

Infiltrating Consumers' Minds: The Effectiveness of Soft Selling in Digital Product Viral Marketing Strategies

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ABSTRACT

In the fast paced digital marketing era, viral marketing strategies have become a popular approach to reach a wide audience through the power of sharing on social media. However, the success of this strategy depends not only on the speed of dissemination but also on the communication approach used. This study is a narrative review of literature from 2020–2024 that discusses the effectiveness of soft selling methods in the context of viral marketing, specifically in the digital product sector in Indonesia and globally. Soft selling is a subtle and persuasive marketing approach that prioritizes storytelling, emotional value, and audience relevance over direct calls to purchase. The study results show that soft selling strategies have been proven to increase audience engagement, strengthen brand awareness, and contribute to purchase intent and sustained conversions. Soft selling allows viral content to be more authentic, non-intrusive, and creates a deep emotional connection with consumers. These findings recommend the use of soft selling as a primary strategy in digital product viral campaigns, with adjustments to the cultural context and audience behavior.

Keywords: Soft Selling, Viral Marketing, Digital Product, Marketing Engagement, Consumers, Brand Awareness

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INTRODUCTION

Illustration of the concept of viral marketing on social media. Viral marketing is a strategy for spreading promotional messages through social networks and digital media quickly and widely, resembling the spread of a virus.[1] In practice, this strategy encourages the audience to share content or messages with other users, thereby achieving exponential growth in audience reach.[2] Viral marketing is widely used in digital product marketing because it offers various benefits, including increasing brand awareness, reaching a wider audience at a relatively low cost, and triggering effective marketing buzz.[3] However, the key to a successful viral campaign lies in the appeal of the content itself it must be interesting and engaging enough to compel people to share it. This is where the soft sell approach becomes crucial.

Soft selling is a subtle or indirect sales method, focusing on building relationships and emotional engagement with the audience rather than aggressively pushing for a sale. Unlike hard selling, which is straightforward and urgent ("buy now"), soft selling is more subtle and persuasive, for example through storytelling, humor, or educational content that is valuable to consumers.[4] In the digital marketing era, there has been a shift from demonstrative hard selling methods to more persuasive soft selling, utilizing storytelling on social media to connect emotionally with audiences (Wei et al., 2023; Syahrivar et al., 2025). This narrative approach is effective because it activates consumers' affective processing and generates more positive attitudes toward the brand than explicit, factual advertising.[5][6] Soft-selling content typically doesn't feel like direct advertising, making it more easily accepted and trusted by audiences. This is

especially relevant in viral marketing strategies: content that doesn't feel like advertising tends to be more liked and shared by users, potentially going viral.

This narrative review will examine the effectiveness of the soft-selling approach in viral marketing strategies, focusing on the digital product sector. The discussion focuses on the impact of soft-selling on audience engagement, increased brand awareness, and conversion or purchasing behavior. The literature used covers global and Indonesian publications from 2020–2024 from accredited journals (indexed by SINTA and Scopus). This review aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of soft-selling in viral digital product marketing, as well as its implications for consumer engagement, brand awareness, and sales conversion.

METHOD

This study was conducted as a narrative literature review using the IMRAD approach. The literature search focused on SINTA-accredited journal articles (for the Indonesian context) and Scopus-indexed journals (globally) published between 2020 and 2024. Keywords used included: "soft selling," "viral marketing," "digital product marketing," "engagement," "brand awareness," and "conversion" in both English and Indonesian ("soft selling method," "viral marketing," "digital product," etc.). The selected studies included both quantitative and qualitative research relevant to the topic, with a focus on soft selling strategies in the context of viral campaigns on digital media. Inclusion criteria were limited to journal articles (including indexed proceedings) that discussed the effectiveness or outcomes of the soft selling approach, particularly its impact on engagement, brand awareness, and conversion/purchase intention metrics. From the search results, key literature that met the criteria was then reviewed to extract key findings. Next, findings from various sources were synthesized narratively within the Results and Discussion framework. Each statement sourced from literature is given a citation according to the APA 7th Edition format.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

In general, the literature shows that a soft-selling approach plays a crucial role in the success of viral campaigns, particularly in digital marketing. Subtly and engagingly packaged marketing content has been shown to increase audience engagement, strengthen brand recall and awareness, and drive consumer purchase intent. The following presents findings from the literature related to these three key aspects.

Soft Selling and Audience Engagement in Viral Marketing

A soft-selling approach tends to generate higher audience engagement in the context of social media. Because soft-selling isn't oriented toward direct sales, the content presented is typically more customer-centric and valuable to the audience for example, entertaining, informative, or emotional. This makes the audience more willing to pay attention, like, comment, and even share the content, which are indicators of high engagement. Saputra (2025) explains that storytelling-based soft-selling advertisements with emotional and aspirational narratives significantly influence consumer engagement on social media.[7] Narrative content that taps into the audience's emotions or values tends to encourage consumers to identify with the story, leading to greater affective engagement. This emotional engagement is crucial in viral marketing because it encourages people to share their experiences or feelings with their networks.

Furthermore, studies show that the effectiveness of viral marketing relies heavily on active user participation in spreading the content. Relevant and emotional soft-selling content is more likely to spark such participation. A recent analysis highlighted that viral forwarding is heavily influenced by the content's relevance to the audience and the emotional response it evokes.[8] Content that is relevant to the audience's

interests or needs and is able to evoke positive emotions will encourage a stronger intention to share.[8] In other words, a soft selling approach which generally uses stories, humor, or inspirational messages – creates engaging content that drives electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). This aligns with the findings of Wati et al. (2023, in Wibowo et al., 2024) that e-WOM generated from viral content has a positive impact on consumer purchasing behavior.

From a practical perspective, soft-selling content on social media is often realized through collaborations with influencers or user-generated content. Influencers who promote digital products in a subtle way (for example, simply showing product use in everyday life, without an explicit call to purchase) can attract high engagement because it feels authentic. An example of a case in Indonesia is the campaign for the cooking spice product Sasa through comedian Raditya Dika's YouTube channel, where the soft-selling strategy successfully built relationships with millennial audiences and increased engagement and conversation around the brand (Baihaqi & Cahyarani, 2025). This type of content does not offer overt advertising, but rather packages the product message in an entertaining way that suits the audience's interests, resulting in a higher engagement rate than conventional hard-selling ads. This subtle approach also prevents audiences from feeling bored or repelled by advertising; instead, audiences feel entertained or benefited, and then voluntarily share the content. Thus, it can be concluded that soft-selling drives audience engagement, which is a key driver of viral marketing. Compelling, relevant, and emotional soft-selling content creates a positive experience for audiences, making them more actively involved and advocates who voluntarily spread the brand's message.

The Impact of Soft Selling on Brand Awareness

One of the biggest contributions of soft selling strategies to viral marketing is increasing brand awareness. Because soft selling focuses on implicit product communication and building long-term relationships, brand messages tend to be remembered without feeling pushy. Literature shows that soft selling marketing methods are highly effective in building brand awareness, although their direct influence on purchasing decisions may not be as strong as hard selling.[10] According to the results of a study by Muttaqin et al. (2024), marketing using soft selling techniques does not directly influence consumer purchasing interest, but has a significant impact on increasing brand awareness. This means that the audience may not be immediately compelled to purchase the product, but they become more familiar with and familiar with the brand and its products. In the long run, this increased awareness is invaluable because it is the initial stage in forming brand preference and loyalty.

Soft selling approaches often convey the story or values behind a digital product, which helps instill a brand image in consumers' minds. For example, soft selling content might highlight how a digital application simplifies daily life through user stories, rather than detailing specifications or price promotions. This strategy makes the brand more emotionally salient and memorable. As revealed in a Mailchimp study (2023), the benefits of soft selling include creating low pressure on consumers and building a stronger brand connection with the audience, compared to an aggressive hard sell approach. This strong brand connection is indicated by increased brand recall and brand recognition among audiences after exposure to soft-selling content.

Other research supports the positive impact of soft selling on brand awareness. Successful viral campaigns typically show a significant spike in awareness metrics. For example, Traveloka's viral email billboard strategy in 2020 (where the billboard design resembled an unconventional email interface) successfully sparked widespread social media conversation and increased brand awareness. While this approach isn't exactly soft selling in a digital context, the essence is similar: creativity and subtlety of the message capture the public's attention without "forcing" a direct promotion. People are moved to discuss

and share information about Traveloka because they are intrigued by its unique concept, which ultimately increases brand awareness drastically.

Empirically, the relationship between brand awareness and viral marketing has also been confirmed through quantitative research. Wibowo et al. (2024) found that viral marketing significantly influenced TikTok Shop consumers' purchasing decisions, but brand awareness had a more dominant influence on these decisions.[13][14] These findings indicate that the effect of viral marketing on driving sales is largely mediated by its success in increasing awareness. The higher a consumer's awareness of a brand (as a result of exposure to viral content), the more likely they are to consider the product when making a purchase decision. In other words, soft selling that can make a brand go viral in consumers' minds will create brand familiarity and top-of-mind awareness, which are crucial for converting interest into purchases at a later stage.

From the various descriptions above, it can be concluded that the soft-selling approach plays a crucial role in increasing brand awareness through viral marketing. Creative and emotional soft-selling content embeds a brand's message in a subtle yet profound way, enabling audiences to remember the brand more. This increased brand awareness not only benefits market reach but also lays the foundation for building consumer trust and preference for the digital products being marketed.

The Influence of Soft Selling on Conversion and Purchase Intention

The final aspect examined is the impact of the soft selling approach on conversion, namely the change from interest to purchase or consumer intention. Traditionally, hard selling has been considered a more direct sales driver because it involves an explicit invitation. However, recent literature shows that soft selling can also significantly boost conversion through the mechanism of building positive attitudes and consumer trust.

Monesa & Simanjuntak's (2024) research on soft-selling ads on the TikTok platform provides empirical evidence that this subtle approach is effective in driving purchase intent. In the study, short TikTok ads with soft-selling messages (visual, emotional, and implicit) generated positive attitudes toward the ads in the audience, which in turn significantly increased purchase intent. The three dimensions of soft selling studied visual appeal (image), emotional appeal (feeling), and implicit communication were all shown to contribute positively. In fact, engaging visual elements (e.g., aesthetically pleasing product displays within the context of a story) played the strongest role in evoking a positive attitude in the audience. This finding is consistent with Advertising Attitude Theory, which states that a positive attitude toward an advertisement will increase the likelihood of consumers purchasing the advertised product. In other words, soft selling paves the way for conversion by first building rapport and brand liking.

While soft selling tends to take the "long road" to conversion, this approach builds trust and engagement, which are key factors in purchasing decisions, especially for digital products. Digital consumers are often more cautious and rely on reputation and trustworthiness before purchasing a service or application. Informative and sympathetic soft selling can reduce consumer resistance and increase their trust in the brand. Similarly, Mailchimp's (2023) analysis notes that soft selling strategies contribute to higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty, ultimately leading to better conversion rates in the long term. In fact, one example of a soft selling tactic, a drip email campaign, has been reported to increase conversion rates by up to 50%. Shows how a consistent, subtle approach can move consumers towards a purchase when done correctly.

However, several comparative studies note that the effects of soft selling vs. hard selling on conversion can vary depending on the situation. Research by Muttaqin et al. (2024) found that while soft selling is more effective at capturing audience attention, hard selling strategies generate a higher percentage of purchase intention in the short term. In a survey of Gen Z in Indonesia, 73.8% of respondents

were interested in buying a product after seeing a hard-selling advertisement that directly offered the product, while 46.3% were interested in buying after seeing a soft-selling advertisement. This suggests that to encourage impulse buying or quick decisions, direct calls may be more compelling to some consumers. However, the findings also indicate that soft selling has a slight advantage in capturing attention (higher average attention scores). which means soft selling successfully makes consumers aware and interested, even if not all of them immediately intend to buy. Therefore, many experts recommend a combination approach or balanced strategy: soft selling is used to reach a broad audience, building engagement and trust, while hard selling can be inserted in a limited manner for a clear call to action at the final conversion stage.

In the context of digital products, conversion often doesn't happen immediately but rather through a funnel process (awareness → interest → trial → purchase). Soft selling effectively fills the upper funnel stage (awareness and interest) by increasing the number of users interested in the product, which can then be shifted to the purchase stage through further strategies. The success of viral marketing with soft selling is ultimately also reflected in metrics such as increased traffic, number of leads, frequency of app downloads, or new user registrations, which are the initial forms of conversion for digital products. Once the audience is converted into users, the positive experience and emotional connection built through the soft sell approach will increase retention and the potential for repeat purchases or subscriptions.

From this discussion, we can conclude that soft selling has a positive effect on conversion, although the impact is often indirect. Soft selling works by building a strong foundation (engagement, trust, and brand preference) that then drives purchase intent and ongoing purchasing decisions. In other words, this approach may not always generate as high an immediate sales volume as hard selling in the short term, but it is highly effective in creating sustainable long-term growth through a loyal and satisfied customer base.

CONCLUSION

Based on a recent literature review (2020–2024), the soft selling approach has proven effective as a marketing method in viral marketing strategies, particularly in the digital product sector. Soft selling contributes significantly to generating viral content that is loved by audiences, due to its non-aggressive but persuasive and value-added nature. The main findings can be summarized as follows: (1) Soft selling increases audience engagement emotional, relevant, and entertaining content encourages users to interact and share brand messages voluntarily, expanding reach virally. (2) Soft selling strengthens brand awareness consistent, subtle communication makes the brand more memorable and close to the hearts of consumers without causing saturation, so that brand awareness grows rapidly as the content goes viral. (3) Soft selling supports conversion by building positive attitudes and trust although its effect is not as fast as hard selling in triggering instant purchase actions, soft selling builds a foundation of trust and preference that ultimately increases purchase intention and customer loyalty, contributing to sustainable long-term conversion.

The practical implication of this study for digital product marketers is the need to integrate soft-selling strategies into viral campaigns. A soft-selling approach can be realized through the creation of storytelling content, the use of influencers or user-generated content, the presentation of product information in an educational or entertaining manner, and two-way interaction with the audience. In this way, companies can create positive viral buzz while building strong brand equity. While soft-selling should be the dominant approach in viral marketing, a combination with subtle hard-selling elements at crucial points (e.g., a call to action at the end of the content) can be considered to maximize conversions without sacrificing engagement.

As a final note, the effectiveness of soft selling in viral marketing is also influenced by understanding the audience and cultural context. In high-context cultures like Indonesia, the indirect communication style

of soft selling tends to be highly appropriate and well-received.[4]However, consumer preferences can change over time; therefore, continuous evaluation and A/B testing of various approaches are still necessary. In conclusion, the soft selling method is a powerful strategy in viral digital product marketing to increase user engagement, expand brand awareness, and ultimately drive conversions effectively and sustainably. By embracing soft selling, marketers can strike a balance between widespread message dissemination (going viral) and building strong customer relationships, which together drive marketing success in today's digital age.

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