Social Proof as a Leveraging Variable for Purchasing Decisions

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the influence of affiliate marketing and online customer reviews on social proof and purchasing decisions on TikTok. Data collection method by distributing questionnaires to TikTok users in Central Java. The data collection technique uses quota sampling and purposive sampling method. The data analysis method uses structural Equation Modelling, with the AMOS 25 program. The results of the analysis show that the direct and indirect influence between affiliate marketing, online customer reviews on social proof and purchase decisions shows positive and significant results. Social proof is able to strengthen the relationship of the indirect influence of affiliate marketing and online customer reviews on purchasing decisions. This research combines Social Influence Theory and Theory of Planned Behaviour as a bridge to digital strategies in making purchasing decisions. TikTok needs to increase partnerships with affiliate marketers who have a good reputation and great influence in the target market.

Keyword: affiliate marketing; online customer reviews; purchase decisions; social influence theory; theory of planned behaviour

INTRODUCTION

The development of technology and the advancement of the digital era have opened up great opportunities for the development of online buying and selling businesses in Indonesia. Online businesses are transforming to support business activities and have great opportunities after the COVID-19 pandemic. This condition is supported by the high number of internet users in Indonesia. According to survey data conducted by the Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) in 2023, the internet penetration rate in Indonesia from 2022 which originally amounted to 77.02% rose to 78.19%. The high number of internet users and the increasing penetration rate are widely used by some Indonesians to support economic activities through social media.

Social media or often called social networks is one of the simple communication tools whose users can interact remotely and also online channels as a medium of hobby and creativity (Nurjannah & Surianto, 2022); (Sulistiyani, Rustono, et al., 2024).Various social media are developing in Indonesia such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, WhatsApp, TikTok and many more. These various social media are competing to improve performance by developing the latest features in accordance with changing patterns of people's lives. TikTok is one of the most popular social media in Indonesia. According to information from katadata.com TikTok is one of the fastest growing social media platforms in Indonesia. By 2024, the number

of TikTok users in Indonesia will reach 157.6 million, making it the largest market in the world for the platform. TikTok Shop, as TikTok's e-commerce feature, has become a key tool for direct purchases through video content, providing an integrated and entertaining shopping experience. TikTok users in Indonesia spend an average of 2,495 minutes per month on the app, higher than other social media platforms such as Instagram or Facebook. TikTok Shop has seen rapid growth since its launch in Indonesia in 2021, with most of its users coming from millennials and Gen Z, the dominant groups in online shopping. The number of Tik Tok users in Indonesia has begun to surpass the number of other social media users, such as Instagram, Youtube, and Twitter, making this platform a great place to share information, communicate, and promote. A marketing strategy that can be done on Tik Tok is the use of hashtags (#) with certain topics presented in the video so that people can easily search and find the video in question. TikTok was originally an application for various videos, but along with the changing patterns of people's lives since the Coivd 19 pandemic, TikTok officially launched an online shopping feature called TikTok Shop. TikTok Shop makes the TikTok application a social-commerce application. This is also what underlies TikTok launching the TikTok Affiliate program as a collaboration program for TikTok content creators and sellers on TikTok Shop.

This affiliates program on TikTok is the same as what other e-commerce companies like Shopee do. Content creators will create short videos about the products listed in the "yellow basket" which is an icon that will later link directly to the link of products sold on TikTok Shop. Content creators who successfully sell products in the "yellow basket" will earn a commission according to the number of products they successfully sell. Affiliate marketing programs on TikTok can significantly increase the number of sales and help sellers to use social media as marketing(Kwan, 2023).

In addition to the affiliate program that helps potential customers get reviews and information about the products they will buy from content creators on TikTok. TikTok Shop adds a feature that helps potential customers based on direct reviews from previous consumers called online customer reviews. Online customer reviews are a simple solution so that potential buyers are wiser and convince themselves to choose items from several online store options on TikTok Shop. TikTok Shop provides a review feature, namely online customer review so that consumers who have made transactions provide their experience about the quality and condition of the products purchased.

Siregar et al. (2023) state that customers will consider several decisions related to non-purchase behavior. Repeatedly the choice of not to buy can influence the purchase decision. The decision is based on good and bad information and reviews about the goods that potential customers will buy. With the TikTok Shop online customer review feature, potential customers will get this convenience. In the opinion suggests that the experience provided by others can be used as information or input before consumers make purchase decisions. Through the Zhai et al. (2024) online customer review feature on TikTok Shop, consumers will get this and are expected to influence the purchase decision of products sold on TikTok Shop.

Several studies have been conducted on affiliate marketing and online customer reviews of purchasing decisions. Based on research that has been carried out by (Syrdal et al., 2023) showing that affiliate marketing variables affects purchasing decisions. Other research conducted by showing the results of (Husnayetti et al., 2023) online consumer reviews variables have a significant effect on purchasing decisions. Different studies conducted by states that (Wandira & Rahman, 2021) affiliate marketing has no influence on purchasing decisions. Other research on online customer review variables also suggests that online customer reviews do not

affect purchasing decisions. Research conducted by shows Chen et al. (2022) online customer reviews variables have no influence on purchasing decisions. This research was then conducted to get further answers regarding the results of the inconsistencies in the results of the above research and another purpose of this study was to find the influence between affiliate marketing and online customer reviews on purchase decisions on TikTok Shop.

Most previous studies have only explored the direct influence of affiliate marketing or online customer reviews on purchase decisions. This research provides a new perspective by showing how social proof strengthens these relationships through indirect influence. This research combines Social Influence Theory and Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to bridge digital strategies in purchase decision making. By including social proof as a key variable, this research bridges the concepts of digital marketing and social psychology, providing new insights that have not been widely explored.

In the highly competitive digital era, companies need effective strategies to win consumers' attention. every organisation must be prepared to change as the environment evolves (Sulistiyani et al., 2023). Social proof is an important element in strengthening consumer trust in digital promotions. Social proof as a mediator helps understand how purchasing decisions are influenced by digital interactions between individuals. Social proof plays an important role in reducing uncertainty and building consumer trust in products, especially in online transactions. This research provides an innovative framework for companies to optimise the combination of affiliate marketing and online reviews in a more structured way, namely through the creation of strong social proof as a synergistic result of both strategies.

Social proof emerged from the grand theory of Social Influence Theory put forward by (kelman, 1953) explains how individuals are influenced by others in their social environment. This theory includes various concepts that explain how, why, and when people change their attitudes, beliefs, or behavior due to the influence of others. Some of the key concepts in Social Influence Theory include conformity, compliance, and Fulfillment of requests (Myers, 2002). Social Influence Theory has its roots in social psychology and has several relevant theoretical approaches, including (Kassin et al., 2011) normative influence which describes how individuals are influenced to conform to group norms to be accepted or liked, informational social influence which shows how individuals seek information from others when they are concerned about a situation or decision, and then follow others' actions because they believe that others have better knowledge or insight, and referent social influence which focuses on how people are influenced by individuals or groups they identify with or admire. In the context of marketing and consumer behavior, social proof leverages these principles by showing that many other people have chosen a product or service, which then encourages potential consumers to do the same. Social proof has become a very effective tool in marketing strategy because humans tend to trust the collective behavior of others as a valid indicator for their own decision making (Hadiyati et al., 2024).

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) talks about consumer behavior that is formed through attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC) which will then shape intentions. This intention will affect how a person's attitude or behavior Theory of Planned Behavior George (2004) influence of intention or decision on online buying behaviour. This theory was developed analysis the by Icek Ajzen as a refinement of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) with the addition of Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC) variables. This developed theory explains that attitudes, subjective norms, and Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC) together will shape a person's intentions, behaviors , or decisions. Attitude isa

good or bad assessment of a person's good or bad about a behavior. Subjective norms are a person's perception of certain behaviors that are influenced bytheopinions of those around him such as friends, parents, or partners. Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC) is an opinion about how easy or difficult it is to perform certain actions (Ajzen, 1991).

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) can predict human behavior in all aspects. This theory is often used in the field of marketing such as buying behavior, advertising, and entrepreneurship. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is of interest arising from oneself to performcer in actions or behaviors. In this situation, a person's interests will also have an impact on the decisions that will be made Aliedan et al. (2022) in the future. The relationship between the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and this study is because this theory discusses how a person or Individuals have the desire to act or perform certain behaviors such as purchasing decisions.

Purchasers must take a step called "purchase decision" before deciding what goodsorservices they will buy or use buying something, consumers will tend to go through several stages first such as problem recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchases decision, and post-purchase behaviour (Aprilia & Ambarwati, 2024). In these stages, there will be a repurchase decision if the consumer is satisfied. Stone et al. (2020) presenting several aspects of purchasing decisions, such as the first one is need recognition that involves information about how and when the product should be purchased, the second one is information research, when someone will look for more information when they are interested in a product, alternative evaluation is when customers use data to assess brands, the third one purchase decisions is the decision making when the buyer buys goods. Postpurchase behavior,when customers act further after purchase to their satisfaction. Based on those aspects, It can be concluded thatthepurchase decisionsis anaction from consumers to buy something after analyzing various factors when purchasing an item or service.

One marketing strategy to attract customers is withan affiliate program orcommonly known asan affiliate marketingprogram According to (Mangiò & Domenico, 2022) in explaining affiliate marketing, or also Referred to as affiliate marketing is an activity when others promote goods or services owned by someone online or offline using are venue sharing system. The person can promote goods or services through content or share an online store link. Meanwhile, according to Sihombing et al. (2023); affiliates marketing is marketing when someone assures goods or services belonging to others.

Another type of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is on line customers reviews that can be used as a consumer medium to view reviews from other customers about products and services that Online Customer Reviews (OCR) (Bilal & Almazroi, 2023)is one of the facilities that allow consumers to freely and easily write online comments and opinions about goods and services. Online Customer Reviews can greatly in fluence a visitor's purchase decisions (Alsayat, 2023). From some of the definitions of Online Customer Reviews above, it can be concluded that Online Customer Reviews is a review that contains criticism, suggestions, or opinions from consumers or visitors honestly and what the existence of their services or goods just bought.

Social Influence Theory is a framework that explains how individual behaviour is influenced by others through normative and informational mechanisms. The theory is rooted in social psychology and suggests that social interactions can create behaviour change through various mechanisms, such as persuasion, social pressure, and imitation.This theory is relevant in consumer behaviour, and social interactions in the digital world. Social proof is often used

in marketing strategies to increase consumer trust, such as customer testimonials, number of buyers, and product ratings. The influence of influencers or viral trends on platforms such as TikTok or Instagram shows how social influence plays a role in shaping consumer preferences (Rochman et al., 2022). Consumers tend to choose products that are considered popular or have positive reviews as a form of normative and informational influence. The marketing process is one of the most crucial things in the business process. The existence of technology simplifies marketing process. For example, affiliate marketing programs on various online shopping platforms in Indonesia. This statements is supported by research conducted (Asadiyah et al., 2023) that affiliate marketing is a business model where products ares old to other businesses. So the hypothesis proposed is:

H1: Affiliate marketing influences social proof and purchasing decisions.

Normative influence is one approach to social influence theory that informs that individuals follow the behaviour, opinions, or decisions of the group to be accepted or recognised. Some individuals usually have a community and look for product-related information in the community. The informative influence approach in social influence theory conveys that reviews from other customers provide validation that the product or service offered is indeed of quality and as described.

Reviews from other customers provide validation that the product or service offered is indeed of quality and matches the description. This helps potential buyers feel more confident to follow the recommender's behavior in making a decision (Patil & Rane, 2023). According to normative influence explains that individuals tend to use information about the actions of others to determine norms and correct behavior. When they see many people doing something, they assume that the action is correct and worth following(Shah & Asghar, 2023). Valuable information from previous consumers will make valuable references and referrals to reduce the risk of buying less quality products (Yadav et al., 2023). . So the hypothesis proposed is:

H2: *Online customer reviews*influence purchasing decisions.

H3: Social proof influence on customer decisions
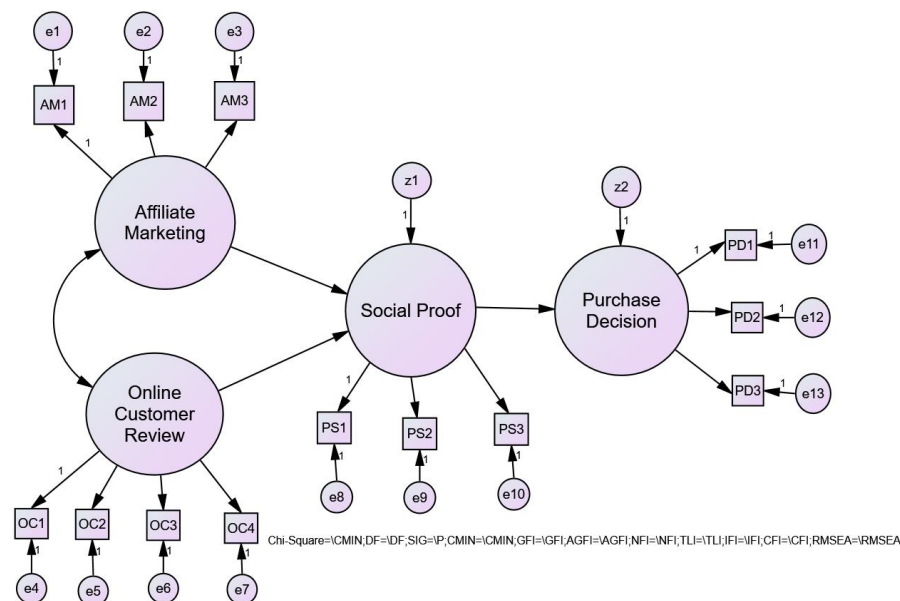
Figure 1. Research model of the relationship between variables
Source: Chen et al. (2022) developed, 2024

METHODS

This studyused descriptive type research with a quantitativeapproaches. The data sources used are primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from the distributionofquestionnaires as a research instrument in the form of Google Form. The data is sourced from various previous research literature, books, surveys results, and journals. Respondents in this research are consumers or users of TikTok Shop. The sampling method is a combination of purposive sampling and quota sampling. The sample quota was set at 300 people. The required sample criteria include being 17 years of age or older, domiciled in Central Java, having made a purchase through the "Yellow Basket" feature for TikTok affiliate content creators and having provided a review of a product purchased at the TikTok Shop. Samples according to the criteria continue to be sought until the sample quota is met.

Respondents' opinions were collected through a questionnaire and distributed via a Google form link. Online customer reviews are measured through a scale of 1-10 adopted from opinions (Putri & Wandebori, 2016) with indicators of source credibility, argument quality, perceived usefulness, quantity of reviews. Affiliate marketing indicators include informativeness, perceived utility and perceived ease to locatebased on opinion (Ul Haq, 2012). Purchasing decisions are measured on a scale of 1-10 with indicators of success in buying after knowing product information, deciding to buy because it is the most preferred brand and buying because it suits your wants and needs, according to your opinion (Qazzaf, 2019). Social Proof indicators are developed from opinions Abdul Talib et al. (2017) including perceived trust, enjoying your product or service, attracting new website visitors.

The collected data were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling SEM), with the AMOS 25.0 application tool. In this study, there are two models evaluated, namely the measurement model and the structural model. The measurement model evaluates the relationship between indicators (observed variables) and latent constructs. Accepted values: ≥ 0.50 for stronger validity (J. F Hair et al., 2019). Structural model The structural model evaluates the relationship between latent constructs. Goodness of Fit Indice, used to assess the overall fit of the model. Accepted values: RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation): ≤ 0.08; CFI (Comparative Fit Index): ≥ 0.90GFI (Goodness of Fit Index): ≥ 0.90. Hypothesis testing in SEM is done by looking at the relationship between latent constructs through the path coefficient value and significant value. The hypothesis is accepted if the p value is ≤ 0.05 (in the 95% confidence level).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) statistical software of AMOS 25.0 for identifying the measurement model and analyzing the causal relationship and regression magnitude as well as for the goodness of fit of the model. The collected data was then analyzed using SEM statistical software AMOS 25.0. This is done to identify causal relationships and regression values between variables(Arbuckle, 2016).

Based on loading factors of the indicator of the constructs, each single variable has a cut-off value of ≥0.50, indicating the magnitude of loading factor is well mirroring the constructed variable(Hair et al., 2018). Several indicators of non-statistical measure such as GFI = 0.945; AGFI = 0.914; TLI = 0.993; IFI = 0.992; CFI = 0.995 is above the cut-off value

of ≥0.90 with the value of RMSEA = 0.035 within the cut-off value of between 0.03–0.08 (Arbuckle 2016), therefore the goodness of fit of the model is achieved.

Regression coefficient of the hypothesized path H1 = 0.964; H2 = 0.233; H3 = 0.172 and H4 = 0.471 with the critical ratio or t-value > 2.0, precisely 1.96 (Arbuckle 2016) indicating the acceptance of all hypotheses in the model.
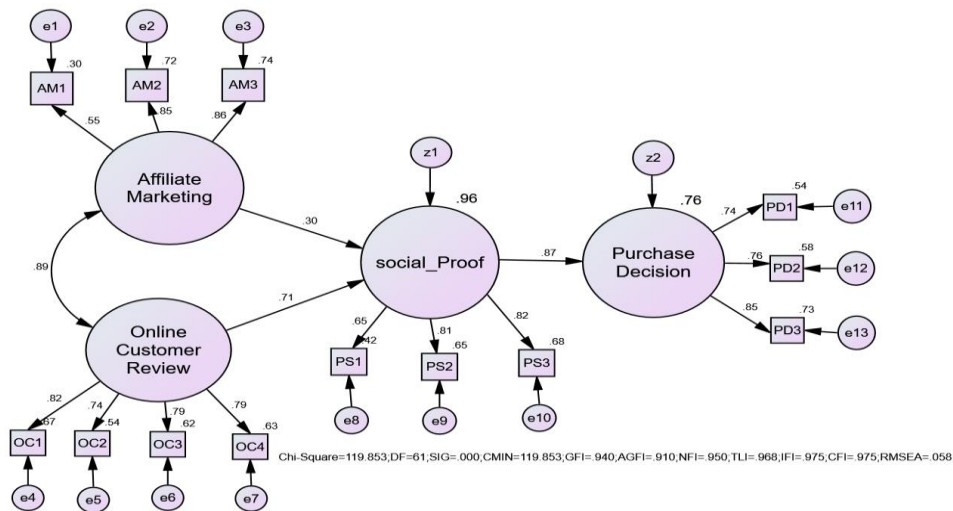
Figure 2. Full structural equation model
Source: AMOS output, 2024

Several indicators of non-statistical measure such as GFI = 0.940; AGFI = 0.910; TLI = 0.968; IFI = 0.975; CFI = 0.975 is above the cut-off value of ≥0.90 with the value of RMSEA = 0.058 within the cut-off value of between 0.03–0.08(Arbuckle, 2016), therefore the goodness of fit of the model is achieved.

Table 1. The results of the regression test

Path, Direct Effects			Estimates	S.E	P-Value	Results
Affiliate Marketing	→	Social Proof	0.339	0.136	0.013	Significant
Online Customer Review	→	Social Proof	0.560	0.105	0,000	Significant
Social Proof	→	Purchase Decision	0.897	0.090	0,000	Significant
Affiliate Marketing→Social Proof→Purchase Decision			Z-value = 2.4181	0.126	0.015	Significant
Online Customer Review→Social Proof→Purchase Decision			Z-value = 4.7023	0.107	0,000	Significant

Source: AMOS output and Sobel Test mediation test, 2024

This study uses social proof mediation variables to connect affiliate marketing and online customer reviews to purchasing decisions. Test the role of mediating variables using the sobel test. The results of the mediation test of the relationship between affiliate marketing

and online customer reviews on purchasing decisions show a z-value = 2.4181 and z-value = 4.7023 greater than the cut of value of 1.96 which indicates the mediating effect of the variables tested.

The direct relationship between affiliate marketing and online customer reviews of social prof shows significant results. The estimated value of online customers in influencing social is more dominant than affiliate marketing. The indirect relationship between affiliate marketing and online customer reviews on purchase decisions through social proof produces significant value. The Z value of online customer reviews is greater in indirectly influencing purchase decisions.

The direct influence of affiliate marketing on social proof shows a significant positive value at an estimated value of 0.339. Likewise, the indirect influence of affiliate marketing on purchase decisions through social proof produces a significant positive value at z value 2.4181. The marketing strategy by Shopee Shop via TikTok by affiliating with third parties in promoting the company's products or services shows good results in increasing sales performance (Naeem, 2021). An affiliate can help a company reach new audiences they may not have known about. Affiliates with various influences and good negotiation communication can influence feelings of trust and consumers ultimately make purchases. In social influence theory, in social media the influence of influencers or viral trends on platforms such as TikTok or Instagram shows how social influence plays a role in shaping consumer preferences.

Sellers at TikTok Shop can work with affiliate content creators, judging by the convenience provided and not much capital spent on promotion through affiliate content creators (Kwan, 2023). Sellers simply provide product samples to affiliate content creators without having to pay any additional costs. Thus, the aim of affiliate marketing is to provide better promotional options to sellers on TikTok Shop so that the products being sold can be reviewed, promoted better without having to spend a lot of money on promotion and in the end it will have an impact on potential consumers to make purchasing decisions (Halim & Devi, 2023). The results of this research are in line with research conducted by (Syrdal et al., 2023) which states that the better the promotions carried out through affiliate marketing, the greater the belief in the benefits of the product, resulting in purchasing decisions (Mangiò & Domenico, 2022). Through the affiliate marketing program provided by TikTok and affiliate content creators or affiliators, TikTok Shop users are expected to be able to increase buying and selling transactions through TikTok Shop and find information related to the products they need more easily through content created by affiliate marketersc (Sihombing et al., 2023).

The direct influence of online customer reviews on social proof shows a significant positive value at an estimated value of 0.560. Likewise, the indirect influence of affiliate marketing on purchase decisions through social proof produces a significant positive value at Z value 4.7023. The estimated value shows dominant results compared to the influence of other variables. This shows that if someone decides to buy a product or service, they need to consider the opinions of many people or communities and groups to be more confident in their product choice (Patil & Rane, 2023). People prefer to get input from various opinions before deciding something, this is so that the value of the money paid is commensurate with the product purchased (Liu et al., 2023). In the world of e-commerce, ratings and reviews are very important, because potential buyers can easily get information about the goods they want to buy. Starting from the quality of the goods, the similarity of the goods, the speed of delivery, to the authenticity of the goods. We can see all information from ratings and reviews from previous buyers. In practice, the TikTok Shop online application gives consumers the freedom

to provide opinions about the products and services provided by the shop/owner, so that consumers get a lot of information about the product and shop (Sulistiyani, Wahyuni, et al., 2024) ;(Inayah et al., 2023).

In the context of social influence theory, social proof is often used in marketing strategies to increase consumer trust, such as customer testimonials, number of buyers, and product ratings. Theory of Planned behaviour asserts that consumers tend to choose products that are considered popular or have positive reviews as a form of normative and informational influence. Social Influence Theory is a framework that explains how individual behaviour is influenced by others through normative and informational mechanisms. This theory is relevant in a variety of contexts, including marketing, consumer behaviour, and social interaction in the digital world.

This research provides a new perspective by placing social proof as a mediator. Previously, many studies discussed the direct relationship between affiliate marketing or online customer reviews and purchasing decisions, but the results were not always consistent. This research has theoretical and practical impacts.

Theoretical impacts include 1) Contribution to Existing Literature. This research provides a new perspective by placing social proof as a mediator. Previously, many studies discussed the direct relationship between affiliate marketing or online customer reviews and purchasing decisions, but the results were not always consistent. By adding social proof as a mediating variable, this study explains the mechanism of how the two independent variables indirectly influence purchasing decisions, strengthening understanding of the role of social proof in digital marketing. 2)The difference in results in previous studies can be bridged by understanding that affiliate marketing and online customer reviews do not always have a direct impact on purchase decisions, but are more effective through increased social proof. Social proof acts as a 'context amplifier' that connects marketing strategies with consumer perceptions, thus providing an answer to the difference in results in previous studies. 3)Validation and Updating of Marketing Theories. This research validates theories such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which shows that subjective norms have an important role in influencing consumer intentions and decisions.

Social Influence theory is also strengthened by empirical evidence that social influence in the form of reviews or affiliate promotions can influence purchases.

Practical Impacts, including 1) Marketing Strategy Efficiency. Shows businesses that affiliate marketing and online customer reviews are not only effective when used individually, but become much more powerful when combined to create significant social proof. Practical example: Using affiliates that actively encourage consumers to leave product reviews creates a domino effect of increased trust and purchases. 2) Social Proof Optimisation in E-Commerce. Identifying the importance of social proof in the buying process helps e-commerce platforms and brands to focus on this element, such as displaying the number of purchases, positive reviews, and ratings. Solution: Platforms like TikTok Shop can increase the credibility and appeal of products by highlighting customer testimonials and live-streaming live interactions.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of data analysis, social proof is proven to mediate the indirect influence between affiliate marketing and online customer reviews on decisions Managerial recommendations include Companies need to increase partnerships with affiliate marketers who have a good reputation and great influence in the target market and encourage consumers to leave positive reviews by offering incentives such as discounts or reward points. TikTok needs to manage and respond to negative reviews quickly and professionally to improve the company's image. Respondents in this study described preferring to buy products by seeking information from previous buyers. This is done to ensure and convince that the product purchased is of the right quality and as desired. Research recommendations, including this study, need to add other variables that can influence social proof and purchasing decisions. Respondents need to be expanded to people outside Central Java or other provinces such as East Java, West Java and provinces outside Java.

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