

Constructing Algorithmic Commercial Legitimacy in the Creator Economy: A Cyberphenomenological Theory of Human–Algorithm Interaction

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ABSTRACT: The creator economy has transformed digital commerce by positioning creators as entrepreneurial actors operating within algorithm-driven platform ecosystems. Existing studies primarily explain influencer credibility, consumer trust, and social commerce from consumer-centric perspectives, providing limited understanding of how creators construct commercial legitimacy through their lived experiences. This study addresses this gap by exploring the experiences of TikTok affiliate creators using a qualitative cyberphenomenological approach. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and digital observations and analyzed using iterative coding, thematic development, and theory triangulation. The findings identify four interconnected dimensions of commercial legitimacy: digital identity construction, algorithmic visibility negotiation, marketplace trust curation, and adaptive commercial learning. These dimensions interact dynamically, demonstrating that creators continuously negotiate legitimacy through interactions with platform algorithms, audiences, and marketplace actors rather than relying solely on persuasive communication or consumer evaluation. Based on these findings, the study proposes Algorithmic Commercial Legitimacy as a novel theoretical construct that extends Source Credibility Theory, Signaling Theory, Social Commerce Theory, and Creator Economy literature. The study contributes by offering a creator-centered explanation of legitimacy construction and advancing cyberphenomenology as an interpretive approach for understanding human–algorithm interaction in digital commerce.

KEYWORDS: Creator economy; Algorithmic commercial legitimacy; Cyberphenomenology; Social commerce; TikTok affiliate; Digital entrepreneurship.

I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the creator economy has fundamentally transformed how economic value is created, distributed, and monetized within digital platform ecosystems (Bleier et al., 2024). Unlike traditional marketing systems, where firms primarily control communication and commercial activities, the creator economy enables individuals to become independent economic actors who simultaneously function as content creators, entrepreneurs, marketers, and community builders. Supported by artificial intelligence, recommendation algorithms, and platform technologies, creators increasingly generate economic value through digital content, audience engagement, and platform mediated commercial interactions. The creator economy has evolved into a global ecosystem valued at more than USD 100 billion and continues to expand rapidly, positioning creators, platforms, consumers, and firms as interdependent stakeholders in digital value creation. Consequently, the creator economy has become one of the most important emerging research agendas in contemporary marketing, with scholars calling for deeper investigations into how creators establish their brands, optimize content, build audiences, monetize digital interactions, and create sustainable commercial ecosystems within platform environments (Peres et al., 2024).

Among contemporary digital platforms, TikTok represents one of the most influential examples of algorithm-driven social commerce. Unlike conventional social networking platforms that primarily rely on follower-based information diffusion, TikTok employs an artificial intelligence-powered recommendation system that continuously evaluates user interactions, engagement signals, viewing behavior, and content relevance to determine content visibility. This algorithmic architecture fundamentally reshapes digital entrepreneurship because creators' commercial success increasingly depends not only on creative capabilities but also on their ability to understand, interpret, and continuously adapt to algorithmic mechanisms governing audience

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exposure and content distribution. Consequently, visibility within TikTok is dynamically negotiated rather than statically owned, making algorithmic interaction a strategic capability for creators operating in platform-based commerce. Furthermore, recent empirical evidence demonstrates that creator popularity, perceived authenticity, and sponsored content characteristics significantly influence audience engagement within TikTok, highlighting the central role of algorithmically mediated visibility in shaping commercial performance (Walsh et al., 2024).

The rapid integration of TikTok Shop and affiliate marketing has further accelerated the commercialization of the platform by enabling creators to monetize content through commission-based partnerships with sellers. Within this ecosystem, affiliate creators simultaneously perform multiple roles as content producers, product curators, trust builders, and commercial intermediaries connecting merchants with consumers (Xu, 2025). Commercial success is therefore determined not merely by persuasive promotional messages but by creators' continuous ability to identify market trends, select trustworthy products, interpret audience responses, optimize content visibility, and adapt to evolving algorithmic feedback (Fileri et al., 2023). Affiliate marketing within TikTok consequently represents a dynamic entrepreneurial practice embedded within algorithmically mediated social commerce rather than a simple promotional activity (Oguntoye, 2025). This transformation illustrates that value creation increasingly emerges through continuous interaction among creators, audiences, platforms, and marketplace actors rather than through traditional firm-controlled marketing processes.

The increasing strategic importance of creator-led commerce has stimulated extensive scholarly attention across marketing, entrepreneurship, information systems, and consumer research (Pal Singh et al., 2026). Existing studies have predominantly examined TikTok through consumer-oriented perspectives, investigating purchase intention, consumer engagement, influencer effectiveness, authenticity, parasocial interaction, and trust formation (L. Wang et al., 2022). Similarly, influencer marketing research consistently explains commercial outcomes through creator attractiveness, expertise, credibility, and authenticity, while social commerce literature emphasizes trust, electronic word-of-mouth, and platform engagement as key determinants of purchasing behaviour (E. S.-T. Wang & Weng, 2024). Although these studies have significantly advanced understanding of marketing effectiveness within social commerce, they largely conceptualize creators as antecedents of consumer responses rather than entrepreneurial actors experiencing complex algorithmically mediated commercial environments (Farrell et al., 2026).

Despite these important contributions, three important theoretical gaps remain. First, existing research primarily explains what influences consumer behaviour but provides limited understanding of how creators themselves experience and interpret algorithmic environments while conducting commercial activities. Second, contemporary theories predominantly conceptualize algorithms as technological mechanisms influencing visibility and engagement, yet relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding algorithms as experiential environments that continuously shape creators' commercial decision-making processes. Third, while current literature successfully explains consumer trust and influencer credibility, it offers limited explanation regarding how creators themselves construct credibility through repeated interaction with platform algorithms, audiences, and marketplace infrastructures. Consequently, the experiential mechanisms underlying creators' commercial adaptation remain insufficiently theorized despite becoming increasingly central to the creator economy.

Addressing these limitations requires an interpretive perspective capable of revealing the meanings creators construct through their everyday interactions with digital platforms. From a cyberphenomenological perspective, digital platforms are not merely technological tools but lived experiential environments in which human experiences, technological affordances, and algorithmic processes continuously shape one another. Rather than simply producing promotional content, TikTok affiliate creators constantly interpret algorithmic feedback, evaluate audience responses, negotiate marketplace relationships, refine commercial strategies, and adapt content production based on ongoing digital experiences. Commercial performance therefore emerges through an iterative process of meaning construction, adaptation, and negotiation occurring within algorithmically mediated social commerce ecosystems.

Accordingly, this study adopts Cyberphenomenology to investigate the lived experiences of TikTok affiliate creators operating within algorithm-driven social commerce. Instead of conceptualizing affiliate marketing solely as a promotional mechanism, this study positions creators as adaptive digital entrepreneurs who continuously negotiate visibility, audience trust, marketplace relationships, and commercial sustainability through ongoing interaction with platform algorithms. By shifting analytical attention from consumer responses toward creators' lived experiences, this research extends current discussions on creator economy, social commerce, and digital entrepreneurship beyond conventional marketing perspectives.

This study addresses the following research question:

How do TikTok affiliate creators construct algorithmic credibility through their lived experiences within algorithm driven social commerce ecosystems?

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This study contributes to the literature in four significant ways. First, it extends creator economy research by repositioning creators as entrepreneurial actors rather than merely marketing intermediaries. Second, it enriches social commerce literature by explaining commercial adaptation from the creators' perspective instead of consumer responses. Third, it introduces a cyberphenomenological perspective for interpreting human–algorithm interaction within digital commerce. Finally, this study develops the concept of Algorithmic Credibility as a novel theoretical explanation describing how creators construct commercial legitimacy through continuous interaction with platform algorithms, audiences, and marketplace actors, thereby providing new theoretical insights into creator economy, platform governance, digital entrepreneurship, and algorithm-driven social commerce.

II. THEORITICAL REVIEW

2.1 Creator Economy: The Transformation of Digital Value Creation

The creator economy represents one of the most significant structural transformations in contemporary marketing, shifting value creation from firm-centric production toward creator-driven digital ecosystems (Filieri et al., 2023). Unlike conventional marketing systems in which organizations primarily control communication, branding, and commercial exchange, the creator economy enables individuals to generate, distribute, and monetize digital content through continuous interaction with audiences, digital platforms, brands, and artificial intelligence technologies. Consequently, creators have evolved from passive content producers into entrepreneurial actors who simultaneously perform the roles of marketers, innovators, community builders, and business owners. This transformation has prompted scholars to recognize the creator economy as a strategic research domain requiring new theoretical perspectives capable of explaining value creation, platform governance, monetization mechanisms, and creator–platform relationships beyond traditional marketing theories (Farrell et al., 2026).

Recent literature further argues that the creator economy should not be understood merely as an extension of influencer marketing. Rather, it constitutes an interconnected ecosystem involving creators, consumers, firms, platforms, advertisers, artificial intelligence, and digital infrastructures that collectively shape commercial value creation. Within this ecosystem, creators compete not only through content quality but also through their ability to develop personal brands, cultivate audience communities, maintain authenticity, and continuously respond to platform dynamics. Accordingly, commercial performance increasingly depends upon creators' capacity to adapt to evolving technological environments rather than solely upon persuasive communication or promotional effectiveness. This perspective fundamentally redefines creators as adaptive entrepreneurs operating within digitally mediated markets instead of marketing intermediaries who merely influence consumer purchasing decisions (Bhargava, 2022).

The emergence of algorithm-driven platforms has further intensified this transformation by fundamentally altering the mechanisms through which commercial opportunities are created. Rather than relying on organizational resources, creators increasingly depend upon platform algorithms to obtain visibility, audience exposure, and monetization opportunities. Platform algorithms therefore function not simply as technological infrastructures but as economic gatekeepers that regulate creators' access to audiences and commercial opportunities. Consequently, success within the creator economy requires creators to continuously interpret algorithmic feedback, experiment with content strategies, optimize audience engagement, and adapt entrepreneurial practices in response to changing platform conditions. This algorithmic dependence distinguishes the creator economy from conventional entrepreneurship and highlights the need to understand creators' lived experiences within platform-mediated environments (Wong et al., 2024).

Despite the rapid development of creator economy research, several conceptual limitations remain. Existing studies have predominantly focused on creator monetization, branding strategies, audience engagement, platform governance, and firm creator collaboration (Tafesse & Dayan, 2023). While these perspectives substantially advance understanding of platform-based business models, they primarily examine creators from organizational, managerial, or consumer viewpoints (Rieder et al., 2023). Consequently, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how creators themselves experience algorithmically mediated commercial environments, construct meanings from continuous interaction with platform infrastructures, and develop adaptive entrepreneurial practices through everyday digital experiences. This limitation suggests that current creator economy literature remains largely outcome-oriented while providing limited insight into the experiential processes through which commercial legitimacy is constructed within algorithm driven ecosystems (Edeling & Wies, 2024).

Accordingly, this study positions the creator economy not merely as a commercial ecosystem but as an experiential environment in which creators continuously negotiate technological affordances, audience expectations, and marketplace dynamics. By adopting a cyberphenomenological perspective, this study extends current creator economy research beyond observable marketing outcomes toward a deeper understanding of how creators interpret, negotiate, and construct commercial legitimacy

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through lived digital experiences. Such a perspective offers an opportunity to enrich existing knowledge by explaining not only what creators achieve within platform ecosystems but also how commercial credibility is continuously constructed through interaction with algorithmic systems.

2.2 Algorithm-Driven Platforms and Algorithmic Visibility

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has transformed digital platforms from passive communication infrastructures into intelligent ecosystems capable of continuously organizing, filtering, and recommending information based on algorithmic decision-making. Unlike traditional social networking platforms where content dissemination was largely determined by users' existing social connections, contemporary platforms increasingly rely on algorithmic recommendation systems to determine which content is distributed, to whom it is delivered, and when it receives visibility. Consequently, algorithms have become central actors in digital platform governance, significantly influencing creators' opportunities to gain audience attention, maintain engagement, and generate commercial value (Zhang et al., 2025).

Within this context, TikTok represents one of the most sophisticated examples of algorithm-driven platforms. Its recommendation system continuously analyzes user interactions, watch duration, engagement patterns, content relevance, and behavioral signals to personalize content exposure. Rather than rewarding creators solely based on the number of followers, TikTok dynamically evaluates each piece of content according to its predicted relevance for individual users. This recommendation mechanism fundamentally changes the logic of digital visibility because commercial success depends increasingly upon creators' ability to continuously adapt to algorithmic preferences rather than merely accumulating followers or publishing promotional content (Sardianos & Briana, 2026).

The growing dependence upon algorithmic recommendation systems has introduced new forms of entrepreneurial uncertainty within platform ecosystems. Creators are required to continuously experiment with content formats, publishing schedules, audience interaction strategies, and engagement techniques to maintain visibility within constantly evolving algorithmic environments. Consequently, commercial performance becomes the outcome of an ongoing adaptive process through which creators interpret algorithmic responses and modify subsequent actions accordingly. Rather than functioning as static technological infrastructures, algorithms increasingly shape creators' strategic decision-making by continuously influencing the opportunities available for audience exposure, market participation, and commercial growth (Krouglov, 2024).

Recent studies increasingly acknowledge that algorithmic systems actively shape digital entrepreneurship, platform participation, and creator performance (Liu, 2025). Nevertheless, the majority of existing research conceptualizes algorithms primarily as technological mechanisms affecting measurable marketing outcomes, including engagement, recommendation accuracy, and content diffusion. Such perspectives provide valuable explanations regarding algorithm effectiveness but offer limited understanding of how creators themselves experience algorithmic governance during their everyday commercial activities. More specifically, relatively little is known about how creators interpret algorithmic feedback, negotiate changing platform expectations, and construct adaptive commercial strategies through repeated interaction with recommendation systems (Serttaş et al., 2025).

From a cyberphenomenological perspective, algorithms should not be understood merely as computational procedures operating behind digital platforms. Instead, algorithms constitute experiential environments that continuously shape creators' perceptions, actions, and commercial decisions. Every interaction with platform analytics, audience responses, declining reach, increasing visibility, or changing engagement patterns becomes part of creators' lived digital experiences (Lin, 2025). Consequently, creators continuously construct meanings regarding how algorithms function, what types of content are rewarded, and which commercial strategies are considered legitimate within platform ecosystems. These interpretive processes gradually influence subsequent entrepreneurial decisions and ultimately shape the way creators understand commercial success in algorithmically mediated environments (Heřmanová et al., 2026).

Accordingly, this study argues that algorithmic visibility should not be conceptualized solely as an outcome of recommendation systems but also as an experiential process through which creators continuously negotiate their commercial existence within digital platforms. Understanding this process requires moving beyond technological explanations toward an interpretive understanding of how creators construct meaning through ongoing interaction with algorithmic infrastructures. Such a perspective provides an important theoretical foundation for explaining how commercial legitimacy emerges within creator economy ecosystems and establishes the conceptual basis for developing the notion of Algorithmic Credibility explored in the present study.

While algorithmic visibility determines whether creators gain audience exposure, sustainable commercial success within social commerce depends not only on being visible but also on being perceived as trustworthy. Therefore, the following section

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examines how existing literature conceptualizes trust and credibility within social commerce and highlights why current theoretical explanations remain insufficient for understanding creators' lived experiences in algorithmically mediated commercial environments.

2.3 Social Commerce Trust and Creator Credibility

The rapid evolution of social commerce has fundamentally transformed online purchasing from transaction-oriented exchanges into relationship-driven commercial ecosystems where trust functions as the primary mechanism facilitating consumer decision-making (Al-Kfairy et al., 2023). Unlike conventional e-commerce, social commerce integrates commercial transactions with user-generated content, interpersonal communication, social interaction, and community participation, allowing consumers to evaluate products through creators' experiences rather than relying solely on firm-generated information. Consequently, creators increasingly function as trust intermediaries who reduce consumers' uncertainty by providing product demonstrations, experiential reviews, and authentic recommendations. Recent studies consistently demonstrate that trust remains one of the strongest predictors of consumer engagement, purchase intention, and long-term participation within social commerce ecosystems (Hsu & Hu, 2024).

Within influencer marketing research, creator credibility has traditionally been explained through Source Credibility Theory, which proposes that consumers evaluate information based on the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of the communicator (Alkhalifah, 2022). This perspective has significantly contributed to understanding why credible influencers generate stronger persuasion, higher engagement, and greater purchase intention than less credible communicators. Similarly, Signaling Theory argues that observable signals including professional appearance, audience size, verified identity, and content quality reduce information asymmetry and increase consumers' confidence in commercial recommendations. Together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that credibility functions as a strategic resource capable of improving marketing effectiveness within digital environments (Lee, 2025).

More recent studies have expanded these perspectives by emphasizing authenticity as a central determinant of creator effectiveness. Rather than responding merely to expertise or attractiveness, consumers increasingly evaluate whether creators appear genuine, transparent, and personally connected with the products they recommend. Authentic storytelling, consistent self-presentation, and transparent commercial relationships have therefore become critical components of successful creator branding. Consequently, creator credibility is increasingly understood as a multidimensional construct emerging from continuous interaction between personal identity, audience relationships, and commercial communication rather than from individual characteristics alone.

Despite these theoretical developments, current literature continues to conceptualize credibility primarily from the perspective of consumers. Existing studies explain how consumers evaluate creators, why consumers trust creators, and how credibility influences purchasing behaviour (Tseng, 2023). Comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how creators themselves construct, maintain, and negotiate credibility while operating within algorithmically governed commercial environments. In practice, creators continuously monitor audience reactions, algorithmic recommendations, marketplace ratings, content performance, and seller reputations before deciding how products should be presented. Consequently, credibility is not simply possessed by creators but is continuously negotiated through ongoing interaction among algorithms, audiences, marketplaces, and commercial experiences (Lee, 2025).

This limitation becomes increasingly important within TikTok social commerce because creator success depends upon more than consumers' perceptions of trustworthiness. Affiliate creators must simultaneously satisfy multiple stakeholders, including platform algorithms that regulate visibility, audiences that determine engagement, and marketplace sellers that influence commercial reputation through product quality and service performance. These interconnected relationships require creators to continuously balance audience expectations, platform requirements, and commercial objectives while preserving their professional identity. Such conditions indicate that creator credibility should be understood as a dynamic and relational process rather than a static individual characteristic.

Accordingly, this study argues that existing perspectives on source credibility and signaling remain insufficient for explaining creators' lived experiences within algorithmically mediated commercial ecosystems. Instead of viewing credibility exclusively as a consumer evaluation, this research conceptualizes credibility as an adaptive process continuously constructed through creators' interactions with platform algorithms, audience engagement, marketplace dynamics, and commercial decision-making. This perspective provides the theoretical foundation for developing the concept of Algorithmic Credibility, which extends existing credibility theories by incorporating the experiential realities of creators operating within contemporary social commerce ecosystems.

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Current literature agrees that trust, authenticity, and credibility play essential roles in determining marketing effectiveness within social commerce. However, existing research remains predominantly consumer-centric and explains credibility primarily as an antecedent of consumer behaviour. Consequently, little theoretical attention has been devoted to understanding how creators themselves continuously construct credibility through repeated interaction with platform algorithms and marketplace infrastructures. This conceptual limitation creates an opportunity to extend existing theories by investigating credibility as an experiential and adaptive process rather than a static marketing attribute.

While trust and credibility explain how commercial relationships are developed within social commerce, they do not adequately explain how creators interpret algorithmic experiences during everyday commercial activities. Addressing this limitation requires an interpretive perspective capable of examining lived digital experiences beyond observable behavioural outcomes. Therefore, the following section introduces Cyberphenomenology as the philosophical and methodological foundation for understanding creator experiences within algorithm-driven social commerce ecosystems.

2.4 Cyberphenomenology as an Interpretive Lens for Understanding Creator Experiences

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence, algorithmic recommendation systems, and digital platforms has fundamentally transformed human experience by blurring the boundaries between physical reality and digitally mediated environments. Contemporary creators no longer interact solely with audiences but continuously engage with algorithmic systems that influence visibility, participation, commercial opportunities, and entrepreneurial decision-making. Consequently, creators' commercial activities cannot be fully understood through behavioural or technological perspectives alone because their experiences emerge through continuous interpretation of digital environments in which algorithms actively participate in shaping everyday practices. This transformation requires an interpretive perspective capable of explaining how meaning is constructed through ongoing interactions among humans, digital technologies, and platform ecosystems (Babayev, 2025).

Cyberphenomenology extends classical phenomenological inquiry by examining lived experiences occurring within digitally mediated environments where technological systems become integral components of human consciousness and everyday practices (Rofiah, 2024b). Rather than conceptualizing technology as an external instrument, cyberphenomenology views digital platforms as experiential spaces in which individuals continuously interpret technological affordances, negotiate digital identities, construct social relationships, and assign meaning to interactions occurring within virtual environments. Accordingly, knowledge is generated not simply through observable behaviour but through understanding how individuals experience and interpret digital realities embedded within technologically mediated contexts (Rofiah, 2024a).

Within TikTok social commerce, creators continuously experience algorithmic uncertainty. Decisions regarding content production, publication timing, product selection, audience engagement, seller collaboration, and commercial adaptation are rarely determined solely by predefined marketing strategies. Instead, creators constantly observe changes in content visibility, audience responses, recommendation patterns, engagement metrics, and marketplace performance before interpreting whether particular actions are rewarded or constrained by platform algorithms. These repeated interactions gradually shape creators' understanding of how commercial success can be achieved within the platform ecosystem. Consequently, creators' entrepreneurial practices emerge through continuous cycles of observation, interpretation, adaptation, and reflection rather than through static strategic planning (Hou et al., 2025).

From this perspective, algorithms function as active participants within creators' lived experiences rather than merely technological infrastructures operating in the background. Every increase or decline in audience reach, every unexpected recommendation, every successful affiliate transaction, and every unsuccessful promotional effort contributes to creators' evolving understanding of platform behaviour (Chodak, 2024). These experiences subsequently influence future commercial decisions, including product selection, content design, marketplace partnerships, publishing strategies, and audience engagement practices. Therefore, algorithmic interaction becomes a meaningful experiential process through which creators gradually construct commercial knowledge and adaptive entrepreneurial capabilities (Issar, 2024).

Applying cyberphenomenology to TikTok affiliate creators enables this study to move beyond dominant marketing perspectives that primarily explain measurable behavioural outcomes. Instead, this research seeks to uncover the underlying meanings creators assign to algorithmic interactions during their everyday commercial activities (Gerbaudo, 2026). Such an interpretive approach facilitates a deeper understanding of how creators perceive algorithmic visibility, evaluate marketplace credibility, negotiate audience expectations, and construct sustainable entrepreneurial practices within digital platform ecosystems (Yang, 2025).

Accordingly, cyberphenomenology provides an appropriate philosophical and methodological foundation for the present study because it allows commercial activities within TikTok social commerce to be interpreted as lived digital experiences rather than

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merely observable marketing behaviours. This perspective enables the development of richer theoretical explanations regarding how creators continuously construct meanings, negotiate uncertainty, and adapt entrepreneurial practices while operating within algorithm-driven commercial environments. Consequently, cyberphenomenology becomes not only the methodological approach adopted in this study but also the interpretive lens through which the concept of Algorithmic Credibility is developed. Existing marketing and social commerce research has successfully explained consumer behaviour, influencer effectiveness, trust formation, and commercial performance. Nevertheless, these perspectives remain limited in explaining how creators experience algorithmic environments as part of their everyday entrepreneurial practices. By adopting cyberphenomenology, the present study shifts analytical attention from observable marketing outcomes toward the lived experiences through which creators interpret, negotiate, and continuously reconstruct commercial reality within algorithm-driven social commerce ecosystems. This interpretive orientation provides the philosophical basis for extending current marketing theories toward a more comprehensive understanding of creator economy.

The literature reviewed above demonstrates that substantial progress has been made in understanding creator economy, algorithm-driven platforms, social commerce, and creator credibility. Existing studies consistently explain how digital platforms influence consumer behaviour, how creators affect engagement, and how trust contributes to purchasing decisions. Likewise, previous research has significantly advanced understanding of platform governance, recommendation systems, authenticity, and influencer marketing. Collectively, these studies have established an important foundation for explaining commercial outcomes within contemporary digital ecosystems.

However, a closer examination reveals three unresolved theoretical limitations.

First, existing studies predominantly adopt a consumer-centric perspective, positioning creators as independent variables influencing consumer attitudes, trust, engagement, and purchasing behaviour. Consequently, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding creators as entrepreneurial actors who themselves experience algorithmically mediated commercial environments. Second, current literature conceptualizes algorithms primarily as technological mechanisms responsible for recommendation accuracy, engagement optimization, and content visibility. Such perspectives insufficiently explain how creators interpret algorithmic responses, negotiate uncertainty, and continuously modify entrepreneurial practices through repeated interaction with algorithmic systems. Third, contemporary theories of source credibility, signaling, authenticity, and social commerce trust explain credibility largely as a consumer evaluation process. These theories remain limited in explaining how credibility is actively constructed, negotiated, and sustained by creators operating within dynamic algorithm-driven commercial ecosystems.

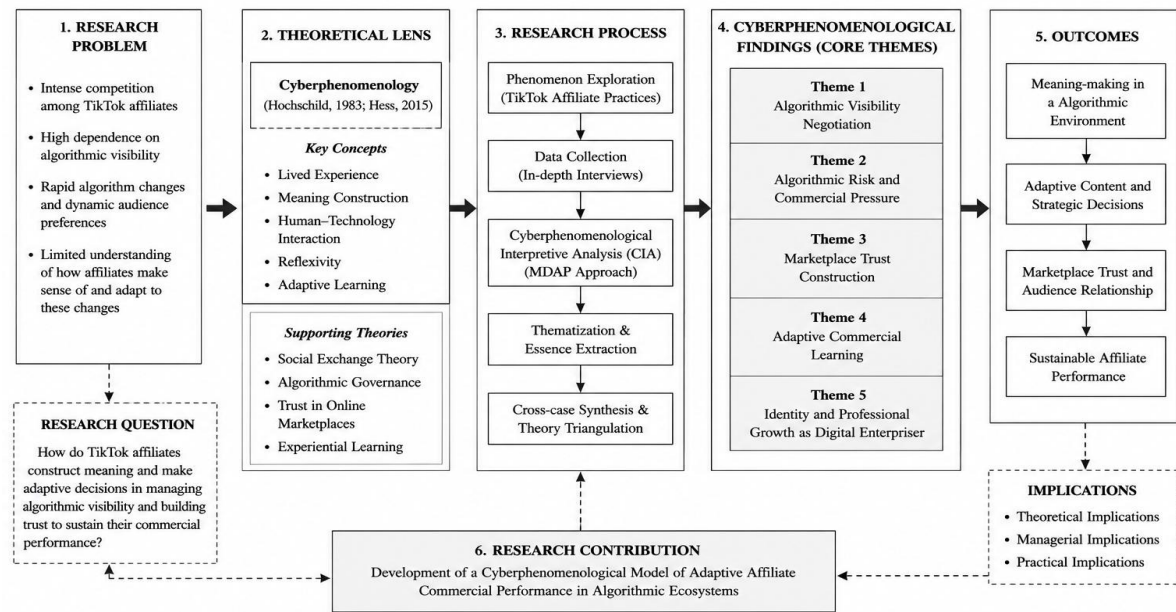
These theoretical limitations indicate the need for an alternative interpretive perspective capable of explaining creators' lived experiences beyond measurable behavioural outcomes. Responding to this need, the present study adopts Cyberphenomenology to investigate how TikTok affiliate creators construct meaning through continuous interaction with platform algorithms, audiences, and marketplace actors. Rather than conceptualizing credibility as a fixed individual characteristic, this study proposes that credibility emerges through an ongoing process of interaction, interpretation, and adaptation occurring within algorithmically mediated social commerce environments.

Accordingly, this research introduces the concept of Algorithmic Credibility, referring to the continuously evolving commercial legitimacy that creators construct through their lived experiences of interacting with platform algorithms, audience engagement, marketplace relationships, and entrepreneurial adaptation. By integrating creator economy, social commerce, algorithmic platforms, and cyberphenomenology, this study seeks to extend existing marketing theories while providing a novel conceptual explanation for commercial legitimacy within contemporary creator ecosystems.

Building upon the theoretical foundation presented above, the following section describes the methodological approach employed to investigate the lived experiences of TikTok affiliate creators. Specifically, it explains the cyberphenomenological research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, analytical strategy, and measures adopted to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

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Figure 1. Research Thinking Flow (Conceptual Framework)



Source: Developed by the authors based on the Cyberphenomenological approach and existing literature.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in Cyberphenomenology to explore how TikTok affiliate creators construct commercial credibility through their lived experiences within algorithm-driven social commerce. Cyberphenomenology extends interpretive phenomenology by positioning digital environments not merely as technological platforms but as experiential spaces in which individuals continuously construct meaning through interactions with algorithms, digital communities, and platform affordances (Rofiah, 2024b). This approach is particularly appropriate because the phenomenon investigated in this study cannot be adequately understood through observable behavioural outcomes alone. Instead, it requires an in-depth interpretation of creators' subjective experiences as they interact with algorithmic recommendation systems, audience engagement, marketplace actors, and commercial activities within TikTok.

Unlike conventional phenomenology that primarily investigates lived experiences in physical contexts, Cyberphenomenology recognizes that digital experiences are simultaneously shaped by human consciousness and computational infrastructures. Consequently, creators' decisions regarding content production, product promotion, seller selection, publishing schedules, and audience interaction are interpreted as meaning-making processes emerging from continuous engagement with algorithmically mediated environments. This perspective enables the present study to reveal not only what creators do but also how they understand, negotiate, and reconstruct commercial reality within TikTok's social commerce ecosystem.

Accordingly, this study adopts an interpretivist paradigm in which reality is viewed as socially and digitally constructed through continuous interaction among creators, audiences, marketplace actors, and platform algorithms. Knowledge is therefore generated through interpreting participants' lived experiences rather than measuring objective behavioural relationships.

3.2 Research Context

The research was conducted within the TikTok social commerce ecosystem, specifically focusing on creators actively participating in the TikTok Affiliate Program. TikTok represents one of the fastest-growing social commerce platforms globally, integrating short-form video content, artificial intelligence-based recommendation systems, livestreaming, e-commerce, and affiliate marketing into a single digital ecosystem. Within this environment, creators continuously interact with algorithmic recommendation systems while simultaneously maintaining audience engagement and commercial relationships with online sellers.

TikTok Affiliate provides a particularly suitable research context because creators' commercial success depends upon dynamic interaction among multiple actors, including platform algorithms, consumers, sellers, products, and marketplace infrastructures. These interactions create complex digital experiences that extend beyond traditional marketing activities, making the platform an appropriate setting for cyberphenomenological inquiry.

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3.3 Participants and Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected using **purposive sampling**, consistent with interpretive qualitative research. The sampling strategy focused on information-rich cases capable of providing deep insight into creators' experiences within TikTok Affiliate.

The participant selection criteria included:

1. Active TikTok Affiliate creators.
2. Minimum one year of experience managing affiliate activities.
3. Actively producing promotional content through TikTok.
4. Directly involved in selecting products, interacting with sellers, and managing audience engagement.
5. Willing to participate in in-depth interviews.

Two key informants fulfilled these criteria and possessed substantial experience managing affiliate-based commercial activities. Although the number of participants appears limited, phenomenological inquiry prioritizes experiential depth rather than statistical representation. The richness of participants' narratives provided sufficient information to understand the phenomenon under investigation.

3.4 Data Collection

Primary data were collected through **semi-structured in-depth interviews** conducted online. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to provide sufficient flexibility for participants to describe their lived experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews.

The interview guide explored four broad domains:

1. Creators' digital identity and account development;
2. Content creation and algorithmic visibility strategies;
3. Marketplace and seller selection;
4. Affiliate marketing experiences and commercial adaptation.

Rather than following rigid interview sequences, probing questions were continuously employed to explore participants' reflections regarding algorithmic experiences, commercial decision-making, and adaptive entrepreneurial practices. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

To enhance contextual understanding, interview data were complemented by digital observations of participants' TikTok accounts, including publicly available content, engagement patterns, profile characteristics, and commercial activities. This triangulation allowed interview narratives to be interpreted within their natural digital environments.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a Cyberphenomenological Interpretive Analysis (CIA) developed for this study. Unlike conventional thematic analysis that primarily categorizes textual patterns, Cyberphenomenological Interpretive Analysis seeks to uncover the meanings participants construct while interacting with digital environments.

The analysis consisted of six iterative stages.

Stage 1: Familiarization

Interview transcripts were repeatedly read to obtain holistic understanding of participants' digital experiences.

Stage 2: Meaning Unit Identification

Statements reflecting significant experiences related to TikTok Affiliate activities were identified as meaning units.

Stage 3: Initial Coding

Meaning units were transformed into conceptual codes representing participants' perceptions, actions, and interpretations.

Stage 4: Cyberphenomenological Interpretation

Codes were interpreted within participants' broader experiences of interacting with algorithms, audiences, marketplace actors, and commercial environments.

Stage 5: Theme Development

Interpretations sharing conceptual similarities were synthesized into higher-order themes representing essential dimensions of creators' lived experiences.

Stage 6: Theory Triangulation

Emerging themes were compared with contemporary theories, including Source Credibility Theory, Signaling Theory, Social Commerce Theory, and Creator Economy literature. This process enabled identification of theoretical convergence, divergence, and extension, ultimately facilitating the development of research propositions and the conceptual model proposed in this study.

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3.6 Trustworthiness

To ensure research rigor, this study adopted the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba, consisting of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with interview transcripts, digital observations, and iterative interpretation throughout the analytical process.

Transferability was supported by providing rich contextual descriptions regarding participants, platform characteristics, and commercial environments, enabling readers to evaluate applicability to similar contexts.

Dependability was established through systematic documentation of interview procedures, coding processes, analytical decisions, and theme development.

Confirmability was strengthened through maintaining an audit trail documenting coding revisions, analytical memos, interpretation development, and theory triangulation, thereby ensuring that conceptual findings were grounded in empirical evidence rather than researcher assumptions.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were carefully maintained throughout the research process. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate after receiving information regarding the research objectives, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage of the study. Participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms to protect privacy. Digital observations were restricted to publicly available information, and all research data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes.

The analytical procedures described above generated a comprehensive understanding of creators' lived experiences within TikTok's algorithm-driven social commerce ecosystem. Through iterative interpretation and theory triangulation, four interrelated themes emerged, revealing how creators continuously negotiate visibility, trust, marketplace relationships, and entrepreneurial adaptation while constructing commercial legitimacy within algorithmically mediated environments. These findings are presented in the following section.

4. FINDINGS

The cyberphenomenological analysis generated four interrelated themes that collectively explain how TikTok affiliate creators construct commercial legitimacy while continuously interacting with algorithmically mediated social commerce environments. Rather than representing isolated marketing strategies, these themes illustrate an iterative meaning-making process through which creators interpret platform algorithms, negotiate audience expectations, evaluate marketplace actors, and continuously adapt entrepreneurial practices. Collectively, these themes reveal that commercial success within TikTok Affiliate emerges through an ongoing interaction among creators, algorithms, audiences, and marketplace infrastructures, forming the experiential foundation of what this study conceptualizes as Algorithmic Credibility.

The four themes comprise:

1. Constructing Digital Identity and Algorithmic Credibility
2. Negotiating Algorithmic Visibility through Adaptive Content Strategies
3. Curating Marketplace Trust within Social Commerce
4. Adaptive Commercial Learning for Sustainable Affiliate Performance

Each theme is presented below through participants' narratives, cyberphenomenological interpretation, and conceptual synthesis.

4.1 Constructing Digital Identity and Algorithmic Credibility

Participants consistently described that successful affiliate marketing begins long before product promotion occurs. Rather than perceiving affiliate activities merely as selling products, participants emphasized the importance of constructing a credible digital identity capable of attracting audience trust and algorithmic recognition. Followers, niche consistency, profile completeness, audience engagement, and content history were repeatedly interpreted as indicators of legitimacy that determine whether audiences and algorithms recognize creators as trustworthy commercial actors.

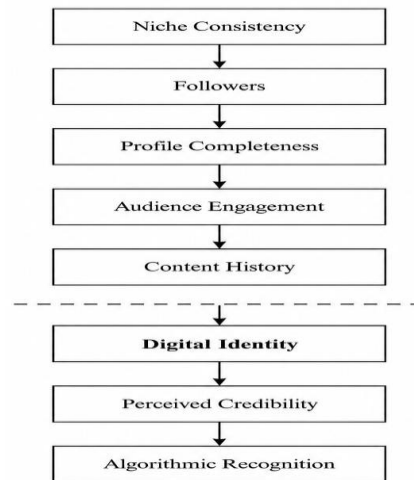


Figure 2. Cyberphenomenological Construction of Digital Identity

Source: Developed by the authors based on the cyberphenomenological analysis of the interview data.

One participant explained:

"For me, the most important factors are the number of followers and likes because audiences are more confident about making a purchase when they perceive the creator as having strong social proof." (P1)

Another participant similarly stated:

"In TikTok promotion, most people first look at the number of followers. However, the profile biography, accessible contact information, and the number of views also play important roles in building trust." (P2)

From a cyberphenomenological perspective, these narratives indicate that followers are not interpreted merely as quantitative metrics but as meaningful symbols representing commercial legitimacy within digital environments. Participants continuously interpreted digital indicators including follower counts, audience engagement, profile completeness, and niche consistency—as socially constructed signals influencing both consumer trust and algorithmic recognition. Consequently, digital identity becomes an evolving experiential construct through which creators perceive themselves as legitimate participants within platform-based commerce.

Importantly, participants did not describe credibility as an inherent personal characteristic. Instead, credibility emerged through continuous interaction among audience responses, platform feedback, and creators' strategic efforts to maintain consistent identities. This finding suggests that commercial legitimacy is progressively constructed rather than statically possessed. Accordingly, creators continuously negotiate digital identity to sustain visibility and commercial opportunities within algorithmically mediated ecosystems.

Unlike conventional marketing perspectives that conceptualize credibility as a source characteristic evaluated by consumers, participants experienced credibility as an adaptive process continuously negotiated through interaction with algorithms and audiences. Digital identity therefore functioned simultaneously as a personal representation, a commercial asset, and an algorithmically interpretable signal. These findings indicate that creators continuously construct credibility through repeated interpretation of digital feedback rather than relying solely on communication expertise or persuasive ability.

Theme 1 demonstrates that creators understand commercial success as beginning with the construction of a credible digital identity. Rather than emphasizing persuasive promotion alone, participants continuously invested in maintaining followers, niche specialization, audience engagement, and profile legitimacy because these digital signals collectively shaped their perceptions of commercial credibility. Consequently, Algorithmic Credibility begins with creators' ongoing construction of digital legitimacy before commercial interactions occur.

4.2 Negotiating Algorithmic Visibility Through Adaptive Content Strategies

Participants consistently described algorithmic visibility as an uncertain yet essential prerequisite for commercial success within TikTok Affiliate. Rather than perceiving the algorithm as an objective technological mechanism, participants interpreted it as a dynamic environment requiring continuous observation, experimentation, and adaptation. Visibility was not considered an automatic consequence of uploading content but the outcome of ongoing negotiations between creators' actions and algorithmic responses. Consequently, participants continuously adjusted content formats, publication timing, storytelling techniques, product presentation, and audience interaction based on previous platform performance.

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One participant explained:

“When a video does not appear on the For You Page (FYP), I usually evaluate it again. The upload time may have been inappropriate, the opening hook may not have been engaging enough, or the selected product may simply have attracted limited audience interest.” (P1)

Another participant similarly stated:

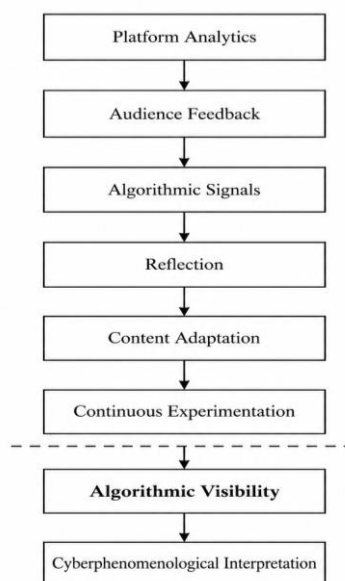
“I never rely on the same pattern continuously. When the algorithm changes, I also have to adjust. Otherwise, the number of views declines immediately.” (P2)

These narratives demonstrate that creators did not regard declining visibility as failure but as feedback requiring interpretation. Every decrease in views, watch time, click-through rate, or audience interaction prompted reflective evaluation regarding what the algorithm might be rewarding or suppressing. Consequently, creators engaged in an iterative learning process through which platform analytics became meaningful resources for subsequent entrepreneurial decision-making.

From a cyberphenomenological perspective, algorithmic visibility emerged as an experiential phenomenon rather than a purely computational outcome. Participants continuously interpreted algorithmic responses as communicative signals reflecting the compatibility between their content and platform expectations. Rather than interacting directly with a human evaluator, creators experienced the algorithm as an invisible yet influential actor whose “responses” were expressed through fluctuations in reach, engagement, recommendation frequency, and audience growth. Through repeated interaction, creators gradually developed intuitive understandings regarding the platform’s behavioural logic, enabling them to anticipate algorithmic preferences before producing subsequent content.

Participants further emphasized that successful adaptation required balancing algorithmic optimisation with audience expectations. Excessive focus on algorithmic trends without maintaining authenticity frequently resulted in declining audience trust, whereas prioritising authenticity without considering algorithmic dynamics often reduced content visibility. Consequently, creators continuously negotiated these competing demands by integrating platform trends with their established content identity. This adaptive balancing process enabled creators to maintain both audience relevance and algorithmic recognition over time.

Importantly, participants described adaptation as a continuous entrepreneurial capability rather than an isolated marketing tactic. They routinely monitored competitor activities, trending hashtags, viral audio, audience comments, and platform analytics to refine future content strategies. Such practices illustrate that entrepreneurial learning within TikTok Affiliate is embedded within ongoing interaction with algorithmically mediated environments rather than predetermined strategic planning. Commercial success therefore emerged through continuous experimentation supported by reflective interpretation of digital experiences.



Source: Developed by the authors based on Cyberphenomenological Interpretive Analysis and theory triangulation.

Figure 3. Cyberphenomenological Process of Algorithmic Visibility Negotiation

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Unlike dominant perspectives that conceptualize algorithms as technological infrastructures determining recommendation outcomes, participants experienced algorithms as continuously evolving environments requiring active interpretation and adaptive engagement. Algorithmic visibility was therefore not understood as an externally controlled variable but as a negotiated achievement emerging through repeated cycles of observation, reflection, experimentation, and adaptation. These findings indicate that creators' commercial performance depends upon their ability to construct experiential knowledge regarding algorithmic behaviour rather than merely applying predefined marketing strategies.

Theme 2 reveals that creators actively negotiate algorithmic visibility through continuous adaptive learning. Rather than passively accepting platform recommendations, participants continuously interpreted algorithmic responses, modified content strategies, and refined entrepreneurial practices based on accumulated digital experiences. These findings suggest that algorithmic visibility functions as an adaptive capability developed through ongoing interaction between creators and platform algorithms. Consequently, Algorithmic Credibility is strengthened not only through digital identity but also through creators' demonstrated ability to sustain visibility by continuously adapting to algorithmically mediated environments.

While algorithmic visibility enables creators to reach audiences, visibility alone is insufficient to sustain commercial performance. Participants consistently emphasized that audience exposure must be accompanied by confidence in the products, sellers, and commercial relationships promoted through affiliate activities. Therefore, the following theme explores how creators continuously curate marketplace trust by evaluating sellers, selecting products, and protecting their reputations within TikTok social commerce.

4.3 Curating Marketplace Trust Through Selective Seller and Product Evaluation

Beyond algorithmic visibility, participants consistently emphasized that sustainable affiliate performance depends upon their ability to curate trustworthy commercial relationships. Rather than promoting every product available within TikTok Shop, participants carefully evaluated seller reputation, product quality, customer feedback, fulfilment performance, and after-sales service before deciding whether a product should be recommended. Such evaluations were considered essential because participants believed that audience trust, once lost due to poor product quality or unreliable sellers, would be extremely difficult to recover. Consequently, affiliate marketing was interpreted not merely as promoting products but as protecting long-term relationships with audiences through responsible commercial decisions.

One participant explained:

"I do not simply choose products with the highest commission rates. Before promoting a product, I carefully examine the seller's rating, customer reviews, product quality, and even how the seller responds to customer complaints. If the product disappoints customers, they do not blame the seller they blame me as the creator." (P7)

Another participant stated:

"Once followers feel that I have recommended a poor-quality product, they become hesitant to trust my future recommendations, even if the next product is actually much better." (P5)

These narratives indicate that creators continuously perceive commercial recommendations as extensions of their personal reputation. Product selection therefore becomes an ethical and strategic activity in which creators attempt to balance commission opportunities against long-term audience trust. Rather than maximizing short-term financial returns, participants frequently rejected products with attractive commission rates when seller credibility or product quality appeared questionable. Such decisions illustrate that commercial success is interpreted as a consequence of sustained audience confidence rather than immediate sales performance.

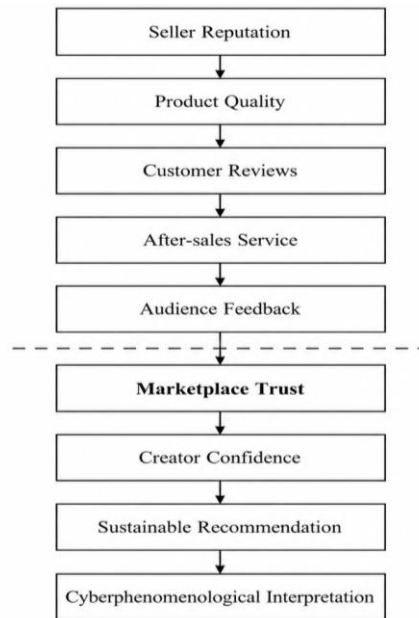
From a cyberphenomenological perspective, marketplace trust emerges through creators' lived experiences of evaluating multiple digital signals simultaneously. Participants interpreted seller ratings, customer reviews, delivery performance, product descriptions, return policies, complaint histories, and audience comments as interconnected indicators that collectively informed commercial decision-making. These indicators were not evaluated independently but interpreted holistically as part of an evolving digital experience that continuously shaped creators' perceptions of marketplace legitimacy. Consequently, trust became an experiential accomplishment constructed through ongoing interpretation rather than an objective marketplace characteristic.

Participants also described audience feedback as an important mechanism reinforcing marketplace trust. Positive comments, repeat purchases, recommendations from followers, and direct messages expressing satisfaction strengthened creators' confidence in future product recommendations. Conversely, complaints, refund requests, or negative reviews encouraged participants to discontinue collaborations with particular sellers regardless of the financial incentives offered. Such experiences

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demonstrate that audience responses continuously influence creators' future commercial decisions, creating reciprocal relationships between marketplace trust and audience trust.

Importantly, participants interpreted marketplace trust as extending beyond the quality of individual products. Trust also encompassed long-term relationships with sellers who consistently maintained product quality, reliable logistics, responsive customer service, and transparent communication. Consequently, creators developed selective partnerships with sellers whose commercial practices aligned with their own values and audience expectations. These relationships gradually evolved into stable collaborative networks supporting sustainable affiliate entrepreneurship rather than isolated transactional exchanges.



Source: Developed by the authors based on Cyberphenomenological Interpretive Analysis and theory triangulation.

Figure 4. Cyberphenomenological Construction of Marketplace Trust

Marketplace trust is experienced by creators not as an external market condition but as an evolving process of interpreting digital information, commercial relationships, and audience responses. Every recommendation carries reputational consequences because creators perceive themselves as accountable for consumers' purchasing experiences. Consequently, commercial decisions emerge through continuous negotiation between economic opportunity and ethical responsibility. This finding extends existing social commerce literature by demonstrating that trust is actively curated by creators through ongoing experiential evaluation rather than passively transferred from marketplace systems.

Theme 3 demonstrates that successful affiliate creators actively curate marketplace trust through rigorous evaluation of sellers, products, and commercial relationships. Rather than pursuing short-term commission maximization, participants prioritized sustainable audience trust by selectively recommending products consistent with their personal standards and audience expectations. These findings indicate that Algorithmic Credibility is reinforced not only through visibility but also through creators' ability to maintain trustworthy marketplace relationships that preserve long-term commercial legitimacy.

4.4 Adaptive Commercial Learning for Sustainable Affiliate Performance

Participants consistently described affiliate marketing as a continuous learning journey rather than a fixed commercial strategy. They emphasized that platform algorithms, consumer preferences, market trends, and seller performance change rapidly, requiring creators to engage in ongoing experimentation and reflective adaptation. Commercial success was therefore interpreted as the cumulative outcome of continuous learning derived from everyday digital experiences rather than from predetermined marketing knowledge or standardized promotional techniques.

One participant explained:

"There is no formula that always works. What is effective this week may no longer work the following week. Therefore, I have to continuously learn from performance analytics, audience comments, and the results of each video I publish." (P4)

Another participant stated:

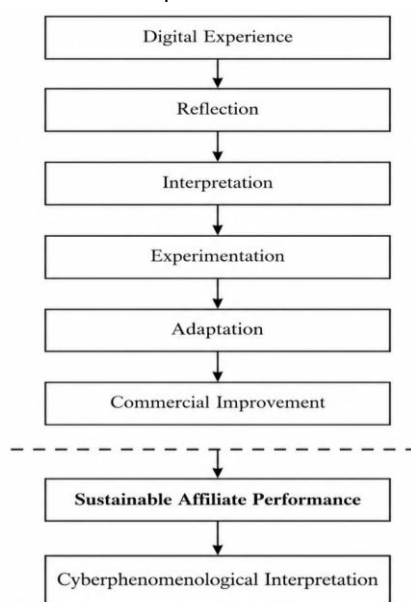
"I treat every video as an experiment. When a video performs well, I analyze what contributed to its success. When it performs poorly, I identify the underlying reasons and apply those lessons to improve my next content." (P7)

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These narratives reveal that creators experience affiliate marketing as an iterative process of hypothesis formation, experimentation, reflection, and refinement. Rather than separating success from failure, participants interpreted both positive and negative outcomes as valuable learning opportunities that informed subsequent entrepreneurial decisions. Such continuous adaptation enabled creators to remain resilient despite rapidly changing platform conditions.

Cyberphenomenologically, adaptive commercial learning represents a process of meaning construction through repeated interaction with digital environments. Platform analytics, audience engagement metrics, sales conversion rates, customer feedback, and marketplace performance become experiential resources from which creators develop practical knowledge regarding effective commercial practices. This experiential knowledge gradually evolves into intuitive judgement, enabling creators to anticipate changes in algorithmic behaviour, identify emerging market opportunities, and respond proactively to shifts in consumer preferences.

Participants further emphasized that sustainable affiliate performance depends upon maintaining learning agility rather than maximizing immediate financial returns. Long-term success required openness to experimentation, willingness to revise established routines, and continuous evaluation of commercial outcomes. Consequently, adaptive learning functioned as an entrepreneurial capability that integrated technological interpretation, commercial reflection, and strategic decision-making into a coherent process supporting sustainable business development.



Source: Developed by the authors based on Cyberphenomenological Interpretive Analysis and theory triangulation.

Figure 5. Cyberphenomenological Cycle of Adaptive Commercial Learning

Adaptive commercial learning reflects creators' capacity to transform digital experiences into entrepreneurial knowledge through continuous interpretation and experimentation. Rather than responding mechanically to platform changes, creators actively construct meaning from algorithmic feedback, audience reactions, and marketplace dynamics. This process enables sustained commercial adaptation and ultimately strengthens their ability to maintain long-term credibility within algorithm-driven social commerce ecosystems.

Theme 4 reveals that sustainable affiliate entrepreneurship is fundamentally supported by continuous adaptive learning. Participants consistently transformed everyday digital experiences into practical entrepreneurial knowledge that guided subsequent commercial decisions. This finding suggests that Algorithmic Credibility is ultimately sustained through creators' capacity to learn, adapt, and continuously reconstruct commercial practices within rapidly evolving algorithmic environments.

Across the four themes, a coherent experiential process emerged. Participants did not perceive commercial success as resulting from isolated marketing tactics but from an ongoing cycle of identity construction, visibility negotiation, trust curation, and adaptive learning. These interconnected experiences indicate that commercial legitimacy is continuously developed through creators' interaction with platform algorithms, audiences, and marketplace actors.

Collectively, the findings suggest that Algorithmic Credibility is not a static personal attribute but a dynamic, experience-based capability that evolves through continuous interpretation and adaptation within algorithm-driven social commerce. This

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empirical pattern provides the foundation for the theory triangulation presented in the following section, where the findings are systematically compared with existing theories to identify points of convergence, divergence, and theoretical extension..

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Theory Triangulation

The findings reveal that TikTok affiliate creators continuously construct commercial legitimacy through an iterative interaction among digital identity, algorithmic visibility, marketplace trust, and adaptive commercial learning. This experiential process extends existing marketing theories by demonstrating that commercial credibility is not a fixed personal attribute but a dynamic capability emerging from creators' continuous interaction with algorithmically mediated social commerce environments. To explain this phenomenon, the present study triangulates the empirical findings with four complementary theoretical perspectives: Source Credibility Theory, Signaling Theory, Social Commerce Theory, and Creator Economy Theory.

Theme 1: Constructing Digital Identity and Algorithmic Credibility

Source Credibility Theory proposes that consumers evaluate information based on the communicator's expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Previous influencer marketing studies similarly demonstrate that authenticity and expertise positively influence consumer trust and purchase intention. The present findings partially support these perspectives by confirming that audience trust remains essential within TikTok Affiliate. However, the empirical evidence further indicates that creators themselves actively construct credibility through continuous management of digital identity, including follower growth, niche consistency, audience interaction, and profile legitimacy. Consequently, credibility emerges not solely through consumers' evaluation but also through creators' strategic interpretation of algorithmic and social signals.

From the perspective of Signaling Theory, followers, engagement metrics, profile completeness, and audience interaction function as observable market signals reducing uncertainty. Nevertheless, participants did not interpret these indicators merely as market signals but as evolving representations of their professional identity. This finding extends Signaling Theory by suggesting that digital signals simultaneously communicate commercial competence to audiences while reinforcing creators' own understanding of legitimacy within platform ecosystems.

Theme 2: Negotiating Algorithmic Visibility

Existing algorithmic marketing literature generally conceptualizes recommendation systems as technological mechanisms optimizing content distribution. The present findings demonstrate a more complex process. Participants experienced algorithms as dynamic environments requiring continuous observation, experimentation, and interpretation. Rather than treating algorithms as deterministic systems, creators actively negotiated visibility by modifying content strategies based on algorithmic feedback. Consequently, algorithmic visibility emerged as an adaptive capability developed through lived experience rather than a passive outcome generated by computational systems.

This finding extends current platform governance literature by positioning creators as active interpreters of algorithmic behaviour instead of passive recipients of algorithmic decisions. Visibility therefore becomes a negotiated achievement resulting from continuous interaction between creators and intelligent platform infrastructures.

Theme 3: Curating Marketplace Trust

Social Commerce Theory argues that trust represents the principal mechanism facilitating online commercial transactions. Previous studies generally conceptualize trust as consumers' confidence in sellers, platforms, or influencers. The present findings support this proposition while simultaneously extending it by demonstrating that creators themselves actively curate marketplace trust before consumers evaluate products.

Participants continuously interpreted seller ratings, customer reviews, fulfilment quality, and after-sales service before deciding whether commercial collaboration should occur. Marketplace trust therefore emerged through creators' interpretive evaluation rather than marketplace systems alone. Consequently, trust functions as a reciprocal process involving creators, audiences, sellers, and digital platforms rather than a one-directional consumer perception.

Theme 4: Adaptive Commercial Learning

Creator Economy literature increasingly recognizes creators as digital entrepreneurs operating within platform ecosystems. However, existing studies primarily explain entrepreneurial success through monetization strategies, branding, or audience engagement. In contrast, the present findings reveal that creators continuously transform everyday digital experiences into entrepreneurial knowledge through reflection, experimentation, and adaptation.

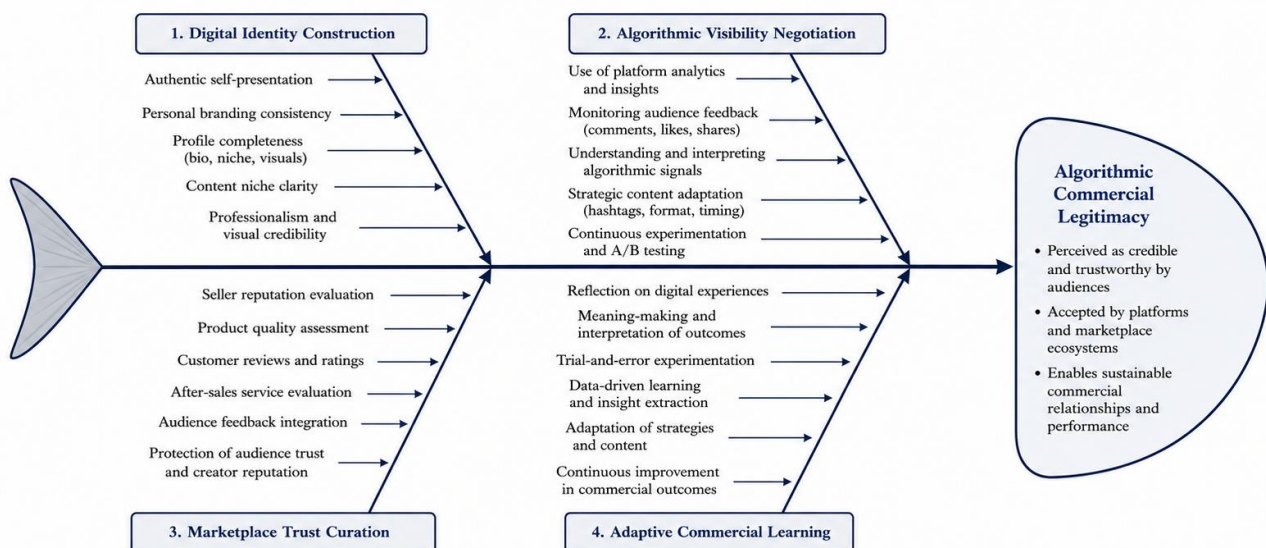
Participants interpreted both successful and unsuccessful commercial experiences as valuable learning opportunities shaping future strategic decisions. Adaptive commercial learning therefore represents an experiential capability developed through continuous interaction with algorithms, audiences, and marketplace actors. This finding extends Creator Economy Theory by

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highlighting learning agility as a fundamental mechanism supporting sustainable entrepreneurial performance within algorithm-driven environments.

To further synthesize the empirical findings and theoretical triangulation, this study develops a Theory-Based Fishbone Framework that illustrates the interrelated factors shaping Algorithmic Commercial Legitimacy within the creator economy. Unlike the conventional Ishikawa diagram, which is primarily used for identifying operational causes of organizational problems, the proposed framework functions as a conceptual synthesis that integrates empirical themes with relevant theoretical perspectives. The fishbone demonstrates how digital identity construction, algorithmic visibility negotiation, marketplace trust curation, and adaptive commercial learning collectively contribute to the development of commercial legitimacy within algorithm-driven social commerce ecosystems. Rather than operating independently, these dimensions continuously interact through recursive cycles of interpretation, adaptation, and entrepreneurial learning, ultimately enabling creators to sustain long-term commercial performance. Consequently, the framework provides a visual representation of the proposed Algorithmic Commercial Legitimacy Theory (ACLT) by illustrating the multidimensional mechanisms through which creators negotiate legitimacy in increasingly algorithm-mediated digital marketplaces.

Figure 6. Theory-Based Fishbone Framework of Algorithmic Commercial Legitimacy



Source: Developed by the authors based on Cyberphenomenological Interpretive Analysis and theory triangulation.

5.2 Convergence and Divergence Analysis

The triangulation demonstrates substantial convergence with existing literature regarding the importance of trust, authenticity, visibility, and engagement within digital commerce. Nevertheless, several important divergences emerge.

First, previous theories conceptualize credibility primarily as a characteristic evaluated by consumers, whereas the present findings demonstrate that credibility is continuously constructed by creators through interaction with algorithmic systems. Second, existing studies predominantly explain platform algorithms as technological infrastructures regulating visibility. In contrast, participants experienced algorithms as meaningful environments requiring ongoing interpretation and adaptive engagement. Third, while social commerce literature emphasizes consumer trust, the present findings reveal that creators themselves actively curate marketplace trust through selective evaluation of products, sellers, and commercial relationships. Finally, current creator economy research largely focuses on business models and monetization mechanisms, whereas this study demonstrates that sustainable entrepreneurial performance fundamentally depends upon creators' experiential learning and continuous commercial adaptation.

Collectively, these divergences indicate that existing theories individually explain only particular aspects of creators' experiences. None sufficiently captures the dynamic interaction among algorithms, audiences, marketplaces, and entrepreneurial adaptation that characterizes affiliate creators' everyday commercial practices.

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Table 5. Theory Triangulation Matrix

Empirical Theme	Existing Theory	Convergence	Divergence	Theoretical Extension
Digital Identity	Source Credibility Theory	Trust fundamental	remains Credibility constructed	is actively Algorithmic Credibility begins with digital identity construction
Algorithmic Visibility	Platform Governance	Algorithms visibility	regulate Creators actively negotiate algorithmic responses	Visibility is an adaptive experiential capability
Marketplace Trust	Social Commerce Theory	Trust commercial performance	influences Creators curate trust before consumers evaluate products	Marketplace trust becomes creator-mediated
Adaptive Commercial Learning	Creator Economy Theory	Learning entrepreneurship	supports Learning emerges through algorithmic interaction	Adaptive learning sustains commercial legitimacy

The theory triangulation demonstrates that none of the existing theories independently explains the entire experiential process observed among TikTok affiliate creators. Instead, the empirical findings suggest the emergence of a broader conceptual mechanism integrating digital identity, algorithmic visibility, marketplace trust, and adaptive commercial learning into a unified process of commercial legitimacy construction. Building upon this synthesis, the following section develops a series of research propositions and introduces the conceptual foundation of the proposed theoretical model..

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Conclusion

This study explored how TikTok affiliate creators construct commercial legitimacy through their lived experiences within algorithm-driven social commerce by adopting a cyberphenomenological perspective. Moving beyond conventional consumer-oriented approaches, the findings reveal that creators are not merely promotional intermediaries but adaptive digital entrepreneurs who continuously interpret, negotiate, and respond to algorithmically mediated environments. Their commercial practices emerge through ongoing interactions with platform algorithms, audiences, marketplace actors, and digital technologies rather than through predetermined marketing strategies.

The empirical analysis identified four interrelated dimensions that collectively explain this process: digital identity construction, algorithmic visibility negotiation, marketplace trust curation, and adaptive commercial learning. These dimensions operate recursively, forming an iterative process through which creators continuously construct, maintain, and reinforce commercial legitimacy. Rather than representing independent marketing activities, they constitute an integrated experiential mechanism shaping sustainable entrepreneurial performance within TikTok social commerce.

The study further demonstrates that existing theories—including Source Credibility Theory, Signaling Theory, Social Commerce Theory, and Creator Economy Theory—individually explain only partial aspects of creators' experiences. While these perspectives effectively explain consumer trust, information signaling, and platform participation, they provide limited explanation regarding how creators themselves experience algorithmic environments and continuously construct credibility through digital interaction. By integrating these theoretical perspectives with cyberphenomenological interpretation, this research extends current knowledge beyond observable marketing outcomes toward a deeper understanding of creators' lived digital experiences.

Accordingly, this study introduces Algorithmic Credibility as a novel theoretical construct describing the dynamic process through which creators establish and sustain commercial legitimacy by continuously interacting with platform algorithms, audiences, marketplace actors, and entrepreneurial learning processes. Unlike traditional credibility perspectives that conceptualize credibility as a relatively stable individual attribute evaluated by consumers, Algorithmic Credibility is conceptualized as an adaptive capability that evolves through repeated interpretation, experimentation, reflection, and commercial adaptation within algorithmically mediated ecosystems.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions to contemporary marketing literature.

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First, it extends Creator Economy Theory by repositioning creators as adaptive entrepreneurs whose commercial success is constructed through continuous interaction with intelligent platform ecosystems rather than through content production alone. Second, it enriches Source Credibility Theory by demonstrating that credibility is not merely evaluated by consumers but is actively constructed and negotiated by creators through repeated interaction with digital environments. Third, it advances Social Commerce Theory by revealing that marketplace trust is curated proactively by creators before consumers evaluate products, thereby positioning creators as active trust managers rather than passive marketing intermediaries. Fourth, this study contributes to Cyberphenomenology by demonstrating its applicability as an interpretive framework for understanding human–algorithm interaction within digital commerce, thereby extending phenomenological inquiry into increasingly algorithm-driven entrepreneurial contexts. Finally, the proposed Algorithmic Credibility Framework offers a middle-range theoretical explanation integrating digital identity, algorithmic visibility, marketplace trust, and adaptive commercial learning into a unified process of commercial legitimacy construction within creator economy ecosystems.

6.3 Practical Implications

The findings provide several practical implications for creators, platform managers, online marketplaces, and digital marketing practitioners.

For TikTok affiliate creators, sustainable commercial performance requires more than persuasive promotional skills. Long-term success depends upon continuously developing a credible digital identity, understanding algorithmic dynamics, maintaining trustworthy marketplace relationships, and engaging in continuous entrepreneurial learning.

For digital platforms, the findings suggest that transparent algorithmic communication and creator support systems may facilitate healthier creator ecosystems by reducing uncertainty associated with algorithmic visibility while encouraging sustainable content development.

For marketplace sellers, commercial collaboration should prioritize long-term relationships with creators who maintain audience trust rather than focusing exclusively on short-term sales performance. Product quality, service consistency, and transparent business practices become essential components supporting creators' credibility.

For digital marketing managers, the study highlights that creator selection should extend beyond follower counts and engagement metrics to include creators' adaptive capabilities, marketplace reputation, and long-term audience relationships.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study was conducted within the context of TikTok Affiliate, which may limit transferability to other platform ecosystems such as Instagram, YouTube, or Shopee Live. Future studies may compare multiple creator ecosystems to examine similarities and differences in algorithmic credibility construction across platforms. Second, the research adopted a qualitative cyberphenomenological approach involving a limited number of information-rich participants. Although this approach provides substantial interpretive depth, future research may employ mixed-method or quantitative designs to empirically validate the proposed conceptual framework. Third, the study focused primarily on creators' experiences without directly incorporating perspectives from audiences, sellers, or platform managers. Future research could employ multi-actor approaches to develop a more comprehensive understanding of commercial legitimacy within creator ecosystems. Finally, future investigations may explore how emerging artificial intelligence technologies including generative AI, virtual influencers, intelligent recommendation systems, and AI-assisted content production reshape creators' lived experiences and influence the evolution of algorithmic credibility within future digital commerce environments.

The creator economy is fundamentally redefining contemporary digital entrepreneurship. Within this evolving ecosystem, commercial success is no longer determined solely by persuasive communication or marketing expertise but increasingly depends upon creators' capacity to continuously interpret, negotiate, and adapt to algorithmically mediated realities. By introducing Algorithmic Credibility as an adaptive and experience-based theoretical construct, this study provides a new conceptual lens for understanding how commercial legitimacy is constructed within intelligent platform ecosystems. As digital commerce becomes progressively shaped by artificial intelligence and algorithmic governance, understanding creators' lived experiences will become increasingly essential for advancing both marketing theory and digital entrepreneurial practice..

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