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Formulation of ethical integrated marketing communication strategy to boost member acquisition for PT HM Sampoerna Tbk.'s smoke-free products

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the persistently low acquisition of members for PT HM Sampoerna Tbk.'s smoke-free products in Indonesia and formulates an ethical, regulation-compliant integrated marketing communication (IMC) strategy to strengthen member growth among adult smokers. Employing a descriptive exploratory design, the research combined a 5 Whys root-cause diagnosis with a cross-sectional online survey of adult smokers and smoke-free product users (N=202). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and a Weighted Score Model to prioritize ethical principles, communication design elements, and channel choices. The results show that ethics is treated as a non-negotiable baseline, with near-equal weights for honesty, fairness, and social responsibility. In communication design, message source credibility ranks highest, narrowly ahead of creative execution, whereas message strategy ranks third. Channel priorities favor interaction-rich, adult-only touchpoints: personal selling and permission-based direct marketing outperform digital marketing, with advertising and public relations being the least preferred under regulatory constraints. Therefore, digital channels are positioned mainly for gated educational content, appointment setting, and retention-oriented CRM rather than as primary conversion engines. This study proposes an IMC roadmap that reallocates efforts toward below-the-line activations, trained product specialists, and structured follow-ups, supported by early ethical screening and continuous compliance monitoring. The findings offer actionable guidance for managers designing harm-reduction communications in tightly regulated contexts and provide a basis for future longitudinal assessments of behavioral change and member lifetime value impacts.

Keywords: integrated marketing communication; marketing ethics; member acquisition; smoke-free products

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the global tobacco industry has undergone a marked strategic shift driven by intensifying public health pressure, evolving consumer preferences, and tighter regulatory scrutiny. Rather than relying solely on combusted cigarettes, several multinational firms have repositioned their portfolios toward “smoke-free” alternatives designed to reduce users’ exposure to the toxicants produced by combustion. Within this landscape, [Philip Morris International](#) (PMI) has articulated a long-term ambition of “delivering a smoke-free future,” framing its transition strategy around the development and scale-up of smoke-free products, such as IQOS. Although these products are not risk-free, they are promoted as reduced-exposure options compared to continued cigarette smoking. Their commercialization relies increasingly on education, controlled distribution, and engagement approaches that differ from conventional tobacco marketing.

Indonesia occupies a strategically important yet operationally complex position in the PMI ecosystem. PT Hanjaya Mandala Sampoerna Tbk (HM Sampoerna) is a key local actor tasked with translating the PMI’s transformation agenda into a market characterized by high smoking prevalence, strong cultural normalization of smoking, and stringent advertising constraints. Globally, PMI reports that more than 24.5 million adult users have switched to IQOS, and smoke-free products contribute over 40% of the total net revenue, according to the company’s annual report ([PT Hanjaya Mandala Sampoerna Tbk, 2023](#)). Despite these global gains, progress in Indonesia remains comparatively limited, reflecting the combined effects of regulatory barriers, market education challenges, and persistent skepticism toward non-combustible alternatives.

Indonesia presents a distinctive context for tobacco harm reduction because it remains one of the world’s largest cigarette markets and continues to face structural difficulties in reducing smoking prevalence rates. Data from the [World Bank \(2020\)](#) indicate that adult male smoking rates in Indonesia are among the highest worldwide. Consistent with this pattern, [Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia \(2019\)](#) Basic Health Research (Riskesdas) documented an active smoking prevalence of 33.8% among individuals aged ≥ 15 years. These figures underscore both the scale of the public health burden and the depth of social acceptance of smoking behavior. In contrast to many countries, where sustained public campaigns and policy interventions have coincided with declining prevalence, Indonesia’s progress has been slower and more uneven, creating a challenging environment for transitioning toward reduced exposure alternatives.

Although international discourse increasingly supports risk-proportionate strategies and consumer switching as part of harm reduction, public awareness and acceptance of smoke-free options such as heated tobacco products (HTPs) and electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS) remain limited in Indonesia. This gap is shaped by constrained public education, ambiguity in nicotine product regulation, social norms that reinforce conventional cigarette use, and distrust of industry-backed claims. Consequently, although firms argue that products such as IQOS can serve as preferable substitutes for adult smokers who would otherwise continue smoking, adoption has not matched the projected potential.

This disconnect between the size of the smoking population and the relatively low uptake of smoke-free alternatives creates both strategic opportunities and governance dilemmas. For HM Sampoerna, accelerating switching requires communication that is simultaneously persuasive, scientifically grounded, ethically defensible, and compliant with Indonesia’s restrictive promotional regime. An integrated marketing communication (IMC) approach is therefore relevant because it emphasizes coherence across channels, combining message consistency with audience-centered engagement while allowing firms to tactically adapt to constraints on mass advertising. However, IMC design in the tobacco domain cannot be treated as a purely managerial exercise; it must operate within legal and ethical boundaries that shape what can be communicated, where it can be communicated, and to whom.

Despite the growing literature on tobacco harm reduction, smoke-free product adoption, and IMC strategies, three academic gaps remain. First, most prior studies discuss smoke-free products from public health, consumer behavior, or regulatory perspectives, while giving limited attention to how IMC

priorities should be structured in highly regulated markets. Second, there is insufficient empirical discussion on which communication elements, such as channel selection, message strategy, and source credibility, should be prioritized when conventional promotional tools are legally constrained. Third, the ethical dimension of communication for reduced-risk tobacco products has often been treated normatively rather than operationally, leaving limited guidance on how firms can balance persuasive effectiveness, regulatory compliance, and responsible communication. These gaps are particularly salient in Indonesia, where smoking is socially entrenched and promotional restrictions narrow the available communication space.

Indonesia's regulatory framework substantially limits tobacco-related promotions, including those for smoke-free products. Key constraints arise from PP No. 109 Tahun 2012 tentang Pengamanan Bahan yang Mengandung Zat Adiktif Berupa Produk Tembakau bagi Kesehatan (Republik Indonesia, 2012), Permenkes No. 28 Tahun 2013 tentang Pencantuman Peringatan Kesehatan pada Produk Tembakau (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2013), Undang-Undang No. 36 Tahun 2009 tentang Kesehatan (Republik Indonesia, 2009), and UU No. 32 Tahun 2002 tentang Penyiaran (Republik Indonesia, 2002) alongside an ongoing Revisi PP 109/2012 (in process) that may further narrow the digital communication space. These provisions collectively restrict broadcast timing and content, mandate health warnings, limit sponsorship, and reduce creative latitude, pushing companies toward more targeted, closed, and relationship-based engagement strategies. Against this backdrop, HM Sampoerna's market position increased the strategic significance of this transition. Following the PMI's majority acquisition in 2005, HM Sampoerna operated as a major player in Indonesia's tobacco sector, holding an estimated 28.6% market share in 2023. However, the company faces a measurable adoption challenge for smoke-free products, reflected in the gap between the stated ambition of one million users by 2026 and the reported growth of 150,000+ users in 2024. A preliminary diagnosis using the five Whys technique points to communication and education constraints, rather than product availability alone, as a central bottleneck, suggesting the need for an optimized, regulatory-compliant IMC strategy.

This study contributes to the literature in two ways. Theoretically, it extends IMC discussions to the underexplored context of ethically constrained communication for smoke-free tobacco products, where effectiveness cannot be separated from legitimacy, transparency, and compliance. Practically and empirically, it proposes a prioritized IMC framework for adult smoker acquisition in Indonesia by identifying communication methods, message strategies, and ethical principles that should receive greater emphasis under restrictive regulatory conditions. In this sense, the study not only examines marketing effectiveness, but also contributes to the development of a more context-sensitive and ethically grounded communication framework for harm reduction products in regulated industries.

This study aims to develop an ethically integrated IMC approach that can support smoke-free product acquisition in Indonesia while respecting regulatory limits and prioritizing responsible engagement with adult smokers. It examines which communication methods are most relevant for acquisition, how message strategy (including creative approach and message source) should be prioritized under constraints, and which marketing ethics principles, such as honesty and transparency, fairness and respect, or social responsibility, should be emphasized to strengthen both the effectiveness and legitimacy of smoke-free communications.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) provides overarching logic for this study, but its relevance lies less in describing the full range of promotional tools and more in explaining how communication decisions can be aligned to support member acquisition in a regulated context. IMC is fundamentally concerned with delivering coherent and coordinated messages across multiple touchpoints so that audiences receive a clear and credible value proposition rather than fragmented or contradictory signals. In contemporary markets, this coordination is especially important because consumers encounter brand communication through a combination of digital, interpersonal, and organizational channels, each of which shapes interpretation differently. Kotler and Keller (2022) argued that integration improves

communication effectiveness by ensuring that message content, channel execution, and brand meaning reinforce each other across the customer journey. Thus, for this study, IMC is best understood not as a broad inventory of promotional tactics, but as a framework for examining how firms prioritize communication elements that are both effective and ethically appropriate in supporting acquisition outcomes (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Marketing Ethics as the Normative Foundation of IMC

The first construct in this study is marketing ethics, which serves as the normative foundation for communication planning and execution. Marketing ethics refers to the standards of morally acceptable conduct that guide how firms communicate with consumers, represent product attributes, and consider broader social consequences in their decision-making. Ferrell and Hartline (2014) define marketing ethics as the application of moral standards to marketing choices, including how firms promote products, shape consumer perceptions, and balance organizational goals with stakeholder welfare. In industries involving public sensitivity, risk perceptions, or strong regulatory oversight, ethics becomes central because communication is judged not only by its persuasive impact but also by its fairness, transparency, and social acceptability.

This ethical dimension is particularly relevant when acquisition strategies seek to influence attitudes or behaviors that may have health, social, or reputational implications. Murphy et al. (2012) identify honesty, fairness, and social responsibility as core ethical principles in marketing. These principles imply that communication should provide accurate and non-misleading information, respect consumer autonomy, and avoid tactics that manipulate vulnerable audiences or obscure facts. From this perspective, communication effectiveness cannot be separated from legitimacy. A message may attract attention; however, if it is perceived as deceptive, exaggerated, or socially irresponsible, it can reduce trust, trigger resistance, and expose the firm to reputational or regulatory risks.

From an IMC perspective, ethics function as a strategic filter that shapes messages, sources, and channels that are considered acceptable. In other words, ethical considerations are not external constraints imposed after communication decisions are made; rather, they are embedded in the design of such decisions. This is especially important in regulated industries, where firms must balance commercial objectives with public scrutiny and legal limitations. Ethical communication, therefore, supports acquisition not only by reducing the risk of backlash but also by strengthening message credibility and institutional legitimacy. When audiences perceive communication as truthful, responsible, and respectful, they are more likely to engage with the message and consider joining the brand ecosystem. For this reason, marketing ethics are positioned in this study as a primary criterion for evaluating IMC priorities.

2.2. Communication Design: Message, Creativity, and Source

The second construct is communication design, which includes three interrelated dimensions: message strategy, creative strategy, and message source. These dimensions are central to IMC because integration depends not only on using multiple channels but also on ensuring that what is communicated,

how it is expressed, and who delivers it remain coherent and credible across touchpoints. [Kotler and Keller \(2022\)](#) framed communication design around three core questions: what to say, how to say it, and who should say it. These questions are particularly useful for empirical analysis because they translate the broad idea of IMC into specific decision variables that can be assessed and prioritized.

2.2.1. Message Strategy

Message strategy refers to the selection of a central promise, supporting claims, and informational content communicated to the audience. [Belch and Belch \(2021\)](#) described message strategy as the deliberate determination of what should be communicated to achieve persuasive or informational goals. Within IMC, the message strategy anchors all communication activities because it defines the core meaning that should remain consistent across different executions and channels. Without a clear message strategy, integration becomes superficial; channels may be coordinated operationally, but consumers may still receive unclear or inconsistent value propositions.

In regulated contexts, message strategy often shifts away from purely emotional or aggressive persuasion toward clearer, more factual, and more educational communication. [Wilkie and Moore \(2020\)](#) argue that stronger regulatory environments tend to increase the importance of information clarity and consumer education, particularly when claims must be carefully justified and audiences are expected to make informed decisions. This becomes even more important when acquisition involves behavioral change rather than a simple product trial. The transtheoretical model suggests that consumers differ in readiness to change and therefore respond differently to communications depending on whether they are unaware, contemplating, preparing, acting, or maintaining a new behavior ([Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983](#)). Accordingly, an effective message strategy should not only be consistent but also relevant to consumer knowledge, motivation, and decision stage. In this study, message strategy is therefore treated as a core communication design component because it shapes whether the acquisition message is understandable, credible, and persuasive.

2.2.2. Creative Strategy

Creative strategy refers to how a message is translated into tangible forms, such as narratives, visuals, demonstrations, tone, and style. [Belch and Belch \(2021\)](#) define creative strategy as the approach used to express communication content in a way that attracts attention and enhances comprehension and recall. In IMC, creativity is not simply about novelty or aesthetic appeal; it is about adapting the same core message into multiple formats while preserving meaning and avoiding inconsistency across touchpoints. This is especially important in environments where firms must communicate responsibly and cannot rely on excessive emotionality, ambiguity, or sensational claims.

[Drumwright and Murphy \(2009\)](#) note that in ethically sensitive contexts, organizations often adopt more practical and educational creative formats that emphasize explanation, demonstration, and transparent framing. This suggests that creative strategy may contribute to acquisition not by intensifying persuasion alone, but by reducing uncertainty and helping consumers understand product functions, usage, and comparative value. [Keller \(2016\)](#) further emphasizes that consistency in brand elements, such as tone, visuals, and narrative structure, strengthens memory and credibility by helping consumers form stable associations over repeated exposures. Therefore, in this study, creative strategy is conceptualized as an important mechanism for making the acquisition message both accessible and trustworthy. It supports IMC effectiveness when creative execution remains aligned with the core message and ethical expectations surrounding the product category.

2.2.3. Message Source

The third element of communication design is the message source, or the individual or institution perceived as delivering the communication. Source effects are highly relevant because audiences evaluate communication not only by message content but also by who communicates it. [Hovland et al. \(1953\)](#) established that source credibility, especially trustworthiness and expertise, significantly influences

persuasion outcomes. When audiences face uncertainty, risk, or controversy, the credibility of the source becomes even more important because it affects whether the message is accepted, questioned, or rejected.

Conner and Norman (2021) argue that for health- or risk-related decisions, people often rely more heavily on expert and institutional sources than on entertainment-oriented endorsers, as such decisions require judgment and trust rather than mere attention. Kumar and Pansari (2016) similarly emphasize the importance of trust in consumer acquisition and engagement, particularly when firms seek to develop longer-term relationships through service systems and ongoing communication programs. In this study, the message source is therefore treated as part of communication design because source credibility can strengthen the legitimacy of acquisition efforts, reduce skepticism, and improve consumers' willingness to engage with the brand. In regulated settings, source choice is not a peripheral issue; it is a core strategic decision that influences whether communication is perceived as responsible and believable.

2.3. Channel Selection and the Delivery of Coordinated Communication

The third construct is channel selection, which concerns the choice of communication touchpoints used to deliver messages to the target audience. IMC literature consistently emphasizes that communication effectiveness depends not only on message quality but also on selecting channels that match audience behavior, communication objectives, and contextual constraints. Kotler and Keller (2022) explain that integrated communication requires firms to coordinate multiple channels so that consumers encounter consistent meanings across the media environments they actually use. This makes channel selection a strategic decision rather than a purely operational one.

Within the promotion mix, different channels offer distinct strengths. Advertising can build reach and awareness, public relations can generate legitimacy, personal selling can support explanation and interaction, sales promotion can stimulate immediate response, and direct marketing can enable personalized engagement (Kotler & Keller, 2022). Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) further note that digital channels play an increasingly important role in acquisition because they support data-driven targeting, registration, conversion tracking, and ongoing relationship management. However, the logic of IMC suggests that no single channel is sufficient on its own. The task is to identify which channels are most appropriate for the audience, product, and regulatory environment and then ensure that they work together rather than in isolation.

In regulated or ethically sensitive categories, channel selection also has compliance and legitimacy dimensions. Some channels may provide broad reach but limited message depth, whereas others may allow for more responsible explanations, guided interactions, or controlled dissemination. Consequently, channel choice affects not only exposure but also the quality of consumer understanding and the degree to which communication remains aligned with ethical and regulatory expectations. This is especially important for member acquisition, because onboarding into a brand ecosystem often requires more than awareness; it requires information, trust, and a frictionless path to registration or participation. Thus, in this study, channel selection is conceptualized as a key IMC construct because it determines how communication is distributed, how consumers engage with it, and how effectively the acquisition pathway is supported.

2.4. Linking the Three Constructs to Member Acquisition

The dependent outcome of this study is member acquisition, understood as the process through which individuals are attracted, converted, and integrated into an ongoing brand relationship. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) describe customer acquisition as the process of attracting and converting new customers, an activity increasingly supported by digital systems that allow identification, database development, and continuing interaction. Kotler et al. (2021) similarly suggest that acquisition should be viewed as part of a broader pathway in which consumers are engaged, converted, and then retained through consistent experiences. In member-based systems, acquisition is therefore more than a one-time transaction; it is an entry point into a structured communication relationship.

The literature reviewed above suggests that member acquisition is shaped by the interaction of the three priorities within IMC. First, marketing ethics influence whether communications are perceived as

legitimate, fair, and socially acceptable. Second, communication design determines whether the message is clear, compelling, and credible through appropriate content, execution, and source choice. Third, channel selection affects whether the communication reaches the right audience in the right context and supports effective engagement and onboarding. Together, these constructs provide a more focused and analytically relevant framework than the broad descriptive treatment of IMC alone. Accordingly, this study posits ethics, communication design, and channel selection as principal dimensions through which IMC can be evaluated in relation to member acquisition.

3. METHOD

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive and exploratory design to examine how PT HM Sampoerna Tbk communicates its smoke-free products (SFPs) and to translate the findings into a practical integrated marketing communication (IMC) plan aimed at strengthening member acquisition among adult consumers. The design followed a problem-driven approach. First, it articulated the managerial issues faced by the company in expanding its SFP membership. Next, the investigation traced the underlying causes of the issue using the 5 Whys technique, drawing on documented evidence from the company's publicly available meeting records and related disclosures. This diagnostic step was paired with a current-state assessment of communication activities using a promotion-mix lens to map the channels and socialization efforts currently deployed for SFPs. The outputs from these early stages were used to structure a conceptual framework grounded in IMC theory and ethical marketing principles, ensuring that the recommended strategy remained feasible within the constraints of a highly regulated industry context.

The framework underlying this study assumes that effective SFP member acquisition depends on the alignment of key communication design elements, particularly message strategy, creative strategy, message source, and channel choice, while also recognizing the strong influence of external constraints, such as government regulations and industry restrictions. The framework positions the member acquisition challenge as the focal business problem and treats internal marketing and external regulatory environments as contextual conditions that shape communication options and consumer responses. The 5 Whys diagnosis served as a mechanism for identifying root causes that may lie beneath surface-level symptoms, such as low conversion, weak engagement, or limited trust. Therefore, the IMC plan proposed at the end of the study was not treated as a generic communication blueprint but as a structured response to the diagnosed causes, refined through theory, and supported by empirical input from the target audience.

3.2. Data Collection Method

This study uses both primary and secondary data to support triangulation and strengthen the relevance of managerial recommendations. Secondary data were collected to build a contextual understanding, define the regulatory and ethical boundaries of communication, and inform the development of the research variables. These materials include peer-reviewed literature on ethical marketing, IMC, consumer behavior change, and marketing communications in regulated industries as well as industry publications, policy documents, and government regulations relevant to communicating smoke-free products. In addition, corporate materials such as PT HM Sampoerna Tbk reports and publicly available meeting records were reviewed to capture the firm's stated strategies, constraints, and ongoing initiatives. This use of secondary sources followed the logic that documentary evidence can enhance validity by anchoring the analysis to verifiable records and established knowledge (Neuman, 2014).

Primary data were gathered through an online cross-sectional survey. The survey targeted adult smokers and current SFP users who were familiar with, exposed to, or engaged in smoke-free product communications because this segment best reflects the audience, whose preferences and ethical perceptions are most relevant to an IMC strategy focused on member acquisition. Online distribution

was selected to efficiently reach geographically dispersed respondents and capture participants in major Indonesian urban areas where smoke-free product adoption and related communications were more visible, including Bandung, Surabaya, Medan, and Jakarta.

The questionnaire measured respondents' ethical evaluations of SFP communications, preferences for IMC design elements, and channel preferences across a tailored promotion mix that fit ethical and regulatory contexts. Instrument development was theory driven and proceeded in three stages: domain specification, item generation, and instrument refinement. First, the content domains were derived from the literature review and mapped onto the three principal constructs of the study: marketing ethics, communication design, and channel preference. Second, indicators were generated from prior conceptual and empirical work to ensure that each construct was operationalized in a manner consistent with the theoretical framework. Third, the draft instrument was reviewed and refined to improve clarity, wording, and construct alignment prior to its large-scale distribution.

The questionnaire was developed based on three theoretical foundations. First, ethical marketing principles were operationalized using the pillars proposed by [Murphy et al. \(2012\)](#), emphasizing social responsibility, honesty, and openness, fairness, and respect. This section assessed whether information about smoke-free products is perceived as clear and accurate, whether benefits and risks are communicated transparently, whether messages avoid exaggeration or misleading claims, and whether communications respect adult autonomy without undue pressure. Social responsibility was assessed through perceptions that the company communicates with consideration for public health, promotes smoke-free awareness, and supports positive behavioral change. Second, IMC communication design was operationalized based on [Kotler and Keller's \(2022\)](#) IMC planning dimensions. Message strategy items examined whether communications explained the distinct value of smoke-free alternatives, connected with adult consumers' needs and values, and clearly differentiated smoke-free products from combustible cigarettes. Creative strategy items evaluated whether design choices, such as visuals, narrative style, and tone, gained attention while remaining authentic and ethically responsible, and whether they improved understanding rather than merely stimulating interest. Message source credibility was assessed by asking respondents to evaluate their trust in official brand channels and the perceived credibility and ethical representation of spokespersons or communicators. Third, channel preference was measured using an adapted promotion mix approach, as proposed by [Kotler et al. \(2020\)](#). In line with the study's ethical stance and regulatory sensitivity, the instrument focused on advertising, public relations, personal selling, direct marketing, and digital marketing as primary channel categories. Items assessed included whether respondents prefer advertising framed in educational or awareness-oriented contexts, whether public education and CSR-linked activities strengthen brand trust, whether interactions with trained representatives are valued when they emphasize education rather than persuasion, and whether personalized communications are appreciated when privacy is respected and messages avoid spam or pressure.

Across these sections, respondents evaluated both their agreement with the statements and the perceived importance of each dimension so that the analysis could move beyond simple popularity toward prioritized decision criteria. All constructs were measured using Likert-type response formats consistent with common survey practices to capture attitudes and preferences ([Neuman, 2014](#)). The final instrument contained 33 indicators spanning three domains. The use of the 33 indicators was justified by the multidimensional nature of the constructs under study. Marketing ethics, communication design, and channel preference cannot be adequately captured through a small number of generic items because each construct contains distinct but related subdimensions. Accordingly, the indicator set was designed to ensure sufficient conceptual coverage rather than mere brevity, while avoiding redundancy through an iterative review of wording and construct overlap.

To strengthen content validity, the draft questionnaire was evaluated against the theoretical definitions of each construct and reviewed for item relevance, representativeness, and clarity. Where applicable, expert judgment was used to assess whether each item adequately reflected its intended construct and whether the overall instrument covered the analytical dimensions required by the study. Additionally, a pilot test was conducted with a limited number of respondents from the target population

to assess readability, item ambiguity, completion time, and response consistency. Feedback from the pilot stage was used to revise wording, eliminate unclear phrasing, and improve the sequencing of the instrument before full deployment.

Reliability testing was also performed to examine the internal consistency of the instrument. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each major construct and for the overall scale. Following common methodological guidance, an alpha value of 0.70 or higher was treated as indicating acceptable reliability for exploratory survey research (Hair et al., 2014). The results showed that the instrument achieved acceptable internal consistency across the main dimensions, with alpha values for marketing ethics, communication design, channel preference, and the overall instrument. Items with weak corrected item-total correlations or those that reduced scale reliability were reviewed before the final analysis to ensure that the retained indicators were both theoretically relevant and statistically coherent.

3.3. Population, Sampling, and Analytical Tools

The target population consisted of adult smokers and current users of smoke-free products in Indonesia who were of legal adult age and aware of smoke-free alternatives, such as heated tobacco products. Because the purpose of the study was to inform members of acquisition strategies, the inclusion criteria emphasized participants with meaningful exposure to smoke-free product communications, including current users and adults considering switching. The sampling used a non-probability purposive approach to ensure that the respondents had the specific characteristics required to provide relevant judgments regarding ethical communication and channel preference. Participants were recruited via online distribution, including digital outreach and community networks associated with smoke-free product users, which enabled access to respondents who were likely to encounter the company's communication touchpoints.

The minimum sample size was determined using the multivariate rule of thumb, which states that the sample size should be at least five times the number of indicators in the measurement instrument (Hair et al., 2014). With 33 indicators, the minimum target was 165 completed responses, while the study aimed to obtain between 165 and 200 valid responses to improve the stability of descriptive patterns and prioritization outputs. The use of this rule was considered appropriate because the study employed a multi-indicator survey instrument and sought stable descriptive estimates across several analytical dimensions rather than causal model estimation.

The analysis combined descriptive statistics with a weighted score model (WSM) to translate the survey findings into actionable priorities for IMC planning. The descriptive analysis summarized the respondent profiles and central tendencies across ethics perceptions, communication design evaluations, and channel preferences, allowing the study to identify the overall direction of attitudes and the relative strengths and weaknesses of each dimension. To reduce subjectivity in selecting strategic priorities, the WSM approach was applied by incorporating respondents' stated importance weights along with their evaluations of each criterion. This approach is suitable when a decision requires ranking alternatives against multiple criteria and when the goal is to identify the most preferred or appropriate option based on stakeholder priorities (Odu, 2019). In this study, WSM outputs were used to identify the ethical principles, message design elements, and communication channels that should be prioritized in the proposed IMC plan for SFP member acquisition.

Before the weighted prioritization stage, the measurement quality of the survey instrument was checked using validity and reliability procedures. Item development was anchored in the established literature, pilot testing was used to refine the questionnaire, and internal consistency statistics were calculated to confirm that the retained indicators performed adequately as measures of the intended constructs. These procedures were incorporated to improve methodological rigor and ensure that the weighted scores reflected systematically measured respondent preferences rather than unstable or weakly defined indicators.

The final deliverable of the method was the construction of an IMC plan tailored to the diagnosed business problem, grounded in theory and empirical preference data. The plan integrated

recommendations for message strategy, creative strategy, message source selection, and channel selection, with explicit attention to ethical communication and regulatory compliance. By combining documentary diagnosis, theory-based measurement, instrument validation, and weighted prioritization of consumer preferences, this study produced recommendations that were intended to be both implementable and defensible in a highly regulated communication environment.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Respondent Characteristics

Table 1 summarizes the respondent profile (N = 202), showing a sample dominated by adults aged 25-34 years (51.5%), followed by 21-24 (24.8%) and 35-44 (19.8%), with only a small proportion aged 45-54 (3.5%) and 55+ (0.5%) years. The gender distribution was skewed towards males (61.4%) compared to females (38.6%). Respondents were drawn from all five Jakarta regions, with the largest shares from Jakarta Utara (23.3%) and Jakarta Barat (22.8%), and the smallest from Jakarta Pusat (14.9%). In terms of occupation, most respondents were private-sector employees (58.4%), followed by self-employed workers (19.3%) and students (12.9%), while civil servants (7.9%) and other categories accounted for a small fraction.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	21-24	50	24.8
	25-34	104	51.5
	35-44	40	19.8
	45-54	7	3.5
	55+	1	0.5
Gender	Female	78	38.6
	Male	124	61.4
Region	Jakarta Barat	46	22.8
	Jakarta Utara	47	23.3
	Jakarta Selatan	43	21.3
	Jakarta Pusat	30	14.9
	Jakarta Timur	36	17.8
Occupation	Pegawai Negeri Sipil	16	7.9
	Karyawan swasta	118	58.4
	Wiraswasta / Pekerja Mandiri	39	19.3
	Mahasiswa	26	12.9
	Ibu Rumah Tangga	2	1
	Polisi	1	0.5

4.1.2. The Ethic Dimensions

The weighting results for the ethics dimension indicate a highly even distribution across the three ethical foundations assessed: honesty, fairness, and social responsibility. Respondents assigned the highest mean score to honesty, with an average rating of 4.09, followed closely by fairness at 4.01 and social responsibility at 4.00. The corresponding normalized weights show the same pattern of near-equality, with honesty accounting for 33.82% of the total ethical weight, fairness for 33.12%, and social responsibility for 33.05%. The resulting rank order places honesty first, fairness second, and social responsibility third; however, the magnitude of separation across these components is minimal.

This near-flat structure suggests that respondents did not treat ethical communication as a set of trade-offs, in which one principle can compensate for another. Instead, ethics appear to be evaluated as a combined standard that must be fully met. In practical terms, the data imply that ethical acceptability is not strongly driven by an emphasis on a single moral dimension; rather, respondents expect smoke-free product communication to be simultaneously accurate and transparent, respectful of autonomy, and attentive to broader societal implications. The lack of a pronounced hierarchy also indicates that ethical judgments are likely to be sensitive to inconsistency. Even if one ethical component performs strongly, the overall perception may not improve if another component is perceived as weak. Accordingly, the results depict ethics as less of a differentiator among alternative communications and more as the baseline condition required for communication to be considered credible enough to engage with further.

4.1.3. Communication Design

The communication design analysis compared three core IMC design elements: the message, creative, and source strategies. At the level of perceived importance, the weights were again relatively balanced, but with a clearer advantage for the message source. The message source recorded the highest importance weight at 33.75%, derived from an average importance score of 4.14. Message strategy followed at 33.27% with an average importance score of 4.06, while creative strategy accounted for 32.98% with an average importance score of 3.92. Although the differences in weights are not large, they are consistent with the observed performance when importance is integrated with preference ratings to produce weighted scores.

When preference ratings were combined with importance weights, the message source emerged as the leading factor in communication design. The preference evaluation associated with the message source emphasized the perceived information accuracy, with a preference rating of 4.06, producing the highest overall weighted score of 1.372, ranking first. Creative strategy, assessed primarily through the appeal of attention and engagement, received a high preference rating of 4.15 and produced a weighted score of 1.369, ranking second. Message strategy, assessed through value proposition clarity and differentiation, obtained preference ratings of 3.92 and 3.95, respectively, and yielded the lowest weighted score of 1.303, placing it third.

The results indicate that respondents prioritized trustworthiness over persuasion mechanics. Although message clarity and value proposition communication remain important, clarity alone appears insufficient to achieve strong evaluations if the source is not considered reliable. Creative execution, which captures how effectively the message attracts attention and supports comprehension, also matters but ranks lower than source credibility. These findings imply that, in the context of smoke-free product communication, respondents are more responsive to who delivers the message and whether the information is perceived as accurate than to how strongly the message is framed or how compelling the storytelling is. This emphasis is consistent with the nature of the product category, where consumers associate communications with health-related claims, risk perceptions, and behavioral change decisions that require confidence in the legitimacy of the information.

4.1.4. Effectiveness and Preference Structure

Unlike the ethics and communication design dimensions, the channel results show sharper differentiation. Five channel families were assessed: advertising, public relations, personal selling, direct marketing, and digital marketing. The importance weights across these channel families ranged from 19.12% to 21.06%, indicating modest differences in stated channel importance but meaningful divergence once preference ratings were considered and converted into weighted scores.

Personal selling was the most strongly preferred approach when importance and preference were integrated. Within personal selling, educational personal selling achieved the highest weighted score overall at 0.96, ranking first among all channel-related aspects, supported by a preference rating of 4.54. Ethical sales communication followed closely, with a weighted score of 0.94 and a preference rating of 4.48, ranking second overall. The importance weight for personal selling was also the highest among the channel families at 21.06%, derived from an average importance score of 4.44. These results collectively

indicate a strong inclination toward interaction-rich formats that allow for two-way clarification, immediate responses to questions, and personalized explanations.

Direct marketing ranked second in the overall channel pattern, reflecting high receptivity to targeted communication, provided it remains respectful and non-intrusive. The privacy-respectful personalization aspect recorded a weighted score of 0.93 with a preference rating of 4.45, ranking third, and non-intrusive communication produced a weighted score of 0.91 with a preference rating of 4.35, ranking fourth. The overall importance weight of direct marketing was 20.92%, supported by an average importance score of 4.41. The combination of a high preference for privacy-respecting personalization and a strong emphasis on non-intrusiveness indicates that respondents accept direct outreach when boundaries are maintained and when the communication is perceived as informational rather than coercive.

Digital marketing occupied a middle position. The responsible digital campaign aspect achieved a weighted score of 0.84 with a preference rating of 4.25, ranking fifth, whereas transparent digital communication produced a weighted score of 0.83 with a preference rating of 4.20, ranking sixth. The overall importance weight for digital marketing was 19.73%, derived from an average importance score of 4.16. This suggests that digital platforms are viewed as useful and relevant, but they do not outperform channels that allow more direct interpersonal engagement. These results imply that digital effectiveness depends heavily on transparency and perceived responsibility, indicating that digital content is accepted when it supports understanding and trust rather than functioning as purely promotional material.

Public relations and advertising produced the lowest performance across the channel dimensions, despite receiving importance weights comparable to those of digital marketing. Public relations recorded an importance weight of 19.12% with an average importance score of 4.03; however, its two evaluated aspects ranked near the bottom of the full-channel list. CSR-based brand trust achieved a weighted score of 0.81 with a preference rating of 4.22, ranking seventh, and PR awareness engagement achieved a weighted score of 0.76 with a preference rating of 3.96, ranking ninth. Advertising also underperformed. Educational advertising orientation produced a weighted score of 0.79, with a preference rating of 4.13, ranking eighth. Ethical advertising appeal produced the lowest weighted score at 0.74, with a preference rating of 3.86, ranking tenth. Advertising's overall importance weight was 19.17%, with an average importance score of 4.04, showing that respondents did not dismiss advertising as irrelevant, but they evaluated its effectiveness as lower relative to other channels once preference and prioritization were considered.

This ordering suggests that respondents perceive mass-reach, low-interaction channels as less capable of conveying ethically sensitive or decision-relevant information than formats that support dialogue and clarification. While advertising and PR may be accepted as supportive or introductory vehicles, respondents appear less willing to rely on them for deeper understanding or reassurance. In contrast, personal selling and direct marketing are evaluated as more effective mechanisms for learning, verifying, and forming trust, likely because they reduce ambiguity and create opportunities for immediate feedback and tailored explanations.

4.2. Discussion

Taken together, these findings reveal a clear hierarchy in how respondents evaluate smoke-free product communications. Ethics functions as the baseline condition, communication design determines whether the message is believed, and channel choice shapes how effectively credibility is delivered and reinforced. Rather than operating as independent dimensions, these three elements form a layered structure for communication acceptance.

First, the ethics dimension indicates that respondents treat honesty, fairness, and social responsibility as unified expectations rather than competing priorities. The near-identical weights across these three principles suggest that ethical communication is holistically judged. Respondents do not appear to reward one ethical strength sufficiently to offset another ethical weakness. In practice, this means that smoke-free product communication must simultaneously be accurate, respectful, and socially

responsible to be considered acceptable. Ethics, therefore, acts less as a source of competitive differentiation than as a threshold of legitimacy. If communication is perceived as ethically weak, its effectiveness in other dimensions is likely to decline, regardless of its creative or strategic quality.

Second, the communication design results show that credibility is the central mechanism through which messages are evaluated. Among the three design elements, the message source received the highest weighted score, followed closely by the creative strategy and message strategy. This pattern indicates that respondents place the strongest emphasis on who delivers the message and whether the source is perceived as reliable and accurate. Message clarity remains important; however, it is insufficient. Similarly, creative execution may attract attention and improve comprehension; however, it cannot compensate for low trust levels. In the context of smoke-free products, where consumers are likely to associate communication with health implications, risk perceptions, and behavioral decisions, trustworthiness is a key condition for message acceptance. This finding suggests that communication effectiveness depends not only on the strength of the value proposition, but also on the communicator's legitimacy.

Third, the channel results showed a stronger preference structure than the ethics and design dimensions. Respondents clearly favor interaction-rich and individualized channels, particularly personal selling and direct marketing, over one-way mass communication formats, such as advertising and public relations. Educational personal selling and ethical sales communication ranked highest among all channel components, indicating that respondents valued formats that allow explanation, clarification, and immediate feedback. Privacy-respectful direct marketing was also strongly preferred, suggesting that targeted communication is acceptable when it is informative, relevant, and non-intrusive. In contrast, advertising and public relations were evaluated as less effective, not because they are irrelevant, but because they appear less capable of supporting a deeper understanding and reassurance in an ethically sensitive product category.

These findings imply that the effectiveness of smoke-free product communication depends on the alignment across three strategic priorities. Therefore, ethical consistency is required to establish legitimacy. A credible communication design, especially trustworthy message sources, is required to secure beliefs and acceptance. Interactive and personalized channels are required to translate credibility into acquisition outcomes. The data support an IMC approach in which communication is not built around broad promotional reach alone, but around structured trust formation.

This interpretation also provides a basis for a more focused implementation roadmap. Rather than treating all channels and activities as equally important, the results suggest a staged communication strategy with four priorities. The first priority is internal ethical and regulatory alignment. Before outward communication intensifies, the organization must ensure that all messages, claims, and communication roles are screened for ethical consistency, legal compliance, and clarity. As ethics emerged as a baseline condition, this internal governance layer is essential. The second priority is source and message validation. Since the message source ranked highest within communication design, firms should identify and prepare communicators who can deliver accurate, credible, and restrained explanations while ensuring that message content and creative execution remain educational rather than overly persuasive. The third priority was channel sequencing. High interaction channels, especially educational personal selling, should be positioned as the core acquisition mechanism, whereas direct and digital marketing should function as supporting channels for structured information access, follow-up communication, and personalized engagement. Advertising and public relations can still play a role, but more so as awareness and reinforcement tools than as the main vehicles for conversion. The fourth priority is ongoing monitoring and refinement. Because ethical credibility is fragile and respondent expectations are holistic, communication performance must be monitored continuously to identify inconsistencies, confusion, or perceived pressure, and to refine execution accordingly.

In this sense, the roadmap derived from the findings is strategic rather than operational. The main implication is that effective smoke-free product communication should begin with governance, move through credibility-building design, and scale through channels that enable dialogue and reassurance. The data do not support a communication strategy centered primarily on broad exposure or creative persuasion. Instead, they support an acquisition model in which ethical legitimacy, trusted

communicators, and interactive explanations work together to reduce skepticism and strengthen member conversion.

Overall, the findings showed that respondents evaluated smoke-free product communication through sequential logic. Communication must first be ethically acceptable, credible in design, and effective in delivery channels. This layered structure explains why educational personal selling and privacy-respectful direct communication outperform mass communication formats as they are better suited to carrying credible information within an ethically sensitive context. Accordingly, the most defensible IMC strategy for member acquisition treats ethics as non-negotiable, credibility as the core persuasive mechanism, and interaction-rich channels as the primary conversion routes.

5. CONCLUSION

This study began with a practical business concern: despite PT HM Sampoerna Tbk's clear strategic alignment with Philip Morris International's "smoke-free future" agenda, the acquisition of members for smoke-free products in Indonesia has remained below expectations. The findings indicate that the core barrier is not primarily product-related but communication-related. Specifically, marketing communication activities have been constrained in scope and effectiveness, largely because the company operates in a highly regulated environment where ethical standards, legal compliance, and informational clarity must be balanced. In response, this study developed a weighted scoring approach to evaluate and prioritize marketing ethics principles, communication design components, and communication channels, producing an evidence-based direction for a more feasible and compliant Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) strategy. Element analysis of marketing ethics shows that honesty (4.06), fairness (4.01), and social responsibility (4.00) are all viewed as similarly important. The absence of a sharp hierarchy is meaningful because it implies that ethical marketing for smoke-free products cannot be reduced to a single "dominant" principle. Instead, it must be executed as a complete package: communicating truthfully and transparently, respecting adult consumers as autonomous decision-makers, and demonstrating societal responsibility by supporting informed harm-reduction choices. In a category that requires behavioral change and often triggers skepticism, ethics becomes a functional requirement for trust formation rather than an optional branding layer.

The communication design ranking demonstrates that the message source (1.372) and creative strategy (1.369) are the most decisive levers, followed by the message strategy (1.303). This pattern suggests that "who delivers the message" and "how it is expressed" are perceived as slightly more critical than "what is said," likely because the smoke-free proposition depends heavily on credibility, clarity, and demonstration of the message. In practical terms, trained product specialists and authorized representatives should play a central role, supported by creative executions that simplify complex product knowledge into understandable, compliant, and non-misleading content. Meanwhile, the channel analysis identified personal selling (4.44) and direct marketing (4.41) as the top priorities, followed by digital marketing (4.16), advertising (4.04), and public relations (4.03). The dominance of personal and permission-based channels indicates that member acquisition in this context depends on interactive, adult-only engagement, where two-way communication is possible. These channels allow immediate clarification, product demonstration, and tailored education, capabilities that mass channels cannot provide under Indonesia's restrictions. Digital platforms remain useful, but mainly as supporting infrastructure for awareness, follow-up engagement, and CRM-based retention, rather than as the primary conversion engine.

The study concludes that PT HM Sampoerna Tbk should concentrate its IMC strategy on personalized, controlled, and engagement-driven communications while using digital and mass communication selectively and strictly within compliance boundaries. A strategic shift toward below-the-line activations and experiential events is strongly justified because these formats provide operational space for ethical education, informed decision-making, and trust-building. By integrating ethics into frontline conduct, prioritizing credible message sources, and reallocating resources to high-impact

channels, companies can improve member acquisition without increasing regulatory risk or compromising responsible marketing standards.

Ethical Approval

Not Applicable

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable. This study did not involve direct interaction with human participants. All materials analyzed were obtained from publicly available legal sources and institutional documents.

Confidentiality Statement

Not applicable. The study did not collect personal or sensitive data. All legal materials and documents used are publicly accessible and were utilized solely for academic and research purposes.

Authors' Contributions

Not Applicable

Disclosure Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this research.

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