Corresponding author:
ardiekso11@gmail.com

Conflict of interest statement: Author(s) reported no conflict of interest

EXPLORING TIKTOK AFFILIATE AS A DRIVER OF DIGITAL BUSINESS TRANSFORMATION MSMEs: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Ardi Eko Santoso [1]

[1]IUniversitas Islam Negeri Walisongo, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Objective: While prior studies on TikTok marketing largely focus on influencer popularity, engagement metrics, or short-term promotional outcomes, limited attention has been given to how TikTok Affiliate functions as a mechanism of deeper digital business transformation for MSMEs. This study aims to explore how TikTok Affiliate operates as a content-driven social commerce model that reshapes marketing practices, interaction structures, and value creation processes within the digital economy.

Research Design & Methods: A qualitative approach was employed using content analysis and non-participatory observation over three months (January–March 2024). Five TikTok Affiliate creators were purposively selected based on follower scale, content consistency, and active affiliate involvement. Data were analyzed from promotional videos and audience interactions, including comments and engagement patterns.

Findings: The findings reveal that TikTok Affiliate enables MSMEs to move beyond transactional online selling toward a content-mediated transformation of digital marketing, characterized by algorithmic visibility, narrative-based persuasion, and interactive consumer engagement. Rather than relying solely on brand-driven promotion, MSMEs benefit indirectly from creators' storytelling capabilities and TikTok's adaptive algorithm, which collectively enhance product discoverability, accelerate purchase decisions, and redistribute marketing functions across the platform ecosystem.

Implications & Recommendations: This study demonstrates that TikTok Affiliate effectiveness is not merely determined by creator popularity, but by the alignment between content narratives, algorithmic amplification, and audience sense-making. Practically, MSMEs are encouraged to strategically collaborate with creators whose content logic aligns with platform algorithms and audience expectations, while policymakers and platform managers should recognize affiliate ecosystems as a driver of inclusive digital participation.

Contribution & Value Added: This study contributes to digital business transformation literature by conceptualizing TikTok Affiliate as an ecosystem-based transformation mechanism, extending influencer marketing research toward a process-oriented understanding of platform-enabled MSME transformation.

Keywords: TikTok Affiliate, Digital Marketing, Social Commerce, Algorithmic Marketing.

JEL codes: M31, L81, O33
Article type: research paper

INTRODUCTION

The rapid diffusion of social commerce platforms has intensified competitive pressures and environmental uncertainty for MSMEs, requiring firms to continuously adapt their marketing practices to remain viable. In this context, business resilience–defined as the capacity to absorb

shocks, adapt to disruption, and sustain operations–has become increasingly critical in digital markets characterized by algorithmic volatility and shifting consumer behavior. Platforms such as TikTok, particularly through affiliate-based marketing models, offer new opportunities for MSMEs to strengthen adaptive capacity by leveraging content-driven promotion, creator-mediated interactions, and algorithmic visibility within dynamic platform ecosystems. A study by Ohara et al., (2024) confirms that digital platforms provide significant opportunities for MSMEs to accelerate the adoption of digital business and increase their competitiveness in the global market. Despite the growing adoption of affiliate-based social commerce, existing discussions largely remain at an operational or performance-oriented level, offering limited explanation of how and why such platforms contribute to MSMEs' adaptive capacity and resilience. From a resilience perspective, digital transformation is not merely about technology adoption or market expansion, but about the ability of firms to reconfigure resources, redistribute functions, and absorb external shocks in volatile digital environments. Platform-dependent marketing models such as TikTok Affiliate therefore raise critical analytical questions regarding MSMEs' strategic flexibility, control over value creation, and long-term sustainability.

From an academic standpoint, examining TikTok Affiliate through a resilience lens is important because MSMEs operate under structural constraints, including limited resources, asymmetric platform power, and exposure to algorithmic uncertainty. While affiliate ecosystems may enhance short-term visibility and engagement, their contribution to business resilience depends on whether MSMEs can leverage creator-mediated promotion and algorithmic amplification as adaptive mechanisms rather than sources of dependency. Understanding this tension is essential for advancing MSME resilience theory in platform-based economies, where survival increasingly depends on firms' capacity to navigate and adapt to externally governed digital infrastructures. The findings of Ardiansah et al., (2024) show that short-form video-based social commerce can significantly drive consumer engagement and positively contribute to business performance. Therefore, TikTok Affiliate has become a strategic instrument for SMEs to adapt to the dynamics of the digital economy and maintain competitiveness in an increasingly competitive market.

MSMEs that have successfully adopted and integrated digital technology optimally generally demonstrate higher competitiveness and are able to respond to market changes more agilely. However, this transformation process still faces a number of obstacles that cannot be ignored. Many MSME players lack technological knowledge and skills, face data security risks, and have limited digital-competent workforce, as revealed by Rupeika-Apoga and Petrovska (2022) and also Anatan and Nur (2023). Dependence on external platforms such as TikTok also raises concerns about business sustainability and full control over digital assets and business strategies. This condition confirms that although digital transformation offers great opportunities, MSMEs still need adequate support in the form of increased digital literacy, strong data protection policies, and human resource capacity building so that the adaptation process can take place effectively and sustainably.

Although TikTok Affiliate has grown rapidly, scientific studies on how this feature drives business transformation are still limited, highlighting the direct experiences of business owners and content creators. A number of previous studies have highlighted the development of digital marketing and affiliate practices on various digital platforms. Kwan (2023) shows that social media-based affiliate marketing has great potential in driving consumer purchasing power while expanding the market reach for MSMEs. In line with this, the TikTok Affiliate program has emerged as one of the most effective marketing strategies, especially for fashion and electronic products, as it is able to generate higher conversion rates compared to traditional marketing methods (Harahap & Sajali, 2024). Rohid (2024) research identifies various marketing strategies used by creators to attract audience attention and drive sales, as well as examines public perceptions of TikTok Affiliate as a source of income.

Scientific studies that specifically examine the role of TikTok Affiliates in driving the digital transformation of MSMEs as the main subject of analysis are still very limited, especially from a qualitative perspective that is able to capture in-depth experiences within the TikTok Affiliate

ecosystem. Although content creators and audiences are involved as supporting actors, this study focuses on MSMEs by analyzing how short video-based affiliate strategies are used to increase business exposure, engagement, and sales performance. The limited in-depth research exploring TikTok affiliate strategies, the dynamics of interaction in short-video-based social commerce, and audience responses highlights the need for more comprehensive investigation. Therefore, this study positions TikTok Affiliate not merely as a digital marketing tool but as a platform-supported transformation mechanism shaping SME resilience pathways. By focusing on the interplay between creators, audiences, and algorithms, this research aims to elucidate how affiliate-based social commerce supports–or constrains–SMEs' ability to sustain operations, respond to market disruptions, and maintain competitiveness over time. This analytical focus addresses a critical gap in the literature on digital transformation and resilience, which has not sufficiently accounted for the role of social commerce ecosystems in strengthening the adaptive capabilities of MSMEs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Transformation in MSMEs

Digital transformation in MSMEs has increasingly been conceptualized not merely as the adoption of digital technologies, but as a strategic process that reshapes organizational structures, resource allocation, and decision-making capabilities. In highly dynamic and uncertain market environments, digital transformation functions as a critical mechanism through which MSMEs enhance their adaptive capacity, enabling them to respond more flexibly to external shocks and competitive pressures. Prior studies emphasize that the integration of digital platforms, e-commerce systems, and data-driven tools allows MSMEs to improve operational efficiency, expand market reach, and sustain business performance amid rapid environmental change (Chien et al., 2022; Sahoo & Thakur, 2023).

From a resilience perspective, the value of digital transformation lies in its ability to support business continuity and strategic reconfiguration, rather than short-term performance gains alone. The adoption of digital technologies enables MSMEs to reorganize business processes, personalize products and services, and access broader markets without heavy reliance on physical infrastructure, thereby reducing vulnerability to market disruptions (Achieng & Malatji, 2022; Liu et al., 2021). As Loonam et al. (2018) argue, the success of digital transformation is closely linked to an organization's capacity to embed digital technologies into managerial and operational strategies, reinforcing long-term sustainability and resilience in volatile business environments.

However, digital transformation does not automatically translate into resilience. MSMEs often face structural constraints such as limited technological capabilities, digital skill gaps, and dependence on external digital infrastructures, which may weaken their ability to fully control value creation processes. These challenges highlight the need to examine digital transformation not only as a technological shift, but as an adaptive process that determines whether MSMEs can absorb shocks and sustain competitiveness over time. Loonam et al., (2018) show that an organization's ability to adapt its business processes to developments in digital technology is directly related to the success of its transformation and business sustainability, especially when the business is able to integrate technology into its operational and managerial strategies.

TikTok as a Social Commerce Platform

As social commerce platforms evolve, TikTok has emerged as a prominent digital ecosystem that integrates content creation, social interaction, and e-commerce transactions. Unlike conventional digital marketing channels, TikTok operates through an algorithm-driven distribution system that amplifies content visibility based on user interaction patterns rather than firm size or advertising expenditure. This platform logic offers MSMEs new opportunities to enhance market access and engagement, while simultaneously exposing them to algorithmic uncertainty and platform dependency (Bray, 2024).

From a resilience lens, TikTok's social commerce ecosystem represents both an opportunity and a strategic challenge for MSMEs. On the one hand, the platform enables rapid

audience reach, accelerates conversion processes, and facilitates community-based engagement through interactive features such as short videos and live shopping. These characteristics support MSMEs' ability to adapt marketing strategies in response to shifting consumer behavior (Maulana & Sandyawati, 2023). On the other hand, reliance on platform-controlled algorithms raises concerns regarding sustainability, control over digital assets, and long-term strategic autonomy. Consumer behavior within TikTok's ecosystem is shaped by peer influence, visual storytelling, and real-time interaction, which collectively accelerate purchasing decisions and strengthen emotional engagement with brands (Bray, 2024; Guo & Li, 2022). These dynamics suggest that platform-based social commerce influences not only marketing effectiveness, but also the resilience of MSMEs by redefining how trust, engagement, and value are co-created within digital communities.

TikTok Affiliate and Creator-Based Marketing Mechanism

TikTok Affiliate represents a creator-based marketing mechanism in which promotional activities are mediated through content creators rather than directly controlled by firms. This model reflects an evolution in digital marketing, where value creation is distributed across an ecosystem involving creators, audiences, and platform algorithms. Prior studies highlight that creator-driven content–characterized by authenticity, storytelling, and social influence–can enhance brand visibility and conversion rates more effectively than traditional advertising approaches (Nguyen et al., 2024). From a resilience perspective, TikTok Affiliate contributes to MSME transformation by redistributing marketing functions and reducing reliance on firm-owned promotional resources. Through collaboration with creators, MSMEs can leverage external creative capabilities and audience trust, thereby strengthening adaptive capacity in environments marked by resource constraints. However, this transformation also introduces new forms of dependency, as MSMEs' performance becomes increasingly influenced by creator credibility and algorithmic amplification.

Drawing on Source Credibility Theory, the effectiveness of TikTok Affiliate marketing is closely tied to creators' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Esa et al., 2025). Empirical evidence suggests that these credibility dimensions significantly shape consumer attitudes and purchase intentions, reinforcing the role of creators as critical intermediaries in social commerce ecosystems (Saskara & Achmad, 2024). In this context, creator credibility functions not only as a driver of short-term sales, but also as a resilience-enhancing mechanism by fostering sustained consumer trust and engagement.

From a creator-based marketing perspective on TikTok, this approach emphasizes the use of authentic, creative, and relatable user-generated content as the primary means of building trust and increasing audience engagement. Unlike traditional advertising formats that tend to be directly persuasive, creator content usually comes in the form of stories, entertainment, or personal experiences that naturally attract viewers' attention. This mechanism is further strengthened by TikTok's algorithm, which is able to distribute content widely based on user interests and interactions, giving affiliate products featured in videos the opportunity to gain much greater exposure. Elements such as viral trends, recommendations from influencers, interaction intensity, and storytelling strategies are key components in increasing brand awareness and building emotional closeness with audiences on this social commerce platform. (Nguyen et al., 2024).

TikTok Affiliate and creator-based marketing reflect a new form of evolution in digital marketing, where social influence, content creativity, and e-commerce transactions are integrated into a mutually supportive ecosystem. Through the trust formed between creators and their audience communities, as well as the use of powerful storytelling, this model is able to produce a more personal, relevant, and convincing promotional experience compared to conventional marketing approaches. Not only does it provide creators with direct monetization opportunities through commissions on the products they recommend, but it also helps brands build more authentic relationships with consumers through content that feels natural and close to everyday life. This integration makes TikTok Affiliate one of the most effective strategies for expanding brand reach and increasing conversions in the era of social commerce (Nguyen et al., 2024; Okonkwo & Namkoisse, 2023).

The TikTok Affiliate System forms a recommendation-based marketing model, in which consumer decisions are greatly influenced by the credibility of creators as trusted sources of information. Based on Source Credibility Theory, the effectiveness of promotional messages increases when creators demonstrate three key components, namely expertise, trustworthiness, and personal attractiveness (Esa et al., 2025). A number of studies have confirmed that influencer credibility has a significant effect on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. For example, research by Saskara and Achmad (2024) found that these three dimensions of credibility directly drive purchase interest by increasing audience trust. In the context of TikTok Affiliate, creator credibility not only builds short-term trust but also creates emotional connections that strengthen campaign effectiveness and increase affiliate product conversions.

METHODS

This study applies a qualitative method by combining content analysis and non-participatory observation as the main strategies. This approach was chosen based on the need to gain an in-depth understanding of the marketing strategies employed by TikTok affiliates and how the public perceives the existence and working mechanisms of TikTok Affiliate. Through content analysis, researchers can examine patterns, themes, and messages that emerge from various digital materials such as videos, captions, and user interactions. Meanwhile, non-participatory observation allows researchers to observe behavior, trends, and engagement patterns without direct intervention, thereby obtaining a more natural picture of the marketing practices that take place (Firmansyah et al., 2021). Overall, qualitative methods were chosen because they are able to comprehensively explore the meanings, experiences, and perceptions contained in complex social phenomena, particularly in the context of digital marketing practices through TikTok Affiliate.

The population in this study includes all TikTok creators involved in the TikTok Affiliate program. Given the large population spread across various content categories, this study imposed restrictions by selecting a purposive sample. Therefore, the study only focused its analysis on five TikTok Affiliate creators who were considered representative. This selection was based on several criteria, including: high engagement rates, a significant number of followers, and their reputation within the TikTok affiliate ecosystem. The five creators were selected for their consistency in promoting products through TikTok Shop, their ability to build audience trust, and their contribution to driving purchasing behavior through review content, live selling, and product recommendations. Thus, this sample is expected to provide an in-depth picture of the dynamics of affiliate marketing strategies on the TikTok platform.

Table 1. Sample of TikTok Affiliate Creators

No.	TikTok Affiliate Account Name	Total Followers	Content Category/Topic	Reason for Selection
1.	Natasha Surya	± 1.6M	Parenting, lifestyle, household product reviews	Consistently creates informative review content; has high engagement rates and is trusted by audiences
2.	Vania Wijaya	± 127.9K	Food recipes, cooking tips and tutorials	Has a natural and relatable delivery style; high comment interaction and frequently appears on FYP
3.	Shincanlifestyle	± 52.1k	Surviving life as a child living away from home	Focuses on affiliate content with high conversion rates; excels at creating clear and engaging short videos that encourage audience interaction
4.	Koh Cun	± 2.1M	Electronics, household appliances, accessories	Provides easy-to-understand product reviews; active in live selling, making it a suitable example of an affiliate strategy
5.	Renny Antonius	± 1.9M	Beauty & skincare	Representative of the beauty category; known for detailed review content that builds consumer trust

This study utilizes two main techniques in data collection, namely non-participatory observation and audience comment analysis as part of qualitative content analysis. Through non-participatory observation, the researcher systematically observed the videos and marketing strategies used by five TikTok Affiliate creators without direct interaction, including noting communication patterns, promotional techniques, and the level of audience engagement as seen from the number of likes, comments, and shares. In addition, this study also examined audience comments to identify patterns of public perception, both positive and negative, towards TikTok Affiliate practices. This analysis highlights issues such as creator transparency, marketing strategy effectiveness, and audience trust in the promoted products. All data was analyzed using a qualitative content analysis approach through a process of selection, categorization, and grouping of findings based on key themes such as marketing strategy, engagement levels, and public perception. This stage helps researchers determine key categories–such as the most dominant marketing techniques, the most effective forms of interaction, and general patterns in audience perceptions of the affiliate system. Ultimately, in-depth analysis of these patterns enables a comprehensive understanding of TikTok Affiliate's contribution to the development of the digital economy and how the public perceives and responds to this phenomenon.

To ensure data validity, this study conducted triangulation by comparing findings from various creators and audience responses, thereby obtaining a more objective and unbiased understanding. Qualitative methods were chosen through content analysis and non-participatory observation because they were in line with the research objective of exploring social phenomena in depth, particularly the dynamics of marketing in TikTok Affiliate. This phenomenon is not only related to sales figures, but also involves communication strategies, persuasion techniques, and the emotional and cognitive responses of the audience to the promoted content. In line with the views of Rofiah and Bungin (2021), a qualitative approach is considered relevant for exploring issues that have received minimal academic attention, especially in the rapidly developing field of digital marketing. Therefore, the methods used are expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of the contribution of TikTok Affiliate to digital economic growth and how the public forms perceptions of the affiliate profession in the digital ecosystem.

RESULT

Creator Collaboration-Based Marketing Tactics on TikTok

Marketing tactics through creator collaboration on TikTok leverage the influence and appeal of creators or influencers to strengthen product and brand promotion through creative content that feels natural to the audience. This approach emphasizes the importance of maintaining authenticity in every collaborative content, as overly commercial impressions can reduce user trust and engagement, especially when the content comes from creators with a large follower base. However, collaborations with popular creators can still generate high levels of engagement if the promoted product or brand is perceived as small, unique, or has authentic values that align with the creator's character, thereby increasing its appeal and resonance with the audience (Walsh et al., 2024). This collaborative approach ultimately underscores that balancing promotional strategies with content authenticity is a key factor in enhancing marketing effectiveness within the TikTok ecosystem.

Collaborative creator-based marketing tactics also leverage TikTok's character as a platform brimming with creativity and high viral potential to strengthen brand awareness while driving consumer purchase intent. Through short, engaging, and easily consumable videos, creators can showcase products in a more vivid way, making the brand easier to recognize, remember, and connect with users–especially millennials, who make up the majority of TikTok users (Maulana & Sandyawati, 2023; Gesmundo et al., 2022). Several factors contribute to the effectiveness of increasing brand awareness through marketing on this platform, including trends, electronic word-of-mouth, influencer influence, entertainment elements, interaction with the audience, and the power of storytelling. Among these factors, trends play the most dominant role in driving brand awareness, while influencers strengthen the delivery of messages to make them more relevant and easily accepted by TikTok users (Nguyen et al., 2024).

In implementing this tactic, brands tend to choose influencers from various categories–ranging from celebrities to micro and nano influencers–to tailor the campaign objectives to the characteristics of the target audience. Micro and nano influencers are often a strategic choice because they are considered more authentic and have a strong emotional connection with their followers, enabling them to build greater trust. Effective influencer-based marketing strategies generally include formulating clear campaign objectives, selecting creators who truly align with the brand identity, developing creative and relevant content, and utilizing a multi-channel approach to expand reach and maximize audience engagement (Okonkwo & Namkoisse, 2023). Collaborating with TikTok creators has also been shown to increase engagement and strengthen positive perceptions of brands, as content produced by creators is often considered more natural, entertaining, and relatable than official brand content. A study of Airbnb, for example, showed that content from influencers and ordinary users generated higher engagement rates than the company's official content, confirming that creators play a vital role in building a more vibrant brand image and encouraging user interaction on TikTok (Marti-Ochoa et al., 2024).

Increasing Product Visibility through the TikTok Algorithmk

Increasing product visibility on TikTok is greatly influenced by the platform's algorithm, which is specifically designed to display content based on user preferences and interaction patterns. The algorithm analyzes viewing behavior, engagement history, and the types of content frequently consumed to determine which videos are likely to interest specific users. With this mechanism, products promoted through TikTok videos have a greater chance of appearing on the For You Page (FYP) homepage, allowing them to be discovered by the right audience without relying solely on paid advertising. This demonstrates that TikTok is a strategic platform for brands and creators to increase product exposure through creative content that is relevant to users' needs and interests.

Various factors play an important role in increasing product visibility on the TikTok recommendation system, ranging from viral trends, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), the role of influencers, entertainment elements, interaction intensity, to the power of storytelling in a video. Content that follows trends has a greater chance of going viral because the TikTok algorithm tends to prioritize videos that are relevant to the collective consumption patterns of users, making trends the main driver of increased brand awareness. On the other hand, e-WOM that emerges through comments, duets, stitches, or resharing also strengthens credibility and expands the reach of products organically. The presence of influencers is a crucial factor because these figures are able to build trust and influence audience perception, especially when they have a reputation as authentic and informative creators. In addition, strong entertainment elements, active interaction between creators and viewers, and the ability to convey interesting stories make content more likable and prioritized by algorithms (Nguyen et al., 2024). The combination of trends, entertainment, and influencers makes content more competitive in attracting the attention of algorithms and audiences, as well as gaining optimal visibility.

TikTok's artificial intelligence (AI)-based algorithm continuously learns user preferences and displays content that is most likely to receive positive responses, providing a great opportunity for businesses, especially MSMEs, to increase brand visibility efficiently. By producing interesting, interactive content and following audience consumption patterns, MSMEs can gain wide organic reach without having to spend a lot of money. Additionally, marketing strategies that combine entertainment, creativity, and interaction have been proven to significantly increase engagement, which ultimately strengthens brand awareness and drives purchase interest (Maulana & Sandyawati, 2023; Ohara et al., 2024). This success is highly dependent on marketers' ability to understand the momentum, choose the right content format, and craft narratives that are relevant to the fast-paced and diverse dynamics of TikTok users.

Figure 1. Product Visibility Review Content (account @_vaniawijaya)

This content shows how relevant and engaging content elements work in harmony with the TikTok algorithm to increase product visibility. The creator uses a friendly and persuasive delivery style, accompanied by on-screen text that clarifies the promotional message, thereby strengthening audience retention. In addition, the product featured–in this case, a drink recipe book–is visually displayed alongside examples of the drinks, increasing the content's appeal. The TikTok Shop feature, in the form of a product label at the top of the video, makes it easier for the algorithm to categorize the content as commercial material relevant to users with similar interests, increasing the chances of distribution to the For You Page (FYP). The use of themed hashtags (#fyp, #book...) also helps the algorithm group videos into specific niches, allowing the content to reach audiences interested in recipes, drinks, or home business inspiration. The combination of visual elements, audience interaction, and content metadata strengthens the video's distribution performance in the TikTok recommendation system.

Product Reviews through Unboxing Videos

Product review content through unboxing videos is a strategy widely used by creators to show the process of opening the packaging while providing a direct assessment of the quality and features of the product. This type of content not only conveys information visually, but also provides entertainment elements that make viewers more interested and engaged, thereby driving purchase interest. The motivation of viewers in enjoying unboxing videos–whether for entertainment or interpersonal needs–also strengthens the parasocial relationship between viewers and creators, where viewers feel closer, more trusting, and ultimately more easily influenced by the recommendations given. Even so, searching for specific information through unboxing videos can also increase purchase intent directly without having to go through that emotional closeness (Kim, 2020). Furthermore, unboxing videos provide an authentic educational experience by showing the actual use of the product, thereby helping consumers understand the product more deeply and reducing doubts before purchasing. By presenting reviews that are considered honest and showing real experiences, this content becomes an effective promotional tool and can significantly influence purchasing decisions.

In the context of the development of the digital marketing ecosystem, particularly through the TikTok Affiliate feature, content types such as unboxing videos also play an important role in driving the digital transformation of MSMEs. Collaboration between creators and business actors

allows MSMEs products to gain wider exposure because such content can spread quickly through TikTok's algorithm, which highlights videos with high interaction rates. In addition, visual testimonials that are displayed spontaneously and authentically in unboxing videos can build product credibility in the eyes of consumers, thereby increasing trust in previously unknown MSMEs brands. The commission system offered by TikTok Affiliate also creates incentives for creators to promote products intensively, while MSMEs can market their products without having to spend money on advertising up front. This mechanism ultimately encourages SMEs to be more adaptive to technology, enhance their digital competencies, and integrate content-based marketing strategies as part of their business transformation in the digital era.

Figure 2. Unboxing Content (account @renny.antonious)

Interactive delivery in unboxing videos is an important element that makes content more interesting and able to hold the audience's attention. In this approach, creators not only show the process of opening the package, but also engage the audience through a more personal style of communication, such as asking rhetorical questions, giving spontaneous responses to the product, or expressing emotions naturally. Creators often utilize gestures, intonation, and real-time commentary during the unboxing process to create an atmosphere that makes viewers feel as if they are part of the experience. This interactive delivery makes the video feel more alive, increases parasocial closeness, and fosters trust in the review being given. As a result, viewers not only gain information about the product but also experience a more immersive and convincing experience, which ultimately strengthens their purchasing interest.

In addition to these interactive elements, the use of subtitles or supporting text in videos has become an increasingly important component in improving the effectiveness of communication. Subtitles help clarify the information being conveyed, especially when viewers are watching without sound or in conditions that are not conducive to audio. In addition, text can highlight important product features, summarize key points, or emphasize the creator's reactions, making the flow of the video easier to follow. The use of subtitles also improves accessibility for various viewer groups, including those with special needs or who do not understand certain intonations.
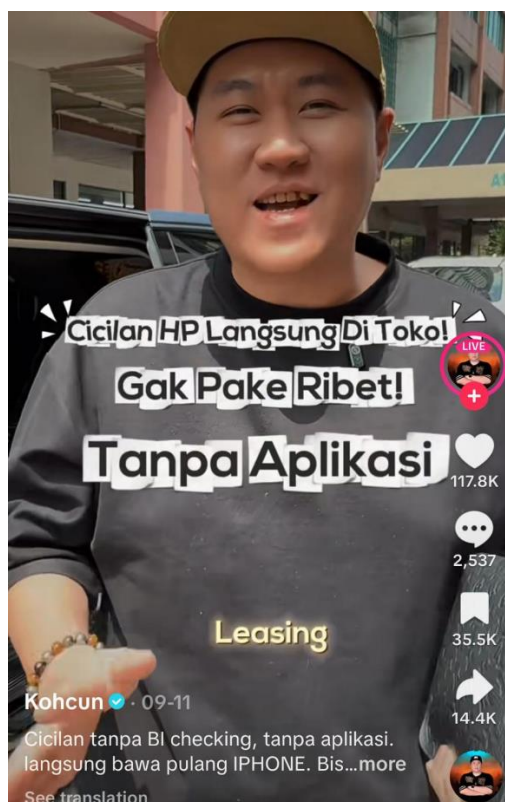
Figure 3. Promotional Content using Subtitles (account @kohcun)

Utilizing Viral Content

Most creators consistently utilize various elements of TikTok trends–from viral sounds and hashtag challenges to popular visual effects–to drive increased engagement with their content. By utilizing these trends, they have the opportunity to reach a wider audience and get recommendations on the "For You" (FYP) page. However, the real key to increasing engagement is not just trends, but consistent content quality, regular posting frequency, active interaction with followers, appropriate use of hashtags, and a willingness to follow relevant trends. The combination of these factors allows content to not only attract temporary attention, but also build a loyal audience community and increase long-term visibility.
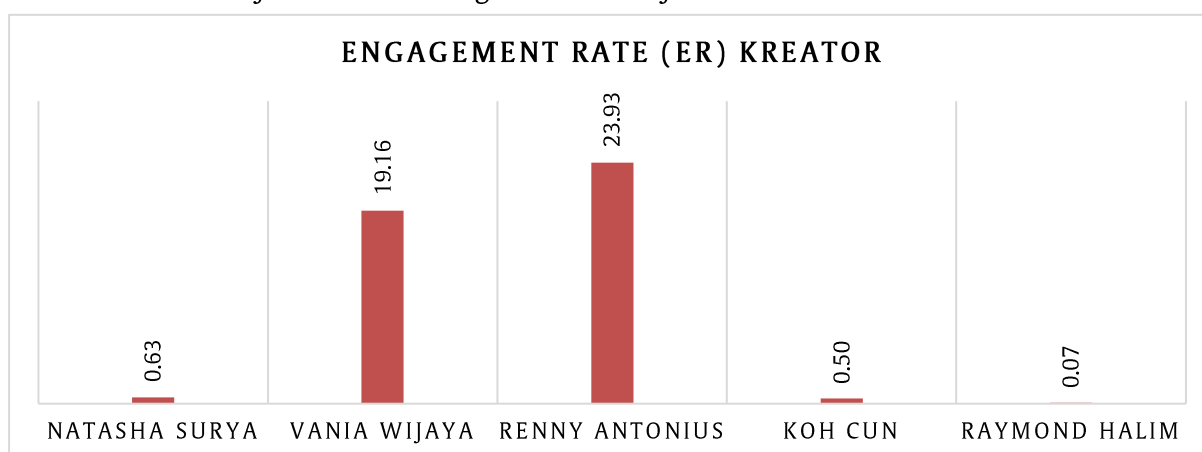

Figure 4. ER Diagram (Source: https://ubiwiz.com/tiktok-engagement-rate)

Based on the Engagement Rate (ER) graph, it can be seen that each creator has a different level of audience engagement, indicating a striking gap in the effectiveness of their content strategies. Creators such as Natasha Surya and Koh Cun stand out with a much higher ER than other creators, indicating their ability to produce relevant, interesting content that triggers active

interaction from the audience. This variation illustrates that in today's digital landscape, competition no longer relies solely on the quality of products or services, but rather on how effectively creators or brands are able to build communicative relationships with their audience through social media platforms. The higher the level of engagement created, the greater the opportunity for content to gain widespread exposure and increase digital competitiveness.

Engagement Rate is currently one of the strategic indicators that not only reflects the popularity of content, but also reflects the level of emotional closeness between creators and their followers. Creators with high ER have greater potential to influence audience decisions, retain their attention, and build a solid and loyal community. A high ER also provides algorithmic advantages, as interactive content tends to have a greater probability of appearing on recommendation pages such as the For You Page (FYP). This makes ER not just a statistical number, but an important asset in expanding reach, strengthening trust, and creating long-term impact in the digital content ecosystem.

Persuasive Call to Action Strategies and Giveaways to Increase Conversionsi

Some creators utilize persuasive calls to action (CTAs) in every piece of content they produce, thereby encouraging their audience to take action more quickly and purposefully. CTAs that are designed with clear, concise, and benefit-oriented language have been proven to increase audience motivation to click on affiliate links, explore products, or make purchases. This approach not only strengthens the driving force in the consumer decision-making process, but also creates the impression that the expected action is relevant and beneficial to the audience. By utilizing phrases such as "check the link now," "buy before it runs out," or "see product details here," creators can optimize the conversion flow while maximizing the effectiveness of promotional messages. This strategy demonstrates that the use of appropriate CTAs can be a key element in guiding consumer behavior amid increasingly intense digital content competition.

In addition, many creators also use giveaways as part of their efforts to expand their reach and strengthen their relationship with their audience. Giveaways are an effective means of increasing interaction, as they usually require the audience to comment, share videos, or follow the creator's account as a condition of participation. This activity not only increases engagement directly, but also helps build emotional closeness and long-term loyalty. The prizes offered are generally relevant to the products being promoted, thereby reinforcing the marketing message and creating a positive experience for participants.

These findings show that the effectiveness of marketing strategies in TikTok Affiliate is largely determined by the creator's ability to generate intense interaction with the audience, present interesting content, and make maximum use of TikTok features to increase engagement. To gain a deeper understanding of how the audience responds to these strategies, an analysis was also conducted on the comments on the creators' videos. Through these comments, it is possible to observe the perceptions, interests, trust, and potential influence that arise from the interaction between creators and audiences. This approach provides a comprehensive picture of how affiliate content is received and how these marketing strategies shape the dynamics of relationships within the digital community.

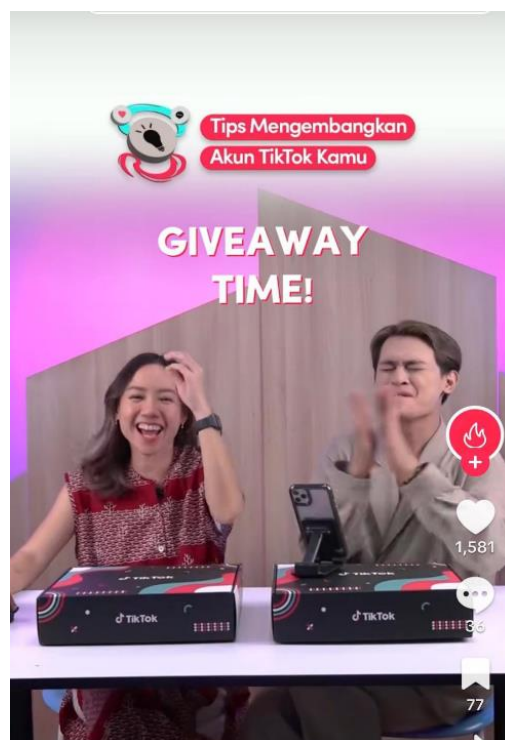Figure 5. Call to Action content (account @shincanlifestyle)

Figure 6. Giveaway content (account @natasha.surya)

Emotionally charged content strategies, as seen in the video–where the creator displays enthusiastic expressions and visuals of cash–are an effective way to spark curiosity, hope, and motivation in viewers. This approach works because emotionally engaging content tends to attract more attention, increase watch time, and encourage initial interaction, which is then interpreted by algorithms as a positive signal. When this strategy is combined with giveaways or calls for participation with prizes, conversion rates can increase significantly. Giveaways provide direct incentives for users to take actions such as following accounts, commenting, sharing videos,

or trying out promoted products/features. The combination of emotionally engaging content that sparks interest and giveaway mechanisms that offer concrete rewards creates an effective flow for transforming passive viewers into active participants, thereby strengthening the likelihood of conversion in TikTok marketing campaigns.

From several comments analyzed, three main categories emerged that describe the diverse responses of audiences to TikTok Affiliate content created by creators.

a. The first category is positive perception, where many audiences appreciate the way creators recommend products, especially when reviews are delivered honestly, clearly, and are considered helpful in the decision-making process. These positive comments often contain expressions of interest, gratitude, and praise for the creators' content delivery style and product demonstrations. In addition to responding positively to the products, some audiences also expressed interest in earning income through TikTok, either by joining as affiliates or by starting to create similar content. This motivation arises because they see the economic opportunities demonstrated by creators, such as the ease of earning commissions from affiliate links. This indicates that content with informative and authentic reviews not only influences purchasing decisions but also inspires audiences to explore income potential within the TikTok Affiliate ecosystem.

b. The second category is negative perceptions, which arise when the audience feels that the promotion seems excessive or does not match their personal experience with the same product. Some negative comments also highlight the lack of clarity regarding the benefits of the product, allegations of overly directive promotion, or discrepancies between the creator's claims and the actual results experienced by the audience. Such criticisms show that some audiences remain critical and do not immediately accept recommendations simply because they are delivered by popular creators.

c. The third category includes neutral or informational comments, such as questions about price, quality, how to use the product, or product availability. Comments in this category show that audiences do not always respond emotionally, but also use the comments section to seek additional information. This response pattern reinforces the finding that interactions in TikTok Affiliate are not only influenced by creator content, but also by the audience's need for information and level of knowledge about the promoted product.

DISCUSSION

This study advances the discussion on digital marketing and social commerce by moving beyond a descriptive account of TikTok Affiliate practices and instead situating the findings within broader debates on digital transformation, platform ecosystems, and MSME resilience. While previous studies have largely emphasized performance outcomes such as engagement, conversion rates, or influencer effectiveness, the present findings demonstrate that TikTok Affiliate functions as a platform-enabled transformation mechanism that reshapes how MSMEs adapt, reconfigure resources, and sustain business continuity in volatile digital environments.

From a digital transformation perspective, the findings support earlier arguments that digitalization in MSMEs is not limited to technology adoption, but involves deeper organizational and strategic change (Chien et al., 2022; Sahoo & Thakur, 2023). However, this study extends prior work by showing that TikTok Affiliate accelerates transformation not through firm-controlled digital infrastructure, but through externally mediated ecosystems involving creators and algorithms. This challenges the dominant assumption in MSME digital transformation literature that firms must internally develop digital capabilities to remain competitive. Instead, the findings suggest that MSMEs can partially externalize marketing capabilities by leveraging creator-based ecosystems, thereby compensating for internal resource limitations.

This insight aligns with Loonam et al. (2018), who emphasize that successful digital transformation depends on the ability to integrate technology into managerial and operational strategies. In the TikTok Affiliate context, such integration occurs indirectly: MSMEs strategically align with creators whose content logic and audience profiles match platform algorithms. This form of alignment represents a reconfiguration of marketing functions, where storytelling, audience

engagement, and trust-building are delegated to creators, while MSMEs focus on product readiness and fulfillment. Academically, this finding expands digital transformation theory by highlighting ecosystem-level adaptation, rather than firm-centric transformation alone.

When examined through a resilience lens, the findings offer more nuanced insights into how TikTok Affiliate contributes to MSMEs' adaptive capacity. Resilience literature emphasizes the ability of firms to absorb shocks, adapt to disruption, and sustain operations over time. The results indicate that TikTok Affiliate enhances MSME resilience by reducing dependence on high-cost advertising, increasing market reach during periods of uncertainty, and enabling rapid adjustment of promotional strategies in response to changing consumer trends. This supports Achieng & Malatji (2022) and Liu et al., (2021) who argue that digital platforms can lower structural barriers and increase flexibility for small firms.

However, this study also reveals a critical tension that has been underexplored in previous research. While TikTok Affiliate strengthens short-term adaptability, it simultaneously introduces platform dependency risks, particularly related to algorithmic volatility and limited control over content distribution. Unlike traditional digital channels where firms retain greater autonomy, TikTok's algorithm governs visibility and reach, creating uncertainty for MSMEs' long-term strategic planning. This finding contributes academically by reframing resilience not as a guaranteed outcome of digitalization, but as a conditional process shaped by platform governance structures. In comparison with earlier studies on social commerce, the findings partially confirm Kwan (2023), who highlights the potential of affiliate marketing to expand MSME market reach and stimulate consumer purchasing power. Similarly, Harahap & Sajali (2024) report higher conversion rates for TikTok-based affiliate strategies compared to traditional marketing methods. While these studies focus primarily on outcomes, the present research adds analytical depth by explaining why such outcomes occur–namely, through the interaction of creator credibility, algorithmic amplification, and audience sense-making. This process-oriented explanation represents a key academic contribution, as it shifts the discussion from "what works" to "how transformation unfolds."

The role of creators emerges as central in this transformation process. Consistent with Nguyen et al. (2024) and Okonkwo & Namkoisse (2023), the findings confirm that creator-generated content enhances authenticity and emotional engagement, making promotional messages more persuasive than conventional advertising. However, this study advances the literature by demonstrating that creator involvement is not merely a marketing tactic, but a resilience-enhancing intermediary mechanism. Through trusted relationships with audiences, creators act as buffers that reduce consumer skepticism and stabilize demand during periods of market uncertainty. This finding resonates strongly with Source Credibility Theory, which posits that expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness determine message effectiveness (Esa et al., 2025). Empirical support from Saskara & Achmad (2024) further confirms that these credibility dimensions directly influence purchase intention. The present study extends this theoretical framework by showing that credibility also plays a structural role in sustaining MSME resilience, as repeated exposure to trusted creator recommendations fosters long-term consumer trust and loyalty, rather than one-off transactions. This represents an important theoretical extension of source credibility from an attitudinal outcome to a resilience-related outcome.

From a platform ecosystem perspective, the findings align Guo & Li (2022) describe TikTok as an interactive, community-driven social commerce environment. However, this study adds a critical analytical layer by highlighting how algorithmic personalization simultaneously enables and constrains MSME resilience. While personalized content distribution increases engagement and conversion potential, it also places MSMEs in a reactive position, where success depends on continuous alignment with opaque algorithmic rules. This duality has been largely overlooked in prior TikTok-focused studies, which tend to emphasize platform advantages without sufficiently addressing strategic vulnerability. Importantly, this study demonstrates that resilience in the TikTok Affiliate ecosystem is not solely determined by technological features, but by strategic alignment across actors. MSMEs that view TikTok Affiliate merely as a promotional shortcut may achieve temporary visibility but remain vulnerable to algorithmic shifts. In contrast, those that strategically collaborate with creators, adapt content narratives, and diversify promotional approaches are better

positioned to absorb shocks and sustain performance. This insight contributes to resilience theory by emphasizing relational and ecosystem-based resilience, rather than firm-level resilience alone.

Academically, the novelty of this study lies in its qualitative, process-oriented explanation of how TikTok Affiliate drives digital business transformation and resilience in MSMEs. While prior studies have relied heavily on quantitative metrics such as engagement rates or sales figures, this research captures the lived experiences and strategic interpretations of actors within the affiliate ecosystem. This approach reveals transformation as an ongoing, negotiated process shaped by platform rules, creator agency, and audience interpretation–an aspect largely absent from existing literature. Furthermore, by positioning MSMEs as the primary analytical subject–rather than creators or consumers–this study addresses a significant gap in social commerce research. Existing TikTok studies often privilege influencer strategies or consumer behavior, leaving MSMEs analytically underrepresented. By foregrounding MSMEs' adaptive strategies and vulnerabilities, this study contributes to a more balanced and inclusive understanding of digital transformation in platform-based economies.

In summary, the discussion demonstrates that TikTok Affiliate should be understood not merely as an innovative marketing tool, but as a platform-mediated transformation mechanism with profound implications for MSME resilience. Its effectiveness depends on how MSMEs navigate the interplay between creator credibility, algorithmic governance, and audience engagement. By integrating digital transformation theory, resilience theory, and social commerce literature, this study offers a more comprehensive and theoretically grounded explanation of TikTok Affiliate's role in shaping MSME adaptation and sustainability in the digital economy.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that TikTok Affiliate functions not merely as a commission-based digital marketing program, but as a platform-enabled mechanism of digital business transformation that reshapes how MSMEs adapt to rapidly changing market environments. By integrating creator-driven content, algorithmic visibility, and social commerce features, TikTok Affiliate enables MSMEs to move beyond traditional, cost-intensive promotional models toward more flexible, data-driven, and interaction-oriented marketing practices. This transformation is particularly relevant for MSMEs operating under resource constraints, as it allows them to leverage external creative and technological capabilities without substantial upfront investment.

From a business resilience perspective, the findings indicate that TikTok Affiliate enhances MSMEs' adaptive capacity by enabling rapid experimentation with content strategies, real-time engagement with consumers, and continuous adjustment to shifting market trends. Creator-mediated promotion and algorithmic amplification help MSMEs absorb market shocks–such as declining offline demand or increased competition–by maintaining visibility and consumer engagement during periods of uncertainty. In this sense, digital transformation through TikTok Affiliate supports not only competitiveness, but also business continuity and shock absorption, which are core dimensions of MSME resilience.

However, this study also highlights that resilience outcomes are conditional rather than automatic. While TikTok Affiliate reduces marketing costs and expands reach, MSMEs remain exposed to platform dependency and algorithmic volatility. Sustainable resilience therefore depends on MSMEs' ability to strategically manage creator collaborations, diversify promotional approaches, and interpret platform data to inform decision-making. This finding contributes academically by reframing digital transformation as a resilience-building process shaped by platform governance, rather than a purely technological or performance-driven outcome.

The study offers several policy implications. First, policymakers and MSME support institutions should recognize social commerce platforms such as TikTok not only as marketing channels, but as strategic infrastructures for MSME resilience. Capacity-building programs should move beyond basic digital adoption and focus on enhancing MSMEs' strategic literacy in content-based marketing, creator collaboration, and data interpretation. Second, platform providers are encouraged to improve transparency and guidance related to algorithmic mechanisms, enabling

MSMEs to better anticipate changes and reduce vulnerability to sudden shifts in visibility. Third, policies supporting creator–MSME partnerships–such as training, certification, or ethical affiliate guidelines–can help strengthen trust, reduce opportunistic behavior, and promote more sustainable ecosystem relationships.

Practically, MSMEs are advised to approach TikTok Affiliate as a long-term adaptive strategy, rather than a short-term sales tool. Strategic alignment with creators, consistent content optimization, and the use of engagement data for learning and adjustment are critical for sustaining resilience in platform-based markets. By embedding these practices into their broader digital strategies, MSMEs can better navigate uncertainty and maintain relevance in increasingly competitive digital economies. In conclusion, this study advances digital transformation and social commerce literature by positioning TikTok Affiliate as a resilience-oriented transformation mechanism within platform ecosystems. By highlighting the interplay between creators, algorithms, and MSME adaptation, the study provides a deeper understanding of how platform-based marketing contributes to both digital transformation and business resilience. These insights offer valuable directions for future research, particularly in examining long-term resilience outcomes and comparative platform dynamics across different social commerce environments.

REFERENCES

Achieng, M. S., & Malatji, M. (2022). Digital Transformation of Small and Medium Enterprises in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Scoping Review. The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v18i1.1257

Anatan, L., & Nur. (2023). Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises' Readiness for Digital Transformation in Indonesia. Economies, 11(6), 156. https://doi.org/10.3390/economies11060156

Ardiansah, M. N., Azizah, A., & Sadida, A. (2024). Social Commerce Success Impact on Business Performance Insight From TikTok Shop Phenomena in Indonesia. Accounting Analysis Journal, 13(1), 25–33. https://doi.org/10.15294/aaj.v13i1.2778

Bray, G. A. (2024). Capturing Consumer Attention: An In-Depth Analysis of TikTok Live Shopping. Law and Economy, 3(1), 32–46. https://doi.org/10.56397/le.2024.01.04

Chien, F., Kamran, H. W., Nawaz, M. A., Thach, N. N., Long, P. D., & Baloch, Z. A. (2022). Assessing the Prioritization ofBarriers toward Green Innovation: Small and Medium Enterprises Nexus. Environment, Development and Sustainability, 24, 1897–1927. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-021-01513-x

Esa, M. M., Ibrahim, S., Naseri, R. N. N., Norman, H., Kasim, N. A. M., & Shah, N. M. (2025). The Relationship between Influences Credibility and Student Purchase Intentions: The Role of Attractiveness, Trustworthiness and Expertise. International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS), 9(09), 2658–2663. https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000227

Firmansyah, M., Masrun, M., & S, I. D. K. Y. (2021). Esensi Perbedaan Metode Kualitatif dan Kuantitatif. Elastisitas: Jurnal Ekonomi Pembangunan, 3(2), 156–159. https://doi.org/10.29303/e-jep.v3i2.46

Gesmundo, M. A. G., Jordan, M. D. S., Meridor, W. H. D., Muyot, D. V., Castano, M. C. N., & Bandojo, A. J. P. (2022). TikTok as a Platform for Marketing Campaigns: The effect of Brand Awareness and Brand Recall on the Purchase Intentions of Millennials. Journal of Business and Management Studies, 4(2), 343–361. https://doi.org/10.32996/jbms.2022.4.2.27

Guo, J., & Li, L. (2022). Exploring the Relationship Between Social Commerce Features and Consumers' Repurchase Intentions: The Mediating Role of Perceived Value. Frontiers in Physiology, 12, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.775056

Harahap, Y. A., & Sajali, H. (2024). Digital Marketing Tiktok Affiliate pada Pemasaran Produk Fashion. Ranah Research: Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development, 6(5), 1733–1743. https://doi.org/10.38035/rrj.v6i5.1003

Kim, H. (2020). Unpacking Unboxing Video-Viewing Motivations: The Uses and Gratifications Perspective and the Mediating Role of Parasocial Interaction on Purchase Intent. Journal of Interactive Advertising, 20(3), 196–208. https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2020.1828202

Kwan, M. C. (2023). The Use of TikTok Affiliate Marketing for e-Commerce and Online Business. Jurnal Adijaya Multidisplin, 1(01), 221–228.

Liu, Y., Ni, Z., Karlsson, M., & Gong, S. (2021). Methodology for Digital Transformation with Internet of Things and Cloud Computing: A Practical Guideline for Innovation in Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises. Sensors, 21(16), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3390/s21165355

Loonam, J., Eaves, S., Kumar, V., & Parry, G. (2018). Towards digital transformation: Lessons learned from traditional organizations. Strategic Change, 27(2), 101–109. https://doi.org/10.1002/jsc.2185

Marti-Ochoa, J., Martin-Fuentes, E., & Ferrer-Rosell, B. (2024). Airbnb on TikTok: Brand Perception Through User Engagement and Sentiment Trends. Social Science Computer Review, 43(2), 318–340. https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393241260242

Maulana, M. A., & Sandyawati, N. S. (2023). Using Tiktok Social Media as a Marketing Promotion Media in Online Business. International Journal of Social Science, 3(4), 507–514. https://doi.org/10.53625/ijss.v3i4.7151

Nguyen, C., Tran, T., & Nguyen, T. (2024). Factors Affecting Users' Brand Awareness through Social Media Marketing on TikTok. Business Perspectives, 20(1), 122–131. https://doi.org/10.21511/im.20(1).2024.11

Ohara, M. R., Suparwata, D. O., & Rijal, S. (2024). Revolutionary Marketing Strategy: Optimising Social Media Utilisation as an Effective Tool for MSMEs in the Digital Age. Journal of Contemporary Administration and Management (ADMAN), 2(1), 313–318. https://doi.org/10.61100/adman.v2i1.125

Okonkwo, I., & Namkoisse, E. (2023). The Role of Influencer Marketing in Building Authentic Brand Relationships Online. Journal of Digital Marketing and Communication, 3(2), 81–90. https://doi.org/10.53623/jdmc.v3i2.350

Rofiah, C., & Bungin, B. (2021). Qualitative Methods : Simple Research with Triangulation Theory Design. Develop, 5(1), 18–28. https://doi.org/10.25139/dev.v5i1.3690

Rohid, N. (2024). Store Advertising Strategy In Tuban In Increasing Product Appeal. Communicator: Journal of Communication, 1(2), 22–29. https://doi.org/10.59373/comm.v1i2.70

Rupeika-Apoga, R., & Petrovska, K. (2022). Barriers to Sustainable Digital Transformation in Micro-, Small-, and Medium-Sized Enterprises. Sustainability, 14(20), 13558. https://doi.org/10.3390/su142013558

Sahoo, P. S. B. B., & Thakur, V. (2023). Enhancing the performance of Indian micro, small and medium enterprises by implementing supply chain finance: challenges emerging from COVID-19 pandemic. Benchmarking: An International Journal, 30(6), 2110–2138. https://doi.org/10.1108/BIJ-11-2021-0668

Saskara, B., & Achmad, N. (2024). The Effect of Social Media Source Credibility on Purchase Interest of Products from Online Stores. Jurnal Ilmiah Manajemen Kesatuan, 12(6), 2549–2558. https://doi.org/10.37641/jimkes.v12i6.2947

Walsh, D., Kliamenakis, A., Laroche, M., & Jabado, S. (2024). Authenticity in TikTok: How Content Creator Popularity and Brand Size Influence Consumer Engagement with Sponsored User-Generated Content. Psychology & Marketing, 41(11), 2645–2656. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.22075