

# A Study on Soft Selling Practices through Content Analysis of Instagram Influencers in Tamil Nadu

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## Abstract:

This study will explore soft-sell promotional strategies on Instagram Reels among micro-celebrities in Tamil Nadu, especially how influencers endorse brands in culturally sensitive manners while preserving audience trust. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, this research examines 303 Instagram Reels produced by ten micro-celebrities across five niches: food, fitness, fashion, beauty, and local exploration. The sample also includes influencers with followers ranging between 10,000 and 100,000, the content being systematically selected from posts published between October 1 and December 31, 2024. In this research, primary soft-sell techniques, disclosure practices, and audience-oriented strategies in influencer content are identified through a binary (yes/no) coding scheme. Placed against the broader diffusion of subtle, authenticity-driven promotion from overt advertising on social media, findings highlight ways in which micro-celebrities use relatability, narrative integration, and cultural alignment as prevailing tactics to promote brands in the absence of overt sales appeals. This study helps to understand influencer marketing practices in regional and culturally specific contexts, underlining the role of soft-sell strategies in sustaining credibility and trust among followers.

## Introduction:

The growth of social media platforms has redefined the advertising industry, resulting in an era where authenticity and relatability are key to win over the consumers' minds. Classic advertising models, normally characterized by overt promotional messages, are increasingly being replaced by more subtle and embedded strategies, especially in the dynamic landscape of spaces like Instagram (Abdul Rani et al., 2022). This is attested to by the rise of "soft sell" advertising strategies that emphasize trust building and rapport with consumers at the expense of direct sales tactics, as impressively captured in content generated by micro-celebrities (Khamis et al., 2017a). Micro-celebrities, as referred to as individuals who have comparatively smaller but highly active base followers, have become important drivers of consumer attitudes and behaviors, especially in targeted regional contexts like Tamil Nadu (Shiromani Gupta, 2020) Their ability to form intimate relationships with their followers, coupled with their subtle acquaintance with local cultures as well as tastes, makes them effective tools of conveying powerful marketing messages that resonate deeply with the target clientele (Wahid, 2022)). The aim of this study

is to examine the soft sell advertising strategies employed by micro-celebrities on Instagram Reels in the context of the cultural and economic environment of Tamil Nadu. The exploration of this issue is integral to the understanding of the evolving dynamics of digital advertising as well as its impact on consumer behavior in a targeted regional context. Through an examination of the strategies employed by micro-celebrities on Instagram Reels, this study aims to shed light on the efficacy of soft sell advertising strategies in the construction of brand engagement, the formation of consumer attitudes, and the impact on purchasing behaviors in the Tamil Nadu market. This research seeks to offer valuable advice for advertisers, marketers, and content producers who wish to recognize the dynamics of internet advertising and take advantage of the advantages offered by micro-celebrity endorsements in the ever-evolving social media environment (Khamis et al., 2017b).

### **The Emergence of Micro-Celebrities and Subtle Advertising Techniques**

The micro-celebrity phenomenon has been of great interest to scholars in the last two years, becoming a core theme in the context of social media influence and digital marketing. Micro-celebrities have arisen because of diverse reasons such as the democratization of content production promoted by social media networks, the increased demand for authenticity and proximity in advertisements, and the increased skepticism concerning traditional marketing tactics. This evidence informs the emerging literature on social media and explains the influence of micro-celebrities on consumer responses ((Zhang & Li, 2019)). This process apart, micro-celebrities differ from celebrities in the scale and structure of their fame, substituting mass media exposure with sustained interaction, perceived authenticity, and personalized content in niche digital communities to develop close, trust-based relationships with followers (Shiromani Gupta 2020). This phenomenon has seen a shift in the practice of advertising, with marketers increasingly embracing the soft sell approach that emphasizes developing trust and rapport with the consumer instead of direct selling. Soft sell advertising is a departure from traditional, overtly promotional message-making, with a focus on subtle persuasion and rapport development (Syarifah, 2022). The fundamental principle of soft sell advertising is the creation of a positive brand experience and establishing rapport with the target market. Such a strategy follows the preferences of contemporary digitally informed consumers, who are more likely to respond positively to authentic and engaging content than to explicit promotional messages ((Hasanah & Wahid\*, 2019)).

### **Instagram Reels and Tamil Nadu Context**

Instagram Reels, a feature that enables short-form videos to be created inside the Instagram app, has seen unprecedented growth in popularity, especially among the youth. The platform of Instagram itself is the most popular social media platform, with nearly 75% of the overall users, with users spending two hours a day on social media (Erwin et al., 2023)). Instagram has been found to be especially popular among young adults (Saini, 2020). For business professionals or marketers representing companies just entering the field of social media, focusing efforts on Instagram is imperative (M. Haikal Sultana Abdullah & Aekram Faisal, 2022). The platform is a powerful marketing platform, enabling businesses to reach a large and diverse group.

Tamil Nadu, south India, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and entertainment sector, providing a fascinating backdrop on which to consider soft-sell advertising strategies. Consumers make purchasing decisions on the basis of their personal opinion, which is influenced by the image of the brand. In the

digital world of Tamil Nadu, micro-celebrities, those with a small but loyal social media following, have emerged as opinion leaders (Ha & Yang, 2023)

The rise of social media platforms like Instagram has created new ways for micro-celebrities to interact with their publics and sponsor products or services. Micro-celebrities utilize social media platforms to endorse the brand image of products since this element is a major part of marketing strategies and forthcoming promotional efforts (Darmatama & Erdiansyah, 2021). The rising trend of TikTok among teenagers has encouraged marketers to wake up and take a notice of sponsoring beauty products through this online platform (Darmatama & Erdiansyah, 2021). Micro-influencers hired on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok have emerged as an important element of the marketing strategies utilized by companies working in industries like fashion, beauty, tourism, and food (Gong & Li, 2017). Studies have shown that customers are more likely to buy products after watching content created by influencers (Afzal et al., 2024) These influencers give companies a chance to introduce their products or services to their respective target markets.

### **Soft Sell Advertising Strategies**

Soft sell advertising strategies focus on establishing trust and rapport with customers and, as such, take a more subtle and interactive marketing style (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020). The goal of such strategies is to create a positive brand experience and create familiarity with the target market. Rather than openly selling products or services, soft sell advertising seeks to exchange value with customers through information, entertainment, or interaction. By providing such valuable information, brands can position themselves as trusted sources and gain credibility with the target market. Soft sell advertising often uses the technique of storytelling to build emotional connections with customers, leveraging emotions such as empathy, humor, or nostalgia to build brand loyalty (Júnior et al., 2023). Soft selling is most successful when influencers focus on being a friend and building a personal relationship with their audience, rather than direct sales. By situating their brand within an environment of something familiar and emotionally appealing, companies can achieve greater levels of interaction than through the use of traditional hard-sell promotion methods. This style has been very successful in the modern reality of social media, where customers are bombarded with advertising messages and are more inclined to reject overt promotional material.

Subtle promotional methods are:

- Storytelling: Compelling storytelling that appeals to the target audience and is emotionally appealing.
- Humor: Utilizing wit and humor elements to connect and create an unforgettably powerful brand experience.
- User-Generated Content is content created by customers that features the product or service naturally and in an informal way.
- Educational Content: Providing insightful and useful information that positions the brand as a knowledgeable authority in the field.

Soft-sell advertising is more effective than any other technique.

### **Methodology**

The research employs a qualitative content analysis approach, with quantitative indicators, to examine the soft-sell advertising strategies of micro-celebrities on Instagram Reels. The examination is on influencers

in Tamil Nadu with a following audience of 10,000 to 100,000, who are typically referred to as "micro-influencers" in Indian digital marketing environments.

### **Sampling Criteria**

- Geographic Target: Influencers that are from Tamil Nadu or have Tamil-language content.
- Platform: Instagram.
- Time frame: Reels and Posts released between October 1, 2024, and December 31, 2024.
- Number of Influencers: 10
- Total Reels Tested: 303 Reels

### **Sample selection**

Tamil Nadu-based Instagram influencers having 10K–1M followers across all niches: beauty, fitness, food, lifestyle, culture, and health.

### **Data Collection**

A systematic sample of 303 Instagram Reels & posts was collected. Each Reel was analyzed for the occurrence of five soft-sell tactics and four indicators of disclosure. Coding was done using a binary approach (yes/no), against overt observation.

### **Analytical Framework**

#### **Soft-Sell Techniques:**

1. Storytelling – narrative context
2. Tamil words – verbal or written
3. Lifestyle integration – product included in daily routines
4. Trust framing – personal use or support
5. Soft CTA – subtle prods, not aggressive sell

#### **Disclosure Practices:**

1. Hashtag presence – "#ad" or "#sponsored"
2. Verbal disclosure – explicit sponsorship
3. Caption note – written collaboration statement
4. Product labeling/visual indicator – brand identifier or emblem displayed.

### **Analysis**

The emergence of social media has changed the way marketing is done, with brands engaging influencers who have direct access to niche communities (Leparoux et al., 2019). Influencers in some niches such as fashion, fitness, cooking, lifestyle, culture, entertainment, technology, and travel use soft selling approaches to engage their audience, building credibility and trust. Through a closer look at how influencers speak to their audience and incorporate subtle endorsements, this research tries to learn more about the approaches that make effective influencer marketing campaigns.

Effective influencer marketing relies on the creation of authentic content that resonates with the audience. These organically place product placements in their daily content, such as marketing a product in a real-

world setting, or referencing a brand in a real-world setting rather than through direct, hard-sell advertisements (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Influencer	Niche	Common Product Types Promoted	Soft-Sell Techniques Used
@cheekylogsss	Fashion & Lifestyle	Independent fashion brands, accessories	Storytelling try-ons, Personal stories + use of humor, Relatability through use of Tamil slang, Soft CTA: "Link in bio".
@deepika_v_	Fashion & Lifestyle	Independent fashion brands, accessories	Storytelling try-ons, Personal stories + life stories in tamil
@lattoskitchen	Cooking	Kitchen provisins like spices, oils etc	personal reference to generations of using the same oil or cookware, promoting products through story telling
@peppa_foodie	Food reviews	Street food & popular desserts	Informal walk-ins, Taste responses ("Semma taste!"), Mentioning nearby businesses, Non-verbal indicators
@tamizh..arasan	Travel Food & Fashion	Travel with strangers, Food reviews & Culture	Cultural storytelling, Travelling with unknown, Local language usage- "Paarunga romba azhagu irukku"
@mylapore_paati	Art & Food	Millet brands, condiments, saree stores	- Paati-style recipe demos- Generational trust element- "Namma ooru samayal" phrase use
@newtochennai	City Exploration	Restaurants, cafés, shops	"Hidden gems" atmosphere, Visually-driven Reels- Laid-back narration + Voiceover in Tamil- Subtle hashtags, not promotional
@sakthii__	Fashion & cinema	Fashion brands & movies	Demo based on routine, showing comfort in a particular brnad, promoting movie songs
@hazelshiny	Lifestyle	Outfits, Products	GRWM (Get Ready With Me) posts, Product talk in routines, Soft CTA: "If it works for you too..."
@dr_sharmika	Health & Education	Wellness supplements, apps	Professional + personal tone- Explains benefits casually- Balanced trust and expertise

**Table 1: An overall view of the microcelebrities and their niche**

Influencer Handle	Niche	Total Reels Analyzed
@cheekylogsss	Fashion/Lifestyle	15
@deepika_v_	Fashion/Lifestyle	14
@lattoskitchen	Cooking	7
@peppa_foodie	Food Reviews	62
@tamizh..arasan	Heritage/Culture	13
@mylapore_paati	Traditional Cooking	96
@newtochennai	City Exploration	49
@sakthii__	Fashion & Cinema	9
@hazelshiny	Haircare/Beauty	25
@dr_sharmika	Health/Education	13
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>303</b>

**Table 2: Influencer Overview**

**Key Findings:**

- A total of 303 reels were studied.
- Most of the reels focused on fashion and lifestyle.

Influencer	Storytelling	Tamil Used	Lifestyle Integration	Trust Framing	Soft CTA
@cheekylogsss	8	8	4	5	12
@deepika_v_	2	5	13	4	13
@lattoskitchen	0	6	4	3	6
@peppa_foodie	22	62	43	57	62
@tamizh..arasan	11	13	11	9	0
@mylapore_paati	12	96	9	81	92
@newtochennai	20	24	27	1	14
@sakhii_	0	9	3	0	2
@hazelshiny	3	16	19	12	18
@dr_sharmika	1	11	13	3	0
<b>Total (310)</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>219</b>

**Table 3: Soft selling strategy used.**

**Key Findings**

- The most used soft-sell method was soft CTA : 219 Reels (72.27 %) which indicates that influencers encourage their audience to take their desired action.
- Tamil Language was used in 250 Reels (82.5%) which indicates high cultural localization
- Storytelling arrived in 79 Reels (26.7 %) to influence sales through context, a method that was least used.

Influencer	Reels with #ad	Verbal Disclosure	Caption Note	Product Tagging/Visual Cue
@cheekylogsss	7	2	8	14
deepika_v_	4	3	11	14
@lattoskitchen	0	7	7	7
@peppa_foodie	0	53	47	62
@tamizh..arasan	2	10	0	13
@mylapore_paati	0	82	91	88
@newtochennai	10	44	39	49
@sakhii_	0	0	3	9
@hazelshiny	19	3	15	25
@dr_sharmika	0	2	11	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>293</b>

**Table 4: Ad Disclosure indicators**

**Key Findings:**

- Only 42 out of 303 Reels (13.8 %) used #ad or other similar hashtags
- There were verbal disclosures in 206 Reels (68 %)
- Visual cues (e.g., product placement/logo reveal) were most frequent: 293 Reels (97 %)
- The best practices were followed by: @hazelshiny by clearly mentioning ad disclosure indicators.

Influencer	Total Reels	Branded Reels (est.)	Disclosed Clearly (any method)	Undisclosed Branded Reels
@cheekyvlogsss	15	13	2	0
deepika_v__	14	11	3	0
@lattoskitchen	7	22	15	7
@peppa_foodie	62	20	16	4
@tamizh..arasan	13	17	10	7
@mylapore_paati	96	18	9	9
@newtochennai	49	19	17	2
@sakthii__	9	20	22	0
@hazelshiny	25	18	15	3
@dr_sharmika	13	27	27	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>303</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>32</b>

**Table 5: Cross Metric Summary**

### Niche Comparison

- Lifestyle & Fashion influencers (e.g., @hazelshiny & @deepika\_v) attained 100% disclosure at visual and captions.
- Food and lifestyle bloggers like @peppa\_foodie and @mylapore\_paati used implicit cues mainly, i.e., product tagging, with about 30% using hashtags or explicit mention.
- Our findings contribute to previous research that soft-selling behaviors increase trust and cultural compatibility (Abidin, 2016; Deep Prakash & Majumdar, 2021). Shortcomings in disclosures indicate regulatory deviations that could erode consumer trust and violate ASCI guidelines (ASCI, 2024). A niche imbalance also suggests ethical imbalances: creators of Lifestyle & Fashion category types indicate greater compliance, possibly because of professional duty.

### Conclusion

Soft-sell marketing is prevalent and culturally sensitive marketing practice in the Instagram space in Tamil Nadu, based on storytelling, local language, and lifestyle integration to reach consumers. Nonetheless, lack of consistent disclosure undermines ethics and transparency. Guidelines in the industry and education campaigns need to be reinforced for influencers and brands.

Practical implications are:

- Required ad tags (platform nudging)
- Brand collaborations requiring explicit disclosure
- Regional creators' training for regulation

This study examined micro-celebrities in Tamil Nadu's strategies for applying soft-sell tactics on Instagram Reels for subtle and convincing brand promotion. Analyzing in-depth content of 303 Reels of ten diverse influencers, we noted extensive use of lifestyle integration (38 %), regional language integration (82 %), and storytelling (26 %) as core elements of soft-sell marketing. These tactics follow the broader trend of digital marketing focusing on cultural integration and story-driven marketing in local cultures (Abidin, 2016)

While the content was effective at combining promotional messages with engaging formats, the practices of disclosure were unethical. Only 13% of the branded content employed explicit hashtag-based disclosures (e.g., #ad or #sponsored), and verbal mention was present in just 67% of cases. These figures raise questions about transparency and compliance with regulatory expectations, particularly within the context of the influencer guidelines published by the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI, 2024).

The disparity between high content engagement and less good compliance with disclosure requirements is most notable in fields like nutrition and health, where consumer decision has concrete consequences. Although health-focused influencers @dr\_sharmika presented considerable consistency in disclosures, food, beauty, and lifestyle content creators tended to rely on implicit signals, like product placement or visual tagging, without explicitly stating their commercial motives. While this study offers important insight into regional soft-sell strategies used on Instagram Reels, several opportunities remain for further study on audience perceptions of soft-sell content and the possible effect of lack of disclosure on brand trust, influencer credibility, or consumer behavior.

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