

TikTok as an Affiliate Marketing Platform: A Case Study on University Students Engagement with Social Media for Profit Generation

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Abstract

The rapid development of digital technology, particularly social media, has opened up new opportunities for young people, including university students, to generate income. TikTok, as a leading short-video social media platform, is now widely used by students as a tool to run affiliate marketing businesses, utilizing TikTok Shop features. This study aims to analyze how students exploit TikTok for profit generation through affiliate marketing. The research employs a qualitative approach, with data collected through interviews, documentation, and observation. Interviews with students managing affiliate accounts were conducted to gain insights into their business strategies. Documentation and observation were used to analyze content, audience engagement, and trends on TikTok. The results show that TikTok's algorithm, creativity in promotional content, and active interaction with audiences are critical factors in the success of student affiliates. Utilizing popular trends and embedding soft-selling strategies into content narratives effectively increased sales. For instance, the account @best.TikTokshop generated around 200 million rupiahs in revenue over a year, with a net profit of approximately 30 million rupiahs. However, students face challenges such as reliance on the platform's algorithm and the constant pressure to produce engaging and relevant content. This research highlights TikTok's potential as a lucrative platform for students who can manage their content well and actively engage with their audiences.

Keywords: TikTok, Affiliate Marketing, University Students, Social Media, Digital Marketing

INTRODUCTION

Initially designed as an entertainment platform, TikTok has rapidly evolved into one of the most influential social commerce platforms, especially among Generation Z. As TikTok's roots lie in entertainment, brands must create engaging content. This adds value to Generation Z's experience with the platform and helps establish emotional connections between brands and users. Generation Z values creativity and entertainment, and brands that align their content with these values are more likely to attract attention.

A vital element of this shift is affiliate marketing. According to Nasution, Aslami, and Harahap (2023), affiliate marketing has been shown to have a significant positive impact on consumer purchasing interest, with a direct and beneficial

influence. The stronger the influence of affiliate marketing on consumers' intent to purchase, the greater the benefits for merchants and brands. TikTok affiliates—users participating in TikTok's affiliate programs—often utilize unique and engaging content formats to capture user attention and build emotional connections with their audience. They may indirectly use music, dance moves, challenges, or compelling storylines to promote products or services. This approach allows affiliates to create entertaining and relevant content for TikTok users, increasing the likelihood of interaction, gaining new followers, and driving sales.

Affiliate marketing methods are widely implemented across various online platforms, but not all have the same positive impact on sales. Businesses often find TikTok more advantageous for affiliate marketing than other social media platforms. TikTok's focus on short videos, which can quickly go viral, provides greater visibility for products promoted by affiliates. Moreover, TikTok's algorithm facilitates users' discovery of product review videos, further boosting sales potential.

The rise of TikTok affiliates is a direct response to TikTok's growing popularity and potential as a powerful marketing platform. With its vast and diverse user base, TikTok offers sellers an attractive space to broaden their reach and promote products or services. Through TikTok affiliation, sellers can collaborate with users who possess large followings and can influence their audiences. Viral marketing on social media is particularly appealing to Generation Z, as they are drawn to trendy, up-to-date, or viral products widely discussed publicly and on social media platforms. Their focus on trending phenomena underscores the importance of brands and affiliates staying attuned to shifting dynamics to remain relevant and connected with their audiences. Trends such as dance challenges, memes, or viral music frequently enhance audience engagement and influence purchasing intent.

One of the main advantages of TikTok affiliation is its ability to reach a broad and diverse audience. TikTok's user base spans various demographics and backgrounds, allowing affiliates to target a broader market. Additionally, TikTok users often have a strong connection with their audiences and can influence purchasing decisions through recommendations and the content they share. This paper discusses the TikTok affiliate phenomenon with a case study on the account "BestTikTokShop."

The "BestTikTokShop" account serves as an exciting example of TikTok affiliation. Its owner—a university student—successfully generated 210 million rupiah in revenue over one year through TikTok's affiliate program. This account draws attention to the student's success, illustrating the significant economic opportunities that TikTok's affiliate program offers to individuals looking to earn money online. The case study provides in-depth insights into the strategies employed by BestTikTokShop, its impact on consumer behavior, and the implications for social media marketing.

As part of Generation Z, university students increasingly leverage social media, particularly TikTok, to generate income through affiliate marketing. TikTok offers distinct opportunities compared to other platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, due to its short-video content approach, which allows creators to be more

creative in product reviews. This raises the question: How do students participating as TikTok affiliates utilize the platform for financial gain?

This research aims to provide new insights for social media users by understanding how students can use TikTok affiliate marketing, particularly in the fashion sector. On one hand, student content creators can profit from affiliate partnerships, while businesses can harness students' creativity in crafting appealing content to enhance consumer interest. The strategies employed by student affiliates include creating content that follows viral trends, using compelling visual marketing techniques, and engaging with audiences through comments and live-streaming features.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, aiming to understand the phenomenon comprehensively through detailed observation and analysis. A qualitative approach is selected as it allows the researcher to capture the broader meanings behind individuals' actions and perspectives concerning students' use of TikTok as an affiliate marketing platform. This qualitative study facilitates the identification of patterns and contexts within natural settings.

Data collection involved in-depth, unstructured interviews, documentation, and observation. In-depth interviews allow for exploring rich, evolving responses from informants without being restricted by rigid interview structures. As Kriyantono (2012) notes, unstructured interviews enable the researcher to delve deeper into spontaneous responses, allowing the conversation to develop naturally based on informants' knowledge and experiences.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on university students actively participating in TikTok affiliation and generating profits through the platform. The purposive sampling method ensures access to the most relevant and in-depth information regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Informants are expected to provide rich data about their strategies for leveraging TikTok, challenges, and techniques to achieve financial success as affiliates.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, involving transcription, coding, and categorizing data into themes relevant to the research objectives. Through this approach, the researcher could focus on how students utilize TikTok for affiliate activities and identify the factors contributing to their success in generating profits.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The rapid advancement of technology has significantly transformed how young generations, particularly university students, seek income. In this digital era, social media platforms have evolved beyond mere social interaction spaces; they have also become tools for content monetization. One of the most prominent platforms in this regard is TikTok, a short-video-based application widely used by the younger generation, including university students, to generate income.

In the context of affiliate marketing, the primary motivation of affiliates is often driven by the desire to earn additional income, as explained by Situmorang (2010). Additionally, affiliates aim to establish their online businesses. This is evident in the case of students from Andalas University, who utilize the TikTok affiliate account @best.TikTokshop to participate in TikTok's affiliate program. These students have successfully grown their business by leveraging various platform features, such as TikTok Shop and the algorithm that promotes viral content. Their success brings financial benefits and enhances their knowledge and skills in digital business management.

Beyond financial motivation, another factor that supports affiliate participation in affiliate marketing programs is the ease of access. Muhaimin and Ahmad (2017) state that one of the critical attractions of affiliate marketing is its flexibility. This activity can be conducted anywhere, including from home, allowing affiliates to manage their time and workplace. This flexibility is particularly relevant for students, who often have busy schedules but still seek to earn extra income. Andalas University students running the @best.TikTokshop account take advantage of this flexibility to operate their affiliate business without being bound by specific times or locations.

Through a creative approach to producing promotional content and active engagement with audiences, the @best.TikTokshop account can follow trends, capture the attention of TikTok users, and increase sales of the advertised products through affiliates. This ease of running a business from various locations further reinforces the affiliates' motivation to continue participating in these programs (Muhaimin & Ahmad, 2017).

One of Generation Z students' strengths lies in their creativity in utilizing digital technology, particularly in marketing. Rather than merely selling products directly, they use creative and entertaining content to promote products. The soft selling strategy has proven effective, where products are subtly incorporated into broader content narratives. Soft selling is a sales technique that avoids pressuring consumers to buy immediately, as defined by Simplicable in Aliya (2020), focusing on subtle persuasion and relaxed language.

Students often employ this approach in their content through vlogs, tutorials, or short comedy videos that indirectly introduce the products they are promoting. This approach appeals more to audiences because it does not feel like a forced advertisement. In this context, Okazaki et al. (2010) identify several indicators of soft selling, including a) Feeling – creating positive emotions; b) Implicit – delivering product messages subtly; and c) Image – utilizing visuals to enhance product appeal.

In affiliate marketing, the soft selling strategy plays a crucial role in promoting products subtly without making consumers feel pressured. Okazaki et al. (2010) identify the following critical elements of soft selling relevant to this context:

1. **Feeling – Creating Positive Emotions.** Student affiliates often focus on evoking positive emotions in their content. This can be achieved through entertaining videos, inspiring stories, or educational tutorials. Content that evokes positive emotions fosters an emotional connection with the

audience, strengthening the bond between the promoted product and the enjoyable experience. This approach makes the audience more likely to consider the featured product because they associate it with positive emotions. In this context, the feelings generated tend to be empathetic and relatable, making consumers comfortable with the product.

2. **Implicit – Delivering Product Messages Subtly.** A significant advantage of soft selling is the delivery of product messages implicitly or indirectly. In many cases, the promoted product is not the main focus of the content but is instead integrated into a broader narrative. For example, students promoting a product often feature it in their daily activities without explicitly encouraging the audience to buy. This approach is highly effective because consumers do not feel bothered by overt advertisements; instead, they are naturally drawn to products that appear to be part of a normal lifestyle.
3. **Image – Using Visuals to Enhance Product Appeal.** Visuals play a significant role in capturing the audience's attention. Generation Z student affiliates often use strong visuals, such as aspirational lifestyles, appealing product presentations, or creative design elements in their videos. These visuals display the product and create an atmosphere that enhances the product's appeal. Consistent and engaging visuals reinforce product branding, making consumers more likely to remember and be interested in the product. For example, effective color, lighting, and framing can dramatically increase consumers' desire to purchase without explicit promotion. Students often incorporate striking or humorous visual elements in their product reviews, increasing engagement and the likelihood that audiences will purchase through affiliate links.

This creativity in promotional content allows students to innovate with content formats and styles. Many use storytelling formats to explain product benefits, provide usage recommendations, or create short comedy sketches. This approach creates an emotional appeal for the audience, making them more interested in following the product recommendations.

This study discusses how student affiliates utilize TikTok to generate income and strategies and leverage TikTok's algorithm and creativity to create effective promotional content.

TikTok's Algorithm for Maximum Benefit

TikTok's algorithm is designed to help users discover new content by displaying relevant videos on the "For You" page. This algorithm is based on user interactions such as views, likes, comments, and shares. It creates significant opportunities for content creators, including students, to expand their content reach.

Student affiliates harness TikTok's algorithm by creating relevant content that aligns with popular trends. Viral challenges, music, or dance routines make their content more discoverable to a broader audience. Additionally, students use relevant hashtags to optimize the visibility of their content.

Using popular trends and engaging visual elements helps their content appear more frequently on the "For You" page, the primary gateway to reaching a larger audience. Student affiliates understand the importance of quick, visually appealing interactions, which increases the likelihood that their content will attract users' attention.

TikTok provides beneficial analytics data for content creators, including student affiliates. This data includes information on content views, likes, shares, and comments. By analyzing this data, students can understand the types of content their audience prefers and create more compelling content in the future.

Feedback from the audience also plays a crucial role in improving content quality. Students running TikTok affiliate accounts listen to audience feedback regarding the promoted products. If audiences offer suggestions or criticism, students can adjust their content or select products more relevant to their audience's needs.

TikTok Affiliate programs provide students with opportunities to earn income by promoting products. Each time a user purchases a product through an affiliate link, the affiliate earns a commission. With the growing popularity of TikTok Shop, the opportunities for students to engage in affiliate programs continue to expand.

Students who build a large audience often receive brand offers for promotional partnerships, including free products or financial compensation for reviews or promotions on their TikTok accounts. These partnerships provide additional income and open opportunities for building relationships with well-known brands, enhancing their reputation as professional content creators.

Challenges in Affiliate Marketing

However, despite the numerous benefits that can be derived from the TikTok Affiliate program, challenges persist. According to Mileva (2023), affiliate marketing has increased online sales in Canada and the US by 16%. However, affiliate marketing is not as straightforward as it may seem. In reality, nearly 95% of affiliate marketers experience failure (Sibulan et al., J. A. (2024)). Inexperienced users often encounter various issues, such as a lack of access to actual sales data (Snyder & Kanich, 2016) and a significant dependence on the platforms they utilize, which may manipulate affiliate earnings unbeknownst to the users.

Furthermore, students acting as TikTok Affiliates must consistently create and upload content daily to sustain engagement on their accounts. This demands a high level of commitment from the affiliates to remain relevant and appealing to their followers. For instance, the user of the account @best.TikTokshop takes advantage of trending audio features on TikTok, incorporating them into every video to ensure that the content remains connected to popular trends.

Many students take advantage of trending audio features on TikTok to ensure their content stays aligned with popular trends. "In TikTok, there is an audio feature. Each audio used in a TikTok video can be reused from my account or others. One of my videos went viral at the start of my account's emergence, and to this day, I always use the same trending audio in every video I upload," the student stated.

TikTok Affiliate Marketing also affects consumer behavior by leveraging its ability to personalize and target advertisements. The platform's algorithm tailors content and recommendations to match the relevant demographics. Affiliate marketers can rely on audience data to promote products that align with consumer needs and preferences, encouraging TikTok users to purchase more based on these recommendations. Student TikTok Affiliates promote products and add value by producing educational and entertaining content. Crafting compelling narratives around the products can transform audiences into loyal customers.

CONCLUSION

The utilization of TikTok by students as affiliates represents a compelling phenomenon in the digital era. By leveraging this platform, students discover ways to generate income and demonstrate creativity and adaptability in response to technological advancements. Student affiliates can build their brands and achieve financial success by deeply understanding TikTok's algorithm, creative content development, and active audience interaction. As TikTok continues its rapid growth and the affiliate trend strengthens, it is crucial for students to continually refine their strategies and innovate in their use of the platform as a source of revenue.

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