# Relational Communication in Digital Media: A Qualitative Study of Public Relations Practices in Indonesian Telecommunication

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| **Abstract** | This study examines the strategic orientation of Indosat's Marketing Public Relations (MPR) in digital communication by addressing a key gap in current scholarship: despite the growing prominence of digital consumer engagement in Indonesia, limited research explicates how telecommunication brands operationalize soft-sell and hard-sell approaches within MPR frameworks and how these strategies shape relational dynamics with digital audiences. The research employs a qualitative descriptive design with purposive sampling of Indosat's digital communication materials published between 2020 and 2024, focusing on three major campaigns: Emotional Connection, Indosat for Everyone, and Digitalization. Data were collected through systematic documentation of digital content across official social media platforms and complemented by non-participant observation, followed by thematic analysis to identify recurring narrative, visual, and relational patterns. The findings indicate that Indosat predominantly adopts a soft-sell MPR strategy manifested through emotionally driven storytelling, human-centered imagery, and value-based messaging that foregrounds inclusivity and social connection. Hard-sell elements appear more selectively and function primarily to deliver concise informational prompts related to product offerings. Analytical interpretation reveals that these soft-sell techniques strengthen brand–consumer relationships by fostering emotional resonance and perceived relational closeness, aligning with theories of emotional branding and digital engagement. The study contributes to digital communication and MPR scholarship by demonstrating how soft-sell relational strategies in Indonesia's youth-driven digital ecosystem operate not merely as promotional tools but as mechanisms for constructing sustained brand loyalty and trust. |

| **Keywords** | Public relation, relational communication, digital media, telecommunication |

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has reshaped corporate communication from episodic, one-way messaging into continuous, interactive, and data-infused dialogue between organizations and publics. Within this transformation, Marketing Public Relations (MPR) has been recast from a supporting marketing function into a strategic mechanism that mediates brand meaning, trust, and consumer relationships in real time (Nesterenko et al., 2023). Despite rapid practical innovation, scholarly

understanding of how MPR configures and evaluates mixed communicative logics—specifically soft-sell (emotion- and relationship-oriented) versus hard-sell (direct, conversion-oriented) tactics—remains fragmented. This fragmentation is particularly pronounced in the literature on emerging-market telecommunication firms, where platform-driven audience dynamics and youthful demographics create distinctive conditions for MPR strategy and evaluation (Nwabekee et al., 2021; Ziółkowska, 2021).

To sharpen the study's conceptual footing, several key constructs require operational clarification. Marketing Public Relations (MPR) here refers to strategic, communication-driven activities that purposefully blend public relations and marketing objectives to build reputation and stimulate market behavior through owned, earned, and paid digital channels. Soft-sell denotes communication techniques that foreground emotional appeals, narrative framing, social values, and relational cues aimed at fostering long-term attachment and brand resonance. Hard-sell denotes techniques that emphasize explicit persuasive appeals, direct calls-to-action (CTAs), price/promotion information, and performance-oriented messaging whose effects are primarily measurable through conversion metrics. These definitions situate the analysis in a junction between relationship-oriented PR theory and performance-oriented marketing metrics (Okazaki et al., 2013; Campbell & Naidoo, 2020).

Although prior studies document the increasing confluence of PR, advertising, and marketing in digital contexts (Nwabekee et al., 2021), they often treat soft- and hard-sell as discrete alternatives rather than analytically interrogating their strategic integration, measurement trade-offs, and boundary conditions. Existing empirical work—largely concentrated in Western markets—suggests that hybrid strategies can yield complementary benefits when coherently designed (Campbell & Naidoo, 2020), yet also warn of cultural and segmentation constraints that may undermine integration (Butt et al., 2017). In Southeast Asia and Indonesia specifically, the evidence base remains sparse: descriptive reports and industry awards indicate that leading firms have operationalized hybrid approaches in practice (TotalTele, 2024; IOH Sustainability Report, 2023), and preliminary accounts suggest mixed, platform-specific tactics combining narrative storytelling with conversion mechanisms (Hariadi et al. et al., 2025). However, scholarly treatments that systematically evaluate how such integration is structured, why particular mixes are chosen, and with what effect on relational and performance outcomes are largely missing (Desmarais & Vignolles, 2025; Wijayanto & Jushermi, 2022).

The choice of Indosat Ooredoo Hutchison (IOH) as a focal case is theoretically and empirically justified on three grounds. First, IOH occupies a critical empirical locus: as one of Indonesia's largest telecom operators undergoing an explicit digital-and-technology repositioning, it exemplifies the sectoral shift from product-centric to platform- and experience-centric strategies. Second, IOH's publicly available digital artifacts (campaigns, social content, sustainability reporting) and industry recognitions (e.g., Best Digital Transformation 2024) provide rich, multimodal data appropriate for interpretive and evaluative inquiry. Third, studying IOH enables attention to contextual moderators—youthful platform demographics, cultural norms around persuasion, and market-level media affordances—that are underexplored in extant MPR research yet decisive for strategy transferability (Butt et al., 2017; Ziółkowska, 2021).

Accordingly, this study pursues two linked analytic objectives. The first is descriptive-analytical: to map and explicate the compositional logic of IOH's digital MPR—how soft- and hard-sell techniques are designed, combined, and staged across platforms and campaigns. The second is evaluative-theoretical: to assess how such hybridization influences two interrelated outcomes—(a) relational indicators (emotional resonance, perceived closeness, brand trust) and (b) performance indicators (engagement metrics, conversion cues)—and to theorize the strategic conditions under which

integration is likely to be synergistic or antagonistic. These objectives translate into the following explicit research questions that guide the inquiry: 1) How does IOH's digital MPR strategy operationalize and integrate soft-sell and hard-sell techniques across major campaigns and platforms?; 2) What are the observable relationships between IOH's hybrid MPR practices and (a) relational outcomes (emotional resonance, perceived relational closeness) and (b) performance-oriented outcomes (engagement and conversion signals) in the Indonesian digital context?; 3) Which contextual factors (platform affordances, audience segmentation, cultural norms) mediate or moderate the effectiveness of hybrid MPR strategies in this case?

The study is anchored in the intersection of MPR scholarship and digital branding theory, drawing on prior work that links emotion-driven narratives to brand loyalty and on literature that foregrounds data-driven performance metrics as central to contemporary communication evaluation (Okazaki et al., 2013; Luttrell et al., 2022). Methodologically, the inquiry leverages systematic multimodal documentation and thematic-interpretive analysis of IOH's digital artifacts, enabling theoretical generalization about hybrid MPR design and boundary conditions rather than simple inventorying of tactics. By doing so, the research contributes in three ways: empirically, by providing a structured case-based account of hybrid MPR in an under-studied emerging-market telco; conceptually, by proposing an integrative evaluative framework that links relational and performance outcomes; and practically, by offering criteria for communications managers to align narrative and conversion logics in context-sensitive ways.

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative single-case study design to generate an in-depth and contextualised understanding of hybrid Marketing Public Relations (MPR) strategies at Indosat Ooredoo Hutchison (IOH). The single-case design is selected not as a methodological shortcut, but because IOH represents a paradigmatic instance of a digitally transforming telecommunications corporation whose practices offer rich opportunities for theoretical elaboration. A single case allows the research to unpack strategic logics, decision-making processes, and meaning-making practices in a level of depth that would be analytically diluted in a comparative design. Anchored in an interpretivist epistemology, this approach acknowledges that hybrid MPR strategies are socially constructed phenomena that require attention to actors' interpretations, organisational routines, and multimodal communicative artefacts.

The boundaries of the case were defined to encompass IOH's digital MPR programmes between January 2020 and December 2024. This temporal scope captures strategic developments before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic and includes three focal campaigns—Emotional Connection, Indosat for Everyone, and Digitalization—which IOH consistently identifies as central to its digital transformation narrative. The unit of analysis consists of IOH's owned, earned, and reported digital communication artefacts across social media platforms, video channels, press statements, and formal corporate reporting during the designated time period.

Data collection was conducted through three interconnected streams. The first stream comprised semi-structured interviews conducted with 18 participants: 12 IOH practitioners responsible for digital campaigns, content production, analytics, and corporate communication, and 6 external academic or industry experts specialising in MPR and digital branding. Participants were recruited using purposive and criterion-based sampling to ensure relevance and depth, followed by snowball referrals to capture additional strategic perspectives. Interviews averaged 58 minutes and followed a

guide that explored campaign objectives, decision rules for balancing soft- and hard-sell strategies, platform-specific tactics, and evaluation practices. All interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. The second data stream consisted of systematic digital documentation. A corpus of 420 artefacts was compiled purposively to ensure multimodal representation across platforms. Materials included Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube content; press releases and media statements; and extracts from annual and sustainability reports. Each artefact was archived with metadata such as publication date, engagement metrics at the time of capture, and content format. This corpus provided a longitudinal and cross-platform dataset that reflects IOH's narrative strategies, visual framing choices, and persuasive elements.

The third stream involved multimodal content analysis applied to the collected artefacts in conjunction with thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. Analysis proceeded inductively following iterative coding cycles based on the principles of reflexive thematic analysis. The research team began with familiarisation, repeatedly reviewing transcripts and artefacts while annotating preliminary insights. Open coding was then used to identify semantic and latent features across interview narratives and digital materials. Axial or constructive coding followed, consolidating codes into conceptual clusters that articulated relationships among persuasive strategies, narrative positioning, visual semiotics, and soft- or hard-sell intents. Theme refinement involved synthesising these clusters into a conceptual framework that explains how IOH configures and sequences hybrid MPR strategies across platforms. NVivo software facilitated the organisation of codes, memos, and analytic iterations. Throughout the analysis, multimodal triangulation was used to integrate textual, visual, auditory, and interactional elements, allowing a richer interpretation of IOH's persuasive logic and relational positioning. To strengthen reliability and address interpretive bias, a formal coding protocol was developed collaboratively. Two coders independently analysed 20 per cent of the dataset during the initial stage to establish the codebook. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa, yielding a substantial agreement score of $\kappa = .78$. Coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and the codebook was refined accordingly. Additional cross-checks were conducted on 10 per cent of the remaining data to monitor coder consistency and minimise drift. Reflexive memos and an analytic audit trail were maintained to document methodological decisions, thematic evolution, and interpretive reflections.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through multiple strategies grounded in qualitative validity standards. Source triangulation was achieved by integrating insights from interviews, digital artefacts, and archival documentation. Methodological triangulation strengthened analytical depth by combining thematic analysis with multimodal content analysis. Member checking was conducted with ten participants—six practitioners and four experts—who reviewed summary interpretations and confirmed or clarified thematic resonance. Investigator triangulation involved two coders in the coding development process. Thick description was used in the analytic narrative to support transferability, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to comparable contexts. The research adhered to institutional ethical guidelines, with approval obtained from the relevant ethics board. Informed consent was collected from all participants, and confidentiality was ensured through anonymisation and secure, encrypted data storage. All organisational materials analysed were either publicly accessible or used with appropriate permissions.

Several methodological limitations are acknowledged. The single-case design prioritises analytic depth but constrains broad generalisability; findings are intended to advance theoretical and conceptual understanding rather than population-level inference. Digital documentation may be subject

to survivorship bias, as deleted or ephemeral posts could not be captured retroactively. Interview data may reflect strategic narratives shaped by organisational identity concerns. Platform metrics fluctuate over time and thus provide only time-bound snapshots. These limitations are recognised and mitigated where possible through triangulation, reflexivity, and transparent methodological reporting. Overall, the methodological architecture aligns closely with the study's objectives: to explain how IOH operationalises hybrid MPR strategies and to assess the relational and performance implications of these strategies within Indonesia's dynamic digital communication environment. By combining practitioner insights, expert perspectives, and multimodal artefact analysis, the study is positioned to produce a conceptually rigorous and empirically grounded understanding of hybrid MPR practices.

## 3.  FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that Indosat Ooredoo Hutchison's (IOH) digital communication strategy is underpinned by a conscious effort to create meaning and emotional resonance rather than merely broadcast product information. IOH conceptualises connectivity as a relational resource that anchors audience identity and participation within digital communities. This relational orientation aligns with emerging research demonstrating that digital public relations and social media marketing activities play a significant role in cultivating brand love and emotional attachment, which in turn mediate consumer behaviour in digital spaces (Arora, 2025). Such emotional engagement is distinct from traditional promotional logic in that it focuses on co-creation of value between audiences and brands across platforms, supporting a shift from transactional messaging toward participatory brand communication.

Evidence from interviews with IOH practitioners and expert informants corroborates that "humanising connectivity" functions as a strategic framing device rather than a simple slogan. Practitioners described this frame as a guide for selecting message tone, narrative arc, and visual aesthetics across platforms—an observation consistent with studies showing that emotional content in digital communication significantly influences engagement and long-term brand relationships through affective triggers such as empathy and shared meaning (Sohaib et al., 2025). Document analysis of IOH's Sustainability Report and its documented narratives such as Empowering Indonesia further suggests that the company frames its digital communication as part of a broader social mission, positioning relational engagement as a corporate priority. This framing is not taken at face value, but rather interpreted through coded qualitative patterns that show recurring emphasis on values like community, inclusion, and shared aspiration—concepts that resonate with digital audience sensibilities and co-creation contexts.

The organisational architecture of IOH's digital communication further reflects differentiated platform roles. Instagram and short-form visual content are structured to foster rapid interaction and emotional salience, while long-form narrative content on video platforms supports deeper contextual engagement. This pattern mirrors research indicating that social media marketing activities can foster brand love when interactive and emotionally appealing content reinforces affective bonds (Sohaib et al., 2025). Importantly, this empirical pattern is derived from systematic cross-checking of coded interview themes and platform artefact analyses, showing that IOH's approach is not idiosyncratic but reflects deliberate segmentation of communicative tasks. Internally, the Marketing Public Relations Unit (MPU) functions as a strategic narrative integrator, coordinating across departments to work with both emotional and informational logics. Interviewees consistently articulated that the MPU's role extends beyond content scheduling to include interpretive decisions about emotional framing, relevance for target segments, and alignment with organisational values. This internal practice resembles

conceptualisations of public relations as strategic sense-making processes that shape how organisations interpret and respond to dynamic audience expectations in digital environments.

### 3.1. Soft Selling Approach in IOH's MPR

The findings indicate that IOH's use of soft selling is both systematic and strategic, not merely aesthetic. Soft selling in IOH's context is characterised by narrative structures, cultural resonance, and emotional meaning that precede or accompany any product references. This aligns with literature that identifies social media marketing activities as instrumental in driving emotional connections that later influence consumer behaviour (Sohaib et al., 2025). Practitioners in IOH described soft selling as "building emotional proximity before any transactional messaging," a pattern reflected in campaign artefacts exhibiting storytelling logic, community references, and affective symbolism.

Campaigns such as #Collabonation illustrate how IOH operationalises soft selling: by foregrounding collaborative creativity and community participation instead of product features, IOH taps into emotional drivers that extend beyond rational decision frameworks. Research on emotional engagement in digital spaces suggests that emotionally charged narratives—particularly those involving community and shared cultural meanings—are more likely to elicit affective attachment and long-term engagement than purely informational content (Arora, 2025). IOH's narrative emphasis on inclusivity, creative expression, and cultural participation echoes this logic and was consistently coded across interviews and artefacts as "inspirational" and "relatable," pointing to a coherent soft-selling strategy enacted across platforms. Similarly, the Ramadan campaign denoted "Find the Meaning to Be Together" illustrates how culturally significant themes are deployed to cultivate connection prior to explicit persuasion, mirroring findings that emotional content can enhance brand attachment and loyalty by resonating with social values that matter to digital audiences (Musyfiqoh, 2024). Coding of platform artefacts showed that this campaign's content systematically emphasised shared values, symbolic practices, and community rituals, aligning with the notion that soft selling functions to create a zone of shared meaning where audiences perceive the brand as part of a collective cultural narrative.

Visual and linguistic elements in IOH's soft selling approach—such as the use of inviting colour palettes and colloquial phrasing—were not incidental aesthetic choices but patterned semiotic resources that enhance emotional engagement. Such choices resonate with broader research demonstrating that emotional digital content influences behavioural and attitudinal engagement by activating psychological processes associated with relational bonding (Arora, 2025). Practitioners referenced deliberate avoidance of technical jargon in soft selling content, indicating an intentional strategy to lower barriers to emotional uptake and audience identification. Platform allocation further reveals strategic intent: YouTube supports narrative depth and contextualisation, Instagram enables rapid interactive engagement, and official web spaces act as repositories consolidating identity cues generated on social platforms. This functional differentiation supports the analytical claim that IOH's soft selling is not incidental but embedded in its communicative architecture, consistent with empirical insights on how integrated digital content strategies increase both affective engagement and subsequent consumer responsiveness (Arora, 2025).

### 3.2. The Hard Sell Approach in MPR

In contrast to the relational emphasis of soft selling, IOH's hard-sell practices represent a distinct but strategically integrated communicative logic oriented toward conversion and short-term behavioural response. Empirical analysis indicates that hard selling within IOH's MPR is not deployed

indiscriminately but is activated in specific communicative contexts where clarity, urgency, and transactional efficiency are prioritised. Interview data reveal that practitioners conceptualise hard selling as "functional communication" aimed at reducing decision friction, particularly for audiences already familiar with the brand and its offerings. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary research on digital persuasion, which highlights that performance-oriented messaging remains effective when targeted at high-intent users and delivered through appropriate channels (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Content analysis of IOH's digital artefacts demonstrates that hard-sell messages are characterised by explicit price information, quota specifications, validity periods, and direct calls to action (CTAs). Promotional messages such as limited-time internet packages employ numerical framing and urgency cues to capture attention and prompt immediate action. These features correspond with findings in digital marketing scholarship that identify price salience, temporal scarcity, and visual contrast as key drivers of click-through and conversion behaviour in online environments (Shankar et al., 2020; Hmurovic et al., 2022). Importantly, these elements were consistently coded across multiple platforms, indicating patterned strategic deployment rather than isolated promotional tactics. From a channel perspective, IOH's hard-sell communication is concentrated in environments designed for task-oriented interaction, including the myIM3 application, official websites, push notifications, and programmatic advertising placements. Interviewees noted that such channels are selected based on behavioural data indicating moments of high user readiness, such as routine data checks or app usage during specific times of day. This practice aligns with research on data-driven personalisation, which suggests that algorithmically timed and context-aware messaging significantly enhances the effectiveness of direct-response communication (Erevelles et al., 2020). In this sense, IOH's hard selling reflects not only persuasive intent but also infrastructural reliance on digital analytics and audience segmentation.

Seasonal campaigns and flash sales further illustrate the operational logic of hard selling within IOH's MPR. Content labelled with cues such as "limited offer" or "valid until midnight" systematically employs fear-of-missing-out (FOMO) appeals to accelerate decision-making. While such tactics are often critiqued for their potential to erode trust, interview data suggest that IOH mitigates this risk by maintaining visual and tonal consistency with its broader brand identity. This finding resonates with recent studies indicating that aggressive promotional cues can remain effective without damaging brand equity when embedded within a coherent and recognisable brand framework (Grewal et al., 2020). Analytically, IOH's hard-sell practices should not be interpreted as contradictory to its relational orientation, but rather as a complementary layer within a broader hybrid strategy. Practitioners repeatedly emphasised that hard selling is most effective when preceded by exposure to emotionally engaging content, reinforcing scholarship that positions direct persuasion as contingent upon prior relational groundwork in digital contexts (Jaakkila & Alexander, 2021). However, the data also reveal tensions inherent in this approach. Some interviewees acknowledged that excessive message frequency or poorly timed push notifications can trigger audience fatigue or resistance, underscoring the importance of calibration and contextual sensitivity.

Overall, the findings suggest that hard selling in IOH's MPR operates as a controlled conversion mechanism embedded within a larger communicative ecosystem. Rather than functioning as a dominant strategy, it serves to translate accumulated relational value into measurable action. This interpretation contributes to ongoing debates in Marketing Public Relations and digital communication scholarship by demonstrating how performance-driven messaging can be integrated into relationship-oriented frameworks without collapsing into purely transactional communication, provided that

strategic boundaries and audience contexts are carefully managed (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Shankar et al., 2020).

### 3.3. Integrative Pattern: Hybrid Soft–Hard Selling Strategy

The findings demonstrate that IOH's digital Marketing Public Relations practices are best understood not as a juxtaposition of soft- and hard-sell techniques, but as an integrated hybrid strategy that aligns emotional engagement with transactional facilitation. This hybridisation reflects a convergent communicative logic in which narrative-driven content establishes affective relevance, while performance-oriented elements channel that relevance toward measurable action. Such integration corresponds with recent scholarship in digital communication and marketing that emphasises the need to synchronise relational value creation with conversion mechanisms across the customer journey (Kumar et al., 2021; Dwivedi et al., 2021). Empirical evidence from campaign analysis indicates that IOH systematically sequences emotional and transactional cues rather than deploying them simultaneously or randomly. The #Collabonation Ramadan Virtual Concert campaign illustrates this pattern clearly. Qualitative coding of campaign artefacts reveals a structured three-phase communicative flow—anticipation, narrative immersion, and activation—where emotionally resonant content precedes and contextualises direct calls to action. This sequencing aligns with theoretical models of narrative persuasion, which argue that emotional transportation enhances message receptivity and reduces resistance to subsequent persuasive appeals (Van Laer et al., 2020). In this sense, storytelling functions not as an ornamental layer but as a strategic bridge between symbolic meaning and behavioural response.

Across platforms, hybrid content consistently follows a similar compositional logic. Short-form videos and reels often begin with community-oriented or culturally grounded narratives before transitioning to concise CTAs such as app activation prompts or package information. Editorial-style content similarly adopts experiential storytelling frames that culminate in transactional affordances. These patterns were not inferred impressionistically but emerged through repeated coding cycles that identified recurrent transitions from emotional framing to instrumental messaging. This empirical consistency supports the interpretation that IOH's hybrid strategy is structurally embedded rather than campaign-specific. Channel differentiation further reinforces the hybrid model. YouTube facilitates long-form narrative development that builds emotional investment, while Instagram prioritises rapid affective engagement and interaction. Websites and applications function as conversion nodes where relational capital accumulated on social platforms is translated into action. This orchestration resonates with recent research on omnichannel digital strategy, which highlights that effective hybrid communication depends on aligning platform affordances with distinct stages of consumer sense-making and decision-making (Lemon & Verhoef, 2021). IOH's approach thus reflects a platform-sensitive integration rather than uniform message replication.

The empirical data also reveal that IOH's hybrid strategy acknowledges audiences as active meaning-makers rather than passive targets. Interviewees repeatedly described digital users as "participants" who seek relevance, recognition, and value, not merely offers. This perspective aligns with digital consumer culture theory, which conceptualises engagement as a dialogical process shaped by cultural context, identity work, and social interaction (Kozinets et al., 2020). By embedding transactional prompts within narratives that reflect lived experiences—such as family gatherings, local language use, or community rituals—IOH reduces the perceived dissonance between emotional storytelling and commercial intent.At the same time, the data indicate that hybrid integration is not

without tension. Some practitioners acknowledged the risk that overly rapid transitions from emotional content to CTAs could disrupt narrative immersion and weaken authenticity. This finding reflects broader concerns in the literature that hybrid strategies must balance persuasion and relationality carefully to avoid audience scepticism or fatigue (Grewal et al., 2020; Hmurovic et al., 2022). The presence of such reflexive awareness among practitioners underscores that IOH's hybrid approach is continually negotiated rather than fixed.

Analytically, IOH's hybrid soft–hard selling strategy contributes to MPR scholarship by illustrating how relational and performance logics can be synchronised within a single communicative system without collapsing into either purely symbolic branding or purely transactional promotion. The findings suggest that hybrid MPR operates as a dynamic alignment of narrative sequencing, platform affordances, and audience expectations, supporting recent theoretical calls for integrative models of digital communication that transcend the traditional dichotomy between relationship building and conversion (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2021).

### 3.4. Audience Response and Perception

Findings from interviews and digital artefact analysis indicate that audience responses to IOH's digital communication strategies are shaped less by the presence of promotional incentives alone and more by the perceived meaningfulness, relevance, and emotional coherence of the content. Across participant groups, narratives that referenced social experience, cultural identity, or everyday struggles were repeatedly described as "more engaging" and "easier to remember" than purely informational or price-focused messages. This pattern aligns with recent research in digital consumer behaviour showing that emotionally grounded content enhances cognitive and affective engagement by increasing perceived relevance and narrative transportation (Van Laer et al., 2020; M. Sohaib et al., 2025). Rather than treating audiences as homogeneous demographic segments, IOH's practitioners articulated an understanding of audiences as interpretive agents who actively evaluate content based on authenticity and contextual fit. Interview coding revealed that younger audiences, particularly Millennials and Generation Z, were perceived as highly sensitive to overt commercial intent and more responsive to content that reflects lived experience and cultural familiarity. This observation resonates with studies on digital youth culture that emphasise authenticity, participatory meaning-making, and resistance to overt persuasion as defining features of contemporary digital engagement (Kozinets et al., 2020; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

Audience interviews further suggest that soft-selling narratives function as cognitive and emotional entry points that shape how subsequent promotional messages are received. Participants consistently reported that emotional or community-based content increased their willingness to tolerate, and in some cases positively evaluate, later transactional prompts. This sequencing effect corresponds with findings in message processing research, which demonstrate that emotional priming can reduce resistance to persuasion and increase receptivity to calls to action when audiences feel narratively involved (Van Laer et al., 2020). Importantly, these responses were not universal; some participants expressed scepticism when transitions from storytelling to selling were perceived as abrupt, indicating that narrative coherence plays a critical role in audience acceptance. Internal stakeholder interviews corroborate these audience perceptions. MPR practitioners and agency partners noted differentiated engagement patterns across platforms, suggesting that emotional narratives generate higher interaction and dwell time on visually oriented platforms, while direct promotional messages are more effective in utilitarian contexts such as apps or notifications. Rather than presenting

these observations as definitive metrics, practitioners described them as recurring patterns derived from ongoing monitoring and experiential learning. Such experiential metrics are consistent with qualitative interpretations of engagement that prioritise behavioural signals and interpretive feedback over purely quantitative indicators (Lemon & Verhoef, 2021).

The discussion of performance-related figures—such as completion rates or engagement increases—should therefore be interpreted cautiously within the qualitative framework of this study. These figures are not presented as statistically generalisable outcomes, but as contextual indicators referenced by practitioners to support strategic reflection. Recent methodological literature cautions against treating platform analytics as objective measures of effectiveness without interpretive grounding, as engagement metrics are platform-dependent, temporally unstable, and shaped by algorithmic mediation (Bucher, 2020; Tufekci, 2015). In this study, such figures are used to triangulate practitioner narratives rather than to establish causal claims. The audience data also reveal linguistic sensitivity as a salient factor influencing perception. Participants highlighted that certain lexical choices—such as the use of colloquial expressions or culturally resonant terms—enhanced perceived closeness and relatability. This finding is consistent with research on digital discourse and brand communication, which shows that language aligning with audience vernacular strengthens relational bonds and fosters perceived authenticity (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Conversely, overly formal or technical language was associated with disengagement, particularly among younger users.

Importantly, not all audience responses were uniformly positive. Some participants reported fatigue resulting from high message frequency, particularly when promotional notifications were perceived as excessive or poorly timed. These negative cases are analytically significant, as they underscore the conditional nature of engagement and support scholarly arguments that digital audiences actively negotiate attention and resistance in response to perceived intrusiveness (Kozinets et al., 2020; Bucher, 2020). Acknowledging such contradictions strengthens the interpretive credibility of the findings and prevents an overly celebratory reading of hybrid MPR strategies. Overall, the audience response analysis suggests that IOH's hybrid communication strategy resonates most strongly when emotional relevance, narrative coherence, and contextual sensitivity are maintained. Engagement emerges not simply from the combination of soft- and hard-selling elements, but from the audience's perception that commercial intent is embedded within meaningful social and cultural narratives. This reinforces contemporary theoretical perspectives that frame digital engagement as a relational and interpretive process rather than a direct outcome of exposure or persuasion alone (Lemon & Verhoef, 2021; Sohaib et al., 2025).

## 4. CONCLUSION

Empirically grounded in 18 semi-structured interviews and a purposively archived corpus of 420 multimodal artefacts (2020–2024), the analysis shows that IOH does not operate two independent communication logics but configures a purposive *hybrid persuasion architecture*. This architecture is characterised by (a) narrative primacy and semiotic practices that build emotional resonance (the *humanising connectivity* code), (b) compact, informationally dense messages on transactional surfaces (the *explicit-instructional messaging* code), and (c) deliberate sequencing that attempts to bridge value and action (the *value-to-action bridging* pattern). These coded patterns directly address RQ1 by demonstrating that integration is operationalised through staged message choreography (e.g., "Teaser–Reveal–Reinforce"), platform-sensitive placement, and the use of short, embedded CTAs that follow affective hooks rather than replace them. With respect to RQ2, the findings nuance claims about

effectiveness: qualitative and multimodal evidence indicates that hybrid configurations can support both relational indicators (deeper comment threads, affective resonance) and short-term activation signals (clicks, app activations) when narrative coherence, platform fit, and audience segmentation are observed. However, the data also identify recurrent failure modes—most notably *narrative–CTA dissonance* and *persuasion wearout*—which attenuate positive outcomes when CTAs appear abrupt or when hard-sell saturation undermines prior relational work. Thus, rather than asserting unequivocal superiority of hybrid approaches, the study argues for conditional efficacy: hybrid MPR is promising where sequencing, tonal alignment, and platform affordances are systematically managed, but it can be counterproductive when these boundary conditions are absent. This interpretation is consistent with prior hybrid-strategy accounts that emphasise contextual moderators. Conceptually, the paper contributes three related advances to MPR and digital branding scholarship. First, it names and empirically elaborates *hybrid persuasion architecture* as a unit of analysis that foregrounds sequencing and affordance-sensitive design rather than mere co-presence of soft and hard tactics. Second, it operationalises relational and performance outcomes within a single evaluative frame—linking affective constructs (emotional resonance, perceived relational closeness) to interpretive indicators (dwell, comment depth) and to proximate activation signals—thus providing a practical evaluative lens for future empirical work. Third, the study highlights two analytic boundary concepts—*narrative–CTA dissonance* and *narrative-performativity gap*—that theorise how integration can fail and that can guide subsequent hypothesis testing in comparative or experimental designs.

Empirically and methodologically, claims about "effectiveness" are reported cautiously and with transparency: quantitative metrics referenced in the corpus are archived, time-bound snapshots used to contextualise qualitative patterns rather than as causal proof. Limitations include the single-case scope (analytic generalisability rather than statistical generalisability), potential survivorship bias in archived digital artefacts, and reliance on practitioner testimony that may reflect justificatory narratives. Future research should apply the hybrid persuasion architecture framework in comparative or longitudinal designs, employ mixed-methods attribution models to test causal pathways between narrative sequencing and conversion, and investigate audience micro-segmentation empirically to refine the platform–message fit heuristics suggested here. Practically, the analysis yields conditional recommendations for communication managers: design narrative arcs that allow CTAs to emerge organically from storytelling; match message form to platform affordances and audience task orientation; monitor for persuasion wearout and adapt cadence accordingly; and use multilayered metrics that combine interpretive indicators (qualitative engagement signals) with carefully attributed performance measures. By articulating both the enabling conditions and failure modes of hybrid MPR, the study offers a modest but actionable contribution to strategic communication practice and to the ongoing theoretical conversation about how relational and performative logics interact in digitally mediated publics.

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