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Identifying and Prioritizing Drivers and Challenges of Marketing Communications for Herbal Medicinal Products: A Qualitative Approach

ABSTRACT

This research aims to design and elucidate an Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) model for the Iranian herbal products industry. This industry has consistently faced structural challenges arising from the confrontation and coexistence of a dual market—traditional (Attaris/traditional apothecaries) and modern (pharmacies and digital platforms)—necessitating a localized and tailored approach to communication strategies. The study was conducted using a mixed-methods (qualitative-quantitative) approach. In the qualitative phase, fundamental categories and concepts were extracted through in-depth interviews with 18 experts and key participants. Subsequently, in the quantitative phase, a fuzzy Delphi approach was employed to validate and prioritize these components. The opinions of 18 specialists were analyzed over three consecutive rounds, leading to the final approval of seven key indicators. Research findings revealed that in the local context of Iran, the traditional apothecary (Attar) is not merely a physical distribution channel but acts in a pivotal role as an “intermediary and reference of trust.” Consequently, the classical concept of “message integration” shifts to an “integration of trust” approach within this industry. The fuzzy Delphi prioritization results, based on the defuzzification index, confirmed that the categories of “dual consumer logic” and “shift of communication control (from the manufacturer to the traditional intermediary)” hold the highest strategic priorities, respectively, highlighting the need to reconsider the allocation of communication resources. Finally, the study concludes by emphasizing the necessity of achieving a “strategic synthesis” between the capacities of tradition and the tools of modernity—an approach where digital channels are utilized not as substitutes, but as complements to traditional networks. By elucidating the concepts of “integration of trust” and “intermediary-centricity,” this research significantly contributes to the localization of IMC theory in markets with a dual structure.

Keywords: Integrated Marketing Communications, herbal medicine, Attar, trust integration, mediator-centrality, fuzzy Delphi method, dual market

Introduction

Marketing communication has evolved from a predominantly promotional function into a strategic process through which organizations establish relationships, communicate value, coordinate stakeholder interactions, and shape customer experiences across multiple contact points. The contemporary communication environment is characterized by fragmented audiences, rapid technological change, interactive media, platform-based consumption, and declining organizational control over brand-related information. Consumers no longer receive marketing messages passively; rather, they search for information, compare alternatives, interact with other consumers, create content, and participate in the interpretation and circulation of brand meanings. Consequently, the effectiveness of marketing communication increasingly depends on the ability of organizations to coordinate messages, channels, actors, and customer experiences within a coherent strategic framework. Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) responds to this requirement by seeking consistency and synergy

among communication activities while ensuring that each interaction contributes to a recognizable and credible brand identity. The strategic importance of such integration has been demonstrated across direct, interactive, and relationship-based marketing contexts, in which coordination among communication instruments can improve responsiveness and strengthen the continuity of customer relationships [1].

The need for integration has become particularly evident following the expansion of digital media. Although mass media continue to provide broad reach and public visibility, digital media offer greater interactivity, personalization, measurability, and opportunities for immediate consumer participation. The distinction between mass and digital media is therefore not merely technological; it reflects different communication logics, audience roles, and patterns of message control. Comparative analyses indicate that organizations must understand the respective advantages and limitations of these environments rather than treating digital channels as simple replacements for conventional media [2]. Global digital communication has also increased the number of platforms, intermediaries, data sources, and cultural contexts involved in marketing exchanges. As a result, organizations must coordinate communication strategies across markets while adapting messages to local expectations, media habits, and institutional conditions [3]. This complexity has transformed IMC from the synchronization of promotional tools into a broader process of managing interconnected customer journeys and communication ecosystems.

Omnichannel communication represents one of the most prominent manifestations of this transformation. Consumers frequently move between online and offline environments during awareness, evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase stages. They may discover a product through social media, obtain advice from an interpersonal source, compare prices online, inspect the product physically, and later share their experience electronically. Effective omnichannel implementation therefore requires consistency in information, service quality, brand identity, and customer treatment across all channels. Evidence concerning the relationship between omnichannel implementation and business performance suggests that integration can create value when communication and service touchpoints function as parts of a unified system rather than as isolated channels [4]. Nevertheless, achieving such integration is difficult when traditional and digital channels operate under different ownership structures, levels of expertise, or systems of accountability.

These difficulties are especially significant in health-related markets, where purchasing decisions are accompanied by uncertainty, perceived risk, and concerns regarding product quality, safety, and efficacy. Marketing communication in these markets performs more than a persuasive role; it also educates consumers, interprets specialized information, reduces uncertainty, and establishes confidence in the source and content of claims. The development of persuasion and communication skills is consequently central to brand building because the credibility of a message depends not only on what is communicated but also on the competence and trustworthiness demonstrated by the communicator [5]. In service institutions, marketing public relations and coordinated communication indicators similarly contribute to the establishment of legitimacy, stakeholder confidence, and organizational reputation [6]. When products directly or indirectly affect health, any inconsistency between promotional claims, professional recommendations, regulatory information, and consumer experience can weaken trust and create resistance to purchase.

The herbal medicinal products market provides a particularly important context for investigating these issues. Herbal products are located at the intersection of health, culture, commerce, and traditional knowledge. Consumers may evaluate them not only according to price, packaging, and brand reputation but also in relation to perceived naturalness, historical

authenticity, cultural familiarity, therapeutic beliefs, and recommendations from trusted individuals. Their purchasing decisions may consequently be guided by two partially different systems of reasoning: a modern logic emphasizing standardization, scientific validation, branded production, and formal distribution, and a traditional logic emphasizing experiential knowledge, interpersonal confidence, cultural continuity, and individualized advice. This duality makes marketing communication more complex because manufacturers must communicate modern quality assurance without undermining the traditional meanings that contribute to product acceptance.

The coexistence of traditional and modern communication channels is especially visible in Iran's herbal medicinal products industry. Industrial producers, pharmacies, online retailers, social media pages, regulatory organizations, traditional apothecaries, and informal interpersonal networks all participate in producing and transmitting information. Traditional apothecaries, commonly known as Attars, are not merely retail outlets. They frequently function as advisers, interpreters of product properties, evaluators of brands, and interpersonal sources of reassurance. Their recommendations may validate or weaken the messages developed by manufacturing firms. Therefore, the communication environment cannot be adequately understood through a conventional producer-to-consumer model. Instead, it involves a network in which communication authority may be distributed among manufacturers, intermediaries, consumers, professional actors, and digital communities.

Studies of marketing communication in culturally distinctive and service-oriented markets support the need for contextualized approaches. Research on integrated marketing communication in Thailand's medical tourism sector demonstrates the importance of coordinating messages and service experiences in a health-related market that combines cultural characteristics, specialized services, and international consumer expectations [7]. Research in the hospitality industry has likewise linked marketing communication with organizational performance, emphasizing the commercial importance of appropriate communication practices in experiential and trust-sensitive services [8]. Similarly, the communication of sustainable hotel practices through social media shows how organizations can use digital platforms to present values, practices, and identities to increasingly attentive consumers [9]. These findings are relevant to herbal medicinal products because consumers in both contexts evaluate not only functional outcomes but also authenticity, credibility, responsibility, and the overall meaning associated with the offering.

Consumer values and social norms further complicate communication effectiveness. Contemporary consumption decisions are increasingly affected by ethical concerns, mindful consumption, identity, and perceived social expectations. Research on second-hand clothing purchases indicates that mindful consumption, ego involvement, and social norms contribute to purchase-related decision processes [10]. Although herbal products differ substantially from second-hand clothing, both markets contain symbolic and value-based dimensions that cannot be reduced to conventional economic utility. Consumers may regard herbal products as expressions of natural living, cultural identity, preventive health behavior, or resistance to highly industrialized consumption. Accordingly, marketing communication must address the meanings and norms surrounding consumption rather than concentrating exclusively on product attributes.

Economic considerations remain equally important. Consumer decisions emerge through the interaction of communication stimuli with income, perceived value, price sensitivity, opportunity costs, and assessments of alternative products. An integrated microeconomic and communication perspective suggests that communication strategies influence consumer decision-making within broader economic constraints rather than independently of them [11]. Marketing capabilities may also affect organizational and export outcomes through their relationship with competitive strategy and

communication effectiveness [12]. For herbal medicinal product companies, which often include small and medium-sized enterprises, limited communication budgets make the strategic allocation of resources essential. Investments in packaging, advertising, social media, intermediary education, public relations, and digital sales must therefore be prioritized according to their contribution to credibility, market access, and sustainable competitive positioning.

Digital platforms have expanded the communication options available to such firms. Social media can support educational content, consumer feedback, peer recommendations, live demonstrations, and direct interaction with brands. Research on TikTok live-streaming strategies illustrates how brands can combine real-time communication, product presentation, entertainment, and consumer engagement within platform-specific marketing practices [13]. Social media adoption by non-professional sports clubs similarly demonstrates that even organizations with limited resources can use digital platforms as strategic communication tools, although adoption practices depend on organizational capacity and contextual conditions [14]. These insights are relevant to herbal medicinal product firms, many of which lack extensive marketing departments but may benefit from accessible digital channels. However, successful digital participation requires more than platform presence; it requires relevant content, credible interaction, and alignment between online promises and offline experiences.

Consumer engagement within digital environments also depends on the communicative forms used by brands. For Generation Z, visually expressive elements such as emojis may affect engagement and purchase-related attitudes by shaping the informality, emotionality, and perceived authenticity of digital messages [15]. Social media communication can also contribute to consumer loyalty when interactions provide value, responsiveness, and relationship continuity rather than repetitive promotional exposure [16]. Furthermore, participation in online brand communities can strengthen positive electronic word-of-mouth and repurchase intentions when community interactions generate trust [17]. In herbal product markets, digital communities may allow consumers to exchange experiences, discuss product effects, and recommend sellers. Nevertheless, such communication also increases the possibility of unsupported claims, misinformation, and inconsistent interpretations, making trust management a central strategic issue.

Excessive, unsolicited, or poorly targeted communication can undermine this trust. Spam and intrusive marketing communications may generate irritation, avoidance, and negative attitudes toward the sender rather than increasing product acceptance [18]. This problem is particularly serious for health-oriented products because repeated unverified claims may be interpreted as manipulation or exploitation of consumer vulnerability. The transformation of television advertising after the COVID-19 pandemic also demonstrates that communication narratives and informational appeals change in response to public crises, shifting consumer sensitivities, and new expectations regarding reassurance and responsibility [19]. Herbal medicinal product communication must therefore balance persuasion with evidence, emotional appeal with informational accuracy, and commercial objectives with ethical responsibility.

Narrative strategies can facilitate this balance by connecting products to meaningful consumer experiences. Offline and online narratives may influence consumer preferences for domestic products when they communicate identity, heritage, usefulness, and credibility across coordinated channels [20]. Nostalgia marketing similarly demonstrates the capacity of memories, cultural symbols, and emotionally significant representations to shape brand relationships [21]. These approaches may be especially effective in the Iranian herbal product market because traditional medicine is closely associated with family practices, local knowledge, historical marketplaces, and intergenerational experience. However, nostalgia and cultural symbolism must not be used as substitutes for transparent information regarding quality and safety. Their strategic value lies

in complementing modern evidence and standards, thereby establishing continuity between traditional legitimacy and contemporary consumer requirements.

Technological innovation has further expanded the possibilities and risks of marketing communication. Artificial intelligence enables audience segmentation, automated content production, predictive analytics, personalization, customer-service automation, and real-time campaign optimization. At the same time, it introduces concerns regarding transparency, data privacy, algorithmic bias, authenticity, and the potential depersonalization of communication. Research on artificial intelligence in digital marketing communication highlights both its operational advantages and its implications for the changing relationship between organizations and audiences [22]. Other analyses identify new business opportunities as well as strategic and ethical challenges associated with the increasing use of AI in marketing communications [23]. For herbal medicinal products, AI may support personalized educational content and analysis of consumer concerns, but excessive automation could weaken the interpersonal trust that remains central to traditional distribution networks.

Software-as-a-service and AI-based tools can also facilitate the coordination of integrated communication activities, especially for firms seeking to manage campaigns, customer data, content, and performance measurement through relatively accessible technological systems [24]. Nevertheless, technological tools cannot resolve structural fragmentation on their own. A company may possess sophisticated data and automation systems while remaining disconnected from traditional intermediaries who directly influence customer decisions. Similarly, data-driven communication may fail when its categories do not adequately reflect culturally embedded trust relationships. Digital transformation must therefore be conceptualized as an extension of the communication ecosystem rather than a process of replacing relational channels with automated ones.

Innovative retail environments demonstrate how technology, service experience, and communication interact. Research on smart unmanned stores has shown the importance of service innovation and experiential relationship quality in shaping shopping outcomes [25]. While herbal medicinal products are commonly purchased in settings that differ from unmanned stores, this evidence reinforces the principle that technological convenience must be accompanied by a satisfactory experience and a sense of relational quality. In a product category where consumers may wish to ask questions, inspect products, discuss symptoms, or receive tailored advice, purely technology-driven retail can be insufficient. Digital channels may be more effective when they complement physical consultation and trusted interpersonal communication.

The general business analysis of digital marketing strategies similarly indicates that digital communication should be linked to organizational objectives, customer characteristics, and the broader competitive environment [26]. In online retailing, communication models can influence purchasing behavior through the combined operation of information, interaction, trust, and promotional mechanisms [27]. These considerations suggest that herbal medicinal product companies must move beyond fragmented promotional practices and develop integrated systems linking manufacturers, Attars, pharmacies, digital platforms, and consumers. Without such coordination, conflicting claims and differences in channel practices can create confusion, reduce message credibility, and weaken the overall market.

Research in sport tourism also illustrates how integrated marketing communications can be used to attract consumers to offerings involving place identity, experience, and multiple stakeholder groups [28]. The relevance of this perspective lies in the fact that both tourism and herbal medicine markets frequently depend on cooperation among independent actors rather than communication controlled by a single organization. When stakeholders communicate different promises, standards, or identities, the consumer encounters a fragmented offering. Integration therefore requires stakeholder alignment as well as

media coordination. In the herbal products industry, this means that manufacturers cannot achieve communication consistency solely through internal marketing departments; they must also engage intermediaries and other influential actors who shape the final meaning of the message.

Despite the growing literature on digital communication, omnichannel strategies, artificial intelligence, social media engagement, customer trust, narratives, and integrated marketing practices, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature examines formal organizations and assumes that the focal brand retains substantial control over communication. This assumption is questionable in traditional markets where intermediaries possess independent authority and established social relationships. Second, existing studies often emphasize communication tools without adequately analyzing the structural distribution of trust and influence. Third, limited attention has been paid to markets in which consumers simultaneously rely on institutional assurances and traditional interpersonal validation. Fourth, the specific drivers and barriers affecting marketing communication for herbal medicinal products in Iran have not been sufficiently identified, organized, and prioritized through systematic engagement with relevant experts and market participants.

Addressing these gaps requires an approach capable of revealing context-specific meanings and differentiating fundamental structural issues from secondary tactical concerns. Qualitative inquiry can uncover how manufacturers, marketing specialists, academics, distributors, and Attars understand communication effectiveness, consumer trust, channel conflict, and the changing roles of traditional intermediaries. Expert-based prioritization can subsequently determine which factors should receive the greatest strategic attention. Such an approach is particularly appropriate where the boundaries between tradition and modernity, interpersonal and institutional trust, and physical and digital communication remain fluid. It can also contribute to the localization of IMC by showing how integration should be reinterpreted in a market where communication control is dispersed and intermediaries actively validate, modify, or reject manufacturer-generated messages.

Accordingly, the aim of this study was to identify and prioritize the principal drivers and challenges of marketing communications for herbal medicinal products and to develop a context-sensitive understanding of integrated marketing communication within Iran's dual traditional-modern market structure.

Methodology

This study was conducted with the aim of developing integrated marketing communication strategies for herbal medicinal products, based on the pragmatism paradigm. To gain deep understanding of the complexities of this market, a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design was employed. The first and foundational phase of this research is dedicated to a qualitative approach, in which the target population included university professors, managers of herbal medicine manufacturing and distribution companies, marketing specialists, and experienced Attars. Participant selection was carried out using purposive sampling and snowball technique to ensure individuals with the richest information entered the study.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews; the approximate duration of each interview varied between 45 to 90 minutes. In qualitative research, sample adequacy is determined based on the concept of theoretical saturation. In this study, after conducting 15 interviews, no new data emerged that would lead to formation of new categories, and theoretical saturation was achieved; however, to ensure complete comprehensiveness of data, 3 additional interviews were conducted, and ultimately analyses were implemented on data from 18 experts. The process of analyzing

textual data from interviews was based on a systematic approach at three distinct levels including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, so that fundamental concepts could be carefully extracted and categorized.

After extracting qualitative categories, the fuzzy Delphi technique was used to validate findings and prioritize identified factors. Employing fuzzy logic at this stage helped control ambiguity and uncertainty present in verbal and human judgments and convert them into more precise quantitative values. The expert panel in this section also consisted of 18 specialists who evaluated 25 final categories in two consecutive rounds. The questionnaire return rate in both rounds was complete.

To assess content validity of indicators presented in the Delphi panel, the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) was employed, and items whose scores exceeded the standard threshold were retained for subsequent analyses (Lawshe, 1975). Additionally, to evaluate the degree of consensus and agreement among panel members across different rounds, Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance (W) was calculated, indicating desirable convergence of expert perspectives regarding integrated marketing strategies.

Table 1

Summary of Qualitative Phase and Delphi Methodology

Research Phase	Tool / Technique	Sample Size / Participants	Analysis / Evaluation Approach	Key Source
Exploratory Phase	Semi-structured in-depth interview	18 experts (saturation reached at interview 15)	Three-stage coding (open, axial, selective)	(Strauss & Corbin, 1998)
Validation	Fuzzy Delphi panel (two rounds)	18 industry and academic specialists	Kendall's coefficient (W), Content Validity Ratio (CVR)	(Lawshe, 1975)

Findings and Results

Based on indicators extracted from literature review, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed in three main sections: ecological characteristics of herbal products, communication experiences and consumer communication channels, and challenges and integration strategies. Theoretical purposive sampling was implemented within specialized subgroups, and the population included 18 individuals from university professors, company managers, marketing specialists, and experienced *Attars*. After the fifteenth interview, theoretical saturation was achieved, and three additional interviews were conducted solely to confirm data stability. Generational diversity among *Attars* (from first generation with 8 years of experience to third generation with 30 years of experience) provided opportunity for careful examination of channel transformations.

Based on the qualitative content analysis approach using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) methodology, interview data were coded in three stages: open, axial, and selective. After extracting 49 initial concepts in the open coding stage, these concepts were classified into 25 axial categories based on semantic similarities. Finally, in selective coding, these categories were organized around the theoretical core of "managing channel duality in indigenous integrated marketing communications."

Table 2

Interview Coding Process

Extracted Open Codes	Axial Code (Category)	Key Dimensions/Subcategories	Selective Code (Theoretical Core)
Duality of brand and <i>Attar</i> voice; dual search for trust	Consumer Dual Logic	Relational logic (<i>Attar</i> -centered), Institutional logic (brand-centered), turbulence in prioritization	Managing Channel Duality in Indigenous Integrated Marketing Communications
Absence of <i>Attar</i> in educational models; framework incompatibility	Inefficacy of Classical Frameworks	Educational-operational gap, need for theoretical localization	
Multiple message sources without coordination; trans-boundary gap	Multiplicity of References without Integration	Regulator level, industry and retail; message misalignment	
Generational value tension; generational conflict in purchase	Generational Gap in Consumption Logic	First generation (monopoly), Second generation (combination), Third generation (digital)	

<i>Attar</i> as identity mediator; redefinition of <i>Attar</i> role	Redefinition of <i>Attar</i> Identity and Role	From salesperson to health consultant and value co-creation partner
Informal transfer of relationship management; displacement of control	Displacement of Communication Control	Formal control (brand ownership) versus actual control (relationship ownership)
Network disconnection between strategist and intermediary	Structural-Network Disconnection	Formal network (vertical) and <i>Attar</i> informal network (horizontal)
Contradiction between demand for control and reality of its loss	Paradox of Control in IMC	Demand for management versus reality of control dispersion
Online search before visit; price comparison on Instagram	Digitalization of Purchase Path	Digital awareness, physical confirmation, doubt in online purchase
<i>Attar</i> as health educator; home-based educational workshops	Redefinition of Education at Point of Sale	Informal education, experiential knowledge transfer, transformation of <i>Attar</i> into educational authority
Respect for Iranian traditional medicine; doubt toward industrial formulation	Cultural-Identity Pull of Traditional Products	Indigenous authenticity, resistance to industrialization, cultural value of tradition
Smelling and touching before purchase; reliance on sensory experience	Sensory Trust in Quality Assessment	Sensory evaluation, lack of digital substitute, trust in physical experience
First generation: denial of change; Third generation: acceptance of online platform	Generational Transformation in Intermediation	First generation resistance, second generation adaptation, third generation innovation
Lack of unified standard; multiplicity of regulatory bodies	Inefficacy of Regulatory Framework	Multiple authorities, lack of coordination, ambiguity in standards
Intimate <i>Attari</i> space; shared memory with <i>Attar</i>	Relational Capital in Traditional Channel	Spatial intimacy, relational memory, trust based on historical interaction

Analysis of extracted categories reveals a multi-layered structure of communication challenges in the herbal medicine market across five dimensions:

First Dimension: Redefining Integration in Dual Market Context. Classical literature that defines integration as message coordination under centralized brand control (Schultz & Kitchen, 2000) is inadequate for this market. Communication control has effectively been transferred to a traditional intermediary, which aligns with the bottom-up approach theory (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998), but here control lies with the intermediary rather than merely the consumer.

Second Dimension: Channel Duality as Structural Feature. Consumers simultaneously operate in relational (*Attar*) and institutional (brand) logics. This logic conflict corresponds to the concept of market duality (Sheth, 2011), indicating simultaneous operation of formal and informal markets.

Third Dimension: Multi-level and Intersecting Gaps. Institutional, sectoral, and network gaps have weakened messages and caused decision-makers to suffer from “data blindness”—a concept similar to hidden data traps in digital space (Baker, 2016), but occurring in the physical context of traditional markets.

Fourth Dimension: Generational Transformation. Strategic changes are not limited to consumers; different generations of *Attars* also have varying approaches to innovation adoption and product integration, which confirms the sociology of generations concept (Mannheim, 1952) in traditional retail.

Fifth Dimension: Theoretical Core and Conceptual Innovation. The theoretical core of this research is based on “mediator-centrality.” The *Attar* is not merely a distribution channel but a strategic partner in co-creating value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), and marketing communications must be redesigned based on the brand-mediator-consumer triangle.

Design and Implementation of Fuzzy Delphi

To validate qualitative findings and prioritize 25 identified categories, the fuzzy Delphi method was employed. This method combines the systematic nature of classical Delphi (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963) with fuzzy logic’s capability in modeling uncertainty of human judgments (Zadeh, 1965). A seven-point fuzzy Likert scale with linguistic variables (from very low to very high) was designed. The Delphi population included 18 experts (professors, managers, consultants, and experienced *Attars*), which is an acceptable number according to this method’s standards (Hsu & Sandford, 2007).

Delphi was conducted in three rounds. In the second round, none of the categories reached complete consensus threshold (FCV < 15%), indicating diversity of judgments. Categories with defuzzified value CF > 0.70 entered the third round. In the final round, seven strategic categories with CF > 0.75 were confirmed as main and critical indicators.

Table 3

Fuzzy Delphi Round 3 Results (Seven Final Confirmed Indicators)

No.	Category (Axial Code)	Fuzzy Mean	Defuzzified Score (CF)	Fuzzy Coefficient of Variation (%)	Consensus Status
1	Consumer Dual Logic	(0.75, 0.88, 0.96)	0.863	23.9	Relative Consensus
2	Displacement of Communication Control	(0.72, 0.85, 0.94)	0.837	25.9	Relative Consensus
3	Structural-Network Disconnection	(0.70, 0.83, 0.92)	0.817	26.5	Relative Consensus
4	Redefinition of <i>Attar</i> Identity and Role	(0.68, 0.81, 0.90)	0.797	27.2	Relative Consensus
5	Multiplicity of References without Integration	(0.66, 0.79, 0.89)	0.780	29.1	Relative Consensus
6	Paradox of Control in IMC	(0.65, 0.78, 0.88)	0.770	29.5	Relative Consensus
7	Message-centric Gap	(0.63, 0.76, 0.86)	0.750	30.3	Relative Consensus

Final round Delphi results prove four strategic insights: First, experts' prioritization of cognitive-structural concepts over tactical tools indicates that the main challenge in this market is understanding power structure and control displacement. Second, the authority and central role of *Attar* is clearly visible in the top four categories, substantiating the "mediator-centrality" approach. Third, lack of consensus on boundary indicators (digital-physical tensions) in early rounds suggests that the process of localizing communication strategies has not yet reached full maturity in the industry. Fourth, stability of ranking in final rounds confirms existence of a shared perceptual pattern among scientific and executive industry elites regarding communication challenges (Hsu & Sandford, 2007).

Deeper analysis of interviews and Delphi revealed three complementary findings.

First Finding: Dynamics of "Parallel Trust" in Consumers. Data showed that consumers do not rely on a single source of trust but develop "parallel trust": trust in brand for standard quality assurance and trust in *Attar* for authenticity and customization assurance. These two forms of trust, when in conflict, create "trust paradox" for consumers, complicating decision-making. Third-generation *Attars* recognize this dynamic and attempt to address both logics by offering branded products alongside traditional products.

Second Finding: "Informal Displacement of Control" and Managerial Tool Weakness. Despite investments in advertising and branding, companies have lost actual control of messages. *Attars*, through interpreting, confirming, or rejecting brand claims in daily customer interactions, have effectively become "final message editors." This phenomenon, which can be termed "informal displacement of control," indicates that traditional integration management models have lost their effectiveness in this market.

Third Finding: "Heterogeneity of Consensus" in Delphi and Necessity of Localization. Delphi results showed that consensus on structural concepts (duality, control) was achieved faster, but persistent disagreement existed regarding operational solutions (e.g., channel combination or digital platform development). This "heterogeneity of consensus" indicates that the industry has not yet reached a shared "theory of action" in integrated marketing communications.

As previously mentioned, in the final (third) round, seven strategic categories successfully crossed the more stringent threshold (CF>0.75) and were established as vital and ultimately approved indicators. To determine the degree of importance of each dimension, the final categories were prioritized based on the defuzzification index, the results of which are presented in the table below.

Table 4*Third Round Fuzzy Delphi Results (Seven Final Approved Indicators with Prioritization Applied)*

Priority (Rank)	Strategic Category Title	Defuzzified Score (CF)	Status
1	Dual Consumer Logic	0.863	Final Approval
2	Shift of Communication Control	0.837	Final Approval
3	Structural-Network Disconnection	0.817	Final Approval
4	Redefining the Attar's Identity	0.797	Final Approval
5	Multiplicity of Authorities (and Diversity of Message Sources)	≥ 0.750	Final Approval
6	Paradox of Control (in Message Distribution)	≥ 0.750	Final Approval
7	Message-Centric Gap	≥ 0.750	Final Approval

An integrated analysis of the final Delphi round results highlights four key strategic insights regarding the localization of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) for herbal products. First, prioritizing cognitive-structural concepts over tactical tools indicates that, from the experts' perspective, the primary challenge in this industry lies in understanding the power structure and how communication control is transferred, rather than merely selecting media channels. Second, the central role of the "Attar" (traditional apothecary) in high-priority categories is clearly evident, which strongly corroborates the concept of "intermediary-centricity" proposed in the study's qualitative findings. Third, the initial lack of consensus among the panel on boundary indicators in the early rounds suggests that the concept of strategic communication localization in this industry has not yet reached sufficient maturity. However, the stability of the final ranking in the third round indicates the formation of a shared perceptual model among academic experts and industry practitioners.

In addition to the above, the complementary findings of this research phase illuminate the hidden communication dynamics in the herbal medicine market. The results demonstrate the emergence of a kind of "parallel trust dynamic" among consumers; such that trust in the brand for ensuring standard quality and trust in the Attar for product authentication and personalization occur simultaneously. Furthermore, the validation of the "shift of communication control" category as the second strategic priority signifies an informal control shift wherein companies lose actual control over the message, and Attars act as the ultimate message editors. Finally, the heterogeneity in expert consensus reveals that reaching an agreement on structural concepts is significantly easier than on operational solutions; an issue confirming that this specialized field still requires the development of an applied and shared communication theory.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to identify and prioritize the principal drivers and challenges of marketing communications for herbal medicinal products within Iran's dual traditional-modern market structure. The qualitative findings demonstrated that marketing communication in this industry cannot be adequately explained through conventional models based on direct and centrally controlled communication between manufacturers and consumers. Analysis of the interviews resulted in 49 initial concepts, which were organized into 25 axial categories around the central phenomenon of "managing channel duality in indigenous integrated marketing communications." The fuzzy Delphi analysis subsequently confirmed seven strategic categories. Dual consumer logic received the highest defuzzified score, followed by the displacement of communication control, structural-network disconnection, redefinition of the Attar's identity and role, multiplicity of authorities and message sources, the paradox of control in integrated marketing communications, and the message-centric gap. Collectively, these results indicate that the major communication challenges of the herbal medicinal products market are primarily structural, relational, and trust-based rather than merely technological or promotional. In other words, the central issue is not simply

which advertising medium should be selected, but who controls the interpretation of the message, which source is trusted by the consumer, and how traditional and modern communication systems can be coordinated.

The prioritization of dual consumer logic as the most important category reveals that consumers of herbal medicinal products simultaneously employ two different but interconnected decision-making logics. The first is an institutional or brand-centered logic, in which consumers seek standardized production, formal certification, scientific information, professional packaging, and regulatory assurance. The second is a relational and intermediary-centered logic, in which the credibility of the product depends on the Attar's experiential knowledge, personal recommendation, familiarity with the consumer, and historical position within the traditional market. Thus, consumer trust does not originate from a single source. Instead, it develops through a form of parallel trust in which the brand represents standardized quality while the Attar represents authenticity, personalization, and culturally grounded credibility. This result is consistent with research showing that communication in health-oriented service markets must combine technical information with culturally credible relationship mechanisms [7]. Similarly, marketing communication in the hospitality industry has been associated with organizational performance because consumers evaluate both formal information and the quality of interpersonal service encounters [8]. In the herbal products market, the coexistence of these trust systems means that neither formal branding nor traditional recommendation can independently provide a sufficient basis for sustainable consumer confidence.

The duality identified in this study can also be understood in relation to symbolic, cultural, and value-oriented consumption. Herbal medicines are not evaluated solely on the basis of functional benefits; they may also symbolize natural living, cultural continuity, traditional knowledge, and resistance to excessive industrialization. Research on mindful consumption has shown that purchase behavior is influenced by personal involvement, social norms, and the meanings consumers associate with their choices [10]. Likewise, offline and online narratives can encourage preference for domestic products when they communicate cultural identity and credible product meanings [20]. Nostalgia marketing research further demonstrates that memories and culturally familiar symbols can strengthen emotional relationships with products and brands [21]. Accordingly, the high priority assigned to dual consumer logic may reflect the consumer's effort to reconcile modern expectations regarding safety and standardization with emotional and cultural attachment to traditional medicine. An effective communication strategy should therefore avoid presenting modernity and tradition as mutually exclusive. Instead, it should translate scientific information into culturally intelligible narratives and connect standardized production with the historical legitimacy of herbal medicine.

The displacement of communication control, which ranked as the second most important factor, is another major contribution of the study. Although manufacturing firms formally own their brands and design their promotional messages, they do not necessarily maintain effective control over how those messages are interpreted at the point of purchase. Attars can confirm, modify, reinterpret, or reject manufacturer claims during their interactions with customers. They consequently function as the final editors of marketing messages. This finding challenges traditional models of integrated marketing communications that assume communication can be coordinated primarily through organizational planning. Contemporary digital marketing literature already recognizes that organizations no longer possess complete control over brand communication because consumers, communities, influencers, and platforms participate in message creation and dissemination [3]. The present results extend this argument by showing that, in traditional herbal markets, the loss of control

does not occur only through digital consumer participation; it also occurs through a culturally established intermediary with substantial relational authority.

The importance of intermediary influence is supported by studies emphasizing the relationship between interaction, trust, and subsequent consumer behavior. Trust in an online brand community can mediate the effects of customer participation on positive electronic word-of-mouth and repurchase intention [17]. Social media marketing communication may similarly strengthen loyalty when communication develops sustained and valuable relationships rather than merely increasing promotional exposure [16]. In the context of the present study, the Attari network can be regarded as an established offline community of trust in which repeated interaction, personal memory, and experiential knowledge influence purchasing decisions. The Attar's recommendation may operate as a powerful form of interpersonal word-of-mouth, particularly when consumers perceive uncertainty regarding product quality or therapeutic effectiveness. Therefore, manufacturers that attempt to bypass Attars may lose access to one of the most credible communication mechanisms available in the market.

The third-ranked factor, structural-network disconnection, indicates that formal manufacturers and traditional distribution networks often operate as separate communication systems. Producers may invest in branding, digital advertising, packaging, or promotional campaigns without developing effective mechanisms for transferring knowledge to Attars. Conversely, Attars may possess valuable information concerning consumer concerns, recurring questions, patterns of product use, and reasons for distrust, but this information may not be systematically communicated to manufacturers. This creates a vertical and horizontal communication gap between organizational strategists and market intermediaries. Research on direct, interactive, and integrated marketing emphasizes that communication effectiveness depends on the strategic coordination of channels and customer contact points [1]. Omnichannel implementation similarly improves performance only when channels are operationally and informationally connected [4]. The present findings suggest that the herbal products industry has multiple channels but has not yet achieved genuine omnichannel integration because the traditional network remains insufficiently incorporated into formal communication planning.

This disconnection may also explain why digital transformation alone cannot resolve the communication problems of the industry. Comparative studies of mass and digital media indicate that the two environments provide different advantages and should be combined according to consumer behavior and communication objectives [2]. Business analyses of digital communication also emphasize that technological tools must be aligned with organizational strategy and market characteristics [26]. In the herbal medicinal products market, online platforms can increase awareness, facilitate comparisons, and provide educational content, but consumers may still seek confirmation from an Attar before completing a purchase. Thus, the consumer journey may begin digitally and end relationally. Integration should consequently involve the transfer of consistent information across websites, social media platforms, pharmacies, manufacturing firms, regulatory institutions, and Attari shops rather than the isolated expansion of digital activity.

The redefinition of the Attar's identity and role, which occupied the fourth position, further confirms the centrality of intermediaries. The findings showed that the Attar should no longer be regarded merely as a seller or physical distributor. Attars function as health educators, interpreters of technical information, providers of personalized recommendations, and co-creators of value. This redefinition is consistent with evidence that non-professional organizations and resource-constrained actors can adopt social media as a strategic marketing communication tool when communication practices are adapted to their capacities and audiences [14]. It also corresponds with research on live-streaming platforms, where sellers

combine product presentation, immediate interaction, education, and relationship-building [13]. Younger and digitally competent Attars may similarly combine traditional credibility with online communication, thereby becoming hybrid intermediaries who operate across physical and digital environments.

The generational differences observed among Attars and consumers also help explain why a single communication strategy is unlikely to be effective. Younger consumers may respond to interactive, informal, and visually expressive communication forms, whereas older consumers may continue to prefer direct consultation and personal recommendation. Research concerning Generation Z demonstrates that even relatively small communicative elements, such as emojis, can affect engagement and purchase-related attitudes in digital marketing environments [15]. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such techniques depends on contextual appropriateness and cannot replace credible health information. Smart retail research similarly shows that technological innovation contributes to shopping outcomes when it is accompanied by positive experiential relationship quality [25]. These findings support the present conclusion that digital communication should complement, rather than eliminate, the relational and sensory dimensions of herbal product purchasing.

The multiplicity of authorities and diversity of message sources constituted another important challenge. Consumers may receive different or contradictory information from manufacturers, Attars, pharmacists, healthcare professionals, social media users, influencers, public institutions, and regulatory organizations. Such inconsistency can produce confusion and reduce confidence in the entire product category. The importance of coordinating marketing public relations indicators in service institutions reflects the need to establish consistent communication among multiple organizational and public stakeholders [6]. Marketing communication also requires persuasion skills and communicator competence to ensure that messages contribute to brand building rather than skepticism [5]. In the herbal products sector, this requirement is particularly important because unsupported therapeutic claims can create ethical concerns and damage trust beyond the individual brand responsible for the claim.

The findings regarding multiplicity of message sources are also compatible with the identified risks of intrusive and poorly controlled communication. Spam and excessive promotional communication can generate avoidance and negative reactions rather than consumer acceptance [18]. Post-pandemic advertising research has also shown that informational, transformational, and narrative strategies must respond to changing consumer sensitivities and expectations regarding safety, reassurance, and responsibility [19]. Therefore, communication for herbal medicinal products should prioritize transparent educational information and realistic explanations of product use. Exaggerated claims may provide short-term attention but weaken long-term confidence in manufacturers, intermediaries, and the broader industry.

The paradox of control and the message-centric gap further demonstrate the inadequacy of communication strategies that focus primarily on producing and distributing promotional content. Organizations may seek greater control over communication while simultaneously using platforms and intermediaries that operate according to independent interests and logics. The message-centric gap occurs when firms assume that message consistency is sufficient, even though the consumer's actual decision depends on trust in the communicator, the quality of interaction, and the compatibility of the message with previous experience. Online retail research indicates that purchase behavior is influenced through an interconnected model of information, communication, trust, and promotional mechanisms [27]. Similarly, economic and communication factors interact in shaping consumer decisions, meaning that messages are interpreted within broader

assessments of value, risk, affordability, and available alternatives [11]. The current findings therefore suggest that integrated communication must move from message integration toward trust integration.

Artificial intelligence and communication technologies can support this transition, but their use must be carefully governed. Artificial intelligence offers opportunities for personalization, consumer analysis, automated responses, and content optimization [22]. It can also create new business opportunities while introducing challenges related to privacy, authenticity, transparency, and excessive automation [23]. SaaS and AI-based tools may facilitate the coordination and measurement of integrated campaigns, particularly for enterprises with limited internal infrastructure [24]. However, the present results indicate that these technologies will remain insufficient unless they are connected to the interpersonal knowledge and trust embedded in the Attari network. An algorithm may identify frequently asked questions, but Attars can explain why consumers hesitate, which claims they distrust, and how cultural assumptions affect product acceptance.

The findings also have implications for competitive performance and market development. Marketing capabilities can influence risky export performance through competitive strategy and communication processes [12]. For herbal medicinal product firms seeking expansion, communication credibility is likely to be as important as production capacity. Similarly, studies of sports tourism show that integrated communication can attract consumers when multiple actors coordinate place identity, services, and promotional messages [28]. Sustainable hotel communication research also illustrates the importance of presenting organizational practices consistently across social media and consumer touchpoints [9]. Applied to the present study, these findings suggest that the development of the herbal medicinal products market depends on creating a coherent communication ecosystem in which producers, Attars, regulatory bodies, and digital platforms reinforce rather than contradict one another.

Overall, the study contributes to integrated marketing communication theory by proposing that integration in a dual traditional–modern market should be conceptualized as the integration of trust, authority, and relational networks, not merely the consistency of promotional messages. Dual consumer logic and the displacement of communication control demonstrate that formal brand ownership does not necessarily equal communication authority. Structural-network disconnection shows that integration cannot occur without incorporating traditional intermediaries into strategy formation. Redefinition of the Attar's role indicates that value is co-created through education, interpretation, and personalized interaction. Finally, the multiplicity of authorities, paradox of control, and message-centric gap illustrate that communication effectiveness depends on the credibility and coordination of the entire market ecosystem. Therefore, successful integrated marketing communication in this industry requires a strategic synthesis in which modern scientific evidence, formal branding, digital capabilities, cultural authenticity, and interpersonal trust function as complementary components.

The findings of the study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The qualitative and expert-based nature of the research means that the identified categories reflect the experiences and judgments of a relatively limited group of academics, managers, marketing specialists, and Attars. Although purposive sampling and theoretical saturation strengthened the depth of the findings, the results may not fully represent consumers, healthcare professionals, regulators, pharmacists, or producers operating in all regions of Iran. The distinctive cultural, economic, and distribution conditions of different provinces may affect the position of Attars and the relative importance of digital channels. Furthermore, fuzzy Delphi prioritization reflects expert consensus rather than direct measurement of causal relationships or consumer behavior. The

rapidly changing nature of digital media, artificial intelligence, regulatory policies, and generational attitudes may also alter the relevance or ranking of some indicators over time.

Future studies should quantitatively test the conceptual relationships identified in this research using larger and more diverse samples of consumers, Attars, manufacturers, pharmacists, and marketing professionals. Structural equation modeling could be employed to examine whether trust in the Attar mediates or moderates the effects of brand communication, digital content, scientific evidence, and regulatory assurance on purchase intention and loyalty. Comparative research across provinces, urban and rural markets, and different generations would clarify the contextual stability of dual consumer logic. Longitudinal research could also examine how the communication authority of Attars changes as younger consumers and younger generations of traditional retailers adopt digital platforms. Experimental studies should compare the effects of brand-only messages, Attar-endorsed messages, scientific educational messages, and combined communication strategies. Cross-national comparisons with countries possessing strong traditional medicine markets would further support the development of a broader indigenous model of integrated marketing communication.

Herbal medicinal product manufacturers should formally recognize Attars as strategic communication partners rather than treating them solely as distributors. Companies should establish structured education programs through which Attars receive accurate information regarding product composition, appropriate use, quality standards, contraindications, and limitations of therapeutic claims. Communication materials should be designed in both scientific and culturally accessible forms so that the same central information can be adapted to different consumer groups without creating contradictions. Digital channels should be used to complement physical consultation by providing searchable information, product verification, educational videos, and opportunities for communication with trusted intermediaries. Manufacturers should also create feedback systems that transfer consumer questions and market concerns from Attars to marketing and production departments. Performance evaluation should move beyond reach, impressions, and sales volume to include indicators such as intermediary confidence, consistency of information across channels, consumer comprehension, complaint patterns, and long-term trust. Regulatory institutions, producers, pharmacists, and Attars should additionally cooperate in developing shared communication standards to reduce contradictory claims and strengthen confidence in the herbal medicinal products industry.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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