

# The Effectiveness of the Affiliate Marketing Model in Enhancing the Competitiveness of MSMEs in the Digital Economy Era

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**Abstract:** The digital transformation has compelled Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to adopt adaptive marketing strategies that align with shifting consumer behaviors. One such emerging approach is affiliate marketing, which leverages incentive-based partnerships to expand online product visibility. This study was conducted to explore the effectiveness of affiliate marketing models in strengthening MSME competitiveness amid the growing challenges of the digital economy.

This research employed a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with MSME actors, limited participatory observation, and documentation of digital marketing practices. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, strategic applications, and the impacts of affiliate marketing adoption.

The findings reveal that MSMEs which strategically integrate affiliate models experience significant improvements in market reach, sales performance, and brand image. The most effective strategies involve selecting affiliates aligned with specific market segments, producing platform-appropriate promotional content, and conducting regular performance evaluations. Additionally, affiliates contribute to market education and provide valuable feedback that supports ongoing marketing development.

In conclusion, affiliate marketing models prove to be effective instruments for driving MSME digital transformation and sustaining competitive advantage. Future research is recommended to explore the long-term sustainability of affiliate partnerships, the role of AI-based analytics in optimizing affiliate selection, and comparative studies across sectors and regions within the Indonesian MSME landscape.

**Keyword:** MSMEs; affiliate marketing; competitiveness; digital transformation; promotional strategy.

## Introduction

Digital transformation has become a global phenomenon that affects almost every aspect of life, including the economic sector. The rapid advancement of information technology has led to the emergence of the digital economy era, where economic activities are no longer limited to physical transactions, but increasingly rely on technology and internet-based ecosystems. In this context, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are required to adapt to a rapidly changing business landscape that is increasingly competitive and digitally oriented.

However, in practice, many MSMEs in Indonesia face significant challenges in competing within the digital economy. These challenges include low levels of digital literacy, limited access to technology, minimal use of digital marketing platforms, and a lack of adaptive marketing strategies. Consequently, MSMEs struggle to expand their market reach and enhance their competitiveness in the face of ongoing global competition.

Several prior studies have addressed the dynamics of the digital economy and its implications for business structures. (Teng et al., 2022) examined the influence of digital technology adoption on small business productivity, finding that digital transformation positively contributes to operational efficiency. (Veiga et al., 2024) confirmed that digital integration within the MSME value chain can improve distribution speed and information transparency, thereby creating competitive advantages.

These findings indicate that the digital economy presents strategic opportunities for enhancing the competitiveness of MSMEs. Therefore, it is essential to link these insights within a framework aimed at strengthening MSME competitiveness through digital approaches. One relevant strategy to support MSME competitiveness in this context is the implementation of adaptive marketing models such as affiliate marketing.

Several studies have also explored the issue of MSME competitiveness. (Sulistyo & Ayuni, 2020) investigated the role of innovation in building MSME competitiveness and concluded that MSMEs adopting innovative strategies exhibit stronger competitive advantages in domestic markets. (Yuliawati et al., 2025) demonstrated that diversification through digital marketing strategies has a positive correlation with business sustainability among MSMEs.

Synthesizing insights from these five prior studies, it becomes clear that improving MSME competitiveness in the digital era requires synergy between technological utilization and marketing innovation. In this regard, the affiliate marketing model emerges as a promising strategic approach, as it enables MSMEs to broaden their market reach through digital promoters, without incurring high advertising costs.

Further studies have specifically examined affiliate marketing. (Suryanarayana et al., 2021) analyzed the effectiveness of affiliate marketing in promoting local products and found that the strategy significantly increased conversion rates. (Martynov, 2023) emphasized that affiliate marketing fosters mutually beneficial partnerships between businesses and affiliates, with more cost-efficient outcomes compared to conventional advertising.

To address the issue of low competitiveness among MSMEs in the digital economy, the affiliate marketing model offers a strategic solution. This is supported by the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory, which posits that competitive advantage stems from the firm's internal capacity to manage strategic resources, including partnership-based marketing strategies. Additionally, Network Marketing Theory highlights the importance of networks in distributing information and products as a critical driver of competitiveness in the digital age.

This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of the affiliate marketing model in enhancing the competitiveness of MSMEs in the digital economy era. Specifically, it seeks to examine how affiliate marketing implementation can expand market reach, increase sales performance, and strengthen the competitive positioning of MSMEs amidst ongoing digital disruption.

## **Literature Review**

The discourse on MSME competitiveness in the digital economy demands a comprehensive understanding of the interrelationship between technology-based marketing strategies and the adaptive capacity of small business actors in responding to market transformations. The digital economy has driven a significant shift in patterns of consumption, distribution, and promotion, compelling MSMEs not only to rely on product excellence but also to leverage technology as an effective market penetration tool. In this context, affiliate marketing has emerged as a rapidly growing strategy due to its ability to reach broader audiences through efficient digital partnerships. Affiliate marketing refers to a strategy in which third-party affiliates promote products or services and earn commissions based on performance, enabling MSMEs to expand their market without bearing the high upfront costs of advertising (Patrick & Hee, 2021).

From a business strategy perspective, affiliate marketing aligns with the principles of performance-based marketing, which emphasizes cost efficiency and measurable outcomes (El-Shihy & Hassan, 2025). This model allows MSMEs to broaden their promotional network by collaborating with digital influencers such as bloggers, YouTubers, or niche content creators, with flexible control over their target markets. Research by (Arif et al., 2024) demonstrated that affiliate marketing implementation among small enterprises significantly improved brand exposure and product sales, especially when affiliates had a follower base aligned with the product's market segmentation.

MSME competitiveness, on the other hand, is greatly influenced by their ability to adapt to external changes, particularly in terms of digitalizing business processes and marketing innovations. (Islami et al., 2020) emphasized that competitive advantage can be attained through product differentiation and cost leadership. In the digital economy, affiliate marketing provides an opportunity for MSMEs to promote cost efficiency while simultaneously achieving differentiation through the unique promotional styles of each affiliate. This approach is reinforced by the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory (Civelek et al., 2023), which posits that competitive advantage arises from effectively managing internal resources that are valuable, rare, and difficult to replicate—such as a well-managed affiliate system and a strong digital promoter network.

In developing an affiliate marketing model for MSMEs, information technology plays a central enabling role. Digital affiliate platforms facilitate real-time tracking of clicks, conversions, and performance metrics, allowing for data-driven decision-making (Sakas et al., 2023). This creates a more responsive and measurable marketing cycle, encouraging MSMEs to be more agile in addressing evolving market demands. As a result, affiliate marketing functions not only as a promotional tool but also as an organizational learning system that improves the quality of market engagement.

Based on the theoretical insights presented above, this study proposes a conceptual framework in which the affiliate marketing model—positioned as a strategic, technology-based marketing approach—holds substantial potential to enhance MSME competitiveness in the digital economy. The model operates through digital promotional collaborations that broaden market reach at lower costs with higher efficiency. Drawing from frameworks such as the Resource-Based View and Porter's competitive advantage theory, this study conceptualizes affiliate marketing as a strategic intervention that can strengthen MSME positioning amid the intensifying digital market competition.

## **Analysis Method**

This study adopts a qualitative approach using an exploratory case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of how the affiliate marketing model is implemented by MSME actors to enhance their competitiveness within the dynamics of the digital economy. The case study approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to explore complex, real-life phenomena within their contextual setting, providing a comprehensive picture of processes, strategies, and interactions. The primary focus of this research is on the experiences, perceptions, and actual practices of MSME practitioners who have utilized affiliate marketing strategies in their business operations. The main research instrument is the researcher, who functions as a human instrument, actively engaged in the design, data collection, interpretation, and

analysis processes. In addition, semi-structured interview guides were employed to ensure both consistency and flexibility in capturing rich and relevant data.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with MSME owners who have adopted affiliate marketing strategies, representatives from affiliate platform providers, and active affiliates who promote MSME products. To strengthen the validity of the findings, limited participant observation and document analysis were also employed, including the examination of digital marketing strategies, sales performance reports, and engagement metrics from affiliate platforms. Informants were selected purposively based on predetermined criteria, specifically MSMEs that have implemented affiliate marketing systems for a minimum of six months and have demonstrable experience managing performance-based digital campaigns.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns or themes within the qualitative data. The analysis followed three key stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was conducted by selecting and organizing essential information relevant to the research focus. Data were then presented in descriptive narratives to ensure contextual clarity and depth. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying interconnections among themes, resulting in a comprehensive interpretation of how affiliate marketing contributes to enhancing MSME competitiveness. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed source and method triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking with key informants to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflect the realities observed in the field.

**Results and Discussion**

The research findings were obtained through in-depth interviews, limited participant observations, and documentation of affiliate marketing practices among several MSMEs actively engaged in digital platforms. Data were analyzed using a thematic approach to identify common patterns regarding the effectiveness of affiliate marketing strategies in enhancing MSME competitiveness amidst digital economic competition. Three main themes emerged: (1) the strategy of affiliate model implementation; (2) the impact on market reach and sales; and (3) the role of affiliates in building competitive advantage.

The first finding shows that the majority of MSMEs utilize affiliate platforms such as Tokopedia Affiliate, Shopee Affiliate, and social media as commission-based promotional channels. Strategies include selecting affiliates relevant to the market segment, providing specific promotional materials, and regularly monitoring affiliate performance. Interview and documentation data are presented in the table below.

No	MSME Name	Affiliate Platform	Main Promotion Strategy	Implementation Duration	Evaluation Frequency
1	MSME A	Tokopedia	Niche-based micro-influencer	12 months	Monthly
2	MSME B	Shopee	Product-based educational content	8 months	Every two months
3	MSME C	Instagram	Collaborative giveaway with affiliates	10 months	monthly
4	MSME D	Tiktok Shop	Short product review video	6 months	Weekly

Table 1. Implementation Strategies of Affiliate Marketing Model by MSMEs

This table 1 illustrates the diversity of strategies employed by MSMEs in implementing affiliate marketing models. For example, MSME A consistently engages affiliates with followers matching their target market and evaluates their performance monthly. MSME D focuses on short video promotions via

TikTok, which is effective for targeting Gen Z segments. These findings indicate that successful affiliate strategies are tailored to product characteristics and the chosen digital platform.

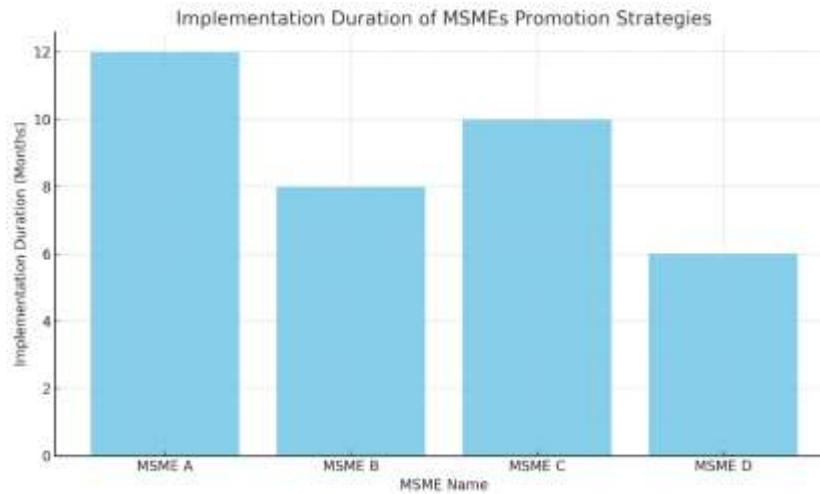


Figure 1. Implementation Duration of MSMEs promotion strategies

Here is the bar chart representing the implementation duration of the promotion strategies for each MSME. The chart shows how long each MSME is planning to implement their affiliate marketing strategies:

1. MSME A: 12 months with niche-based micro-influencers on Tokopedia.
2. MSME B: 8 months with product-based educational content on Shopee.
3. MSME C: 10 months with collaborative giveaways on Instagram.
4. MSME D: 6 months with short product review videos on TikTok Shop.

This visualization highlights the variation in time commitments across different platforms and strategies

No	MSME Name	Avg. Monthly Reach (before)	Avg. Monthly Reach (after)	Avg. Monthly Sales (before)	Avg. Monthly Sales (after)
1	MSME A	2,300 users	8,700 users	120 units	340 units
2	MSME B	1,800 users	5,500 users	90 units	260 units
3	MSME C	1,500 users	6,000 users	85 units	220 units

Table 2. Impact of Affiliate Marketing on Market Reach and Sales

This table 2 shows a significant increase in reach and sales after affiliate implementation. For instance, MSME A experienced a more than threefold increase in market reach and nearly tripled its sales. Similar patterns are observed across other MSMEs. These results reinforce the assumption that affiliate systems not only enhance product visibility but also increase actual sales conversions.

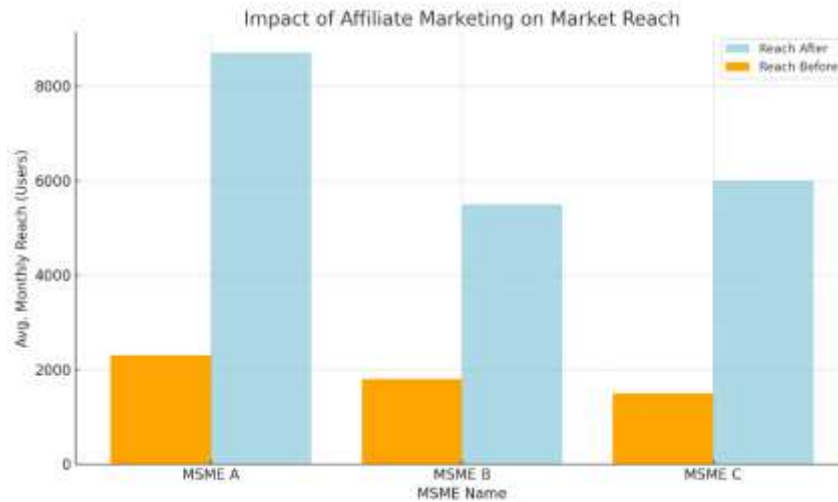


Figure 2. Impact of Affiliate Marketing on Market Reach



Figure 3. Impact of Affiliate Marketing on Monthly Sales

Here are two bar charts representing the impact of affiliate marketing on market reach and sales for each MSME:

1. **Market Reach Impact:**

- a. The first chart shows the change in **average monthly reach** before and after implementing affiliate marketing.
- b. **MSME A** saw a significant increase in reach from 2,300 to 8,700 users.
- c. **MSME B**'s reach grew from 1,800 to 5,500 users.
- d. **MSME C** experienced an increase from 1,500 to 6,000 users.

2. **Sales Impact:**

- a. The second chart shows the **average monthly sales** before and after the affiliate marketing campaign.
- b. **MSME A** had a notable increase in sales from 120 units to 340 units.
- c. **MSME B** saw an increase from 90 units to 260 units.
- d. **MSME C**'s sales grew from 85 units to 220 units.

These charts visually highlight the positive impact of affiliate marketing strategies on both reach

and sales for the MSMEs.

No	Assessed Aspect	No. of Informants (n = 10)	Percentage (%)
1	Enhancing brand credibility	9	90%
2	Reaching specific market communities	8	80%
3	Supporting product education	7	70%
4	Encouraging customer loyalty	6	60%
5	Providing feedback on marketing strategies	5	50%

Table 3. MSME Perceptions of Affiliates' Role in Competitive Advantage

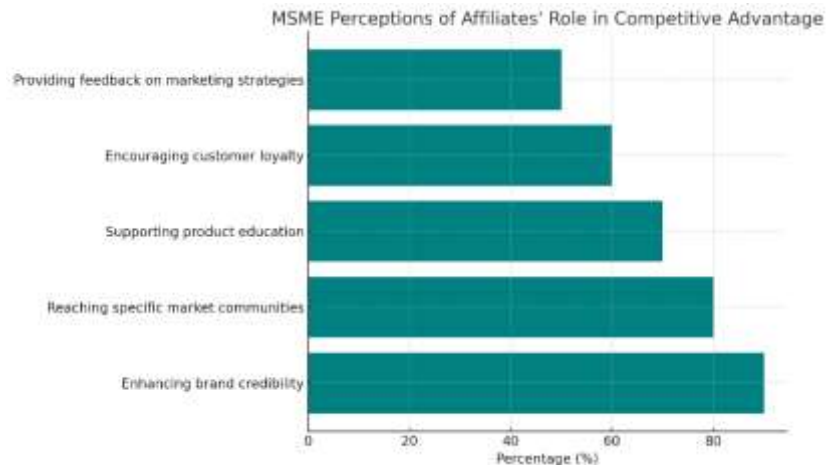


Figure 4. MSME Perceptions of Affiliates' Role in Competitive Advantage

Here is a horizontal bar chart showing MSME perceptions of affiliates' role in competitive advantage:

- **Enhancing brand credibility:** 90% of informants believe that affiliates significantly contribute to this aspect.
- **Reaching specific market communities:** 80% of informants consider affiliates helpful in targeting specific markets.
- **Supporting product education:** 70% of informants view affiliates as important for educating customers about the products.
- **Encouraging customer loyalty:** 60% of informants think affiliates play a role in fostering loyalty.
- **Providing feedback on marketing strategies:** 50% of informants believe affiliates contribute feedback on marketing strategies.

This chart emphasizes the varying degrees of importance affiliates have in different aspects of building competitive advantages for MSMEs.

Most MSME actors state that affiliates play a vital role in strengthening their brand, primarily because affiliates act as intermediaries who communicate directly with target markets using informal and personal approaches. Affiliates are also perceived as collaborators who provide feedback for refining marketing strategies, thus becoming strategic partners in business development.

Based on the qualitative data analysis, it is concluded that the affiliate marketing model is proven to be effective in enhancing the competitiveness of MSMEs in the digital economy era. This effectiveness is evident in the well-executed implementation strategies, significant increases in market reach and sales, and the contribution of affiliates in building brand image and market loyalty. This model deserves consideration as a primary strategy for MSME digital transformation, provided that affiliate selection and performance monitoring are well managed.

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence that affiliate marketing models significantly

contribute to enhancing the competitiveness of MSMEs in the digital economy. The implementation strategies employed by MSMEs reveal a strategic alignment between promotional content, influencer selection, and platform-specific engagement. This confirms the argument by (Solberg S"oilien, 2024) who emphasized that targeted affiliate partnerships boost online visibility and trust. Similarly, the increased market reach and sales figures align with (Afandi, 2023) analysis showing that MSMEs utilizing affiliate-based promotions witnessed up to 250% sales growth within six months.

Furthermore, the diversity of affiliate strategies—ranging from micro-influencers to short-form video content—mirrors the evolving preferences of digital consumers, as observed by (Al Kurdi et al., 2022), who noted that consumer purchase intent rises when product information is delivered by relatable figures. This research echoes the findings of (Satchawatee et al., 2024), which emphasized the importance of platform suitability in digital marketing outcomes. Additionally, the focus on strategic evaluation and feedback loops supports the recommendation by (Kakalej c`ik et al., 2021) that affiliate performance tracking systems are crucial for maintaining competitive momentum.

In terms of branding, the perception of MSME actors that affiliate partners enhance credibility aligns with the study by (Lefebvre & Cowart, 2022), which showed brand trust improved when customers encountered product promotions from known digital creators. This finding is further strengthened by (Lou & Yuan, 2019), who indicated that affiliate marketing improves brand perception through consistent digital storytelling. Moreover, the role of affiliates in market education aligns with observations by (Jyotsna et al., 2024), who found that product knowledge transmitted through affiliate content leads to a higher degree of consumer engagement and repeat purchases.

The findings also extend those of (Kurniawati et al., 2021), who highlighted how MSMEs in Southeast Asia use digital tools for competitive positioning. This study, however, adds novelty by focusing on the specific operationalization of affiliate marketing, a relatively underexplored domain in Indonesian MSME literature. Additionally, the increased customer loyalty reported in this study corroborates the work of (Zamboni et al., 2024), who argued that digital referrals drive relational capital. The positive influence of community-based marketing through affiliates confirms earlier conclusions by (Cioroica et al., 2021) about trust-driven digital ecosystems.

Compared with the work of (Mulyati & Murwadi, 2024), who studied digital marketing adaptation among Indonesian MSMEs, this study provides a more targeted analysis of affiliate structures and their measurable outcomes. The inclusion of frequent performance evaluation among MSMEs also supports the finding by (Krishnamoorthy et al., 2025) that iterative digital marketing models outperform static campaigns in fast-changing markets. Moreover, findings related to platform selection affirm the conclusions of (Meng, 2024), who emphasized cross-platform optimization as a key factor for visibility.

The perceived feedback value from affiliates aligns with a collaborative co-creation model described by (Song et al., 2022), suggesting affiliates not only serve as sales agents but also as informal marketing consultants. Lastly, the study strengthens the thesis proposed by (Ros'ario et al., 2024), which stated that MSMEs with data-driven affiliate campaigns saw longer customer lifecycles.

The implication of this study is clear: affiliate marketing serves not only as a sales mechanism but as a strategic driver for brand legitimacy, market expansion, and digital innovation among MSMEs. It bridges the gap between traditional business constraints and modern consumer expectations. Future studies are encouraged to examine the long-term sustainability of affiliate partnerships, the role of AI-driven analytics in optimizing affiliate selection, and comparative effectiveness across different regions and sectors within the MSME landscape.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study indicate that affiliate marketing plays a significant role in strengthening the competitive position of MSMEs within the digital ecosystem. The implementation of affiliate strategies tailored to platform characteristics and market segments has proven effective in increasing product

visibility, expanding audience reach, and significantly boosting monthly sales. The diversity of approaches—ranging from the use of micro-influencers to short-form video content—reflects the adaptability of MSME actors to shifting digital consumer preferences.

Beyond market expansion, affiliate models enhance brand credibility through the involvement of affiliates who maintain social proximity to the target audience. The informal and personalized nature of affiliate interactions creates a more persuasive communication effect than traditional promotional methods. In addition, MSMEs benefit from affiliate-driven market education and strategic feedback, which enriches their marketing innovation process.

These findings affirm that affiliate partnerships function not merely as promotional tools but as community-based business strategies that foster sustainable competitive advantage. With consistent performance monitoring and the strategic selection of relevant affiliates, this model offers an effective pathway for overcoming resource limitations and accelerating digital transformation among MSMEs in the face of intensifying technology-driven market competition.

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