National Media Strategies for Audience Persuasion in Crises: COVID-19 Pandemic

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Original Article

Abstract

INTRODUCTION: Since systemic limitations such as managerial weaknesses, lack of specialized skills, flawed policymaking, and inefficient structures have created serious challenges in the persuasion process. This study aims to design a strategic model for audience persuasion by the national media during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

METHODS: This research uses the grounded theory approach as a qualitative method. Data were collected through open-ended interviews and purposeful sampling of 20 experts and specialists related to the subject. The final model includes 264 codes, 85 concepts, and 78 categories. Data collection and analysis continued until theoretical saturation was achieved.

FINDINGS: According to the findings, factors such as flawed policymaking, ineffective interaction between the media and other sectors, lack of efficient managerial structures, and unhealthy competition were among the key barriers to audience persuasion during the COVID-19 pandemic. The final strategic model identifies capacities and suggests solutions to improve the audience persuasion process.

CONCLUSION: The results showed that fundamental reforms in structures, strengthening persuasive expertise, clarifying policies, improving interactions, and increasing public trust are necessary for the national media to play a more effective role in future crises. Therefore, paying attention to the values of the audience and utilizing cultural capacities can turn the national media into a powerful tool for crisis management.

Keywords: National media; Persuasion; Audiences; COVID-19 pandemic; Crisis management.

Introduction

The media, as one of the most important communication tools, has played a vital role in crisis management, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this period, persuading the audience—meaning influencing their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors—has held particular significance. In state-run media, the principle of authority has been seen as a key tool in the persuasion process. (1)

The success of this process is not only essential in dialogues and direct communications, but also in changing the audience's lifestyles and enabling decisions based on accurate and reliable information. (2) In fact, the influence of persuasion on lifestyle changes, making informed decisions, and using valid and trustworthy information is crucial. In this context, media strategies play a decisive role and can greatly contribute to building trust and fostering effective engagement with the audience. (3)

Nowadays, in line with rapid social and cultural changes and increasing public awareness of challenges such as environmental crises, pharmaceutical issues, and global pandemics, the need to develop effective persuasion strategies is felt more than ever. The present study, aiming to develop proposed persuasion solutions, seeks to design strategies that can be generalized to other health crises and contagious diseases. This can be achieved through the establishment of flexible communication protocols, public education on health and disease prevention, and the effective use of social media for disseminating accurate and timely information.

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The COVID-19 pandemic, as a global public health crisis, has highlighted the importance of persuading audiences. Persuasive messages in such situations can reinforce preventive behaviors in society and facilitate public cooperation in crisis responses. (4)

Despite the efforts of the national media in this regard, its performance has faced various challenges and criticisms (5). Some studies have shown that issues such as incoherent policymaking, lack of specialized experts, and dissemination of contradictory information have led to a decrease in public trust in the national media (6).

To design effective persuasion strategies, it is essential to consider the psychological and social factors that influence individual behavior. Research shows that providing clear and honest information, highlighting the importance of collective participation, and using positive role models can increase the effectiveness of persuasive messages. (7)

Producing engaging and interactive content is a key approach for attracting audiences and increasing the impact of media messages. In this regard, special attention should be paid to word choice and the manner in which information is presented. (8) Addressing the needs and demands of the audiences and adopting a customer-centric approach in the persuasion process can significantly contribute to the success of these strategies. (9)

The performance of the national media in persuading audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic has experienced fluctuations. Despite efforts to provide information, criticisms regarding inconsistent policymaking, a lack of experts, and the delivery of contradictory information have led to a decrease in public trust. (6)

However, the efforts of national media in producing diverse programs and providing information on health measures (such as wearing masks and washing hands) should not be overlooked. In designing persuasion strategies, it is essential to pay attention to the psychological and social factors affecting individual behavior, as these factors may include fear, anxiety, trust, and social norms. Studies by Cheng and Chen (2019) have shown that self-efficacy, media trust, and persuasion literacy are among the factors that directly affect trust in brands and media and can play a decisive role in audience responses to fake news. (10) However, challenges such as the need to update content, pay more attention to the needs

of different audiences, and increase public trust in national media still persist-issues that require careful planning and attention. In this context, updating content and using appropriate and attractive language for diverse audiences can play an important role in increasing the effectiveness of media messages. (8)

A review of global experiences shows that different countries have used different media strategies to manage the COVID-19 crisis. South Korea managed public opinion through transparency and accuracy; Finland relied on scientific data; Japan used live streaming; China controlled information mainly through WeChat, while the United States emphasized self-care through dedicated websites. The European Union did not succeed in creating a unified information system, while Nordic countries and East Asian countries did well by emphasizing cultural values. In contrast, Hong Kong faced censorship and some small East Asian countries and Russia experienced media restrictions. In Iran, restrictions on the dissemination of information, public distrust, and management challenges reduced the effectiveness of national media. These experiences provide insights for playing a more effective media role during future crises.

The theoretical framework of this research was based on the theories of persuasion (with an emphasis on the authority of state media), behavior change, and cognitive dissonance, and the Extension Likelihood Model (ELM) was examined to increase persuasion and enhance behavioral change. In fact, it should be said that the media act as a discourse-shaping force in advancing policies, while strategic management and strategy formulation are integrated in this framework to achieve organizational goals, and together these elements determine how state media influence audiences in a comprehensive framework.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in late 2019, is recognized as one of the largest health crises in history (11), and public concerns about the disease were evident in Iran (6&12).

Despite the importance of the role of national media in times of crisis, studies have shown that the systematic relationship between the strategic persuasion model of national media and crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic has been less explored (13).

The necessity of this study is to design a strategic framework for persuasion by national media during a pandemic, focusing on identifying

key factors that create value for the audience and increasing the role of the media in crisis management. The aim of this study is to design a strategic model for the national media persuasion process during the COVID-19 pandemic. This aim was pursued by examining the impact of persuasion strategies on value creation and identifying key tasks based on the contextual conditions of this process. This research seeks to provide a comprehensive framework for managing similar crises and improving the persuasion process in national media, and the main question is how the strategic model of the national media persuasion process will affect value creation and audience persuasion?

Methods

This study, in terms of purpose, is an applied research. Its processes are designed based on a model encompassing layers of research philosophies, primary research types, approaches, strategies, research typology, method selection, objectives, and data collection techniques. (14) Purposive sampling was employed, with the statistical sample comprising expert professors possessing media experience and familiarity with strategic concepts. Qualitative data were collected until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data collection methods included library-based and survey techniques.

The subject domain of this research is the persuasion process during the COVID-19 pandemic. The timeframe spans from October 2023 to October 2024 in the Persian calendar, and its geographical scope covers Tehran city and Iran's National Media.

The qualitative data analysis in this research was conducted using the Grounded Theory method and the paradigmatic model.

The raw data obtained from in-depth interviews with 20 experts—including university professors, senior media executives, crisis management specialists, and audience persuasion experts—were analyzed in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Participants were selected based on professional diversity and relevant backgrounds.

In the open coding phase, key phrases were extracted from the interviews and labeled as primary codes. This process was performed manually to break down the interview content into its smallest conceptual components; then, in axial coding, the identified concepts were grouped based

on semantic relationships and formed main categories. In this phase, special attention was paid to grouping concepts around contextual conditions, barriers, and influencing processes. Finally, in the selective coding phase, the main categories were analyzed to develop a comprehensive conceptual model of the research. This analysis resulted in 264 codes, 85 concepts, and 78 categories.

Coding is a systematic process devised by Strauss and Corbin (1990) to discover categories and develop theoretical models (15). In this study, the theoretical model addressing the persuasion process of national media during the COVID-19 pandemic was developed through Open Coding (category identification), Axial Coding (inter-category relationships), and Selective Coding (category integration). Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently to achieve data saturation. This approach utilized 20 interviews to identify effective persuasion patterns within media messages. It is worth noting that this analysis was conducted manually, a decision that was in line with the qualitative nature of the research and the possibility of managing the data without relying on traditional tools such as NVivo version 14. All analyses were supervised by research experts and included iterative feedback.

Internal and external validity and questionnaire reliability

In the present study, dimensions of internal and external validity were examined, along with questionnaire validity. External validity was assessed and confirmed through a survey of experts active in national media. In addition, the final model was reviewed and validated by academic experts (supervisors and advisors). Also, internal validity was strengthened through data collection from diverse sources (library archives and in-depth interviews), data analysis by multiple researchers, long-term observation (one year), and confirmation of findings with participants. To avoid biases, theoretical assumptions and potential influences were identified and controlled. In addition, presenting the findings to academic and industry experts and incorporating their feedback enhanced the validity of the final model. Data collection from national media experts improved the generalizability of the model, while assessments by academic and industry experts confirmed its transferability to similar contexts. However, in qualitative research, the ultimate generalizability of the findings requires an assessment of the contextual conditions by new researchers. The

validity of the questionnaire was ensured through review of the questions by experts in the fields of media, crisis management, and persuasion, along with the implementation of necessary modifications. The initial framework of questions was developed based on standard concepts and related theories, and a systematic approach was adopted to conduct interviews and analyses. To ensure transferability, questions were developed across domains and aligned with a common theoretical framework across all interviews. The results were validated through member reviews with participants and reviews by external experts. The final model was refined and formally validated for validity and reliability after being evaluated and validated by university professors and industry experts, with minor modifications. To achieve reliability, the strategy of "achieving reliability throughout the research process" was used.

In this regard, four main criteria were examined to evaluate the quality of the research design, namely, verifiability, validity, transferability, and reliability. (16)

To evaluate the final research model, two industry experts and two university professors were asked to evaluate the proposed model theoretically and practically based on criteria such as comprehensiveness of concepts, implement ability, and alignment with real-world conditions.

The evaluation results showed that the designed model not only meets the needs of the national media during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also has the potential to be generalized to other similar crises. With final modifications, this model will increase the persuasive capacities of the national media in managing social and health crises and can serve as a flexible and operational framework for practical actions.

Findings

In this study, following a thorough examination and analysis of data collected from theoretical foundations and conducted interviews, the fundamental concepts related to the subject of audience persuasion were identified and categorized. In this phase, the researcher adopted an open and unbiased approach to conceptual naming and code assignment. The primary objective was to deconstruct the data into the smallest possible conceptual components to provide a comprehensive and precise depiction of contextual conditions and existing challenges in the domain of audience persuasion.

The findings of this study reveal that profound systemic challenges across cultural, organizational, managerial, and socio-economic dimensions have constrained the effectiveness of this organization's persuasion strategies.

These challenges encompass issues such as failure to update ideological foundations, inefficient management structures, unhealthy competition, lack of attention to global standards, absence of socio-economic justice, and interference from non-media entities. To address these challenges, it is recommended that the organization adopt a comprehensive and systemic approach to restructuring, process improvement, human resource empowerment, and allocation of sufficient resources.

Table 1. Research validity assessment

Objective	Actions Taken
Pluralism	Using multiple researchers, multiple data sources, or multiple methods to validate emerging data.
Member Reviews	Asking respondents about the acceptance of results.
Long-Term observation	Collecting data over a period of time to enhance the credibility of findings.
Pairwise Comparison	Asking individuals to comment on emerging findings.
Eliminating Biases	Identifying assumptions, theoretical tendencies, and biases at the beginning of the research and preventing their interference in the research process.

Table 2. Research reliability assessment

Objective	Actions Taken
Confirmability	Teaching research concepts to interviewees before starting the interview process and presenting the research results to them for feedback and confirmation.
Acceptability	Using an initial theoretical framework as the basis for interviews with experts, conducting interviews with multiple experts in the relevant field, and obtaining the opinions of several experts after extracting the results.
Transferability	Using standard concepts in the stage of developing the initial framework of questions and interviews with experts, employing a common standard framework in all interviews, and considering the necessity of diversity in the interviewees' fields of activity and experience.
Reliability	Obtaining the opinions of several experts outside the interviewee team regarding the obtained results, receiving multiple feedbacks from interviewees for the final confirmation of results, and having a standard guideline and procedure for the interview process.

Table 3. Theoretical research questions in interviews with experts

Row	Question
1	Why does the national media need to use persuasive strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2	What sustainable environmental conditions have governed the national media, prompting it to employ persuasion strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what features and dimensions characterize these models?
3	What obstacles or facilitating conditions are involved in the national media's persuasion strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Table 4. Identified and extracted features related to contextual conditions

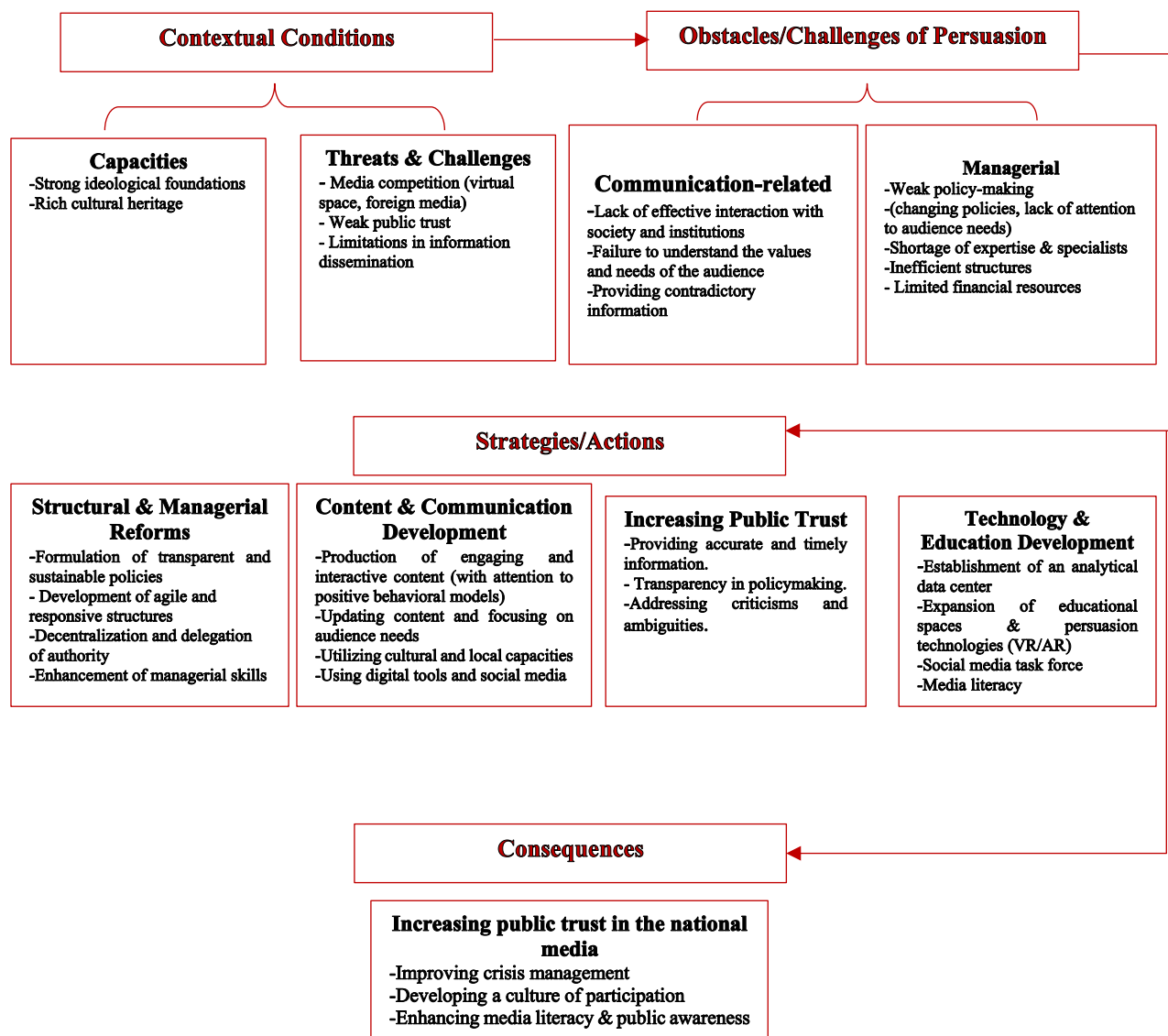| Primary Codes	Primary Codes	Final Codes
Our ideological foundations in audience persuasion are very strong.	achievable Audience persuasion in the country.	Leveraging Strong Ideological Foundations: Strengthening and updating ideological and cultural foundations for more effective audience persuasion.
We have a very strong foundation and background in audience persuasion and the worldview of audience persuasion.	prominent civilizations.	Development of cultural approaches: Relying on rich civilization and history to establish a deeper connection with the audience.
The existence of strong cultural treasures in the field of audience persuasion.	The audience persuasion sector in cyberspace lacks a custodian.	Establishment of a custodian and organization: Designating a responsible institution to organize persuasion activities in cyberspace.
Policymaking in the true sense, as well as supervision and guidance, are not taking place in the field of audience persuasion.	Policymaking in its true sense, as well as supervision and guidance, are not being implemented in the field of audience persuasion.	Policymaking and supervision: Formulating strategic policies and establishing a system for continuous monitoring and evaluation in the field of persuasion.
History and civilization are part of audience persuasion.	Complexities of affairs in administrative structures.	Administrative restructuring: Simplifying administrative processes and reducing complexities to expedite tasks.
Ideological insight and worldview exist in the audience persuasion sector, but they have not been updated.	Incompetence of managers in the tasks assigned to them.	Enhancing managerial competence: Training and empowering managers in the field of audience persuasion and media.
Limited activities have been carried out in the field of audience persuasion.	The presence of grassroots organizations and community-based media in the field of audience persuasion.	Strengthening grassroots organizations: Supporting community-based organizations and local media to enhance participation and effectiveness.
Media tools are used for political interests.	Supportive funds do not include the field of audience persuasion.	Allocation of budget: Increasing funding and financial support for media persuasion activities.
Working based on personal preferences.	Officials support many methods of audience persuasion.	Development of scientific approaches: Promoting the use of scientific and specialized methods in audience persuasion.
Unhealthy competition.	People's main concern is the economy, not persuasion.	Attention to economic issues: Considering people's economic concerns in designing persuasive messages.
Duplicative efforts	Audience persuasion has become a secondary issue.	Prioritizing persuasion: Enhancing the status and importance of audience persuasion in media policymaking.
Lack of concern	Lack of standardization	Standardization of processes: Developing and implementing specific standards in persuasion processes.
Lack of vision	High inflation in society	Economic stability: Striving to improve economic conditions and reduce inflation to enhance public trust.
Failure to consider global standards in addressing audience persuasion issues.	Public unawareness of challenges and problems.	Increasing public awareness: Providing transparent information and raising awareness among people about various issues.
Developing strategic thinking: Formulating long-term and strategic plans in the field of audience persuasion.	Lack of strategic thinking in audience persuasion.	Developing strategic thinking: Designing long-term and strategic plans in the field of audience persuasion.
Managerial problems.	Instrumental thinking in the field of audience persuasion.	Comprehensive approach: Adopting a comprehensive and integrated approach in audience persuasion.
Incompetent managers.	Lack of training specialized personnel in media for audience persuasion.	Training specialized personnel: Investing in education and training of specialists in the field of audience persuasion.
Incompetent managers Wasting budgets.	Insufficient budget in media.	Providing sufficient financial resources. Proper budget management.
Lack of expertise among responsible officials	The issue is not analyzed professionally.	Utilizing experts and specialists.
Lack of organization in the national media's persuasion processes	We have no control over newspapers, and persuasion is not achieved.	Organization of the national media
Lack of focus in policymaking for audience persuasion	Audience persuasion has many complexities.	Focus on policymaking for audience persuasion
Lack of economic justice	Lack of social justice	Establishing social and economic justice

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Figure 1. Conceptual model

Discussion and Conclusion

This research was conducted with the aim of formulating a strategic model for public persuasion in national media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings showed that weak managerial beliefs, poorly defined objectives, lack of expertise, structural challenges, lack of financial resources, conflicting values, incomplete policymaking, and ineffective communication were the main obstacles to audience persuasion.

Given the current societal conditions, national media can leverage the potential of social media and online platforms to produce and disseminate diverse persuasive content (videos, podcasts, infographics, etc.). This approach would be particularly effective in engaging younger audiences and improving access to health-related information. By doing so, accurate pandemic updates can be maintained, and preventive measures can be consistently reinforced among the public.

Furthermore, the research findings suggest that the current situation can be improved through policy reforms, adoption of advanced technologies, enhancement of managerial competencies, structural development of media systems, and adaptation of successful crisis management practices from other countries. Strategic planning, strengthening communication channels, innovative interventions, and promotion of media literacy are also effective strategies to increase the effectiveness of audience persuasion. In other words, national media should play a more effective role in public awareness and persuasion by

integrating engaging content on modern platforms with structural and managerial reforms.

To overcome these obstacles and increase the effectiveness of persuasive communications, national media should adopt a multifaceted strategy centered on the following pillars:

A) Structural and managerial reforms

As Mason (2001) argues in his study, the process of persuasion is not simply a tool for conveying messages to audiences, but can also guide the path of social and managerial change (17). In this context, national media should implement transparent and sustainable policies and restructure their managerial frameworks to better harness their persuasive potential.

B) Improving content production and leveraging advanced technologies

By harnessing the potential of social media and online platforms, it is essential to produce diverse and engaging content (films, podcasts, infographics, etc.) to engage younger audiences and increase access to health-related information. Furthermore, continuous updates on pandemic developments and strengthening preventive measures are equally crucial. To this end, redefining content messaging in line with the cultural and social diversity of audiences - to deliver engaging and inspiring narratives - alongside strategic investments in digital infrastructure and advanced tools to produce high-quality and up-to-date content - should be a priority.

C) Enhancing interaction and trust

Developing effective communication between media and audiences through advanced technologies and providing reliable and transparent information is crucial to fostering audience trust and fostering engagement. This engagement should go beyond one-way dissemination of information by taking into account audience feedback and addressing their questions and concerns. In addition, collaboration with civil society organizations and socio-cultural institutions can foster inclusive public discourse and meaningful audience participation.

D) Empowering human resources

Empowering human resources through continuous training and attracting experts in the field of audience persuasion, along with professional engagement of managers with strategic issues, is essential for the sustainable development of the media.

E) Focusing on cultural aspects

The cultural capacities of the national media, such as its strong ideological foundations and rich persuasive heritage, should be used as a basis for formulating persuasive policies and programs. Prioritizing the values and concerns of the audience in content production can foster a culture of interaction and mutual respect, while at the same time increasing public morale. Consequently, the identified weaknesses should be addressed by exploiting these capacities to create a comprehensive and precise framework for persuasive strategies in future crises. By implementing this multifaceted strategy, the national media can play a more effective role in public awareness and persuasion and become a powerful tool for achieving communication goals and fostering social progress.

F) Providing practical recommendations

This study was conducted to formulate a strategic model for public persuasion by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) during the COVID-19 pandemic, employing a grounded theory methodology. The findings reveal that multiple factors—including managerial deficiencies, a lack of specialized expertise in persuasion, flawed policymaking, financial constraints, and inefficient structural frameworks—constituted the primary challenges in the persuasion process. Furthermore, the absence of clearly defined persuasion objectives, conflicting values, and inadequate collaboration with relevant institutions directly undermined the organization's effectiveness.

Contextual conditions such as cultural capacities, external threats including vulnerabilities in cyberspace, counterproductive organizational dynamics, and structural inadequacies have impeded the implementation of effective persuasion strategies. By identifying these challenges and constructing a paradigmatic model, this study delineates actionable pathways to refine the persuasion process. (Figure 1)

- *Establishment of a data analytics center:* Define precise quantitative objectives, including 95% prediction accuracy, real-time data processing, identification of at least 70% of key persuasion patterns, and collection of

1,000 validated feedback samples, utilizing advanced analytical tools.

- *Leadership Development and Managerial Empowerment:* Conduct structured training programs (three 8-hour sessions and one 2-day intensive workshop) focusing on team management, critical decision-making under pressure, and transformational leadership strategies, while fostering institutional collaborations with academia and national media (IRIB).
- *Social Media and Media Literacy Task Force:* Develop instructional video content and implement a systematic framework for clearly defined role allocation among task force members.
- *Persuasive Content Production:* Establishing a network of writers, organizing writing workshops, implementing a content monitoring and evaluation system, developing a content calendar, and utilizing content management tools.
- *Development of Educational Spaces and Persuasion Technologies:* Collaborating with research centers, utilizing state-of-the-art educational software, organizing research competitions, and employing VR/AR technologies.

In conclusion, to play a more effective role in future crises, the national media needs fundamental and comprehensive reforms aimed at removing existing obstacles and increasing its persuasive capabilities. These reforms should include strengthening expertise, improving organizational structures, increasing constructive engagement, paying attention to the needs of the audience, and updating ideological foundations. In addition, increasing public trust in the national media and other credible sources of information is essential, which can be achieved by providing accurate and timely information, ensuring transparency in policymaking, and responding to criticism and ambiguities. The management structures of the national media should also be reviewed to make them more efficient, accountable, and based on collective wisdom.

Compliance with Ethical Guidelines

All ethical principles have been considered in this article, and participants were informed of the purpose of the research and its implementation steps.

Author's Contributions

This article is based on Farzaneh Rahimi's PhD thesis at Islamic Azad University of Isfahan, who was responsible for conducting the research, collecting, and analyzing the data; and the second and third authors, Hamidreza Hosseini Dana and Ebrahimzadeh Dastjerdi, were responsible for the design, supervision, methodology and correspondence. However, Farzaneh Rahimi was responsible for editing the final manuscript submitted to the journal.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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