

Mega vs. Macro Influencers: Narrative Analysis of Motul Promotions on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

The development of digital technology has transformed the landscape of marketing communication, particularly through social media, which has become a dominant channel for influencer marketing strategies. This research offers novelty by analyzing the differences in soft-selling and hard-selling communication styles employed by mega- and macro influencers in promoting Motul-branded vehicle oil on Instagram, an automotive industry context rarely explored in Indonesia. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with thematic analysis, this study identifies recurring patterns in promotional narratives. Data were collected through content documentation, semi-structured interviews with the Motul brand manager, and online narrative questionnaires. The study operationalizes 'promotional narratives' by analyzing four core elements: personal experience, emotional framing, technical explanation, and Call to Action (CTA). The findings indicate that soft selling is more effective in building emotional attachment, while hard selling drives information seeking. The contextual insights from this research enrich the digital marketing communication literature in the automotive sector and provide a practical contribution for marketers in designing targeted collaboration strategies with influencers that align with audience segments and campaign goals.

Keywords: *influencer marketing; digital marketing communications; soft selling; hard selling; automotive industry*

ABSTRAK

Perkembangan teknologi digital telah mengubah lanskap komunikasi pemasaran, khususnya melalui media sosial, yang telah menjadi saluran dominan untuk strategi pemasaran influencer. Penelitian ini menawarkan kebaruan dengan menganalisis perbedaan gaya komunikasi soft-selling dan hard-selling yang digunakan oleh mega- dan makro-influencer dalam mempromosikan oli kendaraan bermerek Motul di Instagram, konteks industri otomotif yang jarang dieksplorasi di Indonesia. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan analisis tematik, data dikumpulkan melalui dokumentasi konten, wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan manajer merek Motul, dan kuesioner naratif online yang relevan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa penjualan lunak lebih efektif dalam membangun keterikatan emosional dan kesadaran merek, sementara penjualan keras mendorong pencarian informasi dan keputusan pembelian. Integrasi adaptif dari kedua pendekatan telah terbukti mampu membimbing konsumen melalui tahapan model AISAS secara berkelanjutan. Wawasan kontekstual dari penelitian ini memperkaya literatur komunikasi pemasaran digital di sektor otomotif dan memberikan kontribusi praktis bagi pemasar dalam merancang strategi kolaborasi yang ditargetkan dengan influencer yang selaras dengan segmen audiens dan tujuan kampanye.

Kata kunci: pemasaran influencer; komunikasi pemasaran digital; penjualan lunak (soft selling); penjualan keras (hard selling); industri otomotif

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has transformed the landscape of marketing communication, with social media becoming a dominant promotional channel. Influencer marketing has become one of the effective digital marketing communication strategies for reaching and influencing consumers in the social media era (Hudders et al., 2021; Tiago et al., 2023). In Indonesia, the growth of social media users, particularly on Instagram, creates significant opportunities for brands to leverage the power of influencers in building engagement and brand awareness. This trend also applies to the automotive industry, where personal narratives and influencer credibility play a significant role in influencing product purchase decisions, including vehicle lubricants (Statista, 2023; Conde & Casais, 2023). One common approach in influencer marketing strategy is to classify influencers into several categories based on the number of followers: nano influencers (less than 10,000 followers), micro influencers (10,000–100,000), macro influencers (100,000–1 million), and mega influencers (more than 1 million followers) (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022). This category not only represents reach but also influences communication methods and audience engagement levels (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017).

One communication approach frequently used by these influencers is soft selling and hard selling. According to Kotler et al. (2021), modern marketing communication approaches require marketers not only to sell products but also to build emotional engagement with the audience, which aligns with the principle of soft selling. On the other hand, the hard-selling approach remains relevant, especially when marketers want to convey a direct, concise, and action-oriented message focused on purchasing. These two strategies can be delivered through diverse communication styles, depending on the characteristics of the influencer and the social media platform used.

Instagram, as one of the visual-based social media platforms, has its own appeal in facilitating the delivery of promotional messages in a narrative and aesthetic way. Automotive influencers on Instagram often combine a personal communication style with product visualization, creating a closer relationship with their audience (Sokolova & Perez, 2021). However, there haven't been many studies that specifically explore how these soft-selling and hard-selling communication styles are applied differently by mega- and macro-influencers in the context of promoting technical products like vehicle oil. Oil products like Motul present a promotional challenge due to their technical nature, requiring a communication approach that is not only informative but also builds consumer trust. Motul itself is an oil brand known among automotive enthusiasts for its quality and innovation, as well as its active engagement with various local automotive influencers on social media (Motul Indonesia, 2023).

Based on this phenomenon, this study aims to analyze and compare the soft-selling and hard-selling strategies used by mega- and macro-influencers in Motul's digital campaign on Instagram, as well as their implications for consumer perception and the effectiveness of integrated marketing communications (IMC). A qualitative research approach is used to explore these differences in communication styles, particularly within the context of the automotive industry in Indonesia, which is still rarely explored. The findings of this research

are expected to contribute theoretically to the influencer marketing literature in the automotive sector, while also offering practical insights for brands in designing collaboration strategies with influencers that are relevant to audience profiles and campaign goals.

METHOD

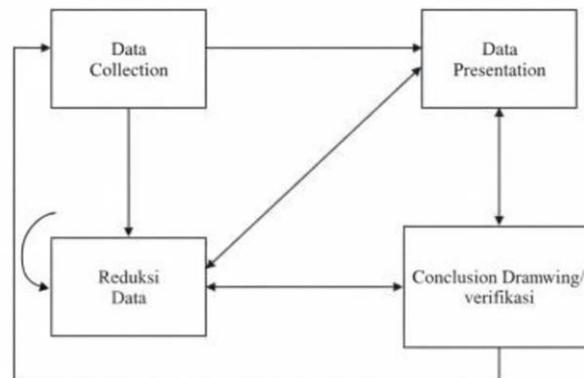
This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive narrative study design. This approach was chosen because the research aims to deeply explore and understand the communication styles used by automotive influencers in promoting Motul oil products through the Instagram social media platform (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allows researchers to explore marketing communication phenomena contextually and reflectively, as well as interpret the meaning of promotional narratives delivered by influencers. The subjects in this study were classified into two categories based on the number of followers: mega influencers (more than 1 million followers) and macro influencers (100,000–1 million followers). The subjects were selected purposively based on their involvement in Motul Indonesia's social media promotion campaign, particularly on Instagram. In this research, 'promotional narrative' is defined as the strategic sequence of messages used by influencers to integrate Motul products into their digital content. The analysis focuses on how influencers transition from Personal Experience (e.g., sharing a road trip story) to Technical Explanation (e.g., explaining oil viscosity) and finally to Call to Action (e.g., discount codes). This multi-element approach ensures that the analysis captures both the emotional and functional layers of the promotion

The data collection techniques in this study involve three main methods: documentation, semi-structured interviews, and online narrative questionnaires. Documentation includes archiving content such as images, videos, narrative captions, and audience interactions like the number of comments and likes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018). This data is used to analyze visual and verbal patterns in the delivery of promotional messages. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face (offline) with a Motul Indonesia Brand Manager as the key informant to explore communication strategies and considerations in choosing automotive influencers. Additionally, online interviews were also conducted with six active Instagram users who regularly follow automotive promotional content. Third, the researchers distributed an open-ended narrative questionnaire online, which yielded five in-depth narrative responses from consumers. This data triangulation approach is used to increase the validity of research findings and capture perspectives from two main sides, namely the brand and the audience, more completely and reflectively (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To analyze the collected data, this study uses thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was chosen because it is capable of identifying, analyzing, and reporting meaningful themes or patterns from qualitative data, whether from content documentation, interviews, or narrative questionnaire responses. The thematic analysis followed a rigorous three-stage coding process: (1) Initial Coding: Identifying raw keywords such as 'smooth engine' or 'link di bio'. (2) Categorization: Grouping codes into narrative clusters (e.g., 'Relatability' vs. 'Authority'). (3) Thematic Mapping: Linking these clusters to the soft-selling/hard-selling dichotomy to ensure qualitative validity

To support the data coding and categorization process, this study also refers to Creswell's (2018) Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers, which provides systematic guidance in classifying and simplifying narrative information into an organized structure. By combining visual and linguistic content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019) with thematic and narrative approaches, this research can generate a deep understanding of the soft-selling and hard-selling communication styles used by mega- and macro-influencers in shaping consumer perceptions of Motul oil products on Instagram.

Figure 1. Analysis of Data Interactive Model



Source: (Miles & Huberman, 2009 in ResearchGate, 2024)

Data Analysis Techniques Used in this Study: The data analysis technique used in this research is data triangulation, which involves combining the results of documentation, interviews, and content analysis to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Triangulation aims to increase the validity of findings by comparing data from various sources and methods (Flick, 2023).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

These findings can be further explained using the Attention–Interest–Search–Action–Share (AISAS) model and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which help to understand how consumers process influencer promotional messages on Instagram. From an elaboration likelihood perspective, the variation between soft-selling and hard-selling communication styles should be understood as a strategic adjustment rather than a fixed influencer characteristic. While mega influencers often leverage emotional storytelling to engage audiences through the peripheral route, macro influencers tend to utilize more rational and information-driven messages aligned with the central route. However, these tendencies are flexible and may overlap depending on campaign objectives, brand guidelines, and audience expectations.

It is important to emphasize that the distinction between soft-selling and hard-selling communication styles in this study does not represent a rigid or exclusive classification. Instead, the findings indicate a dominant tendency in how communication styles are expressed by different influencer types. Mega influencers tend to adopt soft-selling narratives when

aiming to build emotional resonance and long-term brand image, while macro influencers more frequently employ hard-selling approaches when emphasizing technical credibility and product functionality. This suggests that communication styles are context-dependent and strategically adjusted rather than inherently determined by influencer category. The generated content emphasizes technical features, product advantages, and a direct call to action to purchase. This approach aligns with the view of Tiago et al. (2023) that influencers with a very wide audience reach require concise and assertive messaging to maintain audience attention in a short amount of time.

Figure 2. Promoting Motul products on Instagram by Mega Influencer



Source: Motul Indonesia Official Instagram, 2024

The findings demonstrate that soft-selling communication styles play a significant role in fostering emotional engagement, trust, and parasocial relationships between automotive influencers and their audiences. Through personal narratives, storytelling, and the integration of products into everyday experiences, soft-selling content aligns with audience expectations for authenticity on Instagram. Both interview and questionnaire data confirm that audiences prefer non-intrusive promotional messages, as overly explicit or sales-driven content tends to generate resistance. This result supports previous studies highlighting that emotionally driven narratives are more effective in sustaining long-term audience relationships, particularly within digital environments that prioritize relatability and experiential value.

This finding is also supported by open-ended narrative questionnaire responses, which indicate that most respondents feel more comfortable with a less aggressive communication style and tend to prefer an educational and narrative approach.

Table 1. Comparison of the influence of soft selling and hard selling on consumer perception and behavior

Dimensions	Soft Selling	Hard Selling
Emotional Appeal	High (narrative-based)	Low (functional-focused)
Cognitive Processing	Peripheral (low elaboration)	Central (high elaboration)
Trust and Relationship	Through authenticity	Through data credibility
Purchase Motivation	Aspirational	Practical and rational goals
Long-Term Loyalty Potential	Strong (relationship-building)	Moderate (depends on price/promotion)

Source: Adapted from Kotler et al. (2021), Petty and Cacioppo (1986), and Sokolova and Perez (2021)

From an AISAS and ELM perspective, hard-selling communication styles activate central-route processing by emphasizing technical explanations, performance claims, and explicit calls to action. This approach is particularly effective for high-involvement consumers who actively seek product information before making purchasing decisions. Within Motul's digital strategy, macro influencers serve an important role in facilitating the Search and Action stages of the AISAS model by providing technical credibility and practical guidance. However, while hard-selling accelerates purchase intention, its effectiveness depends on audience readiness and may lead to resistance if perceived as overly aggressive.

The following word cloud visualization shows the most frequently occurring keywords from consumer perceptions of automotive influencer communication styles on Instagram.

Figure 3. Word cloud visualization

Source: Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2018

The word cloud in Figure 3 confirms the trend among digital consumers to choose non-intrusive promotional content, with an emphasis on trust, experience, and narrative. This strengthens the interview findings and is consistent with the studies by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Creswell (2018), which state that dominant themes in narrative data reflect the psychological values and motivations behind audience responses. Analysis of interviews shows that consumer response to communication style depends on psychological orientation, level of product involvement, and trust in the endorser. Soft selling, characterized by emotional narratives, lifestyle associations, and indirect persuasion, is more effective for audiences seeking relational value and experiences. Conversely, hard selling with direct language, technical explanations, and promotional calls to action appeals to consumers who desire clear and practical information.

Referring to Motul's brand position as a premium lubricant product that emphasizes performance, the combined use of soft and hard selling allows for the achievement of two strategic goals: strengthening emotional brand associations through lifestyle content and increasing conversions by highlighting technical excellence. This approach reflects the principles of integrated marketing communications (IMC), which is message consistency across channels to maximize campaign impact (Belch & Belch, 2018). This reflects a shift in digital consumer preferences toward more authentic, reflective, and informative communication experiences. Social media audiences today tend to reject explicit and pushy promotional content and are more responsive to content that provides added value, such as light technical education, usage tips, or real-life experience stories. Thus, soft selling is considered more adaptable to the characteristics of digital consumers who desire control in decision-making.

This finding supports the theory of Kotler et al. (2021), which states that a soft-selling approach is more effective in building long-term relationships with consumers, especially for products with low emotional involvement, such as vehicle oil. Furthermore, the communication strategy must consider the context of audience segmentation. For young audiences like Gen Z, soft selling that portrays aspirational and authentic narratives is highly effective. However, in technical segments such as daily motorcycle users and automotive communities, the hard-selling style provides the necessary information to inform purchasing decisions.

Table 2. Framework for alignment between influencer type, communication style, and needs

Influencer Type	Communication Style	Primary Content Format	Benefits for the Audience	Strategic Goals
Mega	Soft-selling	Lifestyle videos, stories	Inspiration, association, emotional connection	Awareness, emotional connection
Makro	Hard-selling	Reviews, tutorials, carousels	Technical information, performance clarity	Consideration, purchase conversion

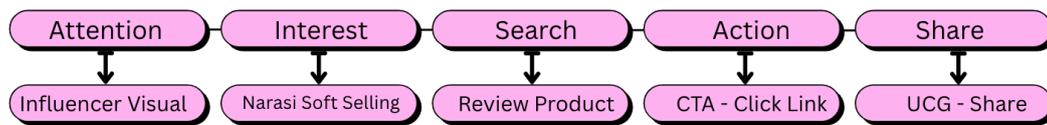
Source: Adapted from Lou & Yuan (2019), Influencer Marketing Hub (2022), and interviews with Motul Brand Manager (2024).

The data demonstrates that reach is not merely a quantitative metric. For Mega-influencers, high reach necessitates a soft-selling approach to maintain a broad, relatable appeal. For Macro-influencers, their mid-tier reach allows for a more 'expert-centric' narrative, leveraging hard-selling to build technical authority within a specialized community. Besides communication styles, the difference in roles between mega- and macro-influencers in Motul's digital campaign is also very significant. Based on an interview with the Motul Brand Manager, mega influencers are typically contracted long-term to quickly reach a large audience, while macro influencers are used in community-based or local campaigns. "We contract mega influencers annually, while macro influencers are usually hyper-local and only used for occasional campaigns" (Motul Brand Manager). Furthermore, the results of the questionnaire and interviews with consumers indicate that macro influencers are perceived as more relatable or closer to the daily lives of their audience, while mega influencers are considered more credible or authoritative sources of information. "I prefer macro, it usually relates to us" (Evan, Consumer). This comment emphasizes that macro influencers tend to build stronger emotional connections with their followers.

Visual elements and parasocial relationships further reinforce the effectiveness of influencer communication styles. Soft-selling visuals tend to employ natural lighting, everyday settings, and relaxed expressions that enhance emotional closeness, while hard-selling visuals emphasize clarity, product focus, and calls to action. Interview data confirms that audiences are more likely to trust influencers perceived as authentic and relatable, strengthening parasocial bonds that increase acceptance of promotional messages. This finding reinforces parasocial relationship theory, which explains how perceived personal connections enhance consumer trust and purchase intention in influencer marketing.

This finding strengthens the parasocial relationship theory (Sokolova & Perez, 2021), which explains that the perception of a personal relationship can influence consumer trust and their purchase intention toward products recommended by influencers. This finding is also consistent with the results of the study by Marquez, Leal, & Ferreira (2020), which, through meta-analysis, found that the soft-selling approach has advantages in building long-term preference compared to hard-selling, especially in the digital context that prioritizes experience and engagement. When reviewed through the AISAS model (Attention, Interest, Search, Action, Share), a digital consumer behavior framework that describes the stages from awareness to information sharing, the narrative and soft-selling approaches proved to be more effective in building interest and driving information seeking. Meanwhile, the hard-selling style is more direct in driving purchasing action but risks causing resistance if it is too explicit. "I checked the price and features after watching the review" (Drajat, Consumer). This shows that the communicative style is able to move the audience toward the 'search' stage. "If there's a CTA, I click it; if not, I skip it" (Rizky, Consumer). The CTA (call to action) is the main driver in the 'action' stage. Motul's communication strategy, which combines soft and hard selling elements in various stages of its digital campaign, has proven capable of guiding consumers from awareness to the action stage continuously.

Figure 4. The AISAS Model Visualization in Motul Product Influencer Marketing Strategy



Source: Adapted from Li and Pan (2023) and Suhud et al. (2022)

This visualization summarizes how each element of influencer communication moves consumers through the stages in the AISAS model, from attention to sharing. This finding aligns with the research by Li and Pan (2023), which showed that integrating visual and narrative signals in digital communication can enhance engagement and information-seeking motivation. Additionally, Suhud et al. (2022) emphasize that each stage in AISAS is significantly interconnected within the context of online consumer behavior, as reflected in Motul's strategy, which combines personal narratives and calls-to-action to achieve promotional effectiveness.

Besides message strategy, the interview results also show that Motul strikes a balance between brand control and influencer creative freedom. A campaign brief was provided, but influencers were allowed to adapt the narrative to their personal style. "Influencers can add drama because audiences like relatable content" (Motul Brand Manager).

Figure 5. Photo documentation with Motul Brand Manager



This approach allows for the creation of more natural content that aligns with audience expectations while maintaining brand image consistency. This collaborative strategy reflects the importance of an adaptive approach in digital communication that prioritizes authenticity. Besides the effectiveness of communication in promotional strategies, the value aspect brought by the brand is also a concern. Although sustainability is a significant global issue, the Motul brand has not actively integrated this value into its promotional narrative. The Brand Manager stated that sustainability is not currently a major focus, but there is potential for future development. This opens up space for further studies to explore how automotive brands can communicate environmental issues in their digital campaigns.

As an academic contribution, this research enriches the literature on narrative communication styles in influencer marketing, particularly in the automotive industry, a topic that is still underexplored in Indonesia. From a practical standpoint, the research findings can serve as a reference for: (1) Brands in selecting the type of influencer that aligns with their communication goals, (2) Digital marketing practitioners in designing campaign narratives that resonate with the audience profile, and (3) Further researchers who wish to explore sustainability aspects or other digital channels such as YouTube and TikTok for comparison. Thus, this discussion not only offers an in-depth analysis of digital communication strategies but also confirms that the success of influencer marketing campaigns lies in the adaptive combination of informative hard selling and emotional soft selling. This approach needs to be tailored to the audience segment and the consumer journey phase, while also opening up new avenues for exploration in value-based and social relationship marketing practices.

This study, which investigates the communication methods of mega- and macro-influencers when advertising Motul oil products on Instagram, was made possible by the invaluable contributions of various major sources and methodologies. In order to guarantee a thorough and thoughtful understanding of the phenomenon, the study used a descriptive qualitative technique with thematic analysis, referencing information from content documentation, semi-structured interviews with a Motul brand manager, and online story surveys. Frameworks for theory, such as the AISAS model, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, and concepts of parasocial relationships, were instrumental in analyzing consumer behavior and the effectiveness of soft- and hard-selling strategies in the digital marketing landscape. The findings, which highlight the distinct roles of different influencer types and communication styles in guiding consumers through their purchasing journey, were enriched by existing literature on influencer marketing and digital communication, providing both academic and practical insights for the automotive sector in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that in Indonesia's digital automotive marketing landscape, influencer reach (mega versus macro) should not be understood merely as a quantitative metric, but as a strategic determinant of narrative function within promotional communication. Rather than operating as rigid categories, mega and macro influencers exhibit dominant tendencies shaped by audience scope, campaign objectives, and brand strategy.

Mega influencers primarily function as gateways for brand exposure and emotional resonance, utilizing soft-selling narratives to maintain broad relatability and trust across diverse audiences. In contrast, macro influencers play a critical role in delivering technical explanations and product credibility, often employing hard-selling elements to support consumers during the information-seeking and purchase stages. Through the AISAS framework, mega influencers are most effective in the Attention and Interest phases, while macro influencers facilitate the Search and Action phases for high-involvement products such as vehicle oil.

These findings demonstrate that effective influencer marketing does not rely on a single communication style, but on an adaptive integration of soft-selling and hard-selling strategies aligned with the consumer journey. Academically, this research contributes to digital marketing communication literature by extending AISAS and parasocial relationship theories into the underexplored context of automotive influencer marketing in Indonesia. Practically, the study offers a strategic blueprint for brands, emphasizing that influencer selection and narrative design must be aligned with campaign goals, audience readiness, and the desired stage of consumer engagement.

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