Social Practices of Affiliates in the Digital Economy Era (Study on Shopee **Affiliates on Social Media Instagram)**

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Abstract

The development of the digital economy has given rise to various new practices, one of which is the affiliate program offered by e-commerce platforms such as Shopee. The phenomenon of Shopee Affiliate, as one of the forms of the digital economy that is growing rapidly in Indonesia, cannot be separated from the social dimensions that underlie it. Although it appears to be an individual and pragmatic practice, Shopee Affiliate contains complex social dynamics. Therefore, this study aims to understand this phenomenon by applying Pierre Bourdieu's social practice theory approach to analyze how habitus, forms of capital, and the digital realm shape and reproduce affiliated practices among the general public. A qualitative-descriptive approach was employed in this study, involving 18 informants selected through the purposive sampling method and supplemented with literature reviews. This study demonstrates that participation in Shopee Affiliate is not merely a rational economic choice but a social practice shaped by social structure, digital habits, and access to capital.

Keywords: social practices; affiliates; social media; digital economy

INTRODUCTION

The digital era has become an inevitability of the rapid development of information and communication technology, which has a broad impact on various aspects of people's lives. This transformation demands rapid social and economic adaptation, especially in business patterns that are now increasingly digitalized (Melovic et al., 2020). Communication media is no longer limited to direct interaction but has crossed the boundaries of space and time through massive digital platforms. In this context, digital technology not only changes the way we communicate but also creates new economic opportunities, one of which is becoming an affiliate.

Affiliates refer to users of affiliate programs. An affiliate program is a digital marketing method where users, or affiliates, promote products through links that they share. If the audience purchases a product through the link, the affiliate program receives a commission. Furthermore, the affiliate will get a profit in the form of a commission from the purchase. This practice in Indonesia is increasingly in demand, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, which has encouraged people to look for flexible income alternatives that can be done from

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home. Affiliate users also come from diverse economic, social, and age backgrounds, indicating that this digital economic activity is appealing to various segments of society. Therefore, these affiliate users have become an increasingly widespread economic activity in this digital economy era. Researchers have found that affiliates use social media as a platform to disseminate information about the products or services they promote.

The Shopee Affiliate program, introduced in 2019, is a genuine form of digital economic opportunity, exhibiting a significant increase in community participation. The purpose of this program is to earn additional income by inviting Indonesian people who use social media to promote products sold on the e-commerce ([Shopee Affiliate Program] Apa Itu Shopee Affiliate Program?, n.d.). According to data provided by Shopee, the number of users participating in this affiliate program has doubled in 2022 compared to the previous year (antaranews.com, 2023). With a fairly easy registration and usage requirements mechanism, as well as profitable benefits, this program has attracted quite a lot of people in Indonesia.

The phenomenon is growing along with the growth of social media users. Based on data from We Are Social, Indonesia has 202.6 million internet users, 143 million of whom are active social media users (Maddalena, 2025). Instagram is the most widely used platform, and is often used by affiliates to spread product links. Instagram, with a user base of 91 million users in Indonesia (*Data Jumlah Pengguna Instagram Di Indonesia 2025*, 2024). This number represents 36.3% of Indonesia's total population, and approximately 47.8% of adults (aged 18 and over) in Indonesia use Instagram. Thus, Instagram has become the main arena for this digital marketing practice.

Several previous studies, such as those by Wicaksono (2022), Permadi (n.d.) and Yanti et al., (2023) have examined the influence of Shopee Affiliate on purchasing interest, the effectiveness of MSME marketing, and the potential of this program as a job opportunity. From previous studies, it can be seen that there has been no research on the social practices of affiliates related to the information society in the digital era within the field of sociology. Researchers aim to understand how these affiliate users perceive and utilise advancements in information and technology in the digital era, so that potential consumers have a sense of trust in the products or services they promote.

Most studies still focus on marketing aspects, purchasing interest, and program effectiveness. There are not many studies that examine the sociological dimensions of this affiliation practice, especially within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's social practice theory and Putnam's social capital. Therefore, this study aims to answer the question, what are the

forms of social practices of Shopee affiliate users on Instagram as part of the digital economy? And how do they utilize social capital and digital habitus in their affiliate practices?

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs qualitative research to understand the social phenomena underlying the growth of Shopee Affiliate users on Instagram, a social media platform within the context of the digital economy. This approach aims to reveal how affiliates build social networks and establish trust in the digital realm, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social practice and Robert Putnam's theory of social capital, and supported by digital theory analysis as a complement to the field of sociology.

The study's social setting focuses on Shopee Affiliate users who are active on Instagram, a social media platform with a large user base in Indonesia, which is seen as a potential arena for supporting the growth of the digital economy. The criteria for research subjects consist of Shopee Affiliate users who meet several criteria, such as being at least 20 years old, not having a permanent job, and actively sharing product links. Additionally, there are non-subject informants, namely consumers who have interacted with or purchased products through the shared Shopee links. The study included 18 informants and was conducted between March and April 2025.

The data collection technique involved two stages: primary data were obtained through the observation of Shopee Affiliate account activities, and in-depth interviews were conducted to understand the experiences and strategies of affiliates in building social networks. Secondary data were also collected from articles, journals, books, and official websites. Data analysis was carried out thematically by grouping the results of interviews and observations according to the research focus and then interpreting them using relevant theories. Data were analysed through a process of transcription, categorization, and in-depth interpretation, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the social practices of affiliates in forming social networks and their impact on their socio-economic conditions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Social Affiliate Practices in the Digital Economy Era

Pierre Bourdieu developed a social analysis framework through the main concepts of habitus, capital, field, and practice. Habitus is a system of dispositions formed through life experiences and social structures that individuals encounter. Capital is divided into four, namely economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Field is a social arena where actors compete

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using the capital they have, and practice is the result of the interaction between habitus and objective conditions in a particular field (Bourdieu, 1990). This approach is useful for understanding why and how individuals participate in affiliate programs, as well as how these practices reflect broader social structures.

This study examines the social practices of Shopee affiliates as part of the rapidly growing digital economy phenomenon. Research data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 18 affiliates, most of whom were students and young workers aged 20-33 years old. They actively use social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Telegram as a space for practice and interaction in carrying out their affiliate activities. The primary motivation for affiliates to participate in the Shopee Affiliate program is to earn additional income flexibly and according to their interests, particularly by creating content that aligns with their daily lives. Interaction with the audience is carried out actively and personally, including replying to comments and direct messages and fostering two-way communication that is responsive and humanistic.

Shopee Affiliate as Part of Digital Social Practice

Shopee Affiliate is an example of a phenomenon in the digital economy that illustrates the interaction between individuals, digital platforms, and audiences, where each influences the others in the process of marketing products online. This program enables individuals, referred to as affiliates, to earn commissions by promoting products through affiliate links on various digital platforms, including social media and blogs. In this context, Shopee Affiliate is not only part of an e-commerce marketing strategy but also part of a digital social practice that connects aspects of the economy, technology, and social interaction.

As part of digital social practices, Shopee Affiliate demonstrates how digital social interactions have evolved into a key component of the digital economy. Digital affiliates function as social actors that create and strengthen technology-based social relationships in the marketing world. In this context, digital social practices refer to the ways in which interactions between individuals in digital spaces influence consumption behavior and marketing processes. Affiliate programs, such as those offered by Shopee, are a clear example of how technology facilitates social relationships that ultimately influence economic decisions, including product purchases.

Affiliates who use social media to promote Shopee products participate in a system of platform capitalism, which combines a results-based economy with digital social relationships. Platforms like Shopee offer economic incentives to affiliates who successfully generate sales,

creating a system that enables individuals to leverage their social capital to earn financial benefits. Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism illustrates how individuals, through their participation in digital platforms, become both data sources and economic actors, occasionally benefiting financially by leveraging their online behaviors and content (Shoshana, 2025), in this case through Shopee Affiliate.

Shopee Affiliate practices, as part of digital social practices, also have a significant impact on how individuals interact with social media and e-commerce platforms. One of the impacts is the transformation in consumption behavior, where audiences who were previously passive consumers are now more active in influencing consumption trends through their involvement in social media. Successful affiliates not only sell products but also create relevant and interesting content, which in turn influences the audience's perception of the promoted product.

Shopee Affiliate is not merely an economic activity but a social practice formed by the interaction between social structures through platforms, technology, algorithms, and individual agency, namely, users. This practice can be understood through Bourdieu's three main concepts: habitus, which refers to the tendency or mindset of users towards digitalization, consumption, and the pursuit of additional income. Furthermore, the concept of capital refers to the resources available to carry out this practice. The last is the concept of realm, which contains the digital arena where affiliates operate and compete.

Habitus Digital Affiliates

Habitus, according to Pierre Bourdieu, is a system of dispositions internalized in individuals as a result of their social experiences, which are formed through social and cultural processes. In this context, digital habitus refers to the mindsets, habits, skills, and practices that individuals or groups have in using digital technology to interact, communicate, and participate in the digital economy. For digital affiliates, this habitus refers to how they adapt to social media and affiliate marketing platforms, as well as how they engage with their audiences to establish credibility and maximize revenue potential.

Shopee Affiliate users typically come from social classes that are familiar with digital technology, have access to social media, and are accustomed to finding efficient ways to earn a living. This digital habitus is formed from the habit of interacting with digital platforms, consumer values, and economic pressures that drive individuals to be digitally productive (Couldry & and Andreas, 2017). The routine use of visual aesthetics, follower engagement, and promotional cues in digital marketing can be seen as a form of internalized habitus. As

Shukla and Bohara highlight, Instagram sellers who consistently apply such strategies tend to experience higher engagement and conversion rates. This illustrates how social practices in digital spaces are not random but embedded in intentional, economically oriented behavior (Shukla & Bohara, 2025). By consistently adopting this habit, consumers become more interested, and product sales can be maximized.

The habitus of Shopee Affiliate users is shaped by their life experiences as part of a social class accustomed to accessing the internet at a low cost, often using economical quotas or free public Wi-Fi, being active on social media and community groups such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok, and seeking additional income opportunities without requiring significant capital. In this structure, users see affiliation as an ideal way to "make money from the internet" without having to sell directly or have stock. Their digital habitus is directed at efficiency, pragmatism, and work flexibility. One informant is a student in one of the cities in Indonesia who actively shares Shopee links on WhatsApp groups and his Instagram account. He does not consider himself to be "doing business", but rather "helping people buy more economically" while "earning extra pocket money" (Rahma, April 2025).

Affiliates' digital habitus also influences the type of content they create and how they optimize their interactions with their audiences. Based on the habitus that has been formed, affiliates decide what type of content they consider relevant and interesting to their audiences. The habitus of these affiliates is shaped by their experience and knowledge of the digital world, especially social media mechanisms and online marketing strategies. This is reflected in their habits and techniques for creating consistent content, selecting products that suit the needs and interests of their audiences, and adopting an honest and authentic personal approach to building trust. One affiliate said that he is used to making video content according to requests from his audience on Instagram DM so that more people are enthusiastic and interested in his content (Dino, April 2025). This is in line with a study conducted by Casaló et al., (2020) which showed that influencers who utilize their habitus in creating content based on values that their audiences value are more successful in maintaining audience engagement and trust. This habitus allows affiliates to be more responsive to the needs and preferences of their audiences, as well as to adopt a more personal and authentic communication style.

Social Capital as a Resource for Affiliate Practice on Instagram

Social capital is a concept that refers to the network of social relationships that individuals or groups can use to gain economic or social benefits. In the context of digital affiliate practices, social capital plays a crucial role as a resource that underlies the success and influence in

marketing products through social networks, as evident in the Shopee affiliate program on social media platforms, particularly Instagram. Shopee's affiliate practices on Instagram are a real example of the application of social capital. Affiliates leverage their social relationships to influence followers or audiences who already have a high level of trust in them. This trust, as part of social capital, plays a central role in purchasing decisions made by these followers or audiences.

Social capital includes the relationships that an individual or group has, as well as the norms that govern interactions within the network. According to Bourdieu, social capital can be defined as the totality of resources that individuals have in their social networks that can be utilized to achieve certain goals (Bourdieu, 1986). In affiliate practices, social capital functions as a catalyst that allows affiliates to reach a wider audience, build trust, and ultimately increase sales conversions. Shopee's affiliate practices on Instagram are a real example of the application of social capital. Affiliates use their social relationships to influence followers or audiences who already have a high level of trust in them. For affiliates, this social capital can be realized in the form of personal relationships that they build through Instagram content that is relatable, honest, and provides added value to their audience. For example, an affiliate who often shares real experiences with a particular product or provides reviews that are not too "sales-oriented" often has greater trust from his audience. Like one informant who showed trust in his audience by choosing products that they had used themselves so that they were able to provide convincing testimonials and build credibility for people who saw it (Adinda, March 2025). This trust, as part of social capital, plays a central role in the purchasing decisions taken by these followers or audiences.

The capital owned by these affiliates is indeed not as large as that owned by influencers, but it is still important. Success in Shopee Affiliate is also uneven because affiliates who have higher social and symbolic capital tend to get more clicks and commissions. Some of the social capital in this affiliate social practice includes online relationship networks, for example WhatsApp group members, social media friends, online communities. Next, there is cultural capital, where the skills of creating narratives, understanding platform algorithms, and compiling attractive promotions are important things for affiliates to do. Additionally, there is economic capital that does not require large investments, but having an internet connection and gadgets requires minimal capital. Although minimal, access to devices and an internet connection is still needed to become an affiliate. The last is symbolic capital, as affiliates have a reputation as "discount hunters" or figures who are trusted to provide recommendations.

These capitals are interconnected and determine how effectively someone runs an affiliate practice. Those with more capital tend to earn more commissions and maintain their position in Shopee's algorithmic system. Social capital in this practice comes through networks of friends, communities, and family support. Affiliates rely on these networks to expand their promotional reach, get free products, and share knowledge and strategies that increase the effectiveness of their practices. One informant stated that he was active in two affiliate communities that consistently provided access to new products and moral support, which could significantly enhance the success of his product promotion (Nasywa, April 2025).

Social Capital in Affiliate Networks in the Digital Economy

In the context of a rapidly growing digital economy, social capital not only functions in direct relationships between affiliates and their followers but also in building relationships between affiliates. Referring to Putnam's social capital theory, social capital consists of two important elements, namely "bridging", a network that connects various groups, and "bonding", a relationship that strengthens bonds within the same group (Putnam, 2000). In the context of affiliation, "bonding" social capital is often built between affiliates and their followers, who trust their recommendations, while "bridging" social capital encompasses relationships between affiliates and various audiences outside their core social circle. The success of affiliates cannot be separated from the strength of social networks, norms, and trust that are built between affiliates and audiences as well as among affiliates. Warm and responsive two-way communication practices create social bonds that strengthen audience loyalty to affiliates, thus encouraging purchasing decisions through affiliate links.

Social engagement in Shopee Affiliate practice is crucial because the more interactions between affiliates and their audiences, the higher the likelihood of sales conversions. This engagement includes likes, comments, shares, and conversations that form around the promoted product. According to Djafarova & Trofimenko, the level of affiliate engagement with their audience on social media can be a key indicator of the success of a marketing strategy (Djafarova & and Trofimenko, 2019). One of the affiliates in this study interacted with the audience or followers by answering DMs asking about products quickly and informatively. Additionally, the informant requested feedback via chat to ensure the content created was more relevant and the relationship could be strengthened (Re, April 2025). Affiliates who succeed in building strong relationships with their audiences tend to have a higher success rate in increasing sales through affiliate programs.

Affiliates also utilize social capital in building relationships with brands or merchants such as Shopee. Through relationships established within the affiliate network, they can gain benefits in the form of exclusive offers, higher commissions, or increased promotional support from the merchant. Additionally, there is an affiliate community that serves as a space for collaboration and information exchange, which not only reduces loneliness in digital practices but also increases the chances of collective success by sharing experiences, tips, and new products. One informant stated that the role of the affiliate community is essential to him because, in addition to receiving the latest product information, he also sometimes obtains free product samples through the community, which he can review and share with his audience (Nasywa, April 2025). This confirms that social capital in the form of trust and norms of mutual assistance is vital in the sustainability and development of affiliate practices.

The digital era provides both opportunities and challenges for affiliate practices. Social media technology is the main field where this social practice operates, with algorithms as a structure that limits and directs affiliate strategies. Marketing communications and affiliate marketing on Instagram social media have a close relationship with purchasing interest (Yanuar et al., 2024). Affiliates adapt by creating engaging content, staying up-to-date with digital trends, and adjusting the timing and format of their posts to maximize engagement. Flexibility in time and location of work is an advantage of this practice, in accordance with the dynamic and mobile lifestyle of the younger generation. However, high competition and the uncertainty of platform algorithms also pose challenges that force affiliates to continue innovating and maintaining consistency to remain relevant and competitive.

Domain and Dominance in the Digital Social Field

Shopee Affiliate is an example of a digital social practice that is very relevant in the era of the digital economy. Through the affiliate program, the social relationship between individuals and their followers on digital platforms, such as Instagram, becomes the basis for a marketing strategy that benefits both parties. The program combines social and economic elements, creating an ecosystem where affiliates leverage social relationships to influence consumption behavior and earn financial rewards. In this sense, Shopee Affiliate is more than just a marketing strategy but also an integral part of a deep and interdependent digital social practice.

Shopee Affiliate can be viewed as a digital realm where various affiliates compete to gain capital in the form of commissions and symbolic influence. In this realm, Shopee acts as a dominant institution that determines the rules of the game, including the bonus system, distribution algorithms, and the conditions for the program to operate. As a competitive arena,

this realm shows how the platform structure strengthens the dominance of those with greater initial capital. Ordinary users must compete with other users who are more adept at content strategy and have wider social networks. As a result, inequality is reproduced in digital form, where small actors struggle in a system that tends to benefit dominant actors. One affiliate said that he had to be consistent in posting on his platform three times a day and respond quickly to audience questions to attract buyers. According to him, when he is slow to respond, the audience's interest in the item tends to decrease; he must be good at taking advantage of the audience's enthusiasm so that they are interested in buying (Shabrina, April 2025).

Shopee Affiliate is part of the informal digital economy, a place where symbolic and material competition between users takes place. The characteristic of this realm is that it is structured by the Shopee algorithm, because whoever gets the bonus is the one who appears in the search. There is a hierarchy based on click performance and commission, as well as dependence on the digital ecosystem due to program rules, account blocking, and system updates. In this realm, there is symbolic domination, where users or affiliates with the ability to make their products viral by composing interesting product captions and reviews, attractive product images, and personal narratives can more easily control the promotional space, thereby attracting consumer buying interest. Support for this dynamic is found in a study of Shopee Instagram affiliates, which finds that campaigns utilizing exclusive promo codes, discounts, and visually rich content effectively incentivize consumer engagement and boost conversion rates (Harsono & Qomariah, n.d.). Furthermore, a quantitative analysis targeting Generation Z marketing on TikTok and Shopee reveals that viral content strategies—characterized by compelling visuals and appealing price cues—account for approximately 74% of the variance in purchase intent.

Social media platforms are social fields where affiliate practices take place and compete. The tight competition between affiliates requires them to continually innovate and adapt to the platform's algorithm so that their content receives maximum exposure. The strategies adopted include leveraging viral trends, engaging storytelling, and utilising various content formats, such as unboxing videos, reviews, and behind-the-scenes stories. Bourdieu stated that practices are born from the relationship between habitus and realm in a particular context. Therefore, the Shopee Affiliate practice is a social strategy used to accumulate capital within the boundaries of their social structure, strengthen their position in the digital community as a "source of promos", and also overcome economic limitations, as it can provide an additional income without requiring large capital. This strategy is not merely economic rationality but a reflection of the social structure of users, their digital habits, and the demands of everyday life.

Through Pierre Bourdieu's framework, Shopee Affiliate can be understood as a social practice that involves the digital habitus of society, mobilizes various forms of capital in the digital realm, and reflects how digital capitalism expands the space of symbolic competition in society. Shopee Affiliate users are not merely "micro-marketing agents" on social media but social actors who seek to utilize digital structures for their survival, often in a subordinate position to the platforms and systems they follow. Shopee Affiliate is not only a symptom of the digital economy but also a social practice that can be explained through Bourdieu's framework. By examining the habitus, capital, and realm that shape this practice, we can gain insight into how the general public interprets and engages with digital economic opportunities. More than just a monetization strategy, Shopee Affiliate is a form of response to structural inequality, economic limitations, and the transformation of society's digital habitus. Thus, this practice is a reflection of the social structure that continues to shift in the era of platform capitalism.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research analysis on affiliate social practices in the digital economy era using the approach of Pierre Bourdieu's social practice theory, Putnam's social capital theory, and digital theory in sociological studies, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- 1. Affiliate social practices are manifestations of digital habitus formed from individual experiences and knowledge about social media and digital marketing. This habitus is reflected in consistent, authentic, and adaptive content production patterns to changes in platform algorithms. Social capital plays a crucial role in the success of affiliate practices, as evidenced by its presence in social networks, communities, and the support of family and friends. This social capital enhances audience trust and provides access to valuable resources, including products and information.
- 2. Social media platforms, as a social field, provide a competitive space for affiliates to operate and compete. Adaptation to the algorithm structure and the effective use of creative content strategies are key to maintaining a position and gaining economic benefits. Affiliate practices in the digital era show the dynamics of flexible working time and location but also pose challenges in the form of tight competition and algorithm uncertainty that require innovation and consistency. Income from affiliate practices can be a significant

- source of additional income, although it is not yet stable, and not many consider it as a main job.
- 3. This social practice of affiliates demonstrates the transformation of the digital economy, which integrates social capital and digital habitus within a dynamic digital social field. The income generated can be a flexible source of additional income, although it is not yet stable and not many have made this practice their main job. This study is limited to qualitative interviews and focuses on the Shopee platform; therefore, the results cannot be generalised to all types of affiliates or other platforms. Further research, employing a quantitative approach and a broader scope, is recommended to deepen the understanding of this social practice.

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