

AFFILIATE CONTENT BEYOND THE TRANSACTION: CUSTOMER TRUST AND RETENTION IN TIKTOK SHOP SOCIAL COMMERCE

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ABSTRACT

Among consumers who had previously purchased through TikTok Shop, this study examines whether affiliate marketing content remains associated with customer retention and whether customer trust carries part of that relationship. Survey data were collected from 100 purposively selected Generation Z fashion consumers in West Java and analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Affiliate marketing content was positively associated with customer trust ($\beta = .752, p < .001$) and customer retention ($\beta = .319, p = .003$), while trust was positively associated with retention ($\beta = .446, p < .001$). The specific indirect relationship through trust was significant ($\beta = .335, t = 2.858, p < .001$), and the direct relationship remained significant after trust was included. This pattern is consistent with complementary partial mediation. The findings locate trust as one relational mechanism connecting affiliate communication with retention, while the remaining direct relationship points to processes beyond trust. For sellers and fashion brands, the results place greater emphasis on accurate and credible affiliate communication than on content volume alone. Because the data are cross-sectional and self-reported, the findings describe associations within the model rather than causal effects or observed repeat purchasing.

Keywords: Affiliate Marketing, Social Commerce, Customer Trust, Customer Retention, Generation Z.

INDRODUCTION

Online retail in Indonesia is increasingly intertwined with social media. Internet penetration reached 81.72% in 2026, representing approximately 235 million users and providing a substantial digital foundation for platform-based commerce. Social commerce differs from conventional e-commerce because product discovery and evaluation are shaped by recommendations, reviews, and other interactions embedded in social platforms (Busalim, 2016). TikTok Shop exemplifies this configuration by combining short-form video and livestreaming with commerce functions (Rolando, 2025). This integration is particularly relevant to online fashion, where consumers must infer product appearance and fit from visual and verbal information rather than physical inspection (Baek et al., 2026). Yet a platform's capacity to generate product discovery and an initial purchase does not establish whether consumers will return. In an environment populated by competing products and sellers, the relevant problem therefore extends beyond conversion to the continuation of the customer relationship after prior shopping experience.

Affiliate marketing adds a performance-based layer to this content-led shopping environment. Under this arrangement, merchants compensate affiliates for sales attributable to their promotional activities, linking creator remuneration directly to conversion (Edelman & Brandi, 2015). On TikTok Shop, affiliate videos can present product demonstrations, comparisons, and use-related explanations while consumers browse. Evidence from adjacent influencer marketing research indicates that the informational value of branded content and the perceived trustworthiness of its source can strengthen trust in branded posts, whereas entertainment value alone may not be sufficient (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This evidence cannot be transferred to affiliate marketing without qualification because affiliates have an explicit financial interest in the transaction (Gregori et al., 2014). That incentive does not

make affiliate content inherently unreliable, but it makes consumers' evaluation of the message and its source consequential (Lu & Miller, 2019). Viewing an affiliate video is therefore not equivalent to accepting its claims. What matters is whether the content supplies information that consumers consider credible enough to use when evaluating a fashion product.

Customer trust offers one mechanism through which these evaluations may extend beyond a single encounter. In online fashion shopping, consumers cannot fully inspect fabric, fit, colour, or product quality before delivery and remain vulnerable to discrepancies between the product presentation and the item received (Kaushik & Dhir, 2019). At the exchange level, trust reflects confidence that product claims and the parties involved in the transaction will perform reliably enough for consumers to accept that vulnerability (Hong, 2015). Research involving experienced online shoppers shows that trust in an e-vendor contributes to intended behaviour (Bartikowski & Merunka, 2015). Relationship marketing theory similarly positions trust as an important condition for maintaining relational exchanges (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). A meta-analysis of 150 e-commerce studies further reports significant relationships between online trust and loyalty and repeat-purchase intention, although the strength of these relationships varies across research designs, websites, and trust measures (Y. Kim & Peterson, 2017). Affiliate content considered dependable may therefore reduce uncertainty surrounding a purchase, but trust should not be treated as the only route through which content relates to retention. It represents a plausible partial pathway rather than a sufficient condition for continued purchasing.

Recent research has begun to connect elements of this process, but the evidence remains segmented. Link influencer credibility and trust on TikTok to loyalty, purchase intention, and recommendation behaviour (Prasetyo & Sobari, 2024; Tian et al., 2025). Examines how affiliate content formats and source credibility relate to trust and purchase intention (Tan & Alexia, 2025), while (Nirwana et al., 2025) investigate repurchase intention in an Indonesian TikTok affiliate setting through convenience and customer satisfaction. Social commerce research also indicates that trust and loyalty may be directed towards different objects, particularly the individual vendor and the platform (Yahia et al., 2018; Yeon et al., 2019). It is therefore no longer defensible to argue that previous research is confined entirely to initial purchase intention (J. B. Kim, 2012). More precisely, these studies do not directly test whether consumers' evaluations of performance-based affiliate content are associated with retention-oriented responses through customer trust while retaining a possible direct relationship between content and retention. This unresolved configuration warrants examination among Generation Z fashion consumers with prior purchasing experience on TikTok Shop.

Accordingly, this study examines whether affiliate marketing content is associated with customer retention among Generation Z consumers in West Java who have purchased fashion products through TikTok Shop and whether customer trust statistically mediates this association. The proposed model retains both a direct pathway from affiliate content to retention and an indirect pathway through trust because trust may explain only part of the relationship. By focusing on consumers with prior purchasing experience, the analysis moves beyond the initial purchase decision towards retention-oriented responses after a transaction has occurred. The contribution lies in bringing affiliate content, customer trust, and a post-purchase outcome into the same model while distinguishing the direct association from the trust-mediated pathway. This integration provides a more specific test of whether affiliate content remains relevant after the first purchase and the extent to which customer trust accounts for that relationship.

Affiliate Marketing Content and Customer Trust

On TikTok Shop, affiliate content sits uneasily between peer recommendation and paid promotion: creators address viewers in the familiar language of social media yet earn a commission when their recommendations are converted into sales. This hybrid character distinguishes affiliate content from both unpaid electronic word of mouth and conventional advertising (Edelman & Brandi, 2015). It can provide fashion shoppers with information that a standard product listing may not convey adequately, including how an item fits, how its material appears when worn, or how it can be combined with other products (Chrimes et al., 2022). The same commercial arrangement that makes such content widely available, however, may also invite scepticism (Friesen & Lowe, 2012). Viewers must decide whether a favourable presentation reflects the product's attributes or the creator's interest in securing a commission. Affiliate content is therefore unlikely to build trust through exposure alone; its relevance depends on whether consumers regard the information it conveys as credible enough to use in evaluating the purchase (Budayanti et al., 2026; Gregori et al., 2014).

For consumers considering a fashion item they have never physically handled, the underlying problem is one of information asymmetry. Signalling theory suggests that, under such conditions, observable cues provide a basis for inferring qualities that cannot be examined directly (Spence, 1978). An affiliate video may serve this function when its claims are supported by product details, realistic demonstrations, or explanations that allow viewers to compare the recommendation with what is visibly presented (Xu et al., 2015; J. Zhang et al., 2025). These cues do not prove that the product or seller will perform as promised, but they can narrow the uncertainty surrounding the transaction. Content built around generic praise or selectively favourable claims provides a weaker basis for such judgement and may instead draw attention to the affiliate's commercial motive. Trust, in this account, develops from the evidential value and perceived credibility of the content rather than from the mere presence of a creator recommending the product.

Evidence relevant to this expectation is dispersed across two neighbouring areas of research—influencer marketing and social commerce—neither of which maps perfectly onto commission-based content on TikTok Shop. (Lou & Yuan, 2019), for example, found that the informative value of influencer-generated content and the perceived credibility of its source contributed to followers' trust in branded social media posts. Their outcome was trust in a sponsored message, however, rather than confidence in the broader shopping relationship. Research conducted at the social-commerce level points in a similar direction. (Mun et al., 2013) identified information quality and communication as antecedents of consumer trust, while (Febrianti & Hidayat, 2022) found that information quality and reputation were positively related to trust among Indonesian social-commerce users. Taken together, these findings make a positive relationship plausible, but they do not establish that trust formed around an influencer's message necessarily carries over to the transaction promoted in that message (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This distinction matters on TikTok Shop because the affiliate who recommends a fashion product may not be the seller who fulfils the order or the platform that governs the transaction. Whether consumers' evaluations of affiliate content extend into broader customer trust therefore remains an empirical question addressed by the following hypothesis:

H1. Consumers' favourable evaluations of affiliate marketing content are positively associated with customer trust.

Customer Trust and Customer Retention

Customer retention concerns the continuation of a purchasing relationship beyond an initial transaction. In the present study, the construct should be understood as consumers' inclination to continue purchasing fashion products through TikTok Shop, rather than as

verified long-term purchasing behaviour (Auliarahman, 2025). This distinction follows from the cross-sectional survey design, which captures respondents' evaluations at a particular point in time. Customer trust represents a different, although related, judgement: whether consumers consider the shopping relationship sufficiently reliable to be continued (Cowles, 1997). Trust does not make retention inevitable. A customer who considers a transaction reliable may still switch because of price, product availability, or changing preferences; conversely, promotional incentives may occasionally produce another purchase even when confidence is limited (Liu-Thompkins & Tam, 2013; Raghubir et al., 2004). The proposed relationship is therefore probabilistic rather than deterministic. Higher trust is expected to make continued purchasing more likely, but it is not treated as its sole explanation.

The commitment–trust theory of relationship marketing offers a theoretical basis for this expectation. Position trust and commitment as central conditions for maintaining relational exchanges. Their original model was developed in an interorganisational setting and cannot be transferred in full to individual shopping behaviour without qualification (Wilson, 2006). The present study does not measure customer commitment and therefore does not test the complete commitment–trust framework. It draws on a narrower proposition from the theory: confidence in the reliability and integrity of an exchange relationship provides a basis for its continuation (Friman et al., 2002). In online shopping, where each subsequent transaction retains some uncertainty, such confidence may make consumers more willing to engage with the same commercial environment again (Chiu et al., 2014). Applied to TikTok Shop, customers who regard their fashion-shopping experience as dependable should display a stronger inclination to continue purchasing through the platform.

The broader e-commerce literature supports this expectation while also showing that the relationship is context-dependent. In a meta-analysis covering 150 empirical studies, (Y. Kim & Peterson, 2017) reported significant relationships between online trust and both loyalty and repeat-purchase intention. The magnitude of these relationships varied with website type, research design, and the measurement of trust, indicating that trust does not operate uniformly across digital settings (Y. Kim & Peterson, 2017). Evidence from Indonesian social commerce is consistent with this general pattern: (Pertwi et al., 2023) found that trust was positively related to repurchase and word-of-mouth intentions. Neither body of evidence, however, establishes the relationship specifically for Generation Z consumers purchasing fashion products through TikTok Shop. The setting can involve several parties—the affiliate presenting the product, the seller fulfilling the order, and the platform facilitating the transaction—while the present model captures customer trust as a single overall construct. Rather than assuming that confidence in each party is identical, this study examines whether respondents' overall trust is associated with their inclination to maintain the purchasing relationship. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Customer trust is positively associated with customer retention.

Affiliate Marketing Content and Customer Retention

Although affiliate content is commonly examined as a means of generating an initial sale, its relevance need not end when that transaction is completed. Consumers who continue using TikTok Shop remain exposed to product demonstrations, recommendations, and comparisons that may assist them in evaluating subsequent purchases (Yesmi & Saptaria, 2025). For fashion shoppers, useful content can reduce the effort involved in searching among rapidly changing products and sellers, while also drawing attention to items that might otherwise remain undiscovered (Alba et al., 1997). These functions provide a plausible basis for an association with continued purchasing. Such an association should

not be taken for granted, however. Repetitive, weakly differentiated, or overtly promotional content may lose its informational value and make the affiliate's commercial motive more salient. Affiliate content is therefore expected to matter for retention only when consumers continue to regard it as relevant and credible, rather than simply because it appears repeatedly in their content feed.

(Meire et al., 2019) provide an indication that social media content can remain commercially relevant after customers have already entered a relationship with a firm. Using social-media participation, survey, and transaction data, they found that firm-generated content was associated with customer spending, cross-buying, and profitability. The communication examined in their study came from firms rather than commission-based affiliates, which limits its direct transfer to the present setting. (Leung et al., 2022) similarly showed that influencer and post characteristics shaped engagement and campaign effectiveness but also found non-linear relationships: greater influencer activity or more positive content did not invariably produce stronger responses. (Chen & Lin, 2019; Foroudi et al., 2020) connected social media marketing activities with continuance intention through social identification, perceived value, and satisfaction, suggesting that continued engagement may depend on intervening evaluations. None of these studies directly establishes that affiliate content retains customers on TikTok Shop. In the present model (Indayani et al., 2026), the direct path has the narrower purpose of testing whether consumers' evaluations of affiliate marketing content remain associated with their inclination to continue purchasing after customer trust is included. It neither identifies a specific non-trust mechanism nor assumes that content exposure causes retention. Informational usefulness, product discovery, or promotional value may contribute to the remaining relationship, but the available data do not permit these possibilities to be separated. The study therefore proposes:

H3. Consumers' favourable evaluations of affiliate marketing content are positively associated with customer retention.

The Mediating Role of Customer Trust

Affiliate content can shape customer retention through a change in how consumers evaluate the reliability of the shopping relationship. A video that offers useful and credible product information may do more than assist with an immediate product assessment; it can also provide consumers with a basis for deciding whether the claims surrounding the transaction are dependable. Customer trust captures this evaluative step. It connects consumers' responses to a particular piece of promotional content with a broader judgement about whether they are willing to rely on the shopping arrangement again (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Without that judgement, content may attract attention or stimulate product interest without creating a sufficient basis for continued purchasing (Scholz et al., 2013). Trust is therefore positioned as an intervening construct rather than as another outcome operating independently of affiliate content (Budayanti et al., 2026).

The proposed sequence draws on the two theoretical arguments developed earlier. Signalling theory explains why consumers may use information presented in affiliate content to assess product-related uncertainty, while the commitment-trust perspective explains why confidence in an exchange relationship may support its continuation (Andersen, 2005). These perspectives perform different roles in the model: the former concerns the formation of trust, whereas the latter concerns its relational consequence. Placed sequentially, they suggest that favourable evaluations of affiliate content are associated with a stronger inclination to continue purchasing partly because such evaluations correspond with greater customer trust (Tavares da Silva et al., 2025). The word **partly** is important. The model retains a direct path between affiliate marketing content

and customer retention, allowing content to remain associated with retention through informational usefulness, product discovery, promotional value, or other routes not represented by customer trust. Because these possible routes are not measured separately, the study does not claim to identify them (Golledge et al., 1993).

Model traces a related, although not identical, sequence: the informative value of influencer-generated content and source-credibility evaluations contributed to trust in branded posts, which was subsequently related to purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019). More direct evidence concerning post-purchase responses comes from Matute et al. (2016). Their study showed that the credibility and quality of electronic word of mouth were indirectly related to online repurchase intention through trust in the vendor. (Meilatinova, 2021) also found, among Indonesian social-commerce users, that information quality and reputation were positively related to trust, while trust was positively related to repurchase and word-of-mouth intentions. These studies locate trust between information-related evaluations and subsequent consumer responses, but their objects of trust and communication settings differ from those examined here (X. Zhang et al., 2023). Electronic reviews, influencer posts, and commission-based affiliate content should not be treated as equivalent, nor does trust in a vendor necessarily correspond to the broader customer-trust construct used in this study. The mediating relationship must therefore be tested specifically among Generation Z consumers with experience purchasing fashion products through TikTok Shop. Given the cross-sectional design, a significant indirect effect would constitute evidence consistent with mediation, rather than proof that changes in affiliate content temporally caused changes in trust and subsequent retention. The hypothesis is stated as follows:

H4. Customer trust mediates the positive association between consumers' favourable evaluations of affiliate marketing content and customer retention.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Study Context

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey to examine the hypothesised associations among affiliate marketing content, customer trust, and customer retention. The unit of analysis was the individual consumer, and the data were obtained through a self-administered online questionnaire. The research model estimated both the direct association between affiliate marketing content and customer retention and the indirect association operating through customer trust. A survey design was appropriate for capturing consumers' evaluations of these latent constructs within a single empirical model. Because the observations were collected at one point in time, however, the analysis cannot establish temporal ordering or causal effects. The estimated relationships are consequently interpreted as statistical associations, while the indirect effect is treated as evidence consistent with mediation rather than proof of a causal process.

The empirical setting comprised Generation Z consumers in West Java who had previously purchased fashion products through TikTok Shop affiliate content. TikTok Shop provides a relevant setting because promotional content, product evaluation, and transaction facilities coexist within the same platform environment. The focus on fashion products is also pertinent because consumers must assess attributes such as appearance, fit, and material through mediated information before receiving the product. Requiring prior purchasing experience ensured that respondents evaluated the proposed relationships as customers who had encountered both the affiliate content and the subsequent transaction, rather than as prospective buyers responding only to a hypothetical purchase. Nevertheless, the study relies on self-reported perceptions and purchasing inclinations rather than independently

verified platform records. Its empirical scope is therefore limited to the consumers represented in the sample and should not be extended automatically to all TikTok Shop users or to Generation Z consumers outside the study setting.

Population, Sampling, and Data Collection

The target population comprised Generation Z consumers residing in West Java who actively used TikTok and had purchased fashion products through affiliate content on TikTok Shop. Respondents were eligible if they were between 14 and 29 years of age, lived in West Java, used TikTok, and reported at least one relevant fashion purchase. These criteria were applied because answering the questionnaire required prior experience with the focal content and purchasing environment. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability procedure suited to identifying respondents with the required characteristics when a complete sampling frame was unavailable. Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered using Google Forms, and the final analytical sample consisted of 100 respondents. Because selection was non-probabilistic, the sample was intended to provide evidence about the hypothesised relationships within the specified consumer group rather than population-level estimates for all Generation Z consumers in West Java.

Measurement of Constructs

The measurement instrument comprised 14 observed indicators representing three latent constructs. Affiliate marketing content was measured by four indicators (KAM1–KAM4), customer trust by five indicators (KP1–KP5), and customer retention by five indicators (RP1–RP5). Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In the estimated PLS-SEM model, the three constructs were specified reflectively. Their empirical measurement properties were subsequently assessed using indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability, average variance extracted, and discriminant validity.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS. The analysis proceeded in two stages. The reflective measurement model was examined first through indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, ρ_A , composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). Indicator loadings of approximately .708 or higher were treated as preferable, while internal consistency coefficients of at least .70 and AVE values of at least .50 were used as reference criteria. Discriminant validity was assessed primarily using HTMT, with values below .90 indicating that two constructs were sufficiently distinct. The Fornell-Larcker criterion was retained as supplementary information rather than as the principal discriminant-validity test because it is less sensitive in detecting construct overlap (Henseler et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2019).

The structural model was subsequently evaluated using inner variance inflation factors, coefficients of determination (R^2 and adjusted R^2), standardised path coefficients, and the associated bootstrap t-statistics and p-values. Customer trust was examined as a mediator by estimating the specific indirect association between affiliate marketing content and customer retention alongside the corresponding direct association. Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 level, and software outputs reported as $p=.000$ were presented as $p<.001$. Interpretation of the structural estimates remained conditional on the quality of the measurement model. The available analytical record identifies SmartPLS as the software used but does not preserve its version, the number of bootstrap subsamples, the test direction, confidence-interval procedure, or random-seed setting. Effect sizes (f^2), out-of-sample predictive assessments, and bootstrap confidence intervals were also unavailable.

The analysis and resulting inferences were therefore restricted to the reported statistics and treated as exploratory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the composition of the analytical sample. Two features are particularly relevant to the interpretation of the subsequent results. Most respondents reported at least three fashion purchases through TikTok Shop within the preceding six months, meaning that the retention measures were largely evaluated by consumers with repeated purchasing exposure rather than predominantly by one-time buyers. At the same time, the concentration of women and respondents aged 20–24 indicates that the resulting estimates primarily characterise this segment of TikTok Shop fashion consumers. Given the purposive recruitment procedure, the percentages are descriptive of the sample and should not be treated as population estimates for Generation Z in West Java.

Table 1. Respondent characteristics

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	17	17
	Female	83	83
Age	14–19 years	4	4
	20–24 years	79	79
	25–29 years	17	17
Domicile	Bandung	34	34
	Sukabumi	18	18
	Bogor	17	17
	Other areas of West Java	31	31
Fashion purchases through TikTok Shop	1–2 purchases	21	21
	3–5 purchases	51	51
	More than 5 purchases	28	28

Measurement Model Assessment

The reflective measurement model was initially examined through indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability, and average variance extracted. As reported in Table 2, the indicator loadings ranged from .552 to .778. Six of the 14 indicators reached the preferred loading level of approximately .708, while the remaining indicators were retained in the reported model.

Table 2. Indicator loadings, construct reliability, and convergent validity

Construct	Indicator	Loading	Cronbach's α	rho_A	Composite reliability	AVE
Affiliate marketing content	KAM1	0.688	0.598	0.61	0.766	0.453
	KAM2	0.654				
	KAM3	0.759				
	KAM4	0.577				
Customer trust	KP1	0.778	0.684	0.701	0.799	0.448
	KP2	0.676				
	KP3	0.733				
	KP4	0.552				

	KP5	0.577				
	RP1	0.768				
	RP2	0.701				
Customer retention	RP3	0.661	0.765	0.769	0.842	0.517
	RP4	0.717				
	RP5	0.743				

Composite reliability exceeded .70 for each construct, ranging from .766 to .842. Customer retention also met the reference values for Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, and AVE. The evidence was less consistent for affiliate marketing content and customer trust. Affiliate marketing content produced a Cronbach's alpha of .598, rho_A of .610, and AVE of .453, while customer trust produced a Cronbach's alpha of .684 and AVE of .448. Convergent validity was therefore established for customer retention but remained limited for the other two constructs. Taken together, the measurement results provide only partial support for the quality of the construct measures. The structural estimates reported in the following sections are consequently interpreted with caution.

Structural Model Assessment and Hypothesis Testing

Structural collinearity was examined before the path estimates were interpreted. The inner VIF values ranged from 1.000 to 2.300, providing no indication that collinearity among the predictor constructs dominated the structural estimates. Table 3 reports the corresponding collinearity statistics and the variance accounted for in the two endogenous constructs.

Table 3. Structural collinearity and explained variance

Endogenous construct	Predictor	Inner VIF	R ²	Adjusted R ²
Customer Trust	Affiliate Marketing Content	1	0.565	0.561
Customer Retention	Affiliate Marketing Content	2.3	0.514	0.505
	Customer Trust	2.3		

Affiliate marketing content accounted for 56.5% of the variance in customer trust. Affiliate marketing content and customer trust jointly accounted for 51.4% of the variance in customer retention. The small differences between the unadjusted and adjusted R² values indicate that adjustment for the number of predictors did not materially change the estimates. These statistics describe explanatory performance within the sample and should not be interpreted as evidence of out-of-sample predictive accuracy.

Table 4. Direct structural relationships

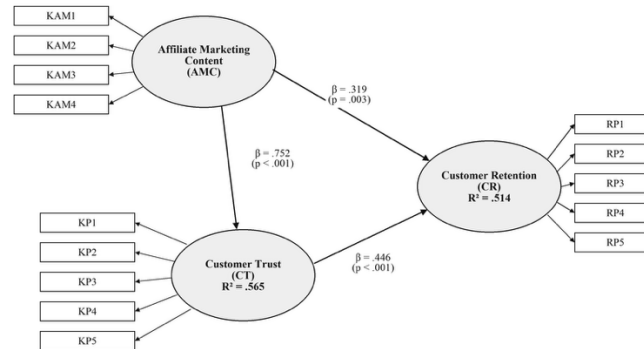
Hypothesis	Structural relationship	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Affiliate marketing content → Customer trust	0.752	12.297	< .001	Positive and significant
H2	Customer trust → Customer retention	0.446	4.288	< .001	Positive and significant
H3	Affiliate marketing content → Customer retention	0.319	2.755	0.003	Positive and significant

Note. β denotes the standardised path coefficient.

Affiliate marketing content was positively associated with customer trust ($\beta = .752$, $t = 12.297$, $p < .001$), yielding a statistically significant estimate in the direction proposed by

H1. Customer trust was positively associated with customer retention ($\beta = .446$, $t = 4.288$, $p < .001$), consistent with H2. Affiliate marketing content also retained a positive direct association with customer retention after customer trust was included in the model ($\beta = .319$, $t = 2.755$, $p = .003$), consistent with H3. All three direct relationships were positive and statistically significant at the structural-model level. The estimates followed the directions specified in the conceptual model but do not establish causal effects.

Figure 1. Final PLS-SEM structural model



Mediation Analysis

Customer trust was examined as the mechanism linking affiliate marketing content to customer retention using the bootstrapped specific indirect effect. This approach provides a direct test of the proposed mediation pathway rather than inferring mediation from the significance of its component paths. The result is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Specific indirect effect through customer trust

Hypothesis	Indirect relationship	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H4	Affiliate marketing content $\rightarrow$ Customer trust $\rightarrow$ Customer retention	0.335	2.858	< .001	Supported

Note. β denotes the standardised specific indirect effect.

The specific indirect effect of affiliate marketing content on customer retention through customer trust was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = .335$, $t = 2.858$, $p < .001$). This result supports H4 and indicates that affiliate marketing content is associated with customer retention partly through its relationship with customer trust. Content perceived more favourably by consumers tends to be accompanied by stronger trust, which, in turn, is associated with a greater tendency to remain engaged with the seller or platform.

Discussion

The results point to a more nuanced role for affiliate marketing content than a simple promotional effect. Affiliate content was associated with customer retention directly, but a significant indirect association also emerged through customer trust. Trust therefore forms part of the explanation for the content–retention relationship without exhausting it, because the direct path remained significant after trust was introduced into the model. This pattern is consistent with complementary partial mediation. In fashion transactions on TikTok Shop, where consumers must evaluate products through mediated information, retention appears to be connected not only to the content itself but also to the confidence consumers place in the information it conveys. The findings consequently shift attention from content exposure alone to the relational judgement formed around affiliate communication. Because the data were collected at a single point in time, this sequence should be understood as a theoretically coherent pattern of associations rather than evidence of a causal process.

The positive relationship between affiliate marketing content and customer trust can be understood against the informational uncertainty surrounding fashion purchases on

TikTok Shop. Consumers cannot inspect fabric, fit, or product finishing directly and must instead rely on representations provided by sellers and affiliate creators. Under these conditions, affiliate content can serve as a credibility cue when the information presented is perceived as clear, consistent, and dependable. This interpretation accords with (Lou & Yuan, 2019), who identified message value and source credibility as central to trust formation in influencer marketing, and with (Gefen et al., 2003), who viewed trust as a means of managing uncertainty in online transactions. The present finding shows the relevance of this mechanism in TikTok Shop affiliate communication among Generation Z consumers. Exposure alone, however, is unlikely to be sufficient; the content–trust relationship rests on how consumers evaluate both the information and its communicator. Because the study measured affiliate marketing content as an aggregate construct, the results do not establish which content attributes contributed most strongly to trust (Budayanti et al., 2026).

Once trust has been established, its relevance is no longer confined to the immediate transaction. Respondents who expressed greater confidence in the information and actors surrounding their TikTok Shop purchases also tended to report stronger retention. Commitment–trust theory helps explain this pattern: a trusted exchange relationship reduces the need for consumers to repeatedly verify the reliability of the other party before continuing their engagement (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Such continuity is particularly relevant in online fashion retail, where uncertainty about fit, material quality, and the correspondence between product presentation and the item received can reappear with each purchase. Trust gives consumers a basis on which to approach subsequent recommendations and transactions with less uncertainty. (Y. Kim & Peterson, 2017) meta-analysis similarly identifies online trust as a central antecedent of favourable consumer responses in e-commerce. The temporal direction remains unresolved, however. Positive prior experiences may have strengthened trust and retention simultaneously, a possibility that cannot be disentangled using cross-sectional survey data.

Trust, however, did not absorb the entire association between affiliate marketing content and customer retention. The direct path remained statistically distinguishable from zero after trust was included, leaving open other routes through which affiliate communication may relate to continued patronage. Familiarity, informational convenience, and repeated engagement are plausible mechanisms in a short-video environment, but none was measured in this study and they should not be presented as confirmed explanations. What can be stated with greater confidence is that the role of affiliate content was not confined to trust formation within the estimated model. This finding extends a literature that has largely examined influencer content in relation to consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Vrontis et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2024) by demonstrating an association with a retention-oriented outcome. It does not establish that exposure to affiliate content produces actual repeat purchases. Substantiating such a claim would require longitudinal evidence or behavioural purchase records showing that content evaluation precedes subsequent patronage.

Customer trust accounted for part, but not all, of the relationship between affiliate marketing content and retention. The specific indirect path was significant, while the direct path remained significant after trust was included. Since both estimates were positive, the pattern fits category of complementary mediation. Consumers who evaluated affiliate content more favourably also reported greater trust, and those with greater trust tended to report stronger retention. The remaining direct path is equally important because it shows that trust alone cannot explain the content–retention relationship. Trust is therefore best treated as one explanatory link rather than the sole or necessarily dominant mechanism. The

analysis does not, however, establish the causal order assumed by mediation. Content evaluations, trust, and retention were measured at the same point in time; a longitudinal design would be needed to show that changes in content perceptions precede changes in trust and, subsequently, retention.

These results come from a particular corner of social commerce: fashion purchases made by Generation Z users of TikTok Shop in West Java. Fashion is difficult to evaluate online because appearance can be presented readily, whereas fit, texture, and correspondence with the delivered item remain uncertain. Trust may consequently carry more weight in this setting than it would for standardised products that are easier to compare. The platform context also matters. Creator-led communication is familiar to Generation Z consumers, but familiarity with the format does not necessarily imply uncritical acceptance of its claims. A further boundary arises from the sample, which consisted entirely of consumers with prior TikTok Shop purchasing experience and was predominantly female. Their responses may not represent less experienced users or the wider Generation Z population. Generalisation beyond comparable consumers, product categories, and social commerce settings therefore requires additional evidence.

Theoretical Implications

Affiliate marketing is commonly assessed in terms of what it achieves before or at the point of purchase. This study addresses a later question: whether consumers' evaluations of affiliate content remain relevant to retention among those who have previously purchased through TikTok Shop. The distinction matters because communication that attracts an initial transaction does not necessarily provide a basis for continued patronage. Earlier influencer research has demonstrated the relevance of message value, credibility, and opinion leadership to purchase-oriented responses (Filieri et al., 2026; Wiyoga & Augtiah, 2026). The present findings place affiliate content within a post-purchase problem by showing that it remains associated with retention among consumers with prior purchasing experience. They do not indicate that content exposure ensures repeat buying. Instead, they suggest that research on creator-led commerce should distinguish more carefully between the role of content in customer acquisition and its relevance to the continuation of an exchange relationship.

Customer trust explains part of this association. Commitment–trust theory argues that trust reduces uncertainty and supports the continuity of exchange relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The specific indirect path is consistent with that argument: favourable evaluations of affiliate content were associated with greater trust, and greater trust was associated with retention. The significant direct path that remained after trust was included is theoretically important because it shows where a trust-centred account becomes incomplete. Trust captures one relational process, but it cannot by itself explain the connection between affiliate content and continued patronage. The unresolved issue is therefore more specific than a general call for additional variables: future research needs to establish which processes operate alongside trust and whether they remain relevant when retention is observed through actual repeat purchases rather than self-reported evaluations.

Practical Implications

For sellers and fashion brands on TikTok Shop, the managerial lesson is not simply to increase the volume of affiliate content. Customer trust formed part of the significant indirect relationship with retention, making the accuracy and consistency of affiliate communication a customer-management concern rather than merely a promotional one. Claims made in affiliate videos should correspond with the information provided on product pages and with what customers are likely to receive. Affiliates also need verified information about materials, sizing, product limitations, and the commercial nature of their

recommendations. These considerations are especially important for fashion products, where discrepancies between presentation and the delivered item can quickly undermine confidence. The study does not identify a single content format that performs best, so prescribing formats would go beyond the evidence. The more defensible implication concerns governance: sellers should monitor the substance of affiliate claims alongside the traffic and conversions those affiliates generate.

The direct association with retention also suggests that affiliate programme performance should not be judged solely at the first transaction. Where the necessary data are available, sellers could compare repeat-purchase rates, returns, complaints, and subsequent engagement across customer groups referred by different affiliates. A creator who generates many initial conversions but is followed by frequent returns or low repeat purchasing may contribute less long-term value than one whose product representations create more accurate expectations. Content directed at existing customers, including sizing clarification, product-use guidance, or relevant product updates, may also warrant testing instead of reserving affiliate activity exclusively for acquisition. These actions remain managerial propositions rather than proven interventions. Their value should be examined through field experiments or longitudinal customer records that connect affiliate exposure with behaviour after the initial purchase.

CONCLUSION

Among Generation Z fashion consumers in West Java, affiliate marketing content was associated with customer retention through two routes. A direct relationship remained after customer trust was included, while the significant specific indirect relationship indicated that trust was also involved in the content–retention link. The coexistence of these paths is consistent with complementary partial mediation. Customer trust is therefore best understood as one relational mechanism within the model rather than a complete explanation of retention. These findings extend the empirical scope of affiliate marketing research from immediate, purchase-oriented responses to retention among consumers with prior transaction experience. They also suggest a more demanding basis for evaluating affiliate communication: its relevance lies not only in attracting consumer attention but also in the confidence consumers place in the information being conveyed. This conclusion is limited to self-reported responses from a purposive sample of 100 Generation Z consumers in West Java. It does not establish that affiliate content produces actual repeat purchasing, and replication using longitudinal or behavioural data is required before the relationships can be interpreted causally or generalised to other consumer groups and product categories.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges Universitas Nusa Putra for the academic and institutional support provided during the development of this research. Appreciation is also extended to the respondents who contributed their time and perspectives by participating in the survey. The interpretations presented in this article, as well as any remaining errors, are the sole responsibility of the author.

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