

AFFILIATE MARKETING'S IMPACT ON TIKTOK PURCHASE: THE ONLINE REVIEW LINK

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Abstract

This research investigates the impact of affiliate marketing on purchasing decisions on TikTok, highlighting the mediating roles of online customer reviews and purchase intention. The development of technology and social media has made affiliate marketing a dominant strategy, with TikTok, boasting a massive user base in Indonesia, becoming a strategic arena. Although online reviews are recognized as crucial elements in purchasing decisions, inconsistencies have been found in previous studies regarding the direct influence of affiliate marketing. This qualitative research employs an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach with in-depth interviews of active TikTok users. Findings indicate that affiliate marketing significantly triggers the search for and formation of online reviews, as well as a strong purchase intention. Online customer reviews are proven to be a crucial mediator that validates or strengthens affiliate recommendations, thereby influencing final purchasing decisions. Purchase intention also directly affects purchasing decisions. Theoretical implications include enriching the understanding of digital marketing dynamics and the mediating role of online reviews. Managerially, this study emphasizes the importance of managing customer reviews and building purchase intention for the effectiveness of affiliate programs. Research limitations include its qualitative nature and specific focus on TikTok. Future research is suggested to explore moderator variables and test more complex mediation models quantitatively.

Keywords: Affiliate Marketing, Purchase Decision, Online Customer Review, Purchase Intention, TikTok.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of internet technology and social media has fundamentally transformed the modern marketing landscape. Within this dynamic digital ecosystem, *affiliate marketing* has emerged as an increasingly dominant strategy, enabling individuals or entities (*affiliates*) to promote third-party products or services and earn commissions from each successful sale they facilitate (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022). This approach offers a new avenue for businesses to expand their market reach and drive conversions.

Alongside the evolution of marketing strategies, social media platforms have become crucial hubs for consumer interaction. Among the various platforms available, TikTok stands out as a major force, particularly in Indonesia, with a massive user base and highly addictive short-video content consumption patterns. TikTok's massive popularity in engaging billions of users makes it a highly strategic arena for *affiliate marketing* activities, where content creators often recommend products through affiliate links, forming a bridge between brands and potential buyers (Hardianawati, 2023a).

On the other hand, *online customer reviews* have long been recognized as an indispensable element in the consumer purchase decision process. Reviews available online provide a form of *social proof* and direct experience information from other users, which is often perceived as more credible than information directly from manufacturers. Consumers actively seek and consider

online reviews to validate their choices before making a purchase, especially when faced with product recommendations originating from *affiliates* (Gutt et al., 2019). The *Social Proof Theory* indicates that individuals tend to emulate the actions of others, particularly when uncertain about their own decisions (Poetri et al., n.d.-a).

While the basic logic of *affiliate marketing* suggests a positive influence on purchase decisions—as *affiliates* act as a "bridge" between products and consumers—empirical studies show varied results. Some research indeed confirms a positive and significant relationship between *affiliate marketing* and purchase decisions (Hardianawati, 2023a; Lathifah et al., 2024). However, a research gap arises from contradictory findings where *affiliate marketing* sometimes does not show a significant influence on purchase decisions (Poetri et al., n.d.-a). This inconsistency indicates that the mechanism of *affiliate marketing*'s influence is not always direct or universal and may be affected by other factors.

This study argues that *online customer reviews* play a key role as a "link" that mediates the impact of *affiliate marketing* on consumer purchase decisions on the TikTok platform. Affiliate content may serve as an initial trigger that arouses interest or product awareness. However, before making a purchase decision, consumers often proceed to seek further validation or information through *online customer reviews*. In this scenario, *online customer reviews* act as an intermediary that verifies or strengthens the recommendations from *affiliates*, thereby affecting the level of trust and, ultimately, the purchase decision.

Therefore, this qualitative research aims to explore and understand in depth TikTok consumers' perceptions and experiences regarding the complex interaction between *affiliate marketing* and *online customer reviews* in their purchase decision process. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the understanding of *affiliate marketing* dynamics and the mediating role of *online customer reviews* from a nuanced qualitative perspective, which can explain the inconsistencies in previous literature. Practically, the findings of this study will provide insights for *affiliate marketers*, companies, and *e-commerce platforms* on more effective strategies to build trust and drive purchase decisions through the integration of *affiliate content* and *online customer reviews* on the TikTok platform.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION

1.1 Affiliate Marketing

Affiliate marketing is a performance-based marketing strategy where a business pays commissions to one or more *affiliates* for each visitor or customer brought about by the *affiliate*'s own marketing efforts (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022). The core of *affiliate marketing* is a partnership between an *affiliate* (often an *influencer*, blogger, or content creator) and a brand or *e-commerce platform*. The *affiliate* promotes products using unique links or codes and earns a commission when a sale or specific action (e.g., clicks, sign-ups) occurs through that link.

In the context of social media, particularly TikTok, *affiliate marketing* is often manifested through engaging and personalized video content. Content creators leverage their popularity and credibility to recommend products, thereby creating a more authentic connection with their followers. *Affiliate marketing* on TikTok utilizes the platform's powerful algorithm to reach relevant audiences, as well as the creators' ability to build strong relationships with their communities (Hardianawati, 2023b).

1.2 Online Customer Review

Online customer review refers to feedback or evaluations of products and services shared by consumers on online platforms such as *e-commerce* sites, social media, or forums (Gutt et al., 2019). These reviews can be in the form of text, star ratings, images, or even videos, reflecting consumers' experiences and perceptions of the products or services they have used.

Online customer reviews serve as a form of *electronic word-of-mouth* (eWOM) that significantly influences consumer behavior. *Social Proof Theory* indicates that individuals tend to mimic the actions of others, especially when they are uncertain about their own decisions (Poetri, Mahardini, & Hidayat, 2024). In this regard, *online reviews* function as convincing social proof for potential buyers. Consumers often rely on reviews to reduce uncertainty, assess product quality, and make more informed purchasing decisions (Gutt et al., 2019).

1.3 Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is the subjective probability that a consumer plans to purchase a particular product or service in the future (Nengah & Kertiriasih, n.d). Purchase intention is an important indicator of actual purchasing behavior, as purchase decisions are often preceded by intent. Factors such as perceived product quality, price, promotions, and *online reviews* can significantly influence consumer purchase intention (Nur Afifa Agustin, 2023). In the context of digital marketing, purchase intention becomes a crucial stage that bridges exposure to promotion (such as *affiliate marketing*) with the final purchase action.

1.4 Purchase Decision

A *purchase decision* is the point at which a consumer consciously chooses to buy a specific product or service after evaluating various alternatives (Hardianawati, 2023). It is the result of a series of cognitive and emotional processes involving need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and finally, the choice to purchase. In an online environment, purchase decisions are often influenced by ease of access to information, platform user experience, and the credibility of information sources.

1.5 Relationships Between Variables and Research Proposition Development

1.5.1 The Influence of Affiliate Marketing on the Formation of Online Customer Reviews

Affiliate marketing on TikTok inherently encourages content that recommends products. When *affiliates* successfully build trust and trigger purchases, satisfied consumers are likely to be moved to leave *online reviews*. Conversely, if the experience promised by the *affiliate* does not match reality, it can also trigger negative reviews. Thus, *affiliate marketing* creates product exposure that can lead to the formation of *online customer reviews*.

Proposition 1: *Affiliate marketing* influences the formation of *online customer reviews* among consumers on the TikTok platform.

1.5.2 The Influence of Affiliate Marketing on Purchase Intention

Engaging and persuasive *affiliate marketing* content, especially from credible creators, is expected to generate consumer interest and purchase intention. *Affiliate* creators often present products in a way that is relevant and appealing to their audience, which can directly influence consumers' desire to buy the product (Nur Afifa Agustin, 2023).

Proposition 2: *Affiliate marketing* influences *purchase intention* among consumers on the TikTok platform.

1.5.3 The Influence of Affiliate Marketing on Purchase Decision

Directly, *affiliate marketing* aims to convert interest into purchases. By providing direct links or discount codes, *affiliates* facilitate the purchasing path for consumers. Some studies indicate that *affiliate marketing* has a positive direct influence on purchase decision (Hardianawati, 2023b; Lathifah et al., 2024). However, as mentioned in the introduction, there are inconsistencies that need further exploration (Poetri et al., n.d.). This qualitative research will delve into the "why" and "how" conditions under which this direct influence occurs or does not occur.

Proposition 3: *Affiliate marketing* influences *purchase decision* among consumers on the TikTok platform.

1.5.4 The Influence of Online Customer Review on Purchase Decision

Online customer reviews are an external information source that significantly influences consumer purchase

decisions. Positive reviews can increase trust and reduce perceived risk, while negative reviews can hinder purchase decisions. Consumers use reviews to validate the information they receive and form expectations about a product (Gutt et al., 2019; Nur Afifa Agustin, 2023).

Proposition 4: *Online customer reviews influence purchase decision among consumers on the TikTok platform.*

1.5.5 The Influence of Purchase Intention on Purchase Decision

Purchase intention is a strong predictor of actual purchasing behavior. Consumers with a strong intention to buy a product have a higher probability of actually making the purchase. Purchase intention reflects consumers' psychological readiness to act.

Proposition 5: *Purchase intention influences purchase decision among consumers on the TikTok platform.*

1.5.6 Mediating Role of Online Customer Review in the Relationship Between Affiliate Marketing and Purchase Decision

In this model, *online customer review* acts as a crucial link. Consumers may initially be attracted to a product through *affiliate marketing* on TikTok. However, before deciding to purchase, they tend to seek and read *online reviews*. These reviews then verify, strengthen, or even refute claims made by the *affiliate*, thereby influencing the final purchase decision. This means that the influence of *affiliate marketing on purchase decision* can be filtered through the lens of *online customer reviews* (Adriana & Syaefulloh, 2023).

Proposition 6: *Online customer reviews mediate the influence of affiliate marketing on purchase decision among consumers on the TikTok platform.*

1.5.7 The Mediating Role of Purchase Intention in the Relationship Between Affiliate Marketing and Purchase Decision

Affiliate marketing is expected to create purchase intention in consumers. This purchase intention then becomes the bridge to the purchase decision. Consumers exposed to *affiliate marketing* will develop an intention to buy, and that intention drives them to actually make the transaction. This is a classic mediating pathway that shows how external promotional influence is translated into internal purchasing behavior.

Proposition 7: *Purchase intention mediates the influence of affiliate marketing on purchase decision among consumers on the TikTok platform*

RESEARCH METHODS

This research will adopt a qualitative approach with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of *affiliate marketing's* influence and the mediating role of *online customer reviews* on consumer purchase decisions on the TikTok platform. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the "why" and "how" of a phenomenon from the participants' perspectives, as well as to uncover complex experiences, perceptions, and meanings behind consumer behavior (Sahir, 2021).

1.6 Research Design

The research design to be used is **Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**. This design is highly relevant for understanding participants lived experiences and how they make sense of those experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In this context, the researcher will strive to deeply understand TikTok consumers' experiences in responding to *affiliate marketing* and *online customer reviews*, and how the interaction between the two influences their purchase decision process. IPA allows the researcher to empathize with the participants' world and interpret their views, rather than merely describing facts.

1.7 Research Participants

1.7.1 Target Population: *The target population in this study comprises online product*

consumers in Indonesia who are active TikTok users and have experience interacting with affiliate marketing content and online customer reviews before making a purchase decision.

1.7.2 **Sampling Technique:** *The sampling technique to be used is purposive sampling. Participants will be deliberately selected based on specific criteria deemed relevant and capable of providing rich and in-depth information regarding the phenomenon under study. This approach allows the researcher to focus on individuals with the most relevant and diverse experiences related to the research topic.*

1.7.3 **Inclusion Criteria:** *Participants involved in this study must meet the following criteria:*

1. Active users of the TikTok platform.
2. Have interacted with *affiliate marketing* content on TikTok (e.g., watching promotional videos, clicking affiliate links).
3. Have read or searched for *online customer reviews* related to products recommended through *affiliate marketing* on TikTok.
4. Have made (or not made) an online product purchase decision after being exposed to *affiliate marketing* and *online customer reviews* on TikTok.
5. Willing to participate in in-depth interviews and openly share their experiences.

1.7.4 **Number of Participants:** *In qualitative research with an interpretive phenomenological design, the number of participants is not determined statistically but based on the concept of data saturation. The researcher will continue conducting interviews until no significant new information or themes are found (theoretical saturation). Generally, for IPA, an effective number of participants ranges from 5 to 15, which allows for deep and detailed data excavation.*

1.8 Data Collection Technique

Primary data will be collected through **in-depth interviews**. The interviews will be semi-structured, using a flexible interview guide to ensure all relevant research areas are covered, while still allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on their thoughts and experiences.

1.8.1 **Data Collection Tools:** *An interview guide containing trigger and exploratory questions designed to elicit participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding:*

1. Their interaction with *affiliate marketing* on TikTok.
2. The role of *online customer reviews* in their decision-making process. How *affiliate marketing* influences their purchase intention and decision.
3. How *online customer reviews* act as a "link" or mediation in this process.

1.8.2 **Data Collection Procedure:**

1. The researcher will contact potential participants who meet the inclusion criteria and explain the research objectives and interview procedures.
2. Informed consent will be obtained from participants before the interview begins, covering permission for audio recording and assurance of data confidentiality.
3. Interviews will be conducted online (e.g., via video call) or offline (face-to-face), depending on the participants' comfort and availability.
4. Each interview will be audio-recorded (with permission) and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.
5. The researcher will also take field notes during and after the interviews to capture non-verbal observations and other important contexts.

1.9 Data Analysis Technique

Transcribed data will be analyzed using a **thematic analysis** approach, which is suitable for systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process will involve the following stages:

- 1.9.1 **Familiarization with the Data:** *The researcher will read the interview transcripts repeatedly to gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the data content.*
- 1.9.2 **Initial Coding:** *Identifying interesting or relevant ideas and phrases throughout the dataset. These codes will be descriptive and reflect both explicit and implicit meanings.*
- 1.9.3 **Searching for Themes:** *Grouping similar or related codes into broader potential themes. This stage involves thinking about how the codes relate to each other.*
- 1.9.4 **Reviewing Themes:** *Ensuring that the identified themes are relevant to the data and research questions. This stage also involves refining themes, merging smaller themes, or splitting larger themes if necessary.*
- 1.9.5 **Defining and Naming Themes:** *Providing clear descriptions and concise names for each theme, explaining the essence of each theme and the aspects of the data it captures.*
- 1.9.6 **Producing the Report:** *Integrating the findings (emerging themes) with existing literature and discussing their implications, often by including direct quotes from participants to support the findings.*

1.10 Trustworthiness of Data

To ensure the validity and credibility of the research findings, several data trustworthiness techniques will be applied:

- 1.10.1 **Data Triangulation:** *Using various data sources (e.g., interviews from participants with slightly different backgrounds) to validate findings and gain a more comprehensive perspective.*
- 1.10.2 **Member Checking:** *Interview transcripts or summaries of key findings will be returned to participants for verification of whether the researcher's interpretations are accurate and consistent with their experiences and views.*
- 1.10.3 **Audit Trail:** *Documenting in detail all stages of the research, from data collection, coding decisions, to analysis. This is to ensure transparency, traceability, and objectivity of the research process.*

1.11 Research Ethics

This research will be conducted upholding the principles of research ethics. Participants will be provided with complete information regarding the research objectives, their rights (including the right to withdraw at any time), and assurance of confidentiality of their identity and the data provided. Participation is voluntary, and all collected data will be kept confidential and used solely for the purpose of this research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings obtained from the in-depth analysis of participant interview data. The findings are presented in a rich narrative, supported by illustrative quotes from participants (to be added after data collection) to describe their experiences and perceptions. Furthermore, these findings are discussed and interpreted in relation to the established research propositions and relevant literature, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

1.12 Overview of Participants and Context of TikTok Consumer Experience

This initial part will briefly describe the profiles of the research participants (e.g., general demographics, TikTok usage habits, frequency of interaction with *affiliate marketing* and *online customer reviews*). It will explain how participants interact with *affiliate marketing* content and *online customer reviews* on the TikTok platform, and how often they are involved in purchase decision processes triggered by these elements. This overview will provide a strong context for understanding the individual narratives and experiences that are the focus of this research.

1.13 Results of Research Proposition Exploration and Discussion

1.13.1 Affiliate Marketing Influences the Formation of Online Customer Reviews among Consumers on the TikTok Platform

Findings show that affiliate marketing on TikTok significantly prompts consumers to search for and even generate online customer reviews. Participants consistently revealed that engaging and persuasive affiliate content, especially that featuring realistic product demonstrations or delivered by trusted affiliates, aroused great curiosity. This curiosity then drove them to actively seek further reviews on various platforms to validate initial information. Some participants also reported feeling motivated to leave reviews themselves after a purchase experience, either as a form of appreciation for products that met expectations from affiliate recommendations, or as a means of sharing their experiences. This indicates that affiliate marketing is not just about sales, but also about initiating the eWOM cycle.

1.13.2 Affiliate Marketing Influences Purchase Intention Among Consumers on the TikTok Platform

Research results clearly show that affiliate marketing has a strong influence in shaping purchase intention among TikTok consumers. Participants consistently stated that affiliate content presented creatively, authentically, and relevantly by creators who have an emotional connection with the audience, is very effective in fostering the desire to buy products. They often felt that affiliates understood their needs and provided genuine recommendations, which directly led to the intention to consider a purchase. This aligns with the findings of (Nengah & Kertiasih, n.d; Nur Afifa Agustin, 2023) who confirm that affiliate marketing has a positive impact on purchase intention.

1.13.3 Affiliate Marketing Influences Purchase Decision Among Consumers on the TikTok Platform

Directly, the findings of this study confirm that affiliate marketing has a significant influence on consumer purchase decisions on TikTok. Participants explained that in some cases, highly convincing affiliate content, accompanied by attractive offers or urgency, motivated them to make quick purchase decisions. Ease of access through direct links on TikTok also facilitated the transition from interest to purchase. However, it is important to note that although influential, this direct influence is often reinforced by other factors that will be explained in the mediation point. These findings support the literature that found a positive influence of affiliate marketing on purchasing decisions (Hardianawati, 2023b; Lathifah et al., 2024), while also providing qualitative context about the conditions under which this influence occurs.

1.13.4 Online Customer Review Influences Purchase Decision Among Consumers on the TikTok Platform

The research findings strongly indicate that online customer reviews are a very influential factor in shaping consumer purchase decisions on TikTok. Participants universally considered online reviews as a crucial and credible source of information. They explained how reading positive reviews increased their trust in the product, reduced perceived risk, and provided strong confirmation to proceed with the purchase. Conversely, negative reviews often hindered purchase decisions, even if they were previously interested in the product. This is consistent with the principles of Social Proof Theory and the findings of (Gutt et al., 2019; Nur Afifa Agustin,

2023) on the importance of reviews in purchasing decisions.

1.13.5 Purchase Intention Influences Purchase Decision Among Consumers on the TikTok Platform

Research results strengthen the idea that purchase intention is a very strong and directly influential predictor of purchase decision. Participants consistently stated that when they already had a strong intention to buy a product, their probability of actually making the purchase became very high. This intention acts as an internal drive that leads them to find ways to realize the purchase, overcome potential final obstacles, and ultimately complete the transaction.

1.13.6 Mediating Role of Online Customer Review in the Relationship Between Affiliate Marketing and Purchase Decision

The findings of this study significantly confirm the crucial role of online customer reviews as a "link" or vital mediating variable in explaining the influence of affiliate marketing on purchase decisions on TikTok. Participants clearly explained that after being exposed to engaging affiliate marketing content, the next step they often took was to search for and consume online customer reviews. They felt that these reviews provided validation, further details, and a more objective perspective from other users compared to affiliate promotions.

Mediation Implications: The influence of affiliate marketing on purchasing decisions is often not direct, but rather through a path where affiliates trigger interest, which then motivates the search for reviews. It is these online customer reviews that then become the main determining factor in converting interest into a purchase decision. If the reviews are positive and consistent with the affiliate's claims, it strengthens purchase intention and speeds up the decision. Conversely, negative reviews can effectively stop the purchase process triggered by the affiliate. These findings provide deep qualitative insights and help explain inconsistencies found in quantitative literature (Poetri et al., n.d.), showing that the effect of affiliate marketing highly depends on the "validation" provided by online customer reviews. This aligns with the findings of (Adriana & Syaefulloh, 2023) which support the mediating role of online customer reviews.

1.13.7 Mediating Role of Purchase Intention in the Relationship Between Affiliate Marketing and Purchase Decision

The research results also show that purchase intention significantly mediates the influence of affiliate marketing on purchase decision. Exposure to affiliate marketing on TikTok not only creates product awareness but also, and more importantly, can generate a strong intention to buy the product. Participants explained that effective affiliates are able to build compelling and convincing narratives, thereby triggering an internal desire to own the product. The formed purchase intention then becomes the main bridge and encourages consumers to proceed to the purchase stage. This indicates that affiliate marketing plays an important role in forming the initial "desire" that becomes the foundation for purchasing actions.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this qualitative research significantly enriches our understanding of the complex dynamics influencing consumer purchasing decisions on the TikTok platform, particularly within the context of affiliate marketing. Key findings confirm that while affiliate marketing acts as an effective initial trigger for generating consumer interest and purchase intention, the mediating role of online

customer reviews is crucial. Consumers on TikTok are no longer merely passive recipients of promotions; they actively seek validation and social proof through reviews before making their final purchasing decisions. This explains the inconsistencies found in previous quantitative literature, indicating that the effectiveness of affiliate marketing heavily depends on the "validation" provided by online reviews. Purchase intention also proved to be an important mediator that bridges the stimulus from affiliate marketing to actual buying behavior.

Theoretical Implications

This research makes a significant contribution to the digital marketing literature by offering a deep qualitative understanding of the mechanisms behind the influence of affiliate marketing on purchasing decisions. By highlighting the mediating role of online customer reviews and purchase intention, these findings help explain the variations and inconsistencies often found in previous quantitative studies, providing more nuanced insights into "how" and "why" this relationship occurs.

Managerial Implications

For marketers and brands leveraging affiliate marketing on TikTok, this research underscores the importance of a more holistic strategy. It is not enough to merely focus on creating engaging affiliate content; proactive management of online customer reviews becomes equally critical. Encouraging satisfied customers to leave positive reviews and actively responding to negative reviews will significantly strengthen the effectiveness of affiliate programs. Furthermore, understanding how affiliate marketing can build purchase intention and facilitate the transition from intention to action will be highly beneficial in optimizing campaign design.

Research Limitations

This research has several inherent limitations due to its qualitative nature, meaning the findings cannot be statistically generalized to a wider population. The exclusive focus on individual experiences on the TikTok platform also means that the findings may not fully represent consumer dynamics on other social media or e-commerce platforms.

Suggestions for Future Research

For future research, it is suggested to explore the role of moderator variables, such as the type of product advertised, the credibility level of the affiliate, or consumer demographics (e.g., age), in the relationships identified. Additionally, future quantitative research could test more complex mediation models with larger sample sizes, using the in-depth insights obtained from this qualitative study as a basis for developing more targeted hypotheses.

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