



EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF SOFT-SELL AND HARD-SELL ADVERTISING FORMATS ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR ON DOUYIN: A STUDY OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR MARKETERS

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of soft-sell and hard-sell advertising formats on consumer behavior and engagement on Douyin, focusing specifically on the cosmetics product category. The objective is to compare the impact of these advertising approaches on purchase decisions and explore differences in consumer acceptance and preference within this high-involvement, image-driven sector. A quantitative research methodology was employed, utilizing a structured online questionnaire distributed via Douyin and WeChat. The study applied convenience sampling, targeting a stratified sample of 400 active users who regularly engage with cosmetic-related content on the platform. Key findings indicate that soft-sell advertising excels in fostering emotional connections and enhancing consumer interaction, particularly by leveraging aesthetic appeal, influencer endorsements, and storytelling techniques. While hard-sell advertising remains effective in driving immediate purchase decisions through direct product highlights and promotional urgency, it struggles to sustain long-term engagement and participation. Soft-sell advertising demonstrates a strong influence on consumer trust and long-term purchase intentions through emotional resonance and brand value transmission. In contrast, hard-sell advertising is more effective in triggering short-term purchase impulses but may risk post-purchase dissatisfaction. Moreover, while soft-sell advertising aligns with consumers' pursuit of emotional and aspirational experiences in the beauty and skincare context, the directness of hard-sell advertising—though capable of quickly capturing attention—may lead to consumer resistance or skepticism.

Overall, the study finds that soft-sell advertising on Douyin enhances long-term consumer engagement in the cosmetics category, while hard-sell advertising drives immediate purchases. Though neither format was strongly preferred, soft-sell appeals to emotions, and hard-sell supports rational decisions. These insights guide beauty brands in balancing short-term conversions with long-term loyalty on social media.

Keyword: Soft-sell advertising, Hard-sell advertising, Consumer behavior, Douyin, Social media marketing

Introduction

Understanding the impact of soft-sell and hard-sell advertising formats on consumer behavior is crucial in the digital age, especially on platforms like Douyin, one of China's most popular social media applications. As digital marketing evolves from traditional methods toward short-form video and interactive content (Dašić et al., 2023), companies increasingly invest in platforms like Douyin to reach specific demographics more effectively (Homburg & Wielgos, 2022).

Douyin's algorithm enables personalized content delivery, making it ideal for studying advertising impact (Li, 2018). Soft-sell advertising, which emphasizes emotional storytelling and brand resonance, is known for fostering long-term loyalty (Okazaki, Mueller, & Taylor, 2010), while hard-sell strategies—direct and product-focused—are often linked to immediate purchase responses but may risk negative perceptions if too aggressive (Ren, 2019).

The platform itself supports both formats: features like hashtag challenges align with soft-sell strategies by encouraging user-generated content and organic brand interaction (Verot, 2023), while live-stream shopping promotes real-time hard-sell opportunities. Consumer preferences also vary by age, with younger users often favoring creative soft-sell content and older users responding better to informative, hard-sell tactics (Chen, 2022).

While prior studies have explored advertising effectiveness on Douyin, few have directly compared soft-sell and hard-sell strategies in the context of specific product categories, such as cosmetics. This study addresses that gap by examining how each format influences engagement, trust, and purchase decisions within the beauty sector. It contributes to both marketing practice and academic discourse by offering insights into optimizing social media advertising for different consumer responses. These findings can guide marketers in crafting balanced campaigns that drive both short-term conversions and long-term brand equity. Further research could explore similar comparisons across other product categories or demographic segments to broaden understanding in this rapidly evolving field (Ausat & Abu, 2023).

Objectives of Study

- 1) To examine the influence of soft-sell and hard-sell advertising formats on consumer behavior and engagement on Douyin.
- 2) To compare the difference between soft-sell and hard-sell advertising formats in the impact on consumers' purchase decisions on the Douyin.
- 3) To explore the consumer's acceptance and preference differences between soft-sell and hard-sell advertising formats on the Douyin.

Literature Reviews

1) Elaboration likelihood model

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1980), offers a foundational framework for understanding how consumers process persuasive messages. On Douyin, this model helps explain how soft-sell and hard-sell advertisements influence users through two distinct cognitive routes: the central route, which involves thoughtful and deliberate message processing, and the peripheral route, which relies on superficial cues like visuals or spokesperson appeal. By recognizing differences in consumers' motivation and ability to process information, marketers can tailor ad content to encourage either deep reflection or quick emotional appeal. Effective application of ELM enables the creation of persuasive advertising strategies that align with users' cognitive states and maximize impact on Douyin.

2) Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) offers insights into how advertising influences consumer intentions and behavior. It emphasizes three key components: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. On Douyin, soft-sell advertisements may enhance positive attitudes and align with social norms through emotional storytelling, while hard-sell formats may increase perceived control by providing direct product information. Understanding how these components interact allows marketers to predict behavioral intentions and refine ad strategies that are psychologically aligned with Douyin users' motivations and social contexts.

3) AIDA Model

The AIDA model, introduced by Lewis (1898), remains a cornerstone of marketing communication. It outlines four key stages in consumer response: Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action. On Douyin, hard-sell advertising often drives immediate attention and action through direct appeals and calls-to-action, whereas soft-sell advertising builds interest and desire over time through engaging visuals and emotional narratives. By analyzing how different ad formats perform at each AIDA stage, marketers can better structure their messaging strategies for greater consumer engagement and conversion.

4) Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory, first developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), focuses on how and why individuals actively seek out specific media to satisfy personal needs. In the Douyin context, users consume content for entertainment, social interaction, and self-expression. Marketers can apply UGT by designing advertising content—especially soft-sell formats—that aligns with these user motivations. For example, campaigns that encourage user-generated content or emotional storytelling can fulfill users' desire for identity reinforcement and entertainment, increasing engagement and brand loyalty.

5) Concept of Online Marketing

Online marketing, as defined by Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019), encompasses a range of strategies that leverage digital channels to reach and influence consumers. On platforms like Douyin, effective online marketing integrates real-time engagement, algorithm-driven personalization, user participation, and data analytics to deliver targeted advertising. Both soft-sell and hard-sell formats benefit from Douyin's tools—such as live streaming and interactive challenges—that enable immersive and measurable consumer interactions. Understanding online marketing concepts is essential for brands aiming to develop adaptive, platform-specific strategies that resonate with digital audiences.

Research Methodology

1) Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design aimed at examining the impact of soft-sell and hard-sell advertising formats on consumer behavior among Douyin users. Although an experimental design using a 2x2 factorial technique would be ideal for establishing causality, a survey-based method was selected due to its feasibility in accessing a large and diverse sample of Douyin users across various regions in China. This approach allows for the statistical analysis of relationships between advertising formats (independent variables) and consumer responses such as engagement, preferences, and purchase intentions (dependent variables). Data was collected using structured online questionnaires, enabling efficient data collection and analysis.

2) Population

The population for this study comprises active Douyin users aged 18 to 45, as this age range is considered the most responsive to digital and social media advertising formats. According to ByteDance (2023), Douyin had over 600 million daily active users as of June 2023, with a significant portion of the user base falling within this age group. The selected age range ensures that the participants are digitally literate, active consumers of content, and within a demographic that marketers typically target for both soft-sell and hard-sell formats. This demographic alignment enhances the study's relevance to advertising strategies and product categories commonly promoted on Douyin.

3) Samples and Sampling Method

The required sample size was calculated using Taro Yamane's formula, with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. Based on the large population of Douyin users, the resulting sample size was 400 respondents.

A convenience sampling method was employed to distribute the questionnaire through Douyin and WeChat, targeting users who were active on these platforms and had prior exposure to both soft-sell and hard-sell advertisements. While convenience sampling has limitations in terms of representativeness,

it enabled the researcher to efficiently gather data from a diverse pool of users who met the demographic and behavioral criteria relevant to the study. Efforts were made to ensure that respondents matched the age and interest profile aligned with typical Douyin consumers.

4) Research Tools and Measurement

The primary data collection tool was a structured online questionnaire, distributed through the Wenjuanxing platform, widely used in China for academic and commercial research. The questionnaire included:

1. Demographic data: Age, gender, education level, and geographic location
2. Social media usage: Frequency of Douyin use, interaction with advertisements, and exposure to soft-sell and hard-sell content
3. Perception and behavior: Items using a 5-point Likert scale to measure perceptions of advertising effectiveness, emotional engagement, and purchase behavior. The questionnaire was carefully designed to distinguish between responses to user-generated content (UGC) and branded advertisements, especially in terms of emotional resonance, awareness, and behavioral intent. The validity and reliability of the instrument were pre-tested with a small group of users before full-scale distribution.

5) Data Collection and Analysis Process

Data was collected via an online survey, allowing broad accessibility and quick turnaround from respondents. Participants were required to confirm that they had been exposed to both soft-sell and hard-sell advertisements on Douyin, ensuring that the data collected was relevant to the study objectives.

Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic data and usage patterns. To examine the relationship between advertising formats and consumer behavior, correlation and multiple regression analysis were employed. These techniques allowed the researcher to assess:

1. The strength and direction of the relationships between independent and dependent variables
2. Whether advertising format had a statistically significant impact on consumer engagement and purchasing decisions

While this study does not employ a true experimental design, the careful selection of relevant demographic groups, exposure criteria, and structured statistical analysis contributes to the internal validity and practical applicability of the findings, particularly for marketers seeking to understand advertising effectiveness on Douyin.

Results of Research

1) Demographic Information

Number and percentage of sample group by gender it was found that 215 people were female, or 53.8% and 185 people were male, or 46.3%. Categorized by age, it was found that most were aged above 50 years old, 141 people, or 35.3%. Categorized by education level, it was found that the most examples had a High school, 112 people, or 28%. Categorized Occupation, It was found that most of examples were retired, 114 people, or 28.5%.

2) Conclusion of Research Results by Objectives of Study

2.1) To examine the influence of soft-sell and hard-sell advertising formats on consumer behavior and engagement on Douyin.

Soft-sell advertising has shown outstanding performance in establishing emotional connection and promoting interaction with consumers. Its strategies and content elements can effectively attract consumers to participate deeply, and meet the needs of Douyin users in entertainment and social interaction. However, this does not mean that hard-sell advertising is useless. Its directness in promoting purchase decisions still has some value, but it needs to be improved in attracting continuous attention and participation of consumers to better adapt to the communication characteristics and user preferences of the Douyin platform.

2.2) To compare the difference between soft-sell and hard-sell advertising formats in the impact on consumers' purchase decisions on the Douyin.

Soft-sell advertising focuses on long-term influence on consumer purchasing decisions, establishing consumer trust and potential purchasing intentions through emotional bonds and brand value transmission. Hard-sell advertising has a strong performance in directly stimulating consumers' purchase impulse in the short term, but it may face the risk of consumer satisfaction after purchase. Marketers should use two advertising formats reasonably based on product characteristics and marketing objectives, balancing short-term sales and long-term brand building needs to achieve better marketing results.

2.3) To explore the consumer's acceptance and preference differences between soft-sell and hard-sell advertising formats on the Douyin.

Soft-sell advertising has won consumers' favor by virtue of emotional resonance and entertainment, and satisfied their pursuit of emotional experience on social media. The directness of hard-sell advertising has certain advantages in attracting attention quickly, but it is also easy to cause consumer resistance. Marketers should have a deep understanding of consumers' needs and contexts and choose or combine advertising formats accordingly to improve the acceptance and effectiveness of advertisements, better meet consumers' expectations in different contexts, and thus enhance the overall effectiveness of marketing activities.

3) Hypothesis Testing Results

3.1) Soft-sell advertising formats will have a positive impact on consumer behavior and engagement on Douyin.

The performance of soft-sell advertising on Douyin is closely related to consumer participation. Through its unique emotional transmission and creative elements, soft-sell advertising has achieved remarkable results in attracting consumers to participate in depth, and consumer participation has become a key factor affecting its effect. This shows that soft-sell advertising can effectively reach the hearts of consumers, stimulate their positive interaction, and provide an important direction for the optimization of advertising effects.

3.2) Hard-sell advertising formats will positively influence consumers' purchase decisions on Douyin.

The hard-sell advertising format plays an important role in the purchase decision-making process of Douyin consumers. Hard-sell advertising, with its direct presentation of product advantages and clear benefit guidance, has a strong performance in promoting consumer purchase decisions. Its direct impact on purchasing decisions is significant, and the model can explain the changes in purchasing decisions well. This provides marketers with a clear idea, that is, in situations where the product has obvious advantages or specific market environments, the reasonable use of hard-sell advertising strategies can accurately convey product value, effectively promote consumer purchasing behavior, and improve sales conversion rates.

3.3) Consumers will show differing levels of acceptance and preference for soft-sell versus hard-sell advertising formats on Douyin.

That in most measurement aspects, consumers do not show obvious preference for soft-sell or hard-sell advertising formats. However, the significant results specific areas where consumer behavior and preferences differ. These findings provide some support for Hypothesis, indicating that consumers' acceptance and preference for these advertising strategies vary from situation to situation. soft-sell format may be more attractive to emotional participation, while hard-sell format may be more consistent with rational decision-making. Consumers' acceptance and preference of soft and hard-sell advertisements show complex situational differences. Although the overall preference is not clear, the unique impact of different advertising formats is highlighted in the comparison of specific issues. This requires marketers to have a deep insight into the needs of consumers in different situations, accurately grasp the advantages and characteristics of soft-sell and hard-sell advertising, and flexibly combine and use them to adapt to diversified consumption scenarios, maximize the satisfaction of consumer expectations, and achieve the optimization and improvement of marketing effects.

Discussion

1) Discussion on Theories and Concepts

The findings of this study align closely with foundational advertising and consumer behavior theories, yet they also provide insights into their continued relevance in the evolving digital landscape—particularly on platforms like Douyin.

Soft-sell advertisements, which utilize emotional storytelling and brand narratives, encourage consumers to engage in deeper cognitive processing through the central route, as proposed by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Shao et al., 2023). For instance, when a brand shares a story of sustainability or corporate social responsibility, it prompts users to evaluate the congruence between their values and the brand, fostering a favorable brand attitude. In contrast, hard-sell advertisements operate via the peripheral route, relying on direct product features and time-sensitive offers to quickly grab attention and encourage immediate decisions.

While these theoretical frameworks were developed before the rise of algorithm-driven, short-form video platforms, their principles remain relevant. The underlying cognitive and emotional mechanisms they describe—central vs. peripheral processing, motivation, and attitude formation—still function in today’s media-rich environment. What has changed is not the validity of the theories, but the contextual delivery mechanisms. Douyin’s unique format of fast-paced, interactive content amplifies both soft- and hard-sell strategies, giving them new digital expressions while reinforcing the foundational psychological processes described in these models.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985; 1991) remains particularly applicable. It posits that behavioral intention is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. On Douyin, soft-sell advertising helps shape favorable attitudes by humanizing brands through emotional storytelling. Meanwhile, the platform’s strong social interaction features—likes, shares, comments—function as modern proxies for subjective norms. Consumers are influenced not only by the content but by their perception of what others think or do. This social validation mechanism aligns with TPB’s premise, showing that even in a social media environment, the formation of behavioral intention remains deeply social and attitudinally driven.

The AIDA model—Attention, Interest, Desire, Action—continues to guide advertising strategies effectively. On Douyin, soft-sell content attracts attention using emotional hooks or aesthetics (e.g., cinematic visuals or touching narratives), builds interest through storytelling, cultivates desire by embedding aspirational lifestyles, and prompts action over time through brand affinity. Meanwhile, hard-sell formats deliver quicker transitions across the AIDA stages with urgency, clarity, and direct calls to action. Although the delivery has become more dynamic and interactive, the psychological journey of the consumer remains unchanged, demonstrating the model’s sustained relevance.

Lastly, Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) underscores why consumers actively engage with content based on their needs. This study finds that Douyin users gravitate toward soft-sell advertising not just for product information but to fulfill emotional, educational, and social needs. For example, emotional storytelling serves entertainment and affective gratification; educational content embedded in ads provides cognitive utility; and the ability to share, react, and comment offers social connectedness. The persistence of this theory highlights that while platforms evolve, human motivations behind media use remain largely constant.

In summary, these traditional theories endure because they describe core human cognitive and behavioral tendencies, which persist even as platforms change. The difference lies in how these tendencies are activated—through features such as algorithmic targeting, short-form formats, and interactivity on Douyin.

2) Discussion on Related Research Studies

This study's findings also resonate with a wide body of prior literature, particularly concerning the effectiveness of soft-sell and hard-sell advertising strategies in shaping consumer behavior and brand perceptions.

Several previous studies have emphasized the role of soft-sell advertising in evoking emotional resonance and strengthening brand image (Xu & Wu, 2022). Consistent with these findings, this study confirms that soft-sell ads on Douyin—through storytelling and emotional cues—can effectively capture attention, build trust, and foster positive emotional associations with a brand. For instance, brand campaigns that share stories about founders' challenges or charitable efforts successfully trigger empathy and increase perceived authenticity, leading to deeper consumer engagement.

This research contributes further by situating these findings within the Douyin ecosystem, where the integration of user-generated content (UGC) with advertising adds another dimension. As users like, share, and comment on soft-sell advertisements, they contribute to the viral spread of brand narratives, reinforcing peer-to-peer validation and emotional bonds—effects less common in traditional media.

Moreover, consistent with Salim and Sofri (2022), this study underscores how soft-sell advertising satisfies a broader range of user needs. On Douyin, users encounter ads that are not just promotional but also entertaining, educational, and socially engaging. For example, ads that incorporate humor, cultural references, or practical tips serve multiple gratifications simultaneously, leading to higher engagement and shareability. This multi-functionality enhances ad effectiveness and supports long-term brand-consumer relationships.

On the other hand, the value of hard-sell advertising is also reaffirmed. As Beard (2004) noted, hard-sell techniques can be effective, particularly when targeting utilitarian purchase motivations. This study shows that when Douyin ads focus on showcasing product features,

limited-time offers, or performance advantages, they succeed in stimulating immediate consumer action—especially among users with clearly defined product needs. The digital context actually amplifies the urgency and impact of hard-sell ads, as real-time comments, countdowns, and promo codes create a sense of immediacy rarely seen in traditional media.

Together, these findings suggest that although digital platforms like Douyin have transformed how consumers interact with advertising, the fundamental principles of persuasion and media gratification remain robust. What has evolved is the platform’s ability to blend entertainment, education, and commerce, allowing both soft-sell and hard-sell techniques to coexist and thrive—depending on consumer context, content format, and engagement design.

Suggestions

1) Suggestions from This Study

1.1) Marketing personnel should have a deep understanding of the characteristics of soft-sell and hard-sell advertising, and skillfully select and combine advertising formats according to product characteristics, marketing objectives and the purchase decision-making stage of consumers.

1.2) A deep understanding of consumer needs is the cornerstone of developing effective advertising strategies. Marketers should use big data analysis, market research, and other methods to accurately grasp consumers’ interests, pain points, and purchasing motivations. Pay attention to the changing needs of consumers in different consumption scenarios, adjust advertising content and form in a timely manner to better meet consumers’ expectations.

1.3) The interactivity of Douyin platform provides a unique opportunity for marketing. Marketers should actively encourage consumers to participate in advertising interactions. Use the social attribute of Douyin to expand brand influence through user sharing and word of mouth communication, promptly responding to consumer comments and feedback, establishing a good communication mechanism between the brand and consumers, and enhancing consumer trust in the brand.

1.4) Soft-sell advertising has unique value in shaping brand image and cultivating long-term consumer relations. Marketing personnel should focus on delivering the brand’s core values and unique personality through soft-sell advertising, so that the brand can establish a positive and positive image in the hearts of consumers. Continue to invest in soft-sell advertising, maintain emotional communication with consumers for a long time, and cultivate consumer brand loyalty.

2) Suggestions for Further Study

2.1) Future research can further expand the sample size to cover consumer groups of different ages, genders, regions, cultural backgrounds, and consumption levels. At the same time, various research methods should be comprehensively applied, such as combining qualitative and quantitative research. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and other methods, research design to more accurately explore the causal relationship between different advertising variables and consumer behavior, providing more convincing basis for the formulation of advertising strategies.

2.2) With the diversified development of social media platforms and the acceleration of globalization process, future research can be expanded to multiple platforms to conduct cross platform comparative research, and analyze the effect differences and influencing factors of soft-sell and hard-sell advertising in different platform ecosystems.

2.3) Future research can further explore the moderating effect of consumer individual differences on the advertising effect of soft and hard-sell. Besides common demographic variables, further exploration can be made into how consumers' psychological characteristics (such as self-efficacy, perceived risk, innovation acceptance, etc.), consumption habits (such as purchase frequency, brand loyalty, shopping decision-making style, etc.), and social media use behavior (such as social media dependence, ways of participating in social interaction, etc.) impact their perception, attitude, and behavioral response to soft and hard-sell advertising.

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