

Comparison of the influence of influencer marketing and affiliate marketing on digital consumer purchasing decisions

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Abstract

This research conducts a comparative analysis of how influencer marketing and affiliate marketing impact digital consumer purchasing behavior in today's social media-dominated landscape. As digital technologies advance and social media usage grows exponentially, businesses are increasingly adopting these platform-based marketing approaches to engage target audiences. Employing qualitative methodology through systematic literature review (SLR), the study examines secondary data from academic publications and relevant sources. Findings reveal that influencer marketing demonstrates greater effectiveness in establishing consumer trust and emotional connections, leveraging influencers' perceived credibility and personal rapport with

their audience. Conversely, affiliate marketing proves more efficient in driving direct conversions while maintaining cost-effectiveness through its incentive-based structure. Each approach offers distinct advantages that can be strategically deployed based on specific market segments and product characteristics. The study emphasizes the need for flexible, integrated digital marketing strategies, proposing synergistic implementation of both methods. These insights equip businesses with valuable guidance for formulating marketing policies that harness the complementary strengths of both strategies to enhance competitiveness in the global digital marketplace.

Keywords: *Influencer marketing; affiliate marketing; marketing strategy; digital consumers; social media*

Introduction

In the last ten years, social media has transformed into one of the main channels in digital marketing strategies. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are no longer just used to share content, but have created new business models that enable direct and intense interactions between brands and consumers (Chen et al., 2024). This development requires business actors to adapt their marketing approaches to align with the dynamics and preferences of today's digital consumers.

The two most prominent approaches in digital marketing today are influencer marketing and affiliate marketing. Influencer marketing involves using public figures or influential individuals on social media to introduce and promote products or services. Meanwhile, affiliate marketing involves certain parties who receive a commission for every transaction or sale made through the link or referral code they share (Husnayetti et al., 2023).

While both strategies are increasingly used, important questions remain about the relative effectiveness of influencer marketing and affiliate marketing in influencing digital consumer purchasing decisions. Are consumers more influenced by personal recommendations from influencers, or are they more attracted to incentives and promotional offers provided through affiliate programs?

Various studies have shown that aspects such as credibility, competence, and personal closeness of influencers have a significant influence on consumer purchasing decisions. On the other hand, the effectiveness of affiliate marketing also plays an important role, especially in a highly competitive e-commerce environment (Husnayetti et al., 2023).

The importance of this research arises from the need for business people to optimize their digital marketing strategies amidst increasingly fierce competition. By understanding the advantages and disadvantages of each strategy, companies can make more informed decisions in allocating marketing budgets effectively and efficiently. In addition, the findings of this analysis can be used as a reference for digital marketers in developing more targeted campaign strategies that can influence consumer behavior effectively.

Today, digital consumers are increasingly discerning and selective in absorbing marketing information. They are more likely to trust recommendations from sources they consider trustworthy and have personal relationships with, such as influencers (Chen et al., 2024). On the other hand, incentives provided through affiliate marketing also play an important role as a driver in the purchasing decision-making process.

Therefore, the comparison between influencer marketing and affiliate marketing plays a crucial role in understanding the development of today's digital marketing strategies. This study is expected to be able to offer new perspectives for academics and practitioners in formulating a more efficient and sustainable marketing approach in the digital era.

Literature Review

Influencer Marketing & Affiliate Marketing

Influencer marketing is a marketing approach that involves individuals with a large and active following on social media to introduce or recommend a product or brand. This strategy relies on the power of influencers, such as audience

reach, personal image, communication style, and the level of trust of their followers, to increase the effectiveness of the company's marketing message. The specialty of influencer marketing lies in its ability to create a personal relationship between influencers and followers, even though the relationship is one-way, not a reciprocal relationship like in real friendships (Hudders & Lou, 2022).

The effectiveness of influencer marketing is determined by various factors, including the authenticity of the influencer, the number of followers they have, and transparency in displaying sponsors in the content they share. In addition, the alignment between the characteristics of the audience and the brand being promoted, as well as the use of a positive tone in the content, also have a significant influence, although they do not always show a completely linear relationship. Several studies have also revealed that the authenticity and creative freedom that influencers have in composing content can strengthen the perception of authenticity and the level of trust of the audience, which ultimately has an impact on increasing consumer intention to purchase (Leung, 2022).

Trends in influencer marketing continue to evolve, with research focusing on one-way interactions, sponsorship forms, authenticity aspects, and audience engagement levels. However, there are a few key challenges, such as the difficulty in identifying the most suitable influencers from a large set of social media data, and maintaining transparency and authenticity in influencer-brand collaborations. In addition, ethical issues have also emerged, especially regarding transparency in marking sponsored content and its impact on young audiences, which require more attention from public policymakers.

To achieve effectiveness in influencer marketing promotion, companies need to choose influencers who are not only highly popular, but also relevant to the brand's values and image, and are able to maintain authenticity in every form of cooperation. A balanced managerial approach that includes managing influencer activities, audience suitability, and delivering positive content can strengthen the impact of the promotion. In addition, it is important for influencers

and brands to build a mutually beneficial relationship, while maintaining trust and authentic perceptions in the public eye.

Meanwhile, Affiliate marketing is a performance-based marketing strategy, where companies reward affiliates for their success in bringing customers through promotional activities carried out. This model involves three main parties: the seller, the affiliate, and the intermediary platform that bridges the two. In its implementation, affiliates market certain products or services and earn commissions when transactions occur that can be identified as originating from their efforts, usually through special tracking links or unique referral codes (Damnjanovic, 2019).

In its implementation, affiliate marketing involves several parties, including sellers, affiliates, and platforms that bridge the two. Affiliates receive commissions in return for their contributions, such as generating sales or clicks. Common payment schemes include commission or revenue sharing systems, where affiliates earn a percentage of the revenue generated through their referrals. Long-term success in affiliate marketing is largely determined by the creation of a mutually beneficial relationship between advertisers and affiliates.

Despite its many benefits, affiliate marketing is not free from challenges, especially related to the risk of fraud and unethical behavior. Affiliate programs are vulnerable to abuse by certain parties, both influencers and non-influencers, which has the potential to harm the brand image and consumers. Therefore, a careful affiliate monitoring and selection mechanism is needed, for example through the implementation of protocols *affiliate listening* in order to identify and anticipate fraudulent actions early on (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022).

Consumer trust plays a vital role in the success of affiliate marketing, especially in industries such as tourism. Affiliates are required to display professionalism and integrity, as well as provide a clear structure and sufficient background information on their sites to reduce consumer doubts. In addition, transparency in the commission system and performance reporting are important

elements to ensure a harmonious and sustainable relationship between all parties involved (Hani et al., 2020).

Studies on affiliate marketing continue to develop, with attention being directed to various aspects such as integration in marketing strategies, risk management, incentive systems, and business model transformation. The literature review shows that affiliate marketing is increasingly being chosen as a core strategy in e-commerce. However, there is still a need for more in-depth and comprehensive research to identify best practices and understand the challenges faced in its implementation (Solichin et al., 2023).

Digital consumer purchasing decision theory

Digital consumer decision-making models such as AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) and Consumer Decision Journey (CDJ) have undergone significant evolution as the digital era has progressed. Today, consumers no longer undergo a linear process, but rather take a more dynamic and interactive path. They can be inspired, explore information, compare options, make purchases, and share their experiences online. The presence of social media and various forms of digital interaction allows consumers to receive various stimuli and information at every stage of the process, making decision-making more complex, multidimensional, and not always predictable (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019).

Internal factors such as motivation, perception, and individual needs still play an important role in the consumer decision-making process. However, in the digital era, these factors are increasingly influenced by external elements of the online environment. The influence of public opinion, developing trends on social media, and the ease of obtaining information online are part of significant external stimuli. The interaction between these internal drives and external influences forms a mutually reinforcing motivation, where consumers are driven to make decisions not only based on personal desires, but also because of exposure to various digital stimuli that they encounter in their daily lives (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019).

Social media is now one of the main sources that form trust and social influence in digital consumer purchasing decisions. Many consumers trust reviews, recommendations, and content created by fellow users or influencers they consider credible. The level of trust is greatly influenced by the credibility, character, and emotional closeness between the influencer and his/her followers. In addition, social media also allows for the rapid and widespread dissemination of information, which strengthens the impact *word-of-mouth* digital and increase social influence in active online communities (Pei, 2024).

For sellers or companies, understanding the consumer decision-making model in the digital realm and the strategic role of social media is key to designing effective promotions. It is important for brands to build a trusted image on social media platforms, actively engage in communication with consumers, and collaborate with influencers who have strong influence and high levels of trust among their audiences. With this approach, brands can optimize the combination of internal consumer drives and external stimuli from the digital environment to drive purchasing decisions and create loyalty amidst increasingly fierce market competition (Gonçalves et al., 2024).

So that it can be concluded that digital consumer purchasing decisions on social media are determined by several things, including the strength of consumer purchasing interest which can be developed through user experience, trust, informativeness and ease of purchase.

Research methodology

The research method used in this study is a qualitative method with a systematic literature review (SLR) approach. This approach was chosen to explore in-depth information from various scientific literature related to the research topic systematically, transparently, and organized. This study aims to understand and analyze influencer marketing and affiliate marketing strategies in the context of marketing strategies. Using this method, data was collected through literature

studies and journal articles, research reports and relevant books, which were then filtered based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The main objective of this study is to provide a more comprehensive insight into the differences and comparisons of influencer and affiliate marketing, and to provide recommendations for marketing strategies that can improve marketing quality. It is hoped that the results of this study will be an important reference for academics, companies/business actors in developing marketing strategies.

Results and discussion

The influence of marketing influencers on purchase decisions

Various studies have shown that influence on consumer purchasing decisions has a strong impact on consumer purchasing decisions. Factors such as credibility, professionalism, and expertise possessed by an influencer can significantly increase the level of trust and purchase interest of the audience, especially when they provide honest recommendations and share positive experiences from other users. In addition, the existence of parasocial relationships (*parasocial relationship/PSR*) between influencers and their followers (which is formed through shared values, physical and social attractiveness) also contributes greatly to influencing consumer intentions to make purchases (Chen et al., 2024).

Influencer marketing has proven to be very effective, especially on products with high engagement rates (*high involvement*) and lifestyle-related products. In this category, consumers usually need more comprehensive information and tend to rely on the expertise and credibility of influencers as a reference source before deciding to purchase (Pan et al., 2024). Influencers who can present informative, relevant content and build emotional connections with their audiences have a greater influence in shaping purchasing decisions for these types of products.

Research also reveals that several factors, such as purchasing channels, the time when consumers make purchases, and follower characteristics, act as

moderating variables in the effectiveness of influencer marketing on purchasing decisions. Audience characteristics including their social identity and level of emotional closeness to influencers can strengthen the influence of the message conveyed. In addition, the informative value and entertainment aspects of the content shared by influencers also significantly increase consumer purchase intentions (Pan et al., 2024).

Overall, influencer marketing has been shown to build trust, loyalty, and influence consumer purchasing decisions, especially in lifestyle products and high-involvement categories (*high involvement*). The success of this strategy depends heavily on the influencer's credibility, authenticity, and ability to build strong personal relationships with their audience.

Influence of affiliate marketing on purchase decisions

Affiliate marketing also has a strong impact on consumer purchasing decisions, especially at the final stage of conversion. Research on Shopee users in Jakarta (Husnayetti et al., 2023) and TikTok users in Malang (Asadiyah et al., 2023) shows that affiliate marketing directly contributes significantly to influencing purchasing decisions, both individually (partially) and as a whole (simultaneously), with a high level of influence and statistically significant. This influence is further strengthened by the presence of purchase interest as a mediating variable, where affiliate marketing first increases consumer interest in purchasing, which then leads to purchasing decisions.

Affiliate marketing has proven to be very effective for fast-moving, low-involvement products, such as skincare and e-commerce products. Research on brands such as Skintific and Somethinc shows that this strategy, especially through digital content and social media platforms such as TikTok and Shopee, can encourage consumers to make quick and impulsive purchases. This effectiveness is reinforced by the nature of products that are easily replaced and do not require in-depth consideration, so consumers are more easily influenced by recommendations from affiliates.

The success of affiliate marketing in influencing purchasing decisions is also influenced by several factors, such as the level of trust in the affiliate, the attractiveness of the content presented, and the role of influencers in conveying the message. The results of the study showed that consumer trust in affiliates, coupled with informative and interesting content, significantly strengthens the impact of affiliate marketing on purchasing decisions, especially among Gen Z who are active and responsive on social media. In addition, the use of additional strategies such as *live streaming*, online reviews, and rating systems also increase the effectiveness of affiliate marketing in driving conversions at the final stage (Husnayetti et al., 2023).

At the final stage of conversion, affiliate marketing plays a crucial role in converting consumer interest into purchasing action. Various studies that apply regression analysis and *path analysis* revealed that affiliate marketing is not only effective in increasing awareness and interest, but also significantly encourages consumers to complete the transaction process. In some cases, such as Shopee users via the TikTok platform, the influence of affiliate marketing is even recorded as very high, with a contribution of 79.5% to purchasing decisions (Asadiyah et al., 2023).

Overall, affiliate marketing has proven to be very effective in influencing purchasing decisions, especially for products with fast-moving and low involvement characteristics. The effectiveness of this strategy is largely determined by the quality of the content presented, the level of consumer trust in the affiliate, and synergy with other digital features such as *live streaming* and online reviews. These findings confirm that affiliate marketing is a crucial strategic approach to driving increased sales conversions in the increasingly competitive digital era.

Comparison of strategies in influencer marketing and affiliate marketing

From the results of the discussion above, it can be concluded that the differences/comparison and recommendations for marketing strategies are as follows:

Table 1. Comparison and recommendations of influencer marketing and affiliate marketing strategies

Aspect	Influencer marketing	Affiliate marketing	Marketing strategy recommendations
Trust vs Conversion	Building trust and loyalty through personal relationships and influencer credibility	Focus on direct conversion, results-based payment (Sales/action)	Use a Hybrid Strategy: Influencer Marketing to build awareness and trust while affiliate marketing to drive measurable and consistent sales.
Engagement vs Transaction	High engagement levels, driving interaction and awareness	More emphasis on transactions and measurable results (clicks, purchases)	Use affiliate marketing to increase transactions. If you have strong promotional capital, it is recommended to use both strategies.
Campaign/Promotion Costs	Costs can vary, the bigger the influencer the higher the cost, and the incentives are needed.	Costs are more economical because payment is only made when a conversion occurs. However, the potential for fraud must still be anticipated.	If you are on a budget or want maximum efficiency then use affiliate marketing. If you want to build a brand image quickly and consistent transactions can use both strategies.
Target Audience Segmentation	Able to target a specific audience that fits the niche or segment that the influencer masters.	Easily target specific segments through relevant platforms and affiliates	If the target audience is emotional, visual and active on social media, use influencer marketing. If the target audience is rational, informative and often compares products, use affiliate marketing.

Platform Relevance	Very effective on social media (Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok)	Effective across digital platforms including blogs, websites and social media	Affiliate marketing is effective across platforms and social media. However, both strategies can be used together to achieve maximum results.
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The table provides a comprehensive comparison between influencer marketing and affiliate marketing across five key aspects: Trust vs Conversion, Engagement vs Transaction, Campaign/Promotion Costs, Target Audience Segmentation, and Platform Relevance. Each aspect highlights the distinct characteristics of both marketing strategies and offers practical recommendations for businesses to optimize their digital marketing efforts.

Trust vs Conversion

Influencer marketing leverages the credibility and personal relationships of influencers to foster trust and loyalty among their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This approach is particularly effective for brand awareness and emotional connection. In contrast, affiliate marketing prioritizes direct conversions, where affiliates are compensated based on performance metrics like sales or clicks (Kumar & Rajan, 2019). The hybrid strategy recommendation suggests combining both methods—using influencers to build trust and affiliates to drive sales—maximizes overall campaign effectiveness.

Engagement vs Transaction

Influencer marketing generates high engagement through interactive content, making it ideal for creating brand awareness (Djafarova & Bowden, 2021). Affiliate marketing, however, is transactional, focusing on quantifiable outcomes such as purchases or leads. Businesses with strong promotional budgets can benefit from both strategies, using influencers for engagement and affiliates for conversions.

Campaign/Promotion Costs

Influencer marketing costs vary significantly, with macro-influencers commanding higher fees (Hudders et al., 2021). Affiliate marketing is more budget-friendly, as payments are performance-based, though fraud risks must be mitigated. For cost efficiency, affiliate marketing is preferable, while brands seeking rapid image-building may invest in both.

Target Audience Segmentation

Influencer marketing targets niche audiences aligned with an influencer's expertise (Audrezet et al., 2020). Affiliate marketing reaches specific segments through tailored platforms. Emotional, visually driven audiences respond better to influencers, while rational, comparison-oriented consumers favor affiliate content.

Platform Relevance

Influencer marketing thrives on visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Ki et al., 2020), whereas affiliate marketing performs well across blogs, websites, and social media. A combined approach ensures broader reach and optimal results. In summary, the table underscores the complementary strengths of influencer and affiliate marketing. While influencer marketing builds trust and engagement, affiliate marketing delivers measurable conversions and cost efficiency. A strategic combination of both approaches, tailored to the target audience and business objectives, can enhance overall marketing performance in the digital landscape. Businesses are advised to assess their goals, budget, and audience preferences to determine the optimal mix of these strategies.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the literature review, it can be concluded that influencer marketing and affiliate marketing have complementary strategic roles in influencing digital consumer purchasing decisions in the social media era. Influencer marketing is superior in building trust and emotional connections with

audiences through authentic and credible content, while affiliate marketing is more effective in driving direct sales conversions with an incentive-based approach and efficient costs. The selection of the right strategy needs to be adjusted to the characteristics of the target audience, the digital platform used, and the objectives of the marketing campaign. Therefore, a hybrid approach that combines the strengths of both is highly recommended to optimize the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies comprehensively and sustainably.

This study has several limitations that need to be considered. The approach used is a literature study (systematic literature review) so that the results obtained are conceptual and have not been supported by empirical data directly from the field. To overcome these limitations, it is recommended that further research use the approach quantitative or mixed method with primary data through surveys or interviews with digital consumers, to obtain more applicable and measurable findings. In addition, it is important to conduct comparative studies on various social media platforms and pay attention to local context and demographic differences in the audience.

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