divisions and hierarchical levels) should acknowledge that core strategic goal is building long-term relationships with stakeholders. In pursuing this aim, all the stakeholders (i.e. managers, advertising agencies, tourism-related institutions, outsourced customer care services, etc.) should be encouraged to share the information each other and the organization needs to ensure that information flows smoothly and goes beyond departmental and even organizational boundaries (i.e., between the hotel and a booking service platform).

Ultimately, the 'organizational alignment' dimension highlights the role of internal synergy, intended as top-down, bottom-up and horizontal integration at organizational and corporate levels. This dimension reflects the fact that the whole company/organization is involved in the process of orchestration of the entire set of communication processes and messages, mechanisms. As a consequence, departmental *silos* represent a significant barrier and their elimination is paramount to reach the greatest degree of IMC.

2.2. Integrated Marketing Communication in Hospitality Management

The relevant role of IMC in the international tourism and hospitality arena has been highlighted in previous studies (Pizam and Holcomb, 2008; Pike, 2008). In this regard, several scholars in the tourism management field (Pike, 2008; Clarke, 2009; Dinnie, Melewar, Seidenfuss and Musa, 2010) have called for more research on IMC applied in the tourism sector. For example, Pike (2008, p. 266) argued that *"one of the greatest marketing challenges faced by DMOs is stimulating a coordinated approach among all those stakeholders who have a vested interest in, and will come into contact with, the target visitors"*. A comprehensive literature review revealed that only a few empirical studies on IMC have been undertaken in the tourism sector (Skinner, 2005; Elliott and Boshoff, 2008; Wang, Wu and Yuan, 2009; Dinnie et al. 2010; Ortega, Rodríguez, and Such-Devesa, 2015)

and, more specifically, in the hospitality industry (Šerić and Gil-Saura, 2011; Šerić et al. 2013, 2014, 2015; Šerić, 2017). More importantly, as mentioned earlier, in previous studies IMC has been assessed as the coordination of marketing communications, taking the narrow-focused approach described earlier and several authors have called for more research efforts to look into the role of firm-wide IMC in the hospitality industry. In addition, while the majority of the extant IMC literature has taken a supply-side approach, only three of the IMC studies applied to the tourism sector and hospitality industry have taken such approach (Elliott and Boshoff, 2008; Dinnie et al., 2010; Šerić and Gil-Saura, 2011), most of them based on a consumer approach. Elliott and Boshoff (2008), who focused their research on the effect of specific orientations on the successful implementation of IMC in small-sized tourism businesses in South Africa, suggested that the importance of IMC is crucial to attract and retain customers and enables small businesses to achieve higher revenues. Dinnie et al. (2010) pointed out that IMC plays a key role in nation branding strategy due to the fact that this pursues multiple objectives and addresses a diverse range of stakeholders. More interestingly, Šerić and Gil-Saura (2011) opened the way for IMC research within the hospitality industry via a research survey conducted among hotel managers of top-quality hotels in Dalmatia (Croatia). In their study, they found that, while the application of Information and Communication Technologies and the hotel category were positively related, the IMC level decreased with the increase of the hotel category. In a number of subsequent research pieces, Šerić and colleagues (Šerić et al., 2013, 2014, 2015; Šerić, 2017) have opted for taking a customer perspective and contributed significantly to pave the way for the development of a more solid body of knowledge on the IMC application and performance in the hospitality industry.

2.3. Relationship between Integrated Marketing Communication and Market Performance

The lack of significant demonstration of the positive association between IMC and performance has been regarded as the prominent barrier limiting a wider acceptance of IMC *"among both pragmatic practitioners and sceptical scholars"* (Ewing, 2009, p. 114). Similarly, Taylor (2010, p. 346–347) pointed out that *"too little research has focused on [IMC] performance metrics"*. The paucity of empirical evidence demonstrating that organizations can benefit from the implementation of IMC is strongly associated to the measurement issue, which remains one of the most challenging unresolved research questions (Ewing, 2009; Tafesse and Kitchen, 2017). To address this research gap, Luxton et al. (2017) highlighted *"an urgent need to adopt a definitional position [...] and to develop a parsimonious and useful empirical measure"*. Undoubtedly, several authors (i.e., Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014; Muñoz-Leiva et al., 2015) have recently suggested that the conceptual background is still fairly disjointed, thus academics have struggled to develop valid and reliable scales and adequately test the IMC-performance link (Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014). In this regard, a limited number of empirical studies were conducted to demonstrate the positive relationship between IMC and performance (e.g. Low, 2000; Reid, 2005; Einwiller and Boenigk, 2012; Luxton et al., 2015, 2017) and only few studies have addressed the link between IMC and performance variables in the hospitality industry.

Table 1 summarizes the most significant studies that relate IMC with a range of market performance variables within several sectors, including the hospitality industry.

Table 1

A Review on the Relationship between IMC and Market Performance

Study	Research Context/Sample/Estimation Method	Approach [Scales]	Key outcomes of IMC
Duncan & Moriarty (1998)	N/A (Conceptual paper)	IMC: Firm-wide approach	- Brand equity - Shareholder value - Customer value - Premium prices
Low (2000)	Multi-sectorial/United States of America Sampling frame: a commercial listing of 1400 companies. Key informant: CEOs or CMOs. 421 cases (36 % response rate) Multiple regressions and bivariate correlation analysis	IMC: Narrow-focused approach centred on marketing communications [3 items measuring message consistency (Low, 2000)]	- Overall profitability - Sales volume - Sales growth - Market share - Customer value
Naik & Raman (2003)	Study of specific brand advertising campaign. Kalman filtering methodology.	IMC: Narrow approach, measured in terms of cross-media synergy.	- Maximization of the communication budgets (Efficiency)
Duncan & Mulhern (2004)	N/A (Conceptual paper)	IMC: Firm-wide approach	- ROI - Purchase intention - Return on customer touchpoint - Brand preference - Brand awareness - Brand attitude
Zahay et al. (2004)	Multi-sectorial/United States of America. Sampling frame: 433 companies. Key-informant: Business to Business marketing executives. 209 cases (48% response rate). EFA. Principal Components Analysis, Varimax Rotation. Regression Analysis	IMC: Firm-wide approach [adapted version of the scale by Reid (2005)]	- Financial outcomes - Customer relationship - Overall brand performance
Rust et al. (2004)	N/A (Conceptual paper)	IMC: narrow approach	- Financial market position - Shareholder value - Customer loyalty - Customer satisfaction - Cash flow - Brand value
Madhavaram, Bradrinarayanan & McDonald (2005)	N/A (Conceptual paper)	IMC: Firm-wide approach	- Overall profitability - Financial results - Brand awareness - Brand image - Stakeholder relationships

Reid (2005)	Multi-sectorial/Australia Sampling frame: a commercial listing of 1000 companies. Key-informant: CEOs or CMOs. 169 cases (18.7 % response rate). AFC to validate the scales and SEM-Path Analysis to estimate the structural model (IMC and Market Performance as second-order reflective constructs).	IMC: Firm-wide approach [Duncan and Moriarty (1997)] Market performance: subjective multidimensional scale and assessed in comparison with the closest competitor.	- Market performance, in terms of: - Sales-related performance (Overall profitability; market share; sales volume; sales growth); - Brand advantage (Brand awareness; premium prices; channel cooperation) - Customer-related outcomes (loyalty and satisfaction)
Navarro-Bailón, Sicilia-Piñero & Delgado Ballester (2009)	FMCGs /Spain Experimental design	IMC: narrow approach (consistency between sponsorship and advertising)	- Brand image - Brand associations - Brand attitude
Navarro-Bailón (2011)	FMCGs /Spain Experimental design	IMC: narrow approach (consistency between sponsorship and advertising)	- Brand image - Brand attitude
Einwiller & Boenigk (2012)	Financial sector/Switzerland Sampling frame: a list of 4056 companies with 50-500 employees. Key-informant: managers in communication, marketing/sales, CEOs, general managers or owner. 642 cases (15,9% response rate). Correlation Analyses.	IMC: Firm-wide approach. Measured in terms of the alignment of the communication with the corporate strategy and mission. Market performance: subjective multidimensional scale and assessed in comparison with the closest competitor.	- ROI - Market share - Communication effectiveness - Brand awareness - Brand image - Brand attitude - Employee satisfaction - Customer satisfaction
Porcu, Del Barrio-García & Kitchen (2012)	N/A (Conceptual paper)	IMC: Firm-wide approach	- ROI - Overall profitability - Sales growth - Brand awareness - Brand image - Brand equity - Brand attitude - Customer loyalty - Customer satisfaction
Luxton, Reid & Mavondo (2015, 2017)	Multi-sectorial/Australia Key informant: senior managers. 187 cases (17.7 % response rate). Variance-based SEM with Smart PLS.	IMC: Firm-wide approach, measured using the scale by Luxton et al. (2015). Brand market performance and brand financial performance measured via subjective scales and assessed in comparison with the closest competitor.	- Campaign effectiveness - Brand market performance (perceived quality; premium prices; channel cooperation; brand loyalty; market penetration) - Brand financial performance (sales value; market share; gross margin, ROI; ROA)
The relationship between IMC and Market Performance within the Hospitality industry			
Study	**Research Context/Sample/Estimation Method**	**Approach [Scales]**	**Key outcomes of IMC**

Šerić, Gil-Saura, & Mollá-Descals (2013)	Dalmatian region (Croatia). Key-informants: Managers of 17 high-class hotels. Survey among 120 guests of the 17 targeted hotels. Mann-Whitney U test. Variance-based SEM with Smart PLS.	IMC: Narrow-focused approach centred on marketing communications [customer-perceived IMC measured via 5 items assessing the dimension 'unified communications for consistent message and image' from the scale by Lee & Park (1997)]. Customer and supply-side perspective.	- Brand loyalty (visit frequency; intention to return; first choice; satisfaction; intention to recommend; non-intention to change).
Šerić, Gil-Saura, & Ruiz-Molina (2014)	Rome (Italy). High-quality hotels. Survey among 400 guests of such hotels (20 per hotel). Face-to-face and self-administered questionnaires. 335 valid responses (83,75 % response rate). CFA and multi-group SEM with EQS.	IMC: Narrow-focused approach centred on marketing communications [customer-perceived IMC measured via 5 items assessing the dimension 'unified communications for consistent message and image' from the scale by Lee & Park (1997)]. Customer perspective.	- Brand equity, in terms of brand image, perceived quality, brand loyalty
Šerić, Gil-Saura, & Ozretic-Dosen (2015),	Croatia and Italy. High-quality hotels. Rome (Italy): 335 valid responses (83,75 % response rate). Croatia: 475 valid responses (98.95 % response rate). Variance-based SEM with Smart PLS.	IMC: Narrow-focused approach centred on marketing communications [Lee & Park (1997)]. Customer perspective.	- Customer satisfaction
Šerić (2017)	Croatia. 24 high-class hotels. 475 valid responses (98.95 % response rate). SEM with Lisrel and multigroup (by country of origin) analysis with Smart PLS.	IMC: Narrow-focused approach centred on marketing communications [two items assessing the dimension 'unified communications for consistent message and image' from the scale by 'Lee & Park (1997)]. Customer perspective.	- Overall brand equity

Among the studies addressing the effect of IMC on some type of performance variables, only two of them were conducted in Spain, however none of them focused on the Spanish hospitality sector.

With regard to the scales used to assess IMC, the instrument proposed by Duncan and Moriarty (1997) and modified by Reid (2005) has been used to apply the broader approach

(e.g. Luxton et al., 2015, 2017), while the scale developed by Lee and Park (2007) was selected by the authors of the empirical studies within the hospitality industry (e.g. Šerić, Gil-Saura, & Ruiz-Molina, 2014), who decided to take a narrow-focused approach measuring IMC as the mere coordination of marketing communications tools and messages. The studies reviewed suggest that market performance variables were basically assessed using subjective scales in terms of perceived performance, confirming that this approach is dominant in the management field (Einwiller & Boenigk, 2012). This is also consistent with the fact the most studies addressing the relationship between IMC and performance have taken a supply-side perspective, the key-informants being CEOs, CMOs and other managers of the company, except for few studies (e.g Navarro-Bailón, 2011). On the contrary, the review of the extant literature on the IMC performance within the hospitality industry revealed that in this case the dominant approach is the customer-perspective, the performance variables being measured as perceived by consumers, more specifically the hotel guests (e.g. Šerić, Gil-Saura, & Ruiz-Molina, 2014), thus missing the managerial views regarding the application of IMC in this sector.

The beneficial effects of IMC have been mostly tested using a multi-sectorial approach, with the exception of the studies conducted by Navarro-Bailón et al. (2009) and Navarro-Bailón (2011) with FMCGs in Spain, and the research by Einwiller and Boenigk (2012), which was performed within the Swiss financial sector. In addition, only four studies addressed the link between IMC and performance within the hospitality industry and were conducted among a specific hotel category (high-class hotels) in specific regions of Croatia and Rome (Italy).

The meaning of the positive relationship between IMC and performance measures is confirmed in the empirical studies reviewed. In this regard, prior academic literature suggests that IMC positively affects the overall market performance of an organization.

As outlined in Table 1, the key outcomes of IMC can be grouped into economic (overall profitability, sales volume, sales growth, market share, efficiency, cash flow, etc.) and financial performance (ROI, ROA, sales value, shareholder value, financial outcomes, etc.), brand-related results (brand equity, brand awareness, brand advantage, brand image, brand preference, premium prices and channel collaboration, etc.), and customer-related outcomes (customer satisfaction, retention, loyalty, etc.).

First, in regard with the effects on economic and financial performance, Duncan and Mulhern (2004) suggested that IMC positively affects ROI and purchase intention, while Porcu et al. (2012) highlighted that IMC is associated to a superior economic and financial performance, in terms of global profitability and sales growth rate. Among the empirical research testing the effects of IMC on economic and financial outcomes, the study carried out by Einwiller and Boenigk (2012) empirically tested the positive association between the effective application of IMC and 'hard' economic measures, such as ROI and market share. Likewise, scholars have found a significant and positive effect of IMC on sales volume, sales growth, market share (e.g. Low, 2000; Reid, 2005; Luxton et al., 2015, 2017), the maximization of the communication budgets (Naik & Raman, 2003), financial outcomes (e.g. Zahay et al., 2004; Reid, 2005), shareholder value and cash flow (Rust et al., 2004), premium prices and channel cooperation (Reid, 2005; Luxton et al., 2015, 2017), ROI and ROA (Luxton et al., 2015, 2017).

Secondly, it is undoubted that the majority of the outcomes that resulted to derive from the application of IMC relates to brand performance. In this regard, Madhavaram et al. (2005, p. 69) pointed out that *"for practitioners IMC has pervaded various levels within the firm* [and] *has become an integral part of brand strategy"*. Duncan and Moriarty (1998) considered that IMC exerts a positive influence on brand equity, while Duncan and Mulhern (2004) suggested that IMC relates to a superior brand performance, more specifically to

greater brand awareness, brand preference and a more favorable attitude towards the brand. Likewise, Keller (2009) pointed out that integrating different communication options enables the organization to achieve the desired brand awareness and brand image in the consumers' minds and that the strength of brand associations will depend on the integration of brand identities. Similarly, several authors have found a strong positive relationship between IMC and brand advantage compared to the closest competitor (Low, 2000; Reid, 2005; Luxton et al., 2015, 2017). In addition, Einwiller and Boenigk (2012) found significant evidence of the beneficial outcomes of IMC in terms of 'soft' psychological performance, namely brand awareness, brand attitude and brand image. Navarro et al. (2009) and Navarro-Bailón (2011) conducted an experimental design and found that the level of IMC, measured in terms of strategic consistency betweeen advertising and sponsorhip, was positively related to favorable brand image, attitude and associations.

Prior studies conducted within the hospitality industry were focused mainly on the beneficial effects of IMC on brand and customer outcomes, such as brand equity (e.g. Šerić et al., 2014) and customer loyalty (e.g. Šerić et al., 2013) and satisfaction (e.g. Šerić et al., 2015), thus there is a dearth of research linking the adoption of IMC with sales-related performance measures in this sector.

Third, Duncan and Mulhern (2004) highlighted that IMC positively relates to more favorable customer attitudes and greater customer satisfaction, loyalty and retention. As mentioned earlier, the customer-related outcomes also emerged as key effects of the implementation of IMC. In this regard, the literature review suggests that IMC is positively associated to a superior customer loyalty and customer satisfaction (e.g. Rust et al., 2004; Reid, 2005).

When it comes to empirical research on the IMC performance within the hospitality industry, the effects of IMC on sales-related and financial performance have been fairly

neglected, most studies focusing on brand and customer-related outcomes. In this regard, Šerić et al. (2013, 2014) found a strong and positive effect of IMC (perceived by customers in terms of message consistency) on key brand-related performance constructs, such as brand image, perceived quality and brand loyalty. In addition, IMC was found to be positively associated to tourist satisfaction (Šerić et al., 2015), this relationship being moderated by the national context where the hotel operates (Croatia vs Italy). Finally, in her most recent study, which was also based on a customer perspective, Šerić (2017) has provided statistical proof for the link between IMC and brand equity, leading the author to conclude that communication consistency can be confirmed as a core management practice and a primary basis for brand equity building in companies. However, none of the reviewed empirical studies conducted within the tourism sector and/or hospitality industry have addressed the measurement of IMC taking the broad organizational approach and the assessment of the effects firm-wide IMC exerts on market performance.

As mentioned earlier, several scholars have emphasized the need for the usage of measurements that capture the essence of IMC as a firm-wide organizational process (e.g. Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Ewing, 2009; Zahay, Peltier, Krishen and Schultz, 2014; Luxton et al., 2015). Despite this, especially the studies conducted within the hospitality industry have focused on the mere integration of marketing communications. In fact, most of the prior research reported in Table 1 used the scale proposed by Lee and Park (2007, p. 225), which is based on the consideration that *"a more practical approach is to confine the boundaries of IMC solely to the marketing communications mix and its components"*. However, Lee and Park (2007) acknowledged that not having used a holistic definition, as the basis of their scale development process, was a significant limitation.

Therefore, this paper sets out to contribute towards providing empirical evidence of the positive relationship between firm-wide IMC and market performance, which is

operationalized as a multidimensional construct, as suggested by prior literature. In fact, the study conducted by Campo et al. (2014) within the hospitality industry highlighted that performance is a construct reflected in two or more dimensions. Thus, to assess the market performance construct we adopted this perspective using the approach taken by Reid (2005), who grouped the performance measures into sales-related performance, brand advantage and customer-related outcomes.

Based on this rationale, we posited the following hypotheses:

H1: The adoption of firm-wide Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) strategy by lodging-related businesses significantly and positively affects their market performance.

H1a. The adoption of firm-wide Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) strategy by lodging-related businesses significantly and positively affects their sales-related performance.

H1b. The adoption of firm-wide Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) strategy by lodging-related businesses significantly and positively affects their brand advantage.

H1c. The adoption of firm-wide Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) strategy by lodging-related businesses significantly and positively affects their customer satisfaction and loyalty.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sampling Procedures

First, Spain has been selected as a suitable sphere of study to conduct reserch aiming at the analysis of those issues that enhance the performance of the hospitality industry (Sellers-Rubio and Casado-Díaz, 2018). Lascu et al. (2018) have examined the Spanish

tourist attractions and their implications for global tourism, revealing five main regions (Ansalusia, Balearic Islands, Canary Islands, Catalonia and Valencia) attracting the majority of tourists, while natural attractions (especially beaches) emerged as the most relevant determinants of tourism. Undoubtedly, tourism is a relevant source of economic growth for many countries, including Spain, (Eurostat, 2017; Lascu et al., 2018). In this regard, the World Economic Forum (2017, p. 306) suggests that *"Spain attains the first place in the global T&T [Travel and Tourism] competitiveness index for the second time in a row* [in 2015 and in 2017]*"*. Similarly, Lascu et al. (2018) suggested that Spain achieved top positions in other top performance rankings at a global scale, being ranked as the second in the world on Tourist Service Infrastructure and Cultural resources and Business Travel and the nineth in the World on Natural Resources and Air Transport Infrastructure.

More specifically, one of the pillars of Spanish tourism is the hospitality industry (Sellers-Rubio and Casado-Díaz, 2018), which is the economic activity that generates the majority of the Spanish tourism income (INE, 2017). Moreover, Eurostat (2017) highlights that the high quality standards of the Spanish hospitality infrastructure, which has recenlty experienced a growth, with a total of 116.000 hotels in 2017 (Hosteltur, 2018; Lascu et al., 2018). Likewise, the hospitality industry has invested over 2,000 millions euros with aproximately 14,600 new lodging businesses operating in this sector. More interestingly, the Spanish hospitality industry registered a total of 330 millions overnight stays of both domestic and international tourists, with an average per guest of 3.3 days and an occupancy rate of 60%, the majority of the international tourists opting for hotels or similar accommodation services (Statistica, 2018). The Spanish hospitality infrastructure is very diverse and the quality standards hold across different types of hotels ('sun and beach', rural, urban), however it must be acknowledged that two thirds of the total tourist incomes derive

from the 'sun and beach' lodging services, due to the predominance of this segment (Hosteltur, 2018).

A web-based survey has been performed among lodging firms operating in Spain with 40 or more employees. The sampling frame of this study consists of a listing of 969 lodging services firms extracted from the SABI Bureau van Dijk database, which supplies business data on a wide range of companies operating in Spain, the information being organized and classified according to the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) system. More specifically, CEOs, senior marketing and communication managers and other senior managers were selected as key informants. To gather the data, a survey was hosted on a web platform, the procedures being as follows: 1) a specialized company was employed to identify the target respondents by phone, gather and check their e-mail addresses, and enquire as to their availability to contribute to this research; 2) the 524 managers who agreed to participate were provided with a customized link to the web-based questionnaire; 3) a follow-up message was emailed to promote response. As a result, we received a final set of 180 fully completed questionnaires and achieved a response rate of 34.4 % of the managers who initially confirmed their availability. Table 2 displays a summary of the main characteristics of the respondents.

TABLE 2
Sample Description

Gender	percentage	n	Age	percentage	n
Male	62.8	113	< 25	3.3	6
Female	37.2	67	25-35	29.4	53
			36-45	37.2	67
			46-55	19.5	35
			55+	10.6	19
Education			**Experience in the current or similar position**		
Primary School	.6	1	Less than 5 years	30.6	55
High school graduate	6.7	12	5-10 years	27.8	50
Professional training	7.2	13	11-20 years	23.3	42
University Undergraduate	34.4	62	Over 20 years	18.3	33
University Graduate	28.9	52			
Master's level graduate/Ph. D.	22.2	40			

Role in the company					
Chief Executive Officer				47.2	85
Senior marketing and/or communication managers				40	72
Other senior managers				12.8	23
Company size (number of employees)			Business type		
40-50	25	45	Hotel	85	153
51-249	63.3	114	Other accommodation services	15	27
250 +	11.7	21			

3.2. Measures

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC). To cope with the measurement limitations emerging from the literature review, we made the decision to formulate a tool to measure IMC consistently with the conceptual framework developed for this study. Following the *modus operandi* proposed by Churchill (1979), we conducted a comprehensive literature review to identify the IMC theoretical domain and generate an initial set of 59 items, based on previous conceptualizations and scales of integrated communication proposed by authors who have adopted a corporate and organizational approach (e.g. Duncan and Moriarty, 1997, 1998; Reid, 2005; Lee and Park, 2007; Christensen et al., 2008; Schultz et al., 2014; Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014). Subsequently, we proceeded with the analysis of the content validation of the measurement instrument via qualitative technique, namely two-round Delphi study.

The Delphi study method is a systematic and iterative group communication process (Kembro, Näslund and Olhager, 2017) that enables anonymous interaction between experts of a specific research field (Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004). The main goal of a Delphi study is to achieve convergence and consensus on a complex problem and it is recommended for exploratory theory building. In a Delphi study, the experts participating provide responses and comments to multiple rounds of questions and the obtained feedback for each round form the input that goes through the subsequent round. The Delphi study described in this paper was performed in five steps, conducting two rounds with questionnaires followed by a
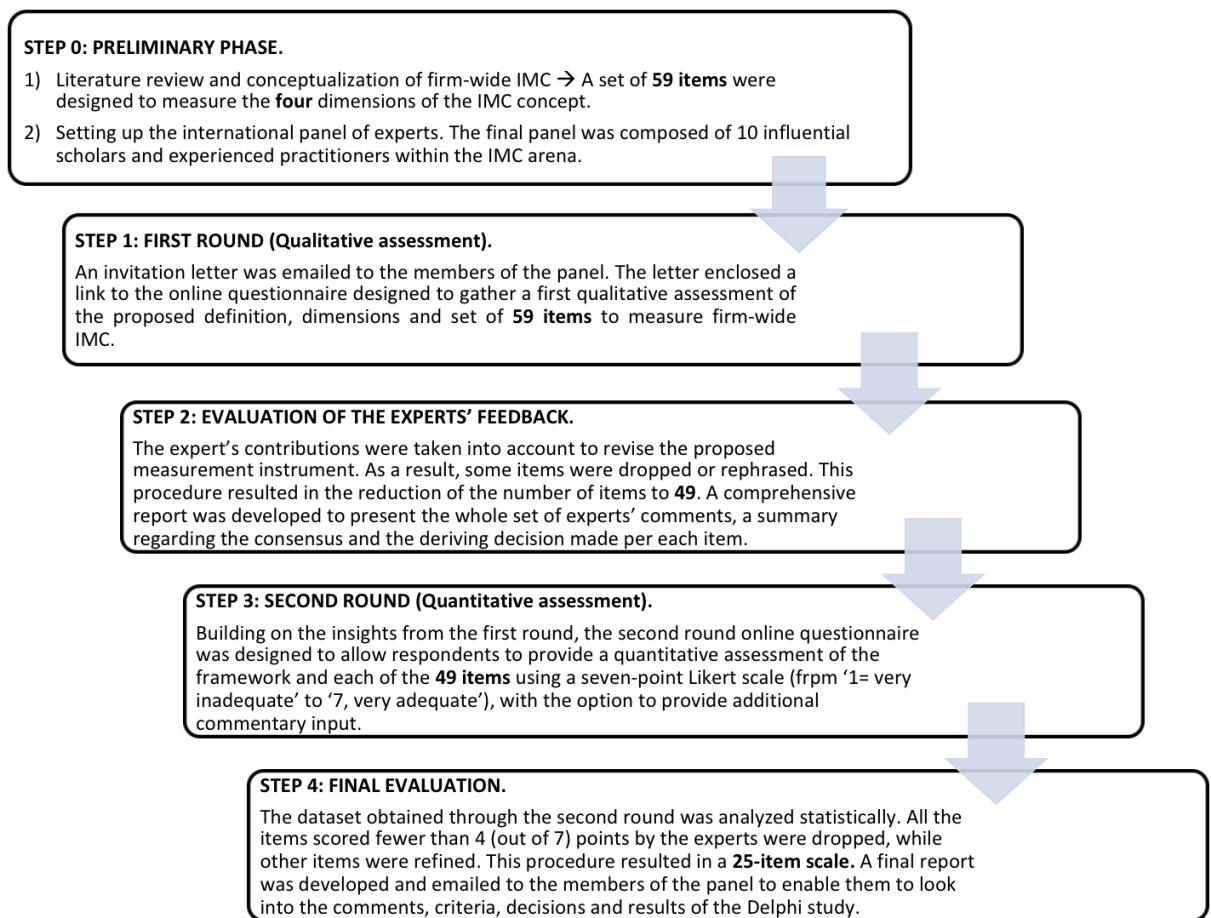
complementing round to understand consensus. The procedures followed in each of steps and the results obtained are described in the following paragraphs and summarized in Figure 1.

As a preliminary phase, twenty international top experts on IMC have been contacted and asked to participate in the study, ten convening to review, assess and amend (where needed) the proposed IMC conceptual background and the 59 items. The panel of experts was made up involving ten academics affiliated to top European and American research institutions and included some influential scholars (i.e. authors of seminal IMC publications) and practitioners in the IMC arena. More specifically, the experts were asked to critically evaluate both the IMC theoretical framework [the IMC definition and the four dimensions, namely 'message consistency' (cons), 'stakeholder-centered strategic focus' (stk), 'interactivity' (inte) and 'organizational alignement' (alig)] and the items proposed. The initial round was performed to ensure a qualitative assessment, and after the suggestions were incorporated to refine and/or eliminate several items, the number of indicators was brought down to 49.

The second round was carried out to evaluate the content qualitatively and to achieve a more parsimonious number of items. To pursue this purpose, the experts were asked to assess the adequacy of each of the remaining items on a seven-point Likert type scale (from '1, very inadequate' to '7, very adequate'). Based on Zaichkowsky (1985) we used as a criterion for deletion that the items rated least than four points have to be dropped from the scale. Following the results of the second round, the content has been further refined and a twentyfive-item instrument resulted from the content validity phase. Therefore, in this study IMC has been assessed by using 25 items rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale (from '1, strongly disagree' to '7, strongly agree'). More specifically, four items were devoted to assess message consistency, while seven items measure each of the remaining three dimensions.

FIGURE 1

The phases of the Delphi study

STEP 0: PRELIMINARY PHASE.
1) Literature review and conceptualization of firm-wide IMC → A set of **59 items** were designed to measure the **four** dimensions of the IMC concept.
2) Setting up the international panel of experts. The final panel was composed of 10 influential scholars and experienced practitioners within the IMC arena.

STEP 1: FIRST ROUND (Qualitative assessment).
An invitation letter was emailed to the members of the panel. The letter enclosed a link to the online questionnaire designed to gather a first qualitative assessment of the proposed definition, dimensions and set of **59 items** to measure firm-wide IMC.

STEP 2: EVALUATION OF THE EXPERTS' FEEDBACK.
The expert's contributions were taken into account to revise the proposed measurement instrument. As a result, some items were dropped or rephrased. This procedure resulted in the reduction of the number of items to **49**. A comprehensive report was developed to present the whole set of experts' comments, a summary regarding the consensus and the deriving decision made per each item.

STEP 3: SECOND ROUND (Quantitative assessment).
Building on the insights from the first round, the second round online questionnaire was designed to allow respondents to provide a quantitative assessment of the framework and each of the **49 items** using a seven-point Likert scale (frpm '1= very inadequate' to '7, very adequate'), with the option to provide additional commentary input.

STEP 4: FINAL EVALUATION.
The dataset obtained through the second round was analyzed statistically. All the items scored fewer than 4 (out of 7) points by the experts were dropped, while other items were refined. This procedure resulted in a **25-item scale.** A final report was developed and emailed to the members of the panel to enable them to look into the comments, criteria, decisions and results of the Delphi study.

As a preliminary step, the IMC scale went through purification procedures using a pilot study conducted with 180 businesses that were randomly drawn from the above-mentioned database. An online survey covering the 25 IMC items resulted in 39 valid responses (21.6 % response rate) that enabled the analysis of psychometric properties. To test dimensionality we carried out an Exploratory Factor Analysis (varimax rotation), which produced four factors, each indicator being loading onto the factor previously identified. In addition, initial reliability was tested using Cronbach's α, which was found to be above the .8 cutoff recommended for purified scales (α_{cns}= .91; α_{int}= .94; α_{stk} = .94; α_{alig} = .90). Finally, the results indicated that item-to-total and inter-item correlations exceeded the recommended cutoffs (.5 and .3, respectively).

Market performance scale. The quest for the "right" measure of performance has emerged from methodological discussions in strategic management (Sainaghi et al., 2017). To measure market performance we opted to implement a slightly modified version of the scale used by Reid (2005) in a multi-sectorial study on IMC performance outcomes. The measurement approach used is in line with recent tourism and hospitality management literature, with the majority of studies opting for subjective business performance measures (Campo et al., 2014). In our version, we took the nine questions posed in relation to Reid's scale and rephrased them as statements, enquiring as to the assessment of the performance in comparison with the closest competitor in the last three years. The resulting scale was composed of four items related to sales-related performance (overall profitability, sales growth, market share, total sales income), three assessing brand advantage (brand awareness, the ability to command premium prices, the level of channel cooperation received) and two for customer satisfaction (customer loyalty, customer satisfaction). All the indicators were assessed via a seven-point Likert scale (1 = much less; 7 = much more).

Other measures. Additional questions were included in the online survey to collect information on respondents (gender, length of service, position in the company) and their companies (number of employees and business typology).

4. FINDINGS

Dimensionality assessment. To assess the dimensionality of the proposed IMC scale, a CFA with LISREL 8.8 has been conducted adopting the RML estimation method and the competing models strategy by estimating and comparing two alternatives: Model 1 where IMC was a unidimensional construct; and Model 2 based on the four-dimensional IMC construct. The results of the second-order CFA indicated that Model 2 (S-B Chi-Square = 470.81, df = 271, p-value= .00; Normed Chi-Square = 1.73; RMSEA= .06; CFI = .99; TLI = .99) showed an acceptable overall goodness-of-fit, while M1 (first-order CFA) (S-B Chi-

Square = 1301.7, *df* = 275, *p*-value= .00; Normed Chi-Square = 4.73 RMSEA = .14; CFI = .94; TLI = .93) was not acceptable. Subsequently, we performed an S-B scaled Chi-Square difference test and the findings suggested that the difference between Model 1 and Model 2 was statistically significant [Δ S-B Chi-Square (*df*) = 254.48 (4), *p* = .00] and provided evidence of the multidimensional nature of the IMC constructs and the unidimensionality of the each of the four factors.

Likewise, a CFA has been performed using the RML estimation method and the competing model strategy to test the dimensionality of the market performance scale: Model 1 where market performance was a unidimensional construct and Model 2 based on the three-dimensional construct and based on the extant theoretical background. The results of the second-order CFA indicated that Model 2 (S-B Chi-Square = 42.31, *df* = 32, *p*-value= .11; Normed Chi-Square = 1.32; RMSEA= .04; CFI = .99; TLI = .99) showed an acceptable overall goodness-of-fit, while M1 (first-order CFA) (S-B Chi-Square = 223.37, *df* = 35, *p*-value= .00; Normed Chi-Square = 6.38; RMSEA = .17; CFI = .92; TLI = .89) was not acceptable. Subsequently, we performed an S-B scaled Chi-Square difference test and the findings suggested that the difference between Model 1 and Model 2 [Δ S-B Chi-Square (*df*) = 180.1 (3), *p* = .00] was statistically significant and provided evidence of the multidimensional nature of the market performance construct and the unidimensionality of the each of the three factors.

Psychometric properties and hypotheses testing. Once the dimensionality of the IMC scale had been tested, we proceeded to estimate the proposed IMC-market performance model to analyze the construct reliability and validity of the scales and test the proposed research hypotheses. The results (see Table 3 and Figure 2) showed an adequate overall goodness-of-fit of S-B Chi-Square = 778.02 (*df* = 519, *p* = .00) and RMSEA = .05. Following Hair et al. (2010), to test convergent validity we checked that all standardized coefficients

were statistically significant ($t > 2.56$, $p < .01$) and greater than .7. In the case of the latter criterion, the only exception was for ALIG_3 ($\beta_{ALIG\_3} = .55$), which exceeds the less conservative .5 cutoff. In addition, all the R^2 values were above the recommended cutoff of .5, except for the indicator ALIG_3 ($R^2 = .31$), which became a candidate for deletion. The findings indicated that the two alternative models (with and without ALIG_3) were not significantly different [Scaled S-B Chi-Square (df) = 33.20 (23), $p = .14$], thus we decided to retain this indicator for content validity purposes. Based on these findings, the evidence of the convergent validity of the scales was provided. In addition, item-to-total and inter-item correlations, Cronbach's alpha, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and the Composite Reliability (CR) exceeded the recommended cutoffs, demonstrating the adequate reliability of the measures.

TABLE 3

Estimation of the Theoretical Model.

Items	Constructs	Non-standardized coefficients	Standardized coefficients	t-value	R^2	α	AVE	CR
CNS_1	Message consistency (cns)	*	.85	*	.72	.91	.76	.92
CNS_2		.85	.80	11.01	.63			
CNS_3		1.07	.91	14.66	.82			
CNS_4		1.03	.92	15.99	.85			
INT_1	Interactivity (int)	*	.78	*	.61	.94	.70	.94
INT_2		1.01	.77	14.82	.59			
INT_3		.98	.84	16.52	.71			
INT_4		.90	.84	15.11	.70			
INT_5		1.07	.88	15.19	.77			
INT_6		1.06	.92	16.76	.84			
INT_7		1.03	.83	16.57	.69			
STK_1	Stakeholder-centered Strategic Focus (stk)	*	.79	*	.62	.94	.68	.94
STK_2		1.08	.79	14.52	.62			
STK_3		1.17	.90	16.74	.81			
STK_4		1.04	.78	13.14	.60			
STK_5		1.14	.84	13.64	.71			
STK_6		1.10	.85	13.51	.72			
STK_7		1.05	.83	13.15	.69			
ALIG_1	Organizational Alignment (alig)	*	.82	*	.68	.90	.68	.93
ALIG_2		1.04	.90	21.20	.82			
ALIG_3		.73	.55	9.61	.31			
ALIG_4		1.03	.85	13.19	.73			
ALIG_5		1.04	.86	11.96	.73			
ALIG_6		1.09	.87	14.35	.76			
ALIG_7		1.07	.86	14.99	.73			
SRP_1	Sales-related	*	.83	*	.69	.72	.72	.93

SRP_2	Performance (srp)	1.11	.88	13.14	.77			
SRP_3		1.19	.88	14.75	.78			
SRP_4		1.05	.79	9.88	.62			
REMA_1	Brand Advantage (rema)	*	.81	*	.65			
REMA_2		.98	.75	11.00	.56	.81	.58	.81
REMA_3		.91	.73	9.60	.53			
SAT_1	Customer satisfaction (sat)	*	.96	*	.92	.89	.78	.91
SAT_2		.97	.84	17.11	.70			
IMC → cns		1.02	.90	10.24	.81			
IMC → int		1.09	.86	10.36	.75			
IMC → stk		1.04	.84	11.97	.71			
IMC → alig		1.07	.84	10.59	.71			
mp → srp		.66	.71	7.81	.50			
mp → rema		.97	.97	9.63	.98			
mp → sat		.79	.81	9.12	.65			
IMC → mp		.67	.67	5.90	.45			

Note: *Parameter fixed at 1 to provide scale to the model.

FIGURE 2

Estimation of the Structural Model

***p < .01. Overall Goodness-of-Fit Indexes: Chi-Square (S-B) = 778.02 (d.f. = 519); p-value = .00; Normed Chi-Square = 1.49; RMSEA = .053; CFI = .99
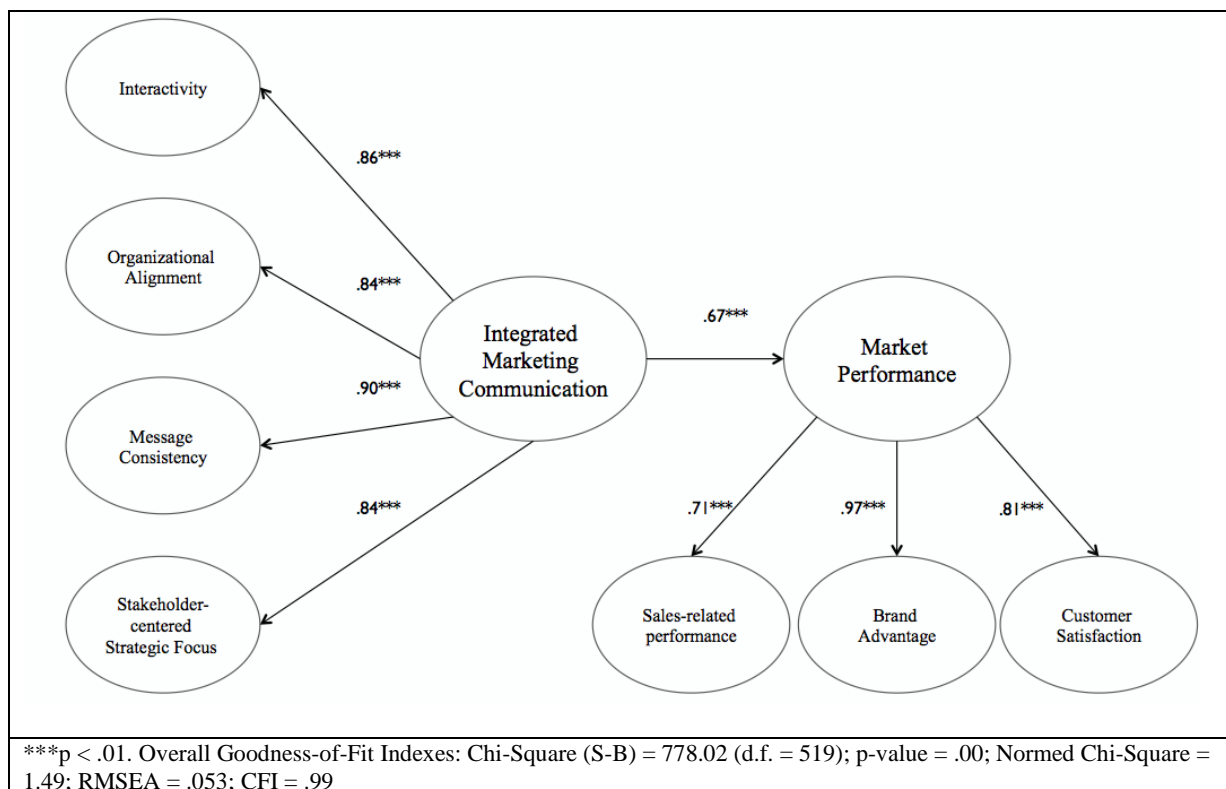
Table 4 shows that the squared root of the AVE is greater than the correlation shared among each pair of constructs and these results provide proof for the discriminant validity of the scale (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

TABLE 4

Discriminant validity assessment

	stk	cons	alig	inte	refi	rema	sat
stk	**.82**						
cns	*.76*	**.87**					
alig	*.71*	*.76*	**.82**				
int	*.73*	*.78*	*.73*	**.84**			
srp	*.40*	*.43*	*.40*	*.41*	**.85**		
rema	*.56*	*.60*	*.56*	*.58*	*.79*	**.76**	
sat	*.46*	*.49*	*.46*	*.47*	*.70*	*.60*	**.88**

Note: The square roots of AVE estimates are in **bold**; the correlations between each pair of constructs are in *italics*

All the standardized coefficients in the measurement model were significant ($p < .01$), positive and greater than .7 or at least above the less conservative .5 threshold. Moreover, all the standardized second-order parameters were greater than .7 and significant ($p < .01$), leading to the conclusion that the first-order constructs (the construct dimensions) loaded adequately on their second-order latent construct ($\beta_{cns} = .90$; $\beta_{int} = .86$; $\beta_{stk} = .84$; $\beta_{alig} = .84$; $\beta_{srp} = .71$; $\beta_{rema} = .97$; $\beta_{sat} = .81$). The results of the validation process indicate that the IMC and market performance scales are sufficient for us to continue with the estimation of the theoretical IMC - market performance model.

The structural model shows a statistically significant ($t = 5.90$; $p < .01$), positive and great ($\beta_{IMC \rightarrow MP} = .67$) association between IMC and market performance, in terms of sales-related performance, brand advantage and customer satisfaction. Thus, hypothesis 1 gains statistical support. Moreover, an analysis of the indirect effects has been conducted to test H1a, H1b and H1c. The findings indicate that IMC is especially beneficial for brand advantage ($IE_{IMC \rightarrow rema} = .66$) and customer satisfaction ($IE_{IMC \rightarrow sat} = .54$), the indirect effect of IMC on sales-related performance being slightly weaker ($IE_{IMC \rightarrow srp} = .47$). In light of these results, H1a, H1b and H1c gained empirical support.

One of the main issues that might emerge from supply-side approach is that managerial staff is overloaded with requests to form part of surveys and research studies and their scarce time available for participating (Li et al., 2005). Nevertheless, the response rate

obtained in the present survey is in line with extant literature and the characteristics of the respondents are considered excellent. In this regard, almost half of respondents was composed of CEOs, while the experience of more than the 40% of the sampled managers was above ten years, thus they were expected to have a deep knowledge about IMC implementation and practice.

The possible non-response bias was analyzed following the recommendations provided by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003). First, a short introduction to the questionnaire provided a short presentation of the main concepts used in the survey without revealing any link between them and informed the respondents about the fact that all responses were anonymous and confidential. Second, the Harman's single factor test (McFarlin and Sweeny, 1992) has been performed to check for any bias among the managers deriving from their organizational positions. To pursue this aim, the 'eigenvalue greater than one' criterion has been applied and the findings revealed four factors, and not just one. Therefore, these results enable to conclude that non-response and common method biases were relatively limited (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This work responds to the numerous calls for further efforts in the IMC field and to provide robust empirical proof of the positive effects that organizations can experience in terms of performance through the implementation of IMC, especially within the tourism sector and the hospitality industry. More importantly, this study provides a unique contribution to the body of knowledge by developing and validating a scale that measures the level of IMC taking a broader organizational approach and demonstrating that the effective integration of all the communication efforts made by hospitality businesses has a strong and positive association with superior market performance.

As mentioned earlier within this paper, the literature review suggests that the paucity of empirical research has hindered a broader acceptance and application of IMC. More specifically, the research presented in this paper represents one the few attempts to empirically demonstrate the effects of the implementation of IMC on the performance of lodging businesses. With these premises in mind, the contribution of this research to the body of knowledge of the field is especially relevant. Likewise, the findings provided further and more compelling empirical proof of the positive influence of IMC on market performance, intended as the overall sales-related outcomes, brand advantage and customer satisfaction, and enabled a substantial and significant response to the call for more rigorous empirical research to demonstrate how the implementation of IMC positively affects performance (e.g. Taylor, 2010; Schultz et al., 2014; Luxton et al., 2015, 2017).

Another key contribution lies in bridging the broader conceptualization of IMC and its measurement, considered as one of the most challenging research gaps. In fact, the dearth of IMC scales and the lack of theoretical clarity have long been regarded as the most prominent barriers preventing scholars from conducting more rigorous empirical researches. Based on a more inclusive conceptualization of IMC, we developed and validated a measurement tool to assess IMC. Taken together, these findings contribute to better understand what IMC is, how it works and can be assessed, providing scholars with a theoretically consistent scale that can be further validated and used to pursue robust empirical research, focusing on one and/or several sectors and industries.

As regards managerial implications, the empirical corroboration of the positive and strong relationship between IMC and market performance is expected to lead to the enhancement of its *"acceptance in boardrooms and practice by organizations"* (Duncan and Mulhern, 2004). Accordingly, we recommend managers to pay more attention to IMC implementation and consider that IMC is a crucial competitive advantage and an effective

approach to achieve a superior sales-related performance, a more favorable brand advantage and higher level of customer satisfaction. We encourage the top management of hotels and other lodging businesses to recognize the need to effectively and efficiently orchestrate communications and actions generated at all hierarchical positions and different departments, divisions and even the partners of hospitality-based businesses (for example, the public relations and advertising agencies). Moreover, managers need to work for the enhancement of the organizational responsiveness, speed of response and reciprocity of the organization-stakeholder relationshionship via an active listening of the internal and external stakeholders' voice. Another key issue managers of hospitality businesses need to acknowledge is the need to ensure that communication flows adequately to promote a healthy climate of collaboration within the organization (both horizontally and vertically) and between the organization and external partners or outsourced functions.

In addition, the proposed IMC scale can serve as a valuable instrument to support the CEOs of hotel chains and senior hotel managers in their decision-making processes. More importantly, this paper provides the managers of hospitality-based businesses with a valid and reliable measurement tool that enables the evaluation of IMC taking a firm-wide approach by assessing the IMC degree achieved among the wide range of communication activities performed in all the organizational functions, divisions and units. While the IMC scale validated in this paper can be applied by hospitality managers to audit and track the IMC score reached by the firm, the dimensional sub-scales can be used as separate measures to assess the degree achieved in terms of consistency, interactivity, stakeholder orientation and alignment of the organizational processes and messages, thus enabling managers ton detect any areas requiring further revision and/or attention. Based on these premises, top and senior managers of hospitality- and lodging-based businesses should emphasize and encourage the application and enhancement of IMC as a key organizational value. In

pursuing this aim, managers need to acknowledge the relevance of adequate coordination of messages generated by different departments and/or divisions of the organization (i.e. hotel reception, marketing management, booking department).

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with any study, there are some limitations to be acknowledged. Firstly, the market performance scale utilized by Reid (2005) was selected to maximize the comparability between this study and extant IMC literature. While the ability to determine whether managers' responses are a true reflection of business performance, subjective measures are considered as the most appropriate for assessing the influence of IMC on performance (Low, 2000; Reid, 2005; Einwiller and Boegink, 2012), plus a strong correlation between self-reported and objective data has been found (Reid, 2005). However, we recommend scholars to include also objective data to measure performance to further test the positive link existing between IMC and financial, brand, and customer outcomes. The quest for the "right" measure of business outcomes remains one of the prominent concepts in the organizational studies (Sainaghi et al. 2017).

Secondly, since this study has been exclusively performed in the Spanish hospitality, future studies are needed to test the proposed link between IMC and market performance in other geographical contexts to enhance the generalizability of the findings and strengthening the theoretical body of IMC research and its practice in the hospitality industry.

Thirdly, this research study focused specifically on the effect of the adoption of firm-wide IMC on market performance of lodging businesses. However, the fact that several factors might influence the proposed model, as antecedents of firm-wide IMC or as mediators and moderators of the relationship between IMC and market performance, need to be acknowledged. Therefore, future research is encouraged to make a step forward examining the role of marketing communications budgets of lodging businesses as an antecedent of the

level of firm-wide IMC or as a moderator of the positive relationship found between IMC and market performance. Likewise, future studies should examine the extent to which the quality of the communication mix, deriving from the media planning, affects the level of integration and, as a consequence, the effect of IMC on market performance.

Finally, it must be noticed that, in pursuing the aim of assessing firm-wide IMC, this study took the whole organization as the unity of analysis and CEOs, CMOs and other senior managers (C-suite) were selected as the more suitable key-informants, thus preventing the analysis of the role played by other variables, such as the type of brand, the hotel category and type (urban, rural, etc.). However, future research could replicate this study among different categories of hotels and brands to assess the effect of such variables in the model and determine whether these findings can be corroborated.

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