

Current Trends in Advertising, Public Relations, Integrated Marketing Communication and Strategic Communication Education

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Abstract

The integration of advertising and public relations is a topic of interest to their practitioners and educators. For years, both have recommended ways to integrate these functions. In accordance with this trend, some advertising and public relations schools decided to merge and to change the names of their programs to Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) or Strategic Communication. This study was designed to investigate the trend of integration between advertising and public relations programs in U.S. higher education. To achieve this purpose, we analyzed the contents of 113 advertising, public relations, IMC, and strategic communication programs that described in these schools' official websites. Although a few schools have begun to use the terms IMC, or strategic communication for the names of their schools or programs, the terms advertising and/or public relations remain in the mainstream. Nine institutions use strategic communication, and most of them use this term as an umbrella term, which includes both advertising and public relations majors. Regarding curriculum, a majority of the programs offering advertising, public relations, or strategic communication tend to offer separate introductory, writing, design, and campaign courses for both advertising and public relations majors, while a small portion of schools provide combined courses for both majors. Implications for curricular integration and design in advertising and public relations are discussed.

Keywords: advertising and public relations curriculum, integration, integrated marketing communication, IMC, strategic communication

Introduction

Integration of advertising and public relations is a topic of interest to their practitioners and educators. According to Rose and Miller (1993), the merger of advertising and public

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relations is “one of the most debated and controversial topics” (p. 20) in mass communication. The concept of integration was originally raised when advertising agencies went on the merger and acquisition trail in the 1970s and 1980s to avoid losing profit (Duncan & Caywood, 1996). Since then, the two fields have increasingly embraced an integrated approach to better serve the complex needs of clients. Educators also have discussed the ideal mix of advertising, public relations, and marketing communication in their programs (Kerr, 2009).

Although no commonly accepted definitions of integrated marketing communications (IMC) or integrated communications exist (Schultz & Kitchen, 1997), IMC and IC generally refer to the use of various strategies and tactics to convey an effective message in a variety of communication disciplines such as advertising, direct marketing, public relations, and sales promotion (Griffin & Pasadeos, 1998; Rose & Miller, 1994; Wilcox, Cameron, & Reber, 2015). Practitioners claimed that they need both the skills of advertising and of public relations and, hence, integrated communication or IMC is an ideal concept (Rose & Miller, 1994).

In accordance with the trend, some advertising and public relations schools decided to merge and change the name of the programs to IMC or Strategic Communication. As of February 2016, a total of nine universities accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) use IMC or Strategic Communication in the names of their schools or degree programs. Also, some schools offer courses that are more integrated and comprehensive to keep their curriculum updated.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the concept of administrative and curricular integration between advertising and public relations in terms of higher education and training. We attempt to identify the trend in advertising and public relations education by analyzing the name of schools, their mission statements or descriptions of majors, degree programs, and curriculum. Through a content analysis of advertising, public relations, IMC, and strategic communication programs in higher education, this preliminary study provides insights on and directions for administrative integration. Also, this study helps educators and administrators with their curricular integration and design in advertising and public relations. Finally, this study underpins future research on the concept of integration and strategic communication.

Literature Review

The term Integrated (Marketing) Communication or Strategic Communication has become popular over the last two decades (What is strategic communications? 2011, March 16). Integrated communication or IMC is generally defined as the practice of aligning messages and communication/activities through various tools and channels so an organization can effectively communicate with its stakeholders as a coherent entity (Christensen, Firat, & Torp, 2008; Rose & Miller, 1994). According to Griffin and Pasadeos (1998), IMC suggests that communication with consumers can be effective by collaborating advertising and public relations in addition to other marketing efforts.

In Rose and Miller’s study on advertising and public relations practitioners’ perceptions about IMC (Rose & Miller, 1994), a majority of the participants agreed that they need skills necessary to do both jobs and that they desired additional communication training to keep current in their professions. However, significant differences existed in areas of training interest between advertising and public relations practitioners. Advertising practitioners were more interested in direct marketing, promotions, and event planning, while public relations practitioners were more interested in communication management, consulting, and strategy

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planning (Rose & Miller, 1994). Supa (2016) conducted a survey to investigate the perceptions of the concept of integration among advertising and public relations practitioners. Although many practitioners agreed that “advertising and public relations must work together in order for an organization to communicate effectively” (p. 5), they were less enthusiastic about the concept of integration.

Although strategic or integrated marketing communication, discussed back in the 1970s and 1980s, grew into a trend of 1990s in communication agencies, curriculum integration that blurs the lines between advertising and public relations has been a contentious issue among educators (Larsen & Len-Rios, 2006; Rose & Miller, 1994). Some proponents of IMC may consider the integration of advertising and public relations in a way that is in harmony with an organizational goal as ideal (Patti, 2005). Duncan, Caywood, and Newsom (1993) also recommended curriculum integration of public relations with advertising and other marketing communication tools. However, as Rose and Miller (1994) mentioned, public relations educators are likely to oppose it, while advertising educators are more in favor of integration. Public relations educators view public relations as a broader concept than is marketing, fulfilling a variety of functions in various organizations (Ferguson & Turk, 1993). Kruckeberg (1998) also argued that subsuming public relations into marketing might not be adequate because it can result in the loss of public relations as a specialized profession.

It seems as though strategic communication is slightly preferred than is IMC by public relations scholars and educators because it is a less marketing-oriented term. The term strategic communication is more frequently found than is integrated (marketing) communication in peer-reviewed academic journals such as *Public Relations Review* and *Journal of Public Relations Research*. Also, PRSA defines public relations as a strategic communication process (“About Public Relations,” n.d.).

However, the term is actually used in much the same sense. Dimitriu (2012) defined strategic communication as “the consistency of strategy, activities, themes and messages, and the aim of obtaining legitimacy and support” (p. 195). In Crawford, Fudge, Hubbard, and Filak’s (2013) study, strategic communication was regarded as a major that encompasses advertising and public relations concentrations. They found that strategic communication students differ from news media students who are in print, broadcast, or visual journalism concentrations in terms of personality traits.

Merging advertising and public relations seems an inevitable discussion topic among educators. Thus, one of the purposes of this study is to answer Rose and Miller’s (1994) questions such as “given that there is a perceived need for advertising and public relations functions to become more aligned, what sorts of programs should institutions of higher education offer? Should there be separate curricula or an integrated one? Should IMC programs be degree granting or executive seminars?” (p. 53). This study investigates how higher education institutions describe a strategic communication major. Several institutions, including Oklahoma State University, Texas Christian University, and the University of Missouri-Columbia, have renamed their programs as “strategic communication.” The description of these integrated/strategic communication majors on educational institutions’ websites is analyzed.

Specifically, the following three overarching research questions are formulated for this study:

- *Research Question 1.* What is the trend in administrative integration of advertising and public relations in higher education?

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- *Research Question 2.* What is the trend in curricular integration of advertising and public relations in higher education?
- *Research Question 3.* How are the terms *integrated communication* and/or *strategic communication* defined in higher education?

Method

The sample for this study is drawn from schools that are accredited by ACEJMC and Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR). ACEJMC accredits programs that meet educational requirements and high standards in journalism and mass communication education. ACEJMC has 115 accredited programs as of February 2016 (ACEJMC Accreditation Status, 2016). Established in 1989 by Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), CEPR accredits programs for meeting certain standards in public relations education. Forty programs that currently hold PRSA certification are listed on the CEPR web page (PR Program Certification, 2016).

To develop the initial categories for the coding sheet, a pilot study was conducted by reviewing the websites of a randomly selected ten schools. We analyzed the names of the schools, the mission statements or the descriptions of the majors on the first page of the school's website, their degree programs, and their curricula. After revising coding categories and rules, two trained coders attempted to locate a website for each sampled school and separately conduct a content analysis of 138 programs. Ten percent of the sampled educational institutions were coded by both coders to check inter-coder reliability. Inter-coder reliabilities using Krippendorff's *alpha* and Cohen's *kappa* ranged from .73 to .78. Krippendorff (2004) suggests .70 or above as an acceptable level of reliability. According to Banerjee, Capozzoli, McSweeney, and Sinha (1999), Cohen's *kappa* greater than .75 is excellent agreement.

Among 138 sampled educational institutions, 113 schools located in 40 states of the USA were finally used for data analysis, excluding 12 international institutions and 13 institutions that are located in the USA, but that have no undergraduate major, concentration, or course in advertising or public relations. For example, Columbia University is an ACEJMC-accredited program, but was removed from the sample because it only has a graduate program. A total of 96 institutions were ACEJMC-accredited programs, and 33 institutions were CEPR-certified programs.

Results

Administrative Integration of Advertising and Public relations

Among 113 educational institutions, 15 institutions use "Advertising," "Public Relations," or both for their school/department names (as shown in Table 1). Five institutions use "Strategic Communication(s)" and one institution uses "Integrated Marketing Communications." Other words frequently observed were "Journalism," "Mass Communication," and "Media." A total of 47 institutions include "Journalism" in their school/department names. Also, 27 institutions include "Mass Communication," and 15 institutions include "Media" in their school/department names. This finding confirms what the 1987 Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education has found: "Most public relations programs are associated with schools or departments of journalism and mass communications." (Kruckeberg, 1998, p. 240).

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Table 1. School/Department Names

Name of School/Department	N	%
Journalism	47	42%
Mass Communication(s)	27	24%
Media	15	13%
Advertising, Public Relations, or both	15	13%
Strategic Communication(s)	5	4%
Integrated Marketing Communications	1	1%
Total	113	

In addition, 81 institutions offer majors or concentrations in Advertising, Public Relations, Integrated (Marketing) Communication, and Strategic Communication (see Table 2). Specifically, 48 institutions offer majors or concentrations both in Advertising and Public Relations. Three schools offer a major in Advertising, but not in Public Relations, and 18 schools only have a Public Relations program. Nine schools have a Strategic Communication major. While four of them actually merge advertising and public relations tracks, the other three programs place both advertising and public relations tracks separately under the strategic communication sequence, and students are allowed to choose either one. One University offers a B.A. in Public Relations and Strategic Communication, but its major courses mainly contain “Public Relations” in course titles. One university offers a B.A. in Public Relations for students in a Strategic Communication major. Two schools offer an IMC major, and one institution offers an Integrated Strategic Communication major.

Table 2. Majors/Concentrations in Advertising, PR, IMC, or Strategic Communication

	N	%
Majors/concentrations in advertising and in public relations	48	59%
Public relations major only	18	22%
Majors/concentrations in strategic communication	9	11%
Advertising major only	3	4%
Majors/concentrations in integrated marketing communications	2	2%
Majors/concentrations in integrated strategic communication	1	1%
Total	81	

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Among those 81 institutions that have advertising, public relations, integrated (marketing) communication, and strategic communication majors/concentrations, 62 institutions actually offer Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) or Bachelor of Science (B.S.) in Advertising, Public Relations, Integrated (Marketing) Communications, or Strategic Communication. As shown in Table 3, 50 institutions offer B.A. or B.S. in Advertising, Public Relations, or both. Ten institutions offer B.A. or B.S. in Strategic Communication (Management). One of them offers B.A. or B.S. in Integrated Strategic Communication. Finally, two institutions offer a B.A. or B.S. in IMC.

Table 3. Bachelor’s Degree Names

	N	%
B.A. or B.S. in Advertising, Public Relations, or both	50	81%
B.A. or B.S. in Strategic Communication	10	16%
B.A. or B.S. in IMC	2	3%
Total	62	

Curricular Integration of Advertising and Public relations

In 95 programs, introductory courses for undergraduate students in advertising and public relations are listed separately (see Table 4). Among them, 90 programs offer both Introduction to Advertising (or Principles of Advertising) and Introduction to Public Relations (or Principles of Public Relations). The other five programs offer an introductory course in public relations, but not in advertising. Among eleven programs that offer a combined introductory class, five schools contain both Advertising and Public Relations in the names of their introductory classes, while six schools use Strategic Communication. Oklahoma State University offers two separate introductory courses for each major under the same name of Introduction to Strategic Communication, one for advertising and the other one for public relations.

Table 4. Curricular Integration in Advertising and Public Relations

	The number of institutions offering a combined course	The number of institutions offering courses separately
Introductory courses	11	95
Writing courses	10	80
Design courses	30	39
Research courses	41	37
Capstone (campaign)	16	65

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Eighty programs offer separate writing courses such as Public Relation Writing, Writing for Advertising, or Copywriting. For example, Baylor University has “Advertising Copywriting” and “Public Relations Writing.” Four of these 80 programs offer a “Public Relations Writing” course only. Ten programs offer a combined writing course that contains either “Advertising and Public Relations” or “Strategic Communication” in their course titles. For example, University of Nebraska-Lincoln offers “Strategic Writing for Advertising and Public Relations,” and the University of Minnesota offers “Professional Writing for Strategic Communication.” Oklahoma State University offers a combined course titled “Persuasive Writing for Strategic Communicators,” but also has these separate courses: “Copywriting and Creative Strategy” (advertising focus) and “Media Relations” (public relations focus). An additional 15 programs offer a general writing course for journalism and mass communication majors such as “Writing for (Mass) Media” and “Reporting and Writing.”

In 39 programs, design-related courses are offered separately for advertising and public relations students. For example, University of Florida offers “Advertising Graphics and Production” for advertising majors and “Public Relations Visual Communication” and “Advanced Public Relations Visual Communication” for public relations majors. At Middle Tennessee State University, “Advertising Design and Visuals” is offered for advertising students and “Public Relations Publications” is offered for public relations students. However, in 30 institutions, a combined design course is offered. As an example, both advertising and public relations students can take “Presentation Design for Strategic Communication” at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Brigham Young University also has a combined course, “Media Design and Graphics.” Similarly, Syracuse University offers “Introduction to Graphic Design” both for advertising and public relations students.

In 37 programs, separate research courses for each major are offered, while 41 programs have a combined research course for both majors. For example, University of Oklahoma, University of Florida, University of Georgia, and University of Memphis offer, not only “Advertising Research,” but also “Public Relations Research.” However, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh offers “Research in Strategic Communication,” which is available for both majors. Rowan University requires both advertising and public relations majors to take a combined research course, “Introduction to Public Relations/Advertising Research.” The University of Texas at Austin offers advertising and public relations majors the same combined research course, but also has a separate course that is called “Advertising Research.”

As a capstone course, 65 educational institutions including University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Florida, University of Tennessee, and University of Memphis offer both “Advertising Campaigns” and “Public Relations Campaigns” for each major. However, 16 educational institutions integrate advertising campaigns and public relations campaigns. At West Virginia University, for example, a combined capstone course called “Strategic Advertising & Public Relations Campaigns” is offered for advertising majors and public relations majors. University of Texas at Austin also offers “Integrated Communications Campaigns” for both majors.

Description of the Strategic Communication Major/Concentration

Some educational institutions have moved to Strategic Communication to give students an understanding of an integrated and comprehensive approach to communication. To see how those institutions define strategic communication, the descriptions of majors/concentrations on

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the websites of ten educational institutions were analyzed. Two additional institutions that have IMC major were also analyzed. One of the institutions that offer Strategic Communication major does not provide the description on its website.

Most educational institutions describe that their strategic communication program as educating and preparing students in advertising, public relations, corporate communication, and other areas of communication. All descriptions found on the official websites of 11 programs mention public relations as one of the form of Strategic Communication. Ten programs list advertising as one of the form of strategic communication.

Six programs list clients and organizations for which students can work, such as companies, nonprofits, sports teams, hospitals, politicians, and governmental agencies. For example, West Virginia University says, “Strategic Communicators tells the stories of their clients, companies and organizations to reach and engage various audiences. They create public health campaigns and promote companies, brands, politicians, sports teams and nonprofits” (“Major in Strategic Communications,” n.d.).

Six descriptions include what students learn in the program. According to these descriptions, students learn to conduct research, plan and implement communication campaigns, build relationships with the public, write and create content for clients, function as spokespeople, and evaluate effectiveness. Two institutions that offer an IMC major also provide similar descriptions about their majors, but use the term “marketing communication.” For example, the undergraduate IMC Certificate Program offered by Northwestern University says that students learn how to conduct research, analyze data on consumer behavior, media usage and marketing communications effects, create and deliver messages through a wide variety of media channels (“IMC Undergraduate Certificate Curriculum”, n.d.).

Discussion and Conclusion

Summary and Implications of the Study

This study was designed to investigate the trend of integration between advertising and public relations programs in higher education. We analyzed the contents of 113 advertising, public relations, IMC, and strategic communication programs in these schools’ official websites. Three main research questions were asked: 1) What is the trend in administrative integration of advertising and public relations in higher education? 2) What is the trend in curricular integration of advertising and public relations in higher education? and 3) How is the term integrated communication or strategic communication defined in higher education? The following main contents were analyzed to find the answers to the questions, including the names of schools, their mission statements, degree programs, and curricula.

Of the 113 institutions analyzed, 15 institutions use the term, “Advertising,” “Public Relations,” or both for their schools’ or departments’ names, while six institutions contain “Strategic Communication(s)” or “Integrated Marketing Communications.” Other words frequently observed were “Journalism” (n=47) “Mass Communication” (n=27) and “Media” (n=15). Among those institutions offering a major or a concentration in advertising, public relations, IMC, or strategic communication, a majority offers both advertising and public relations majors. Nine institutions have a strategic communication major or concentration, and most of these use the term as an umbrella term that includes both advertising and public relations majors. Although a few schools began to contain the term strategic communication or IMC for the names of their schools or programs, the terms, advertising or public relations are currently in

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the mainstream. As these data show, a majority of advertising and/or public relations programs exist under a journalism or a mass communication school. This trend can be explained by the shorter history of advertising and public relations as academic disciplines in comparison to mass communication and journalism. As a new discipline is needed, the administration in a university or school might search for the most appropriate home college or school for the new academic discipline, either advertising or public relations.

While the names of the programs offering advertising, public relations, and strategic communication majors vary, a majority of the programs with advertising, public relations, or strategic communication tends to offer separate introductory, writing, design, and campaign courses for both advertising and public relations majors, while a small portion of schools provide combined courses for both majors. One thing to note is that strategic communication programs often offer separate advertising and public relations courses. A research course is provided as a joint course in some programs, but in other programs separate courses exist for both majors. A few reasons can explain separate courses for most courses offered for advertising and public relations majors. First, the two majors might be different in terms of perspectives and needed skills. A focus of public relations is building trust and mutually beneficial relationship, while advertising focuses on promoting a brand and building exposure (Wynne, 2014, July 8).

Second, the term might not be long enough to cover contents for both majors. One term (a semester or a quarter) ranges somewhere between twelve and sixteen weeks. This time period often is not enough to even cover the contents for one major, either advertising or public relations. Especially, an introductory course (i.e., Principles of Advertising, Principles of Public Relations) covers a wide range of topics applicable to a major, and it is often a first course that a student in a given major takes. Because covering important topics for a major in an introductory course might not be enough during a given semester, most of the schools might provide independent introductory course for advertising and public relations course. This lack of time might be applicable to Campaign course as well. Carroll (2000) reported that students taking the IMC campaigns class demonstrated a lack of time to develop an integrated plan in the given 15-week semester.

However, because it is essential to understand both areas, schools should consider offering a combined course for upper-level students who have basic understanding of their majors (Carroll, 2000). For example, Kent State University offers “Ethical Issues in Integrated Communication” and “Law of Advertising and Public Relations,” which are open to both majors. Similarly, Rowan University requires students who are majoring either in advertising or in public relations to take “PR/AD Law and Ethics,” and a similar course is offered at University of Texas at Austin. Pennsylvania State University’s “International and Intercultural Strategic Communication” is another good example of an upper-level integrated course for those majors. University of Texas at Austin also offers “Multicultural Issues in Advertising and Public Relations.” In addition, University of Alabama offers “A+PR Management,” which covers the managerial role in both advertising and public relations practice. University of Colorado has a “Strategic Communication Analytics and Metrics” course to provide students with a basic knowledge about analytics and metrics. The aforementioned upper-level courses are more comprehensive and holistic and help students to understand that advertising and public relations share much in common and work together effectively. Special topics courses such as healthcare issues, crisis communication, and sports communication can be listed as electives for advertising and public relations students as well.

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Institutions that use the terms integrated communication or strategic communication describe their strategic programs as educating and preparing students in advertising, public relations, corporate communication, and other areas of communication. It seems as though they consider strategic communication as an umbrella term that covers all of the communication disciplines. However, examining the description of strategic communication displayed its similarities to public relations. Six programs with a description of strategic communication list clients and organization for which their students can work, such as companies, nonprofits, sports teams, hospitals, politicians, and governmental agencies. Public relations deals with all types of organizations and their clients, including the aforementioned ones. PRSA explains public relations as “a strategic communication process and the management function that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics or stakeholders. Public relations encompasses understanding and analyzing the public, counseling management, and researching, planning, implementing, and evaluating communication to help a variety of clients achieve their goal” (“About Public Relations,” n.d.). The question of which term, either strategic communication or advertising and/or public relations, is better to be used for the field still remains unanswered. However, it seems clear that the main contents offered in both of them should remain the same.

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

Some factors limit the results of this study. First, given that the sample consisted of 113 educational institutions that are accredited by ACEJMC and CEPR, generalizability of the results can be called into question.

A total of 484 schools are listed in the Journalism & Mass Communication eDirectory (Program listings, 2016), published by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Also, according to the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) website, 347 schools in the USA have a Chapter. Thus, future studies could collect a more representative sample from the directories.

A limitation of this study is in its research method, content analysis. Because this study is based on the analysis of educational institutions and their curriculum, it could not capture the actual perceptions or opinions of the public (that is, students, educators, and professionals) regarding merging advertising and public relations and creating a new major in IMC or strategic communication. Future studies should involve a survey of experts in these areas to investigate the benefits and drawbacks of merging the two majors. The results can be compared to Rose and Miller’s (1994) survey of advertising and public relations practitioners that was conducted in 1993. Through discussion with experts, future studies can give insight into building an innovative curriculum for preparing students to become an effective communicator in the 21st century. Finally, current and future students’ attitudes toward the integrated/strategic communication major can be examined for successful student recruitment.

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