

Effective Communication in Alternative Food Networks: A Scoping Review and Implications for Scottish Food Systems

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Abstract

This study conducts a scoping review of primarily European literature (2015-2025) to synthesise reported communication strategies within Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) and derive implications for enhancing local food systems in Scotland. The synthesis indicates that the literature most frequently reports a combined use of direct interpersonal engagement and digital platforms as an effective approach. A dominant, cross-cutting theme is the strategic use of narrative construction through storytelling, branding and labelling, to convey messages concerning product quality, sustainability and community. These communicative practices are associated with reported gains in social and economic capital for AFNs. Based on this synthesis, we suggest that for Scottish AFNs, consistently developing a coherent narrative identity and employing an integrated, multi-channel strategy represent promising considerations for strengthening community engagement and network resilience.

Keywords Alternative Food Networks · Communication · Local Food Networks · Food Systems · Scotland · Scoping Review · Message Outcomes · Effectiveness

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the concept of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) has gained increasing scholarly attention due to their potential in promoting sustainable food systems (Poças Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021). They do this by adopting eco-friendly practices and enhancing social and economic resilience in communities (Martínez-Guido, Núñez-López and Ponce-Ortega, 2021). AFNs, such as farmers' markets, farm shops, cooperatives, and community-supported agriculture models, are viewed as alternatives to the dominant industrialised agri-food system. However, the success of these AFNs in enhancing food system sustainability largely depends on how effectively they communicate their values, practices, and benefits to stakeholders, including consumers, producers, and policymakers (Burgess *et al.*, 2024).

Communication within AFNs is not merely about transmitting information; it encompasses a dynamic network of interactions, both virtual and face-to-face, that build community, share knowledge, and foster social connections (Furness *et al.*, 2022). Previous research emphasised the need for inclusive and context-sensitive communication strategies to strengthen the sustainability and reach of AFNs (Kastberg, 2015; Stoeva *et al.*, 2024). This is particularly relevant in Scotland, where government policy frameworks (e.g., Good Food Nation Plan, Local Food for Everyone Strategy) aim to promote local food initiatives. Knowing what good food is and how to find it enhances the accessibility and benefits of AFNs (Kessari *et al.*, 2020). AFN's initiatives have a long-standing presence in Europe and globally; therefore, understanding the communication strategies used by AFNs in these contexts can provide valuable insights and practical lessons to enhance food systems in

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Scotland. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the lessons and implications that could be applied to the Scottish context.

2. Theoretical Framing and Key Concepts

The study uses the multi-level perspective (MLP) on transitions as an analytical framework. It conceptualises change as an interplay between three analytical levels: niches (protected spaces where radical innovations like AFNs develop), socio-technical regimes (the stable incumbent systems like the conventional industrial food system), and an exogenous landscape (broad societal trends like climate, policy or consumer values). Transitions occur when landscape pressures destabilise the regime, creating windows of opportunity for niche innovations to scale up and challenge regime practices (Bui *et al.*, 2016). In this analysis, we apply the MLP to examine how communication within and about AFNs functions as a critical activity to nurture the niche, negotiate with the regime, and leverage landscape pressures to foster a transition towards a more localised, sustainable food system. Given the multidisciplinary nature of food systems research, terminological precision is essential for ensuring consistency, particularly when reviewing diverse literature. We explain two main concepts, namely: Alternative Food Networks and communication strategies within AFNs.

2.1. Alternative Food Networks (AFNs)

AFNs refer to a variety of initiatives that seek to provide alternatives to the conventional, industrialised agri-food system. These networks emphasise local, ethical, sustainable, and transparent food production and distribution. The term encompasses a range of organisational forms such as farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), food cooperatives, farm shops, and box schemes (Gori and Castellini, 2023). AFNs are rooted in efforts to re-localise food systems and promote more direct relationships between producers and consumers. AFNs are characterised by three main features: (I) shortened food supply chains (Forssell and Lankoski, 2015); (II) re-socialisation of food, whereby consumers reconnect with the origins and producers of their food (Matacena and Corvo, 2020); and (III) re-spatialization, where food provisioning is embedded within local socio-economic and ecological contexts (Goodman, Goodman and Redclift, 2016).

AFNs also carry a normative dimension, often driven by values such as environmental sustainability, animal welfare, fair trade, and social justice (Alberti, Esposito and Ferrando, 2024). However, as Sarmiento (2017) argue, AFNs should not be romanticised, as they may produce social exclusions and inequalities unless carefully implemented with inclusive practices. In Europe, AFNs have evolved in response to grassroots mobilisation and public policies promoting sustainable rural development (Poças Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021). For instance, the EU's LEADER programme has supported community-based food initiatives, while consumer demand for organic and locally produced foods has accelerated their growth (Celata and Sanna, 2019). Despite their potential, AFNs face operational challenges related to scale, visibility, and sustainability. These challenges are often linked to how effectively they communicate with consumers (Dumitru *et al.*, 2023).

2.2. Communication Strategies in Alternative Food Networks

Communication strategies in AFNs are essential for building trust, mobilising communities, promoting values, and differentiating local food products in a competitive market. In this context, communication is not simply about disseminating information but about facilitating dialogue, participation, and knowledge exchange (Burgess *et al.*, 2024). Communication strategies in AFNs typically operate at different levels: (I) Producer-to-consumer communication through farm visits, social media, and product labelling as a tangible marketing communication tool (Burgess *et al.*, 2024); (II) community engagement through local events, food festivals, newsletters, and participatory decision-making processes (Reckinger, 2022); and (III) Network coordination, where communication fosters collaboration among producers, distributors, activists and institutions (Michel-Villarreal *et al.*, 2025).

AFNs often rely on participatory and horizontal communication models, where there is active engagement of consumers, contrasting with the top-down approaches of the mainstream food industry. Advancements in ICT have facilitated innovative participatory communication tools, allowing 'virtual' direct engagement between producers and consumers. Examples are the use of digital tools such as Facebook groups, WhatsApp,

or local apps. These tools allow small-scale producers to interact directly with consumers, receive feedback, and share narratives about their production methods (Free University of Bozen-Bolzano [FUB] 2017; Prost *et al.*, 2018). At the same time, conventional ‘offline’ methods such as storytelling at farmers’ markets or the visual aesthetics of packaging are still used to communicate AFN values such as care, locality, and sustainability (De Bernardi *et al.*, 2020). However, the success of these strategies depends heavily on context, with associated outcomes primarily serving as a measure of effectiveness. For instance, Rossi and Brunori (2015) observed that in some AFNs, especially in rural or linguistically diverse areas, communication may be hindered by technological barriers, literacy issues, or socio-cultural misalignments. Thus, communication in AFNs must be adaptive to different contexts, employing both traditional and innovative channels to reach diverse audiences. Furthermore, communication plays a vital role in legitimising AFNs and influencing public policy. As Agarwala *et al.*, (2022) highlight, framing food issues through compelling narratives, such as health, community resilience, or ecological stewardship, can galvanise support and attract funding or regulatory backing.

In summary, communication in AFNs is both a strategic and practical component, essential for building alliances, achieving market success, and enacting transformative changes in food systems. Understanding how these strategies and practices were applied across different geographical contexts can help draw lessons for AFNs in Scotland. The study provides a scoping examination of previous research related to communication strategies within AFNs. The purpose of this research is to identify effective communication strategies and messages in the existing literature, examine the impact of messages, identify knowledge gaps, and discuss lessons and best practices that can be applied to enable AFNs in Scotland to achieve their potential in accelerating food system transitions from niche to regime level.

3. Research Methods

The study adopts the Joanna Briggs methodology for scoping reviews and Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) methodological framework which includes: identifying the research question; searching for relevant studies, selecting studies, charting the data, collating, summarising, and reporting the results. For this scoping review, “effectiveness” is operationally defined as positive outcomes or impacts that are reported in the included studies, attributed by study authors, self-reported by participants in the studies, or measured impacts of specific communication strategies or activities. Effectiveness serves as the primary indicator of AFN success. This definition acknowledges the varied methodologies of the source literature while providing a consistent criterion for synthesis.

The review was guided by the following research questions:

- What effective communication strategies and messages are used by European AFNs?
- What is the impact of these messages on consumer awareness, trust, and demand?
- What strategies and key messages can be adopted for AFNs in Scotland?

3.1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure that the literature review was focused and relevant, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established using PICOS (Population, Intervention, Comparison and Setting) before the search and selection of studies (Amir-Behghadami and Janati, 2020). This criterion provided a consistent framework for identifying publications that directly contribute to the research aim of providing a scoping examination of communication strategies in AFNs with lessons that could potentially be applied to the context of AFNs in Scotland.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

PICO	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Population	Studies that address AFNs generally or any type of Alternative Food Network that are actively operating and published between 2015 and 2025.	Studies published before 2015 that addressed general food system topics without a focus on active Alternative Food Networks.
Intervention	Studies with a clear focus on communication strategies or messaging used in Alternative Food Networks.	Studies without a clear focus on communication strategies or messaging used in Alternative Food Networks.
Comparison	Descriptive studies documenting communication practices and comparative studies assessing relative effectiveness	Given the exploratory nature of this scoping review, a strict “comparison” criterion was not enforced as a requirement for inclusion.
Outcome	Studies reporting any outcomes related to the communicative factors that can help AFNs succeed.	Studies not reporting any outcomes related to the communicative factors that can help AFNs succeed.
Geographic focus	Studies conducted within European countries.	Studies conducted exclusively outside Europe were excluded. Global reviews or comparative studies where European cases were not a primary focus.

3.2. Justification of Criteria

The primary objective was to identify, review, and synthesise literature that documents how AFNs in various European countries utilise communication methods and disseminate key messages to promote sustainable local food systems. We carefully designed the inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that only high-quality, contextually relevant literature informed the review. The emphasis on European countries was intended to draw lessons that could be potentially applicable to the socio-economic and policy context of Scotland. Moreover, limiting the time frame ensured that the studies captured recent developments in both communication strategies and the evolution of AFNs. Focusing on peer-reviewed literature enhanced the validity of the review; grey literature was excluded. We also excluded studies without a focus on communication to avoid diluting the research. This structured and geographically targeted approach to selecting literature enables a focused and meaningful synthesis of findings on how communication strategies within AFNs may foster inclusivity and engagement between local producers and consumers. By enabling a comparison across diverse socio-political and cultural contexts, the review highlights lessons that may inform the development of effective AFN communication strategies in the Scottish context.

3.3. Searching for Relevant Studies

The literature search targeted peer-reviewed academic sources from two databases to ensure an inclusive scope of data. The academic databases consulted were Web of Science (www.webofscience.com) and Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.com/>), published in English from 2015 to 2025, to capture the evolution and contemporary practices of communication in AFNs. The search string used for both data bases was (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Alternative Food Networks" OR "Short food supply chains" OR "Local food systems") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("United Kingdom" OR "Poland" OR "Spain" OR "Romania" OR "Europe" OR "Hungary" OR "Germany" OR "Ireland") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Communication strategy" OR "MESSAGES" OR "Consumer engagement" OR "Consumer participation")) AND PUB YEAR > 2014 AND PUB YEAR < 2026. Boolean operators such as AND, OR, and NOT were used to narrow or broaden the search scope as needed.

3.4. Selecting Studies and Charting the Data

The selection of studies was managed using Zotero reference management software, which facilitated organisation, de-duplication, and tagging of sources for easy retrieval during the data extraction and synthesis stages. Each article’s relevance was initially determined through a review of the title and abstract, followed by a full-text assessment to determine inclusion. Emphasis was placed on literature that described communication tools, techniques, channels (digital and non-digital), and the content of messages (e.g., sustainability, food origin, fairness, health, etc) conveyed to different stakeholders within AFNs. For Web of Science, searches were executed between 6th and 10th July 2025 with all identified records screened. For Google Scholar, the

search was conducted between 19th and 25th July 2025. A stopping rule was applied to capture the most pertinent literature: the first 130 results were sorted by relevance, given the platform's lack of precise Boolean filters and its tendency to return a very large result set. Following extraction, data were collated in a spreadsheet for thematic analysis. The analysis was primarily inductive and iterative. Initial codes were generated based on the stated communication strategies and outcomes in the literature. These codes were then iteratively grouped, refined, and organised into broader thematic categories listed in the results.

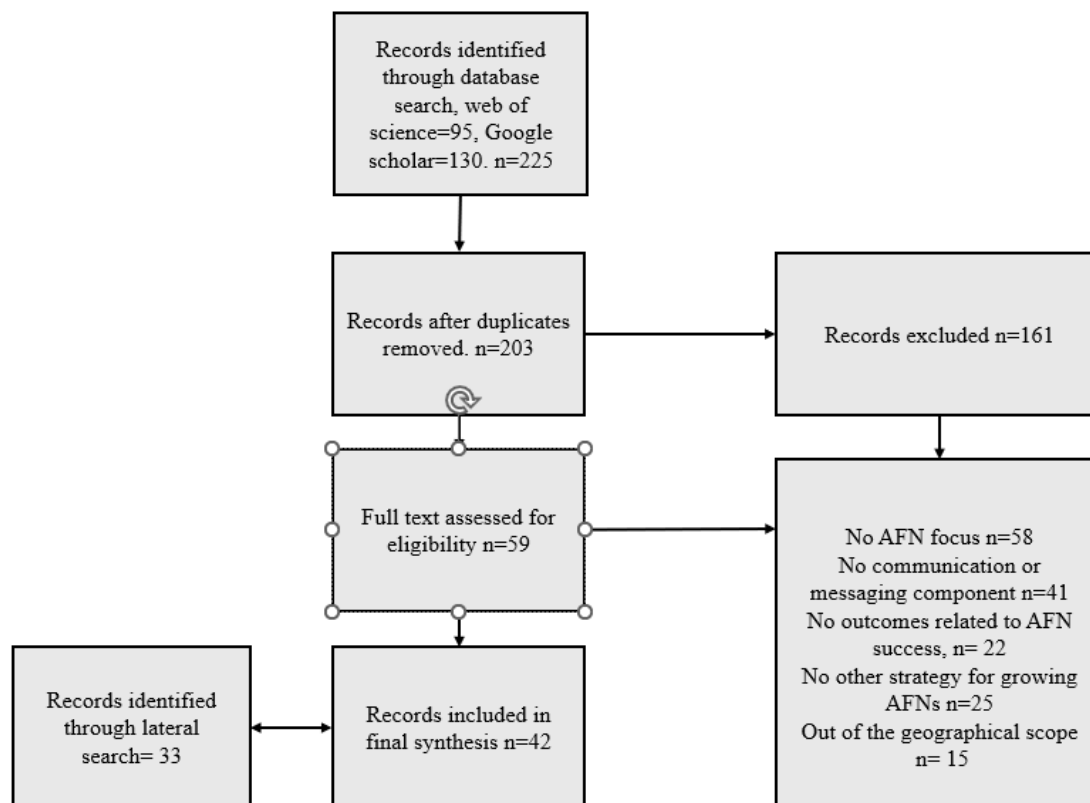


Figure 1. Flow chart of study selection process (peer-reviewed literature only)

3.5. Results

3.5.1. Study Characteristics The search from the two databases resulted in 225 unique records: 95 (Web of Science) and 130 (Google Scholar), which yielded 203 records after removing duplicates (Figure 1). Title and abstract screening reduced this number to 90 articles, with 59 articles meeting the inclusion criteria for full-text screening. From this set, 42 records were included in the final synthesis, with an additional 33 records from lateral search, resulting in a total of 75 records. Lateral search is the examination of reference lists and forward citations of key included articles to identify additional relevant scholarly publications. The included articles comprised a range of review types and empirical studies set within varied geographical contexts reflecting global interest in the field. A significant number of articles presented primary research that focused on a single country. Italy and Spain were the single most frequently studied nations, followed by the United Kingdom, Poland, Romania, and Hungary (Supplementary Table 1). A full descriptive breakdown of the included studies (geographic focus, AFN types, communication channels, key message frames, and reported outcomes) is provided in Supplementary Table 2.

Many studies adopted a comparative approach, analysing AFNs across multiple countries (e.g., Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, the European/Mediterranean context). A portion of the literature consisted of review articles that aimed for extensive geographical coverage, for example, global reviews with international scope and trans-regional reviews (Table 2). The significant proportion of review articles suggests

that the field of AFN research, particularly concerning communication strategies, is growing rapidly, showing dedication to consolidating, mapping, and evaluating the existing knowledge base (Gori and Castellini, 2023).

Table 2. Geographical focus of the studies

Geographical focus	Count	Percent
Europe only studies	70	93%
Non-Europe empirical studies	3	4%
Global reviews/highly multi-country	2	3%

3.6. Communication Strategies of AFNs

The literature revealed a rich and diverse array of communication strategies employed by Alternative Food Networks. These strategies can be broadly categorised into two interconnected themes: (1) Direct and interpersonal communication and (2) Mediated and digital communication. A third cross-cutting theme of storytelling and identity markers was identified as a core communicative function that utilises both themes.

3.6.1. Direct and Interpersonal Communication The most frequently cited and foundational communication strategy in AFNs is direct, face-to-face interaction. This strategy emphasises building trust and community through personal connection and was consistently highlighted in the articles (Lindemann, 2021; Poças Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021a; Burgess *et al.*, 2023, Burgess *et al.*, 2024; Sadovska, 2023; Volken and Bottazzi, 2024; Michel-Villarreal *et al.*, 2025). It occurs in various settings, including farmers' markets and farm visits, where informal exchange allows for dialogue between producers and consumers regarding production and consumption practices. Other contexts that emphasise direct communication are local festivals, events, and catering services that facilitate community engagement (Brunori, 2007).

Beyond the face-to-face interaction, deeper engagement in AFNs is associated with strategies labelled as “participatory and collaborative communication”, “co-action”, and “participatory communication and networking” (Kastberg, 2015; El Bilali, 2019; Melchior and Newig, 2021; Stoeva *et al.*, 2024). This involves incorporating “food citizens” (Rico Mendez, Pappalardo and Farrell, 2021) into a process of raising awareness and making decisions collectively. The reliance on collaborative communication underscores the AFNs' core principles of “re-socialising” and “re-spatialising” food systems by shortening the social and informational distance between producers and consumers.

3.6.2. Mediated and Digital Communication To scale their reach and complement personal interactions, AFNs utilise digital tools and traditional media. This strategy focuses on expanding market reach and maintaining continuous engagement. The use of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube was the most cited digital tool, appearing in a substantial number of articles (Drejerska, Gołębiewski and Fiore, 2019; El Bilali, 2019; Michel-Villarreal *et al.*, 2019; Volpentesta, Felicetti and Frega, 2019; Espelt, 2020; Havadi-Nagy, 2021; Benedek, 2023; Pizzarell, 2023; Tsoulfas *et al.*, 2023; Viciunaite, 2023; Saleh, Hilletoft and Fobbe, 2025) These platforms were reported to be used for information sharing, promoting events, building an online community, and facilitating electronic word of mouth through feedback and reviews.

Many AFNs maintain shared or individual websites, email newsletters and phone calls to provide detailed information (e.g., product lists, farm stories, production data) and regular updates to subscribed customers (Benedek, 2023; Furness *et al.*, 2022; Saleh *et al.*, 2025). A growing trend involves the use of more advanced tools, such as smartphone applications (apps) (Carfora, Morandi and Catellani, 2022), the Internet of Things, and blockchain to provide transparent information on product traceability and quality (Espelt, 2020; Pizzarell, 2023). Digital communication is described as enabling AFNs to overcome geographical limitations, maintain relationships where it is impossible to have one-on-one meetings, and appeal to a tech-savvy demographic.

A cross-cutting theme in the communication strategies employed by AFNs is utilising both direct and digital channels to construct a narrative or identity by storytelling. The storytelling strategy was explicitly named in Rico Mendez *et al.* (2021), Wiedemann *et al.* (2023), and Levidow *et al.* (2024). It involves using personal storytelling (e.g. a sheep farmer narrating their practice), visual storytelling (e.g., photos on Instagram), and

text to convey the values, ethos, and unique qualities of the farm and its products. This is said to transform a product from a commodity into a carrier of meaning (Levidow, Berardi and Jung, 2024).

The literature also reveals that packaging, branding, labels, logos, and certifications (both official and grassroots) act as silent communicators (Burgess *et al.*, 2023; Michel-Villarreal *et al.*, 2025; Sadovska, 2023). They potentially signal credence quality cues (e.g., organic, local, ethical) and are described as critical tools for building trust, especially in the absence of direct personal interaction.

3.7. Key Messages Communicated in AFNs

The analysis revealed that the messages communicated within AFNs are multifaceted and extend beyond simple product promotion. These messages can be synthesised into four primary thematic categories: (1) Product quality and attributes, (2) Sustainability and ethical values, (3) Transparency and knowledge building, (4) Community and shared identity.

3.7.1. Product Quality and Shared Attributes This encompasses messages focused on the experienced quality cues. These messages are used to distinguish AFN products from conventional alternatives. The most frequent attributes highlighted were the product's freshness, good taste, and quality superiority, often linked directly to their local and seasonal nature (Radzymińska, 2021; Wojciechowska-Solis *et al.*, 2022; Burgess *et al.*, 2024). Messages promoting the health benefits of organic or chemical-free production were also common (Poças Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021c; Rico Mendez *et al.*, 2021; Viira, *et al.*, 2022; Wojciechowska-Solis *et al.*, 2022). Producers frequently communicated the "naturalness" and "origin" of their products, using terms like organic, free-range, and antibiotic-free. Emphasising the regional or local origin of a product was shown as a key strategy to signal authenticity and quality (Havadi-Nagy, 2021; Radzymińska, 2021; Renkema & Hilletoft, 2022.).

3.7.2. Sustainability and Ethical Values A defining characteristic of AFN communication is the emphasis on the broader socio-economic and environmental impact of consumption choices. This framing appeals to the ethical and political consciousness of consumers. Messages frequently highlighted environmental benefits, such as reduced food miles (short transport distances), lower carbon footprints, and support for biodiversity and agroecological farming practices (Vos, 2018; Michel-Villarreal *et al.*, 2019; Nosratabadi *et al.*, 2020; Carfora *et al.*, 2022; Viira, *et al.*, 2022; Teufer *et al.*, 2023; Olagunju *et al.*, 2025). Producers communicated social sustainability by emphasising support for the local economy, fair prices for farmers, and the maintenance of production within a region (Michel-Villarreal *et al.*, 2019; De Bernardi *et al.*, 2020; Teufer, Waiguny and Grabner-Kräuter, 2023). Some messages advocated for a sophisticated understanding of localism, one that is conscious of its own potential limitations and seeks to engage with broader global sustainability issues (Saleh *et al.*, 2025).

3.7.3. Transparency and Knowledge Building AFNs actively used communication to demystify food production and build trust through radical transparency. This moves beyond marketing to embrace education. A common finding was in the prevalence of messages that reveal what is "behind-the-scenes" realities of farming, including sharing information on farming methods, production costs (e.g., through budget presentations in CSAs), crop growing states and even problems faced by the farm (Benedek, 2023; Burgess *et al.*, 2023; De Bernardi *et al.*, 2020; Mehrabi *et al.*, 2022). Other educational activities by AFNs include disseminating knowledge on topics like seasonality, food preparation (e.g., recipes for lesser-known vegetables), the pricing systems in conventional chains, and the agroecology of certain products (Saleh, Hilletoft and Fobbe, 2025). This could potentially empower consumers with the knowledge to make informed choices.

3.7.4. Community and Shared Identity Communication is shown to foster a sense of belonging and co-create value, transforming consumers into active participants rather than passive buyers. Messages often encouraged co-creation, collaboration, and mutual knowledge sharing, inviting consumers to take an active

part in discussions, participate in community events, provide feedback, and even actively participate in creating content (e.g., short videos about their experiences) (De Bernardi and Tirabeni, 2018; De Bernardi *et al.*, 2020; Melchior and Newig, 2021; Renkema and Hilletofth, 2022; Pizzarell, 2023). These strategies are explicitly designed to build trust, social capital, and strengthen the relational network between producers and consumers (Burgess *et al.*, 2023; De Bernardi *et al.*, 2020; El Bilali, 2019; Tsoulfas *et al.*, 2023).

3.8. Message Impact on Consumer Awareness, Trust and Demand

The literature documented that effective communication within AFNs generates a wide spectrum of positive outcomes, extending beyond mere awareness, trust and demand to create significant economic, social, environmental, and behavioural change. These can be grouped into four primary outcomes: (1) Economic and market outcomes, (2) Social and community capital outcomes, (3) Consumer knowledge and behavioural outcomes, and (4) Broad systemic outcomes.

3.8.1. Economic and Market Outcomes Communication strategies were shown to be associated with the financial viability and market growth of AFNs in several ways. A primary outcome is increased profitability and economic viability for farmers, including fair prices and improved negotiation power (De Bernardi *et al.*, 2020; Gori and Castellini, 2023a; Michel-Villarreal *et al.*, 2025; Nosratabadi *et al.*, 2020; Olagunju *et al.*, 2025; Stoeva *et al.*, 2024). This is often linked to the willingness of consumers to pay a premium price for products with verified attributes (e.g. local, organic). Effective communication is described as facilitating the upscaling and expansion of AFNs (Cicatiello, 2020), moving them beyond niche markets. Outcomes reported include increased sales volume, widespread incidence of short food supply chains, and the creation of differentiated food markets (Benedek, 2023; Dumitru *et al.*, 2023; Tsoulfas *et al.*, 2023; Kumar *et al.*, 2025). Other economically related outcomes include enhanced business performance and operational efficiency, improved access to market, and increased visibility (Carfora *et al.*, 2022; Havadi-Nagy, 2021; Hebinck *et al.*, 2020).

3.8.2. Social Capital Outcomes The relational strategies employed by AFNs are shown to be highly effective at building strong, resilient communities. The results consistently show the development of trust, solidarity, shared community bonds, and stronger relationships between producers and consumers, which serve as the bedrock for sustained engagement and economic exchange (Sadovska, Ekelund Axelson and Mark-Herbert, 2020; Rico Mendez, Pappalardo and Farrell, 2021; Furness *et al.*, 2022; Mehrabi, Perez-Mesa and Giagnocavo, 2022; Viira, et al, 2022; Levidow, Berardi and Jung, 2024). Communication fosters a stronger community and social ties, a sense of community, shared collective identity, and increased social contact and engagement (Espelt, 2020; Rejeb *et al.*, 2022). This leads to community empowerment and enhanced social resilience. Participation in communicatively rich AFNs also contributes to improved mental and physical well-being for participants through a sense of purpose, connection, and engagement in socially useful activities (Burgess *et al.*, 2023; Furness *et al.*, 2022; Sadovska *et al.*, 2020; Vos, 2018).

3.8.3. Consumer Knowledge and Behavioural Outcomes AFNs used communication as a tool for consumer education, which may lead to altering consumer behaviour through informed consumption decision-making, including increased purchase intention and selection of local food, enhanced sustainable and anti-consumption behaviours, more frequent home-cooked meals and fruit and vegetable consumption (Drejerska *et al.*, 2019; Carfora *et al.*, 2022). A direct outcome is improved consumer knowledge and awareness of food production systems, seasonality, sustainability, and nutritional qualities (Sadovska, Ekelund Axelson and Mark-Herbert, 2020; Radzymińska, 2021; Zoll, Specht and Siebert, 2021; Wiedemann, Lauterbach and Häring, 2023). Furthermore, communication is reported to cultivate positive emotional attitudes towards local food, leading to increased customer loyalty, long-term relationships, and a higher share of household food expenditure directed towards AFNs (De Bernardi and Tirabeni, 2018; Sadovska, Ekelund Axelson and Mark-Herbert, 2020; Radzymińska, 2021; Sadovska, 2023).

3.8.4. Broad Systemic Outcomes The cumulative impact of successful AFN communication is shown to contribute to larger shifts in the food system. Outcomes include positive environmental impacts, such as reduced food miles, biodiversity conservation, and support for agroecological practices that improve ecological resilience (El Bilali, 2019; Havadi-Nagy, 2021; Kumar *et al.*, 2025; Poças Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2025). AFNs are associated with enhanced food security at a local level, increased agility and adaptability in the face of disruptions, and a more resilient alternative food system overall (Gori & Castellini, 2023b; Viira, *et al.*, 2022; Vos, 2018). Ultimately, the communication and practices of AFNs contribute to the larger goal of facilitating a sustainability transition in urban and regional food systems by passing formal institutions and creating new, more sustainable and resilient food systems worldwide (Balázs *et al.*, 2016; Benedek, 2023; Cicatiello, 2020; El Bilali, 2019; Kumar *et al.*, 2025; Mehrabi *et al.*, 2022; Olagunju *et al.*, 2025; Rejeb *et al.*, 2022; Tsoulfas *et al.*, 2023).

3.9. Methods and Key Messages for AFNs in Scotland

The communication strategies and insights synthesised in this review are derived from a geographically diverse literature, but with pathways for transferability to Scotland's context. The relevance of findings from Europe and other countries rests on key shared characteristics. First, the core challenges and goals of AFNs across these developed, post-industrial economies are similar (Renting, Marsden and Banks, 2003). The struggles to build trust in AFNs, to compete with the discursive power of supermarkets and to articulate values of sustainability and animal welfare are near-universal within the AFN landscape. The communication mechanisms that address these challenges are therefore likely to be functionally relevant in Scotland as tools for achieving similar ends. Also, like many European regions, Scotland is navigating a shift in rural economies, where notions of multifunctionality, cultural heritage, and community resilience are increasingly valued alongside the production and distribution of food. AFN communication that successfully packages food as an embodiment of these values in other contexts offers a replicable model. The dominance of concentrated retail buyers (Supermarkets), standardised regulations, and consumer habits oriented towards convenience constitutes a similar regime configuration against which AFNs must strategise across the UK and Northern Europe. Furthermore, similar to the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy, Scotland's Good Food Nation legislation provides a congruent policy narrative that legitimises AFN goals of localism, community health, and environmental stewardship. This creates a receptive landscape pressure that AFN communication can leverage.

Studies from outside Europe (e.g., North America, Australia) were primarily valued for their conceptual contributions, offering validated models of communication mechanisms that are transferable. European studies from contexts sharing socio-political or agro-ecological similarities with Scotland (e.g. central Europe) provided contextual analogues, suggesting plausible outcomes and adaptation requirements. Finally, the UK-specific and Scottish literature provided the essential place-based evidence to anchor and critically refine the implications drawn from the wider literature.

Based on the patterns and themes identified in the reviewed literature, a combination of communication strategies has clear advantages and should therefore be central to AFNs in Scotland. Specifically, stakeholders involved should prioritise the creation of avenues where they can meet and talk with consumers while maintaining active social media and web pages. Crafting a story around their message, making it practical, visually or audibly engaging and making the consumer feel part of something will be key, not forgetting the power of identity markers as silent communicators. Key messages should focus on social sustainability issues, for example, health and wellbeing, community building and the intrinsic qualities of the products.

4. Lessons Learned and Gaps in the Literature

The scoping review revealed several key lessons while exposing critical gaps that warrant further exploration. One important lesson is that effective communication plays a central role in fostering consumer trust, loyalty, and sustained participation in AFNs. Studies consistently demonstrate that transparent storytelling, authenticity, and regular updates, especially through direct contact and social media, can enhance consumer engagement (Bos and Owen, 2016). Moreover, the integration of participatory communication strategies where consumers are co-creators in narratives and decision-making leads to stronger community bonds and deeper food citizenship (Cacciolatti and Hee Lee, 2025).

Another important insight is that communication strategies must be tailored to specific cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic contexts. For instance, AFN customers in the UK are motivated by the need to care for the environment, while consumers in Poland are motivated by the desire to try out a new lifestyle (Wojciechowska-Solis *et al.*, 2022). This highlights that there is no “one size fits all” when designing communication strategies.

The literature also reveals notable gaps. First, some studies focus on AFNs generally or short food supply chains, making it difficult to link a particular effective strategy to a specific type of AFN. Second, empirical evidence on consumer responses to specific messages (e.g., on sustainability, local origin, or health) is sparse. There is a need for more consumer research using ethnographies or behavioural experiments, to understand message framing effects and purchase behaviour (Carfora, Morandi and Catellani, 2022).

Another underexplored area is the role of digital literacy in excluding certain producer or consumer groups from AFNs. While digital communication is celebrated, there is insufficient analysis of how it may marginalise older producers or low-income consumers who lack access or know-how. Similarly, language and literacy barriers, particularly in multicultural and rural regions, remain largely unaddressed in existing communication frameworks. Additionally, there is a dearth of longitudinal studies that assess how communication strategies evolve and contribute to the sustainability of AFNs. There is also a need for research on institutional support mechanisms, such as public communication infrastructure or policies that integrate AFNs into mainstream discourse.

Overall, the literature offers a rich foundation for understanding communication strategies in AFNs, but it is fragmented and methodologically limited. Future research should aim to bridge these gaps through comparative, interdisciplinary, and participatory approaches that not only evaluate communication strategies but also empower local actors to innovate and adapt them within their specific socio-economic and cultural environments.

5. Discussion

This section discusses the results that emerged from the literature search performed for the purpose of finding the effective messaging strategies that can potentially be adopted to boost the performance and emergence of AFNs in Scotland. First, we analyse the communication methods used by the different types of AFNs, then we discuss the specific messages conveyed, and finally, we discuss the impact or outcome of these messages.

5.1. Communication Methods used by AFNs

The findings indicate that effective communication in AFNs is not reliant on a single strategy but on a multi-channel approach. The most prominent strategy is face-to-face, while social media serves complementary purposes.

Direct and interpersonal communication is central in any business model and holds great potential in creating desired outcomes due to the emotional attachment it involves (Radzymińska, 2021). This would generally involve active participation of the consumers through real-time interaction and long-term commitment to the activities of the AFNs (Burgess *et al.*, 2024; Trenouth & Sovová, 2025). This approach is the primary tool for building strong, trusting relationships and shared identities, thereby creating a tight social network that protects the niche from regime pressures by fostering loyalty and a shared sense of mission. This “trust in people” is built through verbal communication, shared experiences, and the ability of consumers to directly interrogate producers (Furness *et al.*, 2022).

Social media is a digital communication strategy that was frequently cited as a key tool for quick updates and visibility within AFNs. Social media channels like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram were used to share product information and stories about the farming business. These tools are instrumental in performing “virtual reconnection”, extending the network’s reach and fostering a sense of community online; however, they demand consistency and digital literacy, which is a problem for some producers in some parts of the world (Elghannam *et al.*, 2019). Training producers on best practices for digital storytelling and encouraging community groups to build digital solidarity among AFNs might make social media use more appealing.

Ultimately, the synergy between face-to-face and social media is recognised. A farmer can meet a consumer at a market (direct, face-to-face communication), invite them to follow the farm on Instagram (digital

mediation), and use that platform to post a story about the day's harvest. This ecosystem of communication strategies works collectively to construct a transparent, value-based narrative that is central to the identity and effectiveness of AFNs. It moves beyond merely conveying information to building relationships and a shared community identity around food.

The use of email, newsletters, and phone are traditional communication method, but they remain vital for tailoring communication to older or less digitally-inclined consumers. These direct channels maintain relational integrity and trust, especially when consumer demographics vary (Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, 2016). They are useful for sensitive consumer feedback, and they reinforce long-term engagement and loyalty (De Souza, 2020). It might be useful for producers to develop segmented mailing lists to personalise content and ensure accessibility of contact phone numbers, as well as email addresses.

5.2. Key Messages

The findings demonstrate that the message strategy of AFNs is complex and value-laden. The communication is not merely informational, but profoundly relational and transformational. The core function is to construct meaning and value around food that transcends its price and nutritional content.

Social sustainability messages about community building, portraying stories of the producers, how farm work is being done, social events, and benefits to the community were highly attractive to the consumers, indicating that people are drawn to initiatives that celebrate inclusiveness and give everyone access to resources and a better quality of life. This corroborates the findings of Kessari *et al.* (2020) and Forssell and Lankoski (2015), who stated that Alternative Food Networks are known to promote social justice and equitable food access as well as provide nutritious, culturally appropriate foods. It can be inferred that messages about the good taste of products, as well as health and well-being, will lead to high consumer interest and participation. By educating consumers and inviting them to participate, AFNs are effectively creating a community of advocates. This aligns with the finding that AFNs are more effective when they successfully convey their core values, as this fosters long-term consumer retention and loyalty.

Messages stressing product quality (freshness and taste) and traceability were evident in a significant number of articles reviewed. How the products are produced, how they can be used, and the logistics of how products are delivered, including payment options, were also regular highlights in the messaging. Product-focused messages resonate with consumer trust and satisfaction (Palascha and Chang, 2024), and the emphasis on convenience for consumers is a high selling point for producers. Such messages help to differentiate AFNs from the conventional food systems and build consumer loyalty through transparency and product integrity. Producers should therefore maintain consistent messaging on product quality and health benefits, emphasising unique attributes of local foods.

Environmental sustainability messages were also highlighted in the literature but to a lesser extent than social sustainability messages and messages about the product. This implies that even though environmental protection is important, it may not be a top priority in attracting consumers. The reason could be attributed to the high cost of living experienced in recent times. However, AFNs' alignment with ecological stewardship is well established in the literature (Reckinger, 2022). They build environmental consciousness by reinforcing support for climate-resilient food systems. A consideration for AFN practitioners could be to amplify messages that emphasise how food choices contribute to better human health while continuing to uphold underlying environmental practices.

Messages about fair prices for producers and local economic development were not very prominent, but were still included in the communication by AFNs. These are linked to shortening supply chains and improving farmer livelihoods (Gori and Castellini, 2023). Economic sustainability messaging could strengthen public appreciation for the role of AFNs in securing farmers' income and rural regeneration. Since consumers are usually price sensitive (Radzymińska, 2021) AFNs could develop communication strategies that showcase fair pricing, advantages to local economies, and support for small-scale producers.

Messages about support for the farm rarely featured in the messaging strategies of AFNs. These are messages that encourage solidarity with producers, highlighting the enormous workload faced by small-scale producers and inviting consumers to be allies. Such messaging aligns with the participatory ethos of food sovereignty and emphasises mutual dependence (Cacciolatti and Lee, 2025). It might be useful to craft stories that humanise farming experiences and build empathy, reinforcing the interconnectedness between eaters and growers.

Messaging about educational workshops is featured sparingly in the literature. This sort of message fosters awareness, critical thinking, and food literacy among consumers. Education within AFNs can foster transformative food practices (Zoll, Specht and Siebert, 2021) and empower consumers to participate meaningfully in food system change (Zoll *et al.*, 2018). Educational messaging encourages participatory engagement and informed choices, cultivating more conscious food citizens. Integrating educational content into AFN messaging strategies to stimulate dialogue, reflection, and active learning among consumers might bring about positive outcomes that might destabilise the dominant industrial food regime.

The findings also demonstrate that the outcome of communication in AFNs is profoundly multi-dimensional and interconnected. The function of communication is reported to extend beyond simple information transfer. It activates a virtuous cycle linking sustainability and ethical values, informed consumption, building trust, and systemic change.

There is an assumption that communication in AFNs is inherently effective due to their small-scale, localised nature and strong interpersonal ties (Brinkley, 2018). However, this assumption can mask the lack of structured evaluation (Poças Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021). The lack of attention to measurable outcomes might hinder continuous learning and limit the optimisation of communication strategies. AFNs might consider incorporating basic evaluation tools to assess messaging effectiveness and inform future strategies.

Increased sales, trust and solidarity were the most frequently cited social outcomes in the literature. Effective messaging is shown to influence consumer decisions by highlighting shared values and co-creating meaning (Cacciolatti and Hee Lee, 2025). Messaging that increases sales demonstrates the value of strategic communication in enhancing viability and resilience. A consideration emerging from the literature is that co-creating content with consumers and producers can sustain sales by deepening engagement through shared narratives. Also, messaging was said to foster trust and relationships among consumers and producers, increasing solidarity and mutual engagement. Social capital could be enhanced through repeated interactions and shared goals communicated through participatory strategies (Furness *et al.*, 2022).

Another outcome of effective communication was a notable increase in sign-ups, implying improved outreach and visibility. Effective participatory communication was shown to create a sense of belonging and responsiveness, which enhances engagement (McDaniel, Soto Mas and Sussman, 2021). Effective messaging can be a recruitment tool, helping AFNs grow and reach a more diverse audience. Maintaining transparency and inclusivity in messaging could sustain interest and increase membership.

Message outcomes like economic viability and building trust are the protective barriers for AFNs; outcomes like community empowerment and social capital represent the internal innovation and learning processes within AFNs. Outcomes like increased market share and scaling up demonstrate AFNs' ability to grow, and outcomes like increased environmental awareness and motivation show an AFN aligning itself with landscape trends, thereby increasing its own leverage against the conventional food retail. The outcomes of increased knowledge and behavioural change are not accidental but are the core objectives of AFN communication. This educational role is a critical differentiator from the conventional food system and a key driver of long-term systemic impact (Volpentesta, Felicetti and Frega, 2019).

However, the effectiveness of communication is not universal; the finding that consumer characteristics (e.g. pre-existing values, education, income) affect outcomes suggests that messages must be tailored to different consumer segments. The identification of distinct "utilitarian" and "hedonic" consumer segments underscores the need for strategic communication that speaks to multiple motivations (Viciunaite, 2023). The outcomes of AFN communication prove that effective communication can simultaneously achieve economic prosperity for producers, foster community well-being, educate the public, and contribute to the broader transition towards a more sustainable and resilient food system.

6. Theoretical Interpretation

For a niche to survive and grow, it must create a "protective space" where new practices can develop (Bui *et al.*, 2016). AFN messages are fundamental to constructing this space, not just physically but socially and cognitively. The intense focus on transparency, storytelling, and direct relationships is a mechanism for building deep resilience through trust. The message is not "our milk is cheaper", but "our milk represents a fair wage for the farmer and a better life for the cows". This creates a different value proposition that is immune to direct price comparison. Strong social capital and shared identity create loyal communities that will

consciously support the niche, even if it requires more effort or costs, thereby allowing alternative practices to mature and stabilise (Reckinger, 2022). Education and empowerment create a ripple effect, slowly shifting cultural norms and consumer expectations, which in turn create market and political opportunities for a broader systemic reconfiguration (Forssell and Lankoski, 2015).

7. Limitations

We acknowledge that searching only Scopus and Web of Science, while standard for capturing high-quality peer-reviewed literature and ensuring analytical depth, may have omitted relevant studies indexed in other databases. This choice is justified as the selected databases are reasonably comprehensive and multidisciplinary. We acknowledge that excluding a formal, systemic search of grey literature means we may have missed some practical insights, which is a limitation for capturing the full practitioner perspective. While the majority of screening and data extraction were conducted by a single researcher, uncertain cases were discussed and agreed upon among the author team. The lack of formal dual screening and calculation of inter-rater reliability is a limitation, but it was mitigated through the use of a predefined protocol to ensure consistency. A further limitation is that the operationalisation of “effectiveness” in this research, as the positive outcomes of communication, may potentially overlook other specific measures of effectiveness. We acknowledge the difficulties in proving that a specific communication strategy caused an outcome when other external factors cannot be isolated. The social, cultural and political landscapes of AFNs differ significantly across geographical settings; future research should focus on co-designing and piloting recommended communication strategies in a specific local context. Future researchers may also use other methodological approaches to analyse interactions in Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats, etc., to understand how information is shared within AFNs.

8. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, we conclude that communication strategies in AFNs are far more than practical tools for market coordination. They are essential elements of a socio-technical niche. Through a deliberate combination of trust-building, interpersonal engagement, digital tools, and value-legitimising labels, AFNs are actively working to reconfigure the social, cultural, and informational landscape of food. The messages in AFNs simultaneously function to de-legitimise the dominant regime by exposing its flaws, legitimise the niche alternative by building trust and community, and empower individuals to become agents of change, thereby creating the necessary social energy for a broader transformation of the food system. The outcomes of AFN communication strategies derived from international best practices are not a random collection of benefits but are foundational to their identity and impact, and offers evidence-based conceptual toolkit for Scottish researchers and practitioners.

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Data Availability Data sharing is not applicable for this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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