



Brand contact integration in the Ethiopian beer market: An internal IMC view of the market interface

Abstract

This paper assesses Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and brand contact integration in three areas that have received insufficient research attention. The study was conducted in a region that has received little research coverage (Ethiopia), a low involvement product sector (brewing) and from the theoretical perspective of the Nordic School. Following a series of in-depth interviews and an inductive content analysis, we find that the brewer's messaging is similar to the international norm, differing only in emphasis and application. Publicity and personal promotion are emphasised, product quality receives great attention, the company concentrates on a narrowly defined service interface, and a strong market-back strategy is evident in its communications. The Nordic School model of brand contact integration offers a heuristic prism for the assessment of communication integration, and we conclude that IMC principles are firmly embedded in the marketing communication practice of the Ethiopian brewer, but with characteristics that are specific to its unique market conditions.

Keywords

IMC; Ethiopia; integration-in-use; Nordic School; breweries

AUTHOR(S)

Samson Mekonnen

Unisa

ORCID: 0000-0002-8802-4300

George Angelopulo

Unisa

ORCID: 0000-0002-0244-3003

PUBLISHED ONLINE

Volume 41 (1) July 2022

Pages 25-34

Submitted March 2021

Accepted September 2021

ISSN

0259-0069

INTRODUCTION

The principles of integrated marketing communication (IMC) have been widely incorporated in marketing practice, but the question remains whether this is the case across markets and industries. This study explores IMC in one leading brewery within Ethiopia's highly competitive brewing industry. Ethiopia's beer production and consumption are amongst the fastest growing in Africa, with annual production around seven million hectolitres and consumption increasing at an annual rate of around 16 per cent (Whitehouse, 2019). The number of breweries in Ethiopia has grown steadily, making it an increasingly competitive market (Mutesi, 2019) of multinational and locally owned breweries that include Heineken, Brasseries et Glacières Internationales, Diageo, AB InBev, Habesha, Dashen, St. George, Walia, Meta, Anbessa and Zebidar. This study considers the marketing communication of one of these breweries and focuses specifically on its brand contact integration and strategy for influencing customers' purchasing decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The IMC paradigm emerged in the last decades of the 20th century, in large part as a result of globalisation, technological evolution and the emergence of new communication modalities (Finne & Grönroos, 2017; Kitchen & Burgmann, 2015; Kliatchko, 2008), reducing further the relative independence of its composite disciplines. Inclusion of the word "integrated" suggested a more holistic model that

generated more than the sum of its parts (Keller, 2016). Since its original conceptualisation, IMC has demonstrated its efficacy, improving companies' market shares, sales, customer satisfaction and brand equity (Delgado-Ballester, Navarro & Sicilia, 2012; Duncan & Moriarty, 1997; Zabkar, Mumel & Vanita, 2015). IMC is widely implemented by companies to distinguish their products and brands in an increasingly competitive world, and the principles of IMC have been so widely incorporated in marketing practice that the "integrated" differentiator may, in certain markets, be superfluous (Burgmann, 2007; Schultz, 2010).

Within the broad sphere of IMC, brand contact integration is a particularly significant concept (Duncan, 2002; Duncan & Moriarty, 1997; Grönroos, 2015; Keller, 2016). Duncan (2002) indicates that most significant brand contacts can be located in four areas. Planned points of brand contact that are identifiable in the traditional elements of marketing communication are advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing and personal selling. Product-related points of brand contact exist in the performance of the product, its appearance, durability, pricing and design (Duncan & Moriarty, 1997; Grönroos, 2015). Service points of brand contact originate in service quality and interaction with the organisation, its employees and representatives (Grönroos, 2015). Other contact points also deliver brand messages but, because the company has little or no control over these, they are defined as unplanned points of brand contact. These may originate from sources outside the company, from sources in the company over which it has little influence, and through word-of-mouth (Duncan, 2002).

Grönroos (2015) points to the value of firms integrating what they say (planned and product brand contacts) with what they do (service brand contacts). Keller (2016) proposes a number of other constructs of brand contact integration. The first two, coverage and cost, are related to efficiency in reaching the largest section of the target audience with the fewest resources. The third, *contribution*, relates to the quality of individual brand contacts and how they work in isolation from all others. The remaining dimensions describe ways that brand contacts work in combination. *Commonality* refers to brand contact outcomes also intended by other brand contacts; *complementarity*, to brand contacts that reinforce other brand contacts; *cross-effects*, to brand contacts aimed at achieving synergy and an enhancement of the results of brand contacts acting separately; and *conformability* to brand contacts that have unintended, but still positive outcomes.

Despite IMC's expansion and consolidation, several authors point to its inadequacy in certain theoretical, practical and methodological areas (Finne & Grönroos, 2017; Kliatchko & Schultz, 2014; Šerić, 2016). Of these, this study addresses three: the dearth of applications in specific geographical regions, research in low involvement product sectors and expansion through cross-pollination with elements of the Nordic School.

With empirical studies of IMC concentrated in English-speaking countries and particularly the USA, studies in other regions are necessary to broaden the body of IMC research (Kitchen & Schultz, 2009; Šerić, 2016). IMC research is further concentrated in the communication, education, retail and tourism sectors, leading Šerić (2016) to suggest that research should be extended to other, underrepresented sectors. The cross pollination of IMC with elements of the Nordic School, promises to contribute significantly to the evolution and theoretical depth of IMC, particularly with the concept of value-in-use in studies such as those of Finne and Grönroos (2017), Grönroos (2020), Gummerus and von Koskull (2015) and Heinonen, Strandvik and Voima (2013).

The Nordic School purposely confronts established views, avoiding the restriction of existing theories, frameworks, models, or concepts, and it is guided by the principles, "think for yourself, step aside from the mainstream, do what you think is best in any given situation, be original, but be valid" (Grönroos et al., 2015:29). Embracing a spirit of free enquiry, the Nordic School takes an idiographic approach to research that may be characterised by theory generation, inductive reasoning and the case-study method, motivating in large part the methodology used in this study. Questioning established ways of thinking, it investigates phenomena from a value-in-use perspective that generates novel conceptualisations from the perspective of those experiencing those phenomena (Gummerus & von Koskull, 2015). Services, products, and information are instruments of value-in-use with the locus of their evaluation (Edvardsson, Tornvoll, & Gruber, 2011) corresponding with the instruments and locus of IMC. Despite this work, Finne

and Grönroos (2017) state that much is still to be done in understanding the relationship between instruments of brand contact, perceptions in the market, and marketers' understanding of the outcome.

This study systematically investigates brand contact integration from the Nordic School perspective in its application to one Ethiopian brewery, and it does so by addressing the practical, methodological, and theoretical gaps addressed above. Specifically, we explore and define the nature, structure and value of the firm's brand contact integration from the perspective of its key marketing and marketing communication team members. In accordance with its request for confidentiality, the company that is the case in this study, is not referred to by name, but rather as *The Brewery*.

METHODOLOGY

Research paradigm design

This study has been guided by the underlying assumption that IMC exists in a reality created by its social actors – the marketers who understand and implement marketing communication and its integration in their own unique ways. This accords with the views of Burgmann (2007) that IMC takes on symbolic modes that are characterised in the language and actions of those who practice it, is best defined by this group, and best explored in their perceptions, beliefs and interpretations. In Ethiopia this approach is promising, as the dimension of integration in marketing communication and customer contact remains largely unexplored.

The idiographic, interpretivist approach taken in this study focuses on the brewer's individual marketers and emphasises their personal interpretation of the company's marketing practice. Idiographic research is primarily qualitative, commonly utilising case studies with – as in this case – interviews for the generation of in-depth insights into participants' perceptions and actions. The approach emphasises participants' understanding, views and actions, and identifies IMC and customer brand contacts as social constructs that can be understood in the actions and perceptions of its practitioners. IMC is considered in the context of its brand message sources, as interpreted by the people who give them meaning. Given their level of exposure to international best practice and a highly competitive market, marketing practitioners in Ethiopia's brewing industry are as exposed to best practice as marketing practitioners elsewhere. However, the ability of a brewer to maintain and grow market shares in Ethiopia does not call so much for generic insight into marketing practice as it does for localised application and adaptation to the unique market environment of the country and the resources available to the individual company. To obtain the subjective, local, personalised insights into IMC and brand contact integration that this study strives to identify, the methodology is selected to crystallise the perspectives of the small group working together in the formulation and execution of the single brewer's marketing communication strategy.

The study was designed to crystallise the highly personal practices and perceptions of individual marketers and obtain a deeper understanding of their unique views on marketing communication and its integration. This was undertaken firstly to gain insight into the phenomenon of IMC within the operations of an Ethiopian beer producer, and secondly to develop theoretical and conceptual insights to contribute to the broader body of knowledge on IMC in areas where such insights are sorely needed. This accords with Šerić's (2016:25) view that "IMC is a rather new phenomenon and the exploratory research design is necessary for its better understanding and building of IMC theory". This study approaches IMC and its constituent theories with the guiding question of value identified in *The Brewery's* brand contact integration and its ensuing influence on customers' purchasing decisions, and it includes theoretical reflection that may yield details in the data that could otherwise be overlooked, following Flick (2018a) and Kennedy & Thornberg (2018).

Participants in the study were the four key members who determined *The Brewery's* marketing communication and who were formally located in the company's brand and sales management structures. They comprised the universe of opinion and behaviour and for that reason any question of sampling fell away. All were fulltime employees with marketing, marketing communication and customer relationship

management as their key functions. The intention behind their selection was to understand the complete marketing communication portfolio's wide-ranging perception of IMC and each member's individual, deep understanding of brand contact integration.

Data collection method and analysis

Face-to-face in-depth interviews were utilised to collect data for the study. In-depth interviews were selected because they made it possible to gather rich information from each participant and to explore known and previously untapped areas, as illustrated by Silverman (2017). Following Flick (2018b) and Smith (2015), the literature was used to guide the construction of the interview schedule. A funnel technique was employed, beginning with less-structured, open-ended questions and moving to more structured, targeted questions. The interviews were informed by the planned, product, service and integrated brand contacts suggested in the literature, allowing the identification of themes, and probing of specific, sensitising concepts, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Flick (2018c). Two pilot interviews were conducted prior to the in-depth interviews in the manner suggested by Barbour (2018) and Maison (2019) to ensure that the interview schedule and the contingencies of the interview would generate the type and range of responses sought.

One in-depth interview of an hour and 39 minutes was conducted with the company's marketing manager. Similar interviews were concluded with two territorial sales managers with durations of 2 hours, 32 minutes, and 2 hours, 28 minutes respectively, and a final interview of an hour and 15 minutes was held with the brand manager.

The interview data was processed in an inductive content analysis following Creswell and Creswell (2018), Flick (2018b), Kennedy and Thornberg (2018), Maison (2019) and Silverman (2017). The analysis was initiated by listening to the audio records before transcribing all interviews verbatim and checking the transcripts. An overview of the text provided the opportunity to become familiar with the text and begin the process of generating code from the data set. Thematic analysis was used to analyse and organise data and themes categorised along principles deemed important in the subject matter, with data coded directly from the raw text and in constant reflection with the literature. The complete analysis was undertaken in three sub-processes: an initial coding process to generate a detailed line-by-line series of codes that fractured the data into segments, selective coding that organised the fractured data into conceptual categories and axial coding that generated a summary of the most meaningful dimensions of the data. Codes captured single ideas associated with a segment of data related to the research question. Codes were developed into subthemes that shared a similar central idea, and subthemes were aligned in themes, which captured commonly recurring patterns in the data set of the central concept.

Our thematic analysis was consciously undertaken in a process of inductive reasoning, with the generated themes in any decision reviewed to combine, refine, separate, or discard what appeared to be recurring patterns in the data. The final step involved "refining and defining" the themes, a process that permitted the provision of a name and working definition for each theme, following Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Flick (2018a).

Accordingly, codes were developed into subthemes and then categorised into themes and concepts related to the phenomena under investigation. For instance, codes such as *broadcast*, *print* and *social media* that appeared in the transcribed interview, were grouped to form a subtheme titled *advertising*. Codes such as *sampling*, *premiums* and *other miscellaneous* activities were grouped to signify the *sales promotion* subtheme. The consolidation of these subthemes then generated a theme titled *market-led message integration*, signifying The Brewery's *planned brand contact interventions*. This is how results were generated and subsequently presented in this study.

RESULTS

The raw data from the in-depth interviews ultimately generated a number of themes along a central

concept of The Brewery's brand contact integration that may be termed *integration-in-use*.

The first of these is titled *market-led message integration* and describes The Brewery's planned brand contact interventions that include elements of its sales promotion, sponsorship, direct marketing and advertising. The company's advertising channels incorporated broadcast, print, outdoor, social media and a set of art creations that formed the cornerstone of its creative strategy. Planned brand contacts coalesced around a creative theme depicting Ethiopian culture, that extended wherever possible, to each channel of promotion. Because its execution addressed cultural values, participants noted that the strategy had unintentionally triggered a discourse on unresolved historical and current political issues in the country, with significant division in the assessment of its value and impact.

Promotions, banners, transit advertising and a series of unique handmade leatherwork were themed throughout with a portrayal of the company logo with an ancient drawing style peculiar to Ethiopian Orthodoxy. It was also reflected in promotional and point-of-sale items such as refrigerators, beer containers, glassware and cutlery. Similarly, branded aprons, shirts and gowns were provided to waiters, barmen, chefs and kitchen staff at retail outlets, with other promotional material including branded watches, pens, shirts, jackets, caps and umbrellas. These were distributed to promote loyalty and ultimately to influence customers' purchasing decisions.

Models, dressed in clothes with the logo and colours of the brand, and accompanied by a company-backed music band, promoted The Brewery's products in busy thoroughfares. In addition to the entertainment that they provided, the band and team of models fulfilled sales promotion functions wherever they appeared.

This is reflected in the following quotations of the participants:

"In the campaign, around one hundred modelling girls personified Lucy. They were dressed in our brand colour – black and gold. They walked on the street to advertise our product. For example, they made an advertisement with a heading 'Who has seen Lucy?' For us, the brand logo represents Lucy which refers to the earliest human fossil ever found archaeologically in the eastern part of Ethiopia"

"The company has its music band called Music Pack which is used to conduct entertaining events during different public ceremonies. On the events, the music band also advertised our product in our different distribution regions"

More broadly, sales promotions took on the form of sampling, premiums and other miscellaneous activities, with a range of sponsorships at cultural festivals, sports and other events, much in common with the range identified in the literature (Percy, 2008; Shimp, 2007; Shimp & Andrews, 2013). The Brewery was also present on a range of social media platforms that included Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Direct marketing was wide ranging, and included tele-marketing, website and interactive digital media activities. The latter were more limited than is common in more developed markets because of infrastructural limitations, data cost and the erratic nature of the internet in Ethiopia.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) was also seen as an opportunity for planned messaging. Community support and environmental protection were specific areas of social responsibility addressed by the firm. These opportunities had limited value at the consumer interface and were indeed planned to generate limited value because they were mostly undertaken away from the public eye, with the intention of generating greater value in long-term social relations, than they were for direct sales.

The range of planned brand contacts are notably similar to those identified in the literature, but also somewhat different in their form. Advertising, sales promotion and direct marketing were consistently used for brand contact and messaging, but on balance, and because of the unique nature of the market, publicity and non-technical personal promotion featured comparatively more strongly than in most markets.

The findings of the study showed that product design, technical quality, price, and availability were the

dimensions of product messaging that were seen to hold the greatest value for The Brewery. The company focused on a number of areas of product design, with particular attention given to bottle colour, size and labelling. Their form reflected, and was reflected, in The Brewery's graphical themes, images, patterns, brand logo, name, ISO certification, customer information of prohibitions, customer service contact detail, instruction of the thermochromic button, alcohol content, ingredients, and place of production. Consistent with the literature, product price, availability and distribution were identified as the key dimensions of the brand message that emerged in the study.

What is notable, however, is the singular importance placed on the technical quality of its beer in The Brewery's messaging through its products, leading to the identification of the second major construct as *non-negotiable beer quality*. Aspects such as beer colour, taste, alcoholic content and perceived satisfaction were specific elements of the physical product that were commonly seen to significantly drive customers' selection and consumption of the product. The following comments, forwarded by the participants represent the above views:

"Colour of beer is a technical issue in the brewing process. Our brewer's recipe guarantees that beautiful golden coloured beer for each bottle; our rich and refreshing Cold Gold. You cannot find beer with the same colour in the market. This is peculiar as it is consistent with the bottle colour. Our beer has a golden colour especially when you put a light on it"

The interviewees elaborated that the company exerts huge effort to create a balance between full-bodied taste and smooth drinkability. This is evident in the following quotations:

"We brew with the emphasis on making the taste of the beer smooth. When we talk about taste, we need to consider the comfort one feels while consuming and inconveniences the same consumer feels the next day. I know that a great deal of attention is given to ingredients and technicalities during the brewing process. For instance, I have observed the attention given to select the quality barley, change the barley into malt, purify the water, and ferment the malt. I have also observed the efficiency of the packing machines that secure the quality of our product"

The participants further indicated that they brew five a per cent alcohol by volume (ABV):

"Most beer products in Ethiopia maintain five per cent ABV, so does our beer. There are very few beer products in the market containing below five per cent ABV or above. Other alcoholic drinks in Ethiopia, including wine, have alcohol levels far greater than a beer does"

Concerning perceived satisfaction, participants mentioned that:

"The beer technical qualities such as colour, alcohol content and taste are designed to yield a high degree of satisfaction. As a result, it is possible to influence consumers' purchasing decisions ...These qualities of the product and a high degree of satisfaction urges customers to permanently prefer our product. Product satisfaction includes the absence of post-consumption inconveniences such as hangover, gastritis and headaches that can influence consumers to purchase and consume our beer. Most of the feedback, we have received so far, express that our beer is hangover-free"

The company planned and consciously communicated through its products to influence customers'

consumption decisions. In addition to design, price and availability, technical quality gained a degree of attention that, comparatively, appeared far greater than was evident amongst its market peers in Ethiopia, or in most other markets.

The literature identifies service sources of brand messages at the interface between customers and a broad range of service employees that could include customer service representatives, receptionists, secretaries, delivery personnel and drivers, amongst others (Duncan & Moriarity, 1997; Grönroos, 2015). Such service brand contacts constitute a distinctly identifiable element in the communication efforts of The Brewery, but in application, the company's approach to the customer-specific service interface, being far narrower, was not as generic.

The Brewery strove to supply valuable information and develop a sense of trust in interactions between distribution agents, sales teams, and customers, with service contacts seen as a central component of its marketing communication across the distribution chain. In terms of communication with its customers specifically, and not across the whole distribution chain, The Brewery identified a far narrower group as its key service interface. The significance of this customer contact interface emerged as a third construct and was named the *narrowband service interface*. Distribution agents and sales teams, including sales managers, sales executives and sales trainees, were seen as the individuals responsible for the company's service brand contacts, and they actively engaged in both service delivery and product distribution. The Brewery recognised the distinct value of service interaction, and while valuable, saw service at the customer interface as a smaller, albeit important component of its broader service rendering, apparently because of the narrower control that is possible with a more focused group. As with many FMCG brands, this narrower view was held because the product was seen as the central focus of exchange and far more controllable, but not because of strategic oversight or the unique characteristics of the beer market in Ethiopia.

Planned, product and service brand contacts were approached at The Brewery in a highly collaborative and coordinated manner. Brand contacts – those brand contacts perceived by the key marketing team to impact the customer's purchasing decision most directly – differed from the total available spectrum of brand contacts in the degree to which they were perceived to generate value for the customer and ultimately to effect product purchase. Brand contacts-in-use were vital to the firm because they were the distillation of the brand contacts deemed to influence customers' decision-making most positively. The customer and the customer's integrated brand communication needs were placed at the centre of The Brewery's communication strategy and execution. The findings point to consistent integration-in-use and the perception that the preferred processes of integrating brand contacts contribute directly to the value and impact of individual brand contacts. As intended by the company, the sales team's activities, for example, consistently overlapped with other areas of communication such as advertising. Themes from The Brewery's advertising were uniformly reflected in the presentation, activities, engagements and portrayal of the sales teams across all regions of the country. Product presentation such as packaging similarly reflected themes from the advertising campaigns, and in their personal appearances, most of The Brewery's representatives and promotional models reflected images from advertising campaigns with the same hairstyles, clothes and presentation.

This form of integration is akin to Keller's (2016:292) cross-effect integration, where "communication options are designed to explicitly work together with ... interaction or synergy ... and enhanced communication effects emerge as the result of exposure by consumers to both options". The Brewery's advertising campaigns, its planned media messages, coordination with sales teams, promotional activities and service offerings were perceived to generate a compounding effect that would ultimately affect customers' purchasing decisions more favourably than each on its own.

Utilising Finne and Gronroos' (2017) propositions on *value-in-use* and the codes and themes generated from the views and perceptions of The Brewery's strategic marketing communication team, it is evident that a unique firm-driven view of customer-centred brand contact integration had been generated in the company's marketing strategy. The firm undertook cross-effect integration with all elements of its

communications and customer interfaces, and in doing so its brand messaging programme does not differ extensively in global comparison, except in narrower areas of emphasis that reflect local market contingencies more closely. There was, for example, lighter weighting on digital communication, greater weighting on personal contact and promotion, and comparatively greater emphasis on product quality than the industry norm, or in other markets.

Most significantly, The Brewery used a market-back strategy in its communication and brand contacts that is indicative of the extent to which integrated marketing communication has become entrenched in marketing communication practice around the globe, often without being defined as "integrated." The firm integrates a broad number of its contact points and processes, and does so across planned, product and service brand contacts. From the perspective of the participants in this study, these contact points influence each other and ultimately merge in the customer's internal integration process, informing all decisions on whether, when and how to purchase the product.

CONCLUSION

This study addresses three underrepresented areas of IMC research through application in a geographical region that has received little attention (Ethiopia), by undertaking research in a low involvement product sector (brewing) and by including theoretical insights from the Nordic School (with *value-in-use*). It assesses IMC from the perspective of brand contact integration and the firm's strategy for influencing customers' purchasing decisions. Brand contact integration is significant because it reflects the consolidated effects of brand contacts that influence customers' purchasing decisions. The integration of this class of brand contacts is described here as integration-in-use – the integration of brand contacts that have the greatest influence on customers' purchasing decisions.

This study investigates brand contact integration in one Ethiopian brewery, from the perspective of its key marketing and marketing communication team members. Following an idiographic interpretivist approach, the work emphasises participants' understanding, views and actions, and identifies IMC and customer brand contacts as social constructs that can be understood in the actions and perceptions of its practitioners. The raw data from in-depth interviews, yields a series of subthemes and three primary themes that are titled *non-negotiable beer quality*, *narrowband service interface* and *market-led message integration*. These are subsequently used to formulate the company's unique integration-in-use.

The study has theoretical and practical implications. Firstly, it confirms that, as the norm, many of the principles of IMC have become embedded in marketing communication and suggests that this was made possible in developing markets and low involvement product sectors in the same way as was done elsewhere. It demonstrates the benefit of including the value-in-use concept of the Nordic School in the broader body of IMC theory. More practically, the study shows the value of assessing marketing communication practice from the applied perspectives of planned, product and service brand contacts, and ultimately from the holistic perspective of integration-in-use.

The findings show specifically that The Brewery's range of planned brand contacts is similar to those identified in the literature in other regions, but also that they differ somewhat in their regional form and application. Advertising, sales promotion and direct marketing are consistently used for brand contact and messaging, but on balance, and because of the unique nature of the market, publicity and personal promotion feature comparatively more strongly than they do elsewhere. Technical product quality gains a degree of attention that in comparison and on balance would appear to be greater than it is in other markets. In terms of communication with customers specifically, and not across the whole distribution chain, the company focuses on a more narrowly defined group as its key service interface. The company's messaging from all sources is highly collaborative and integrated. It becomes clear that the customer, and the customer's integrated brand communication needs, are placed at the centre of its communication strategy and execution. The findings point to consistent integration-in-use and the perception that this integration contributes directly to the value and impact of individual brand contacts.

A unique firm-driven view of customer-centred brand contact integration is generated in the company's marketing endeavours with cross-effect integration of planned, product and service brand contacts. A strong market-back strategy is evident in its communication and brand contacts, indicative of the extent to which IMC has become embedded in the company's marketing communication practice. This is the case even though IMC is not overtly described as a principle of the company's strategic communication.

The findings of this in-depth study of the key members of one company's marketing team remain the findings of only one company. It would be valuable in further research to explore the extent and nature of integration across the brewing sector in Ethiopia and other developing markets. Perhaps more significantly, it would be interesting to explore whether integration-in-use is experienced in the market amongst customers in the same way as it is conceptualised and planned by marketing teams across industrial sectors and regions.

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