

## Affiliate marketing programs: A study of consumer attitude towards affiliate marketing programs among Indian users

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### **Abstract**

Affiliate marketing has seen fewer studies even being a multibillion dollar industry and one of the most expanding online advertising lead generators for direct marketers. The aim of this survey described in this paper is to evaluate the attitude of respondents towards affiliate programs or affiliate marketing, used as a source of information, advertisement and a connecting link between the online marketer and the customer. In this regard a survey was conducted among 300 Indian internet users to know their attitude towards affiliate programs and the various factors that affect the effectiveness of these programs. The findings of this survey demonstrate a positive view of affiliate marketing. This research also found that the stronger predictor of the consumer attitude of affiliate marketing is the usefulness, informativeness, incentive and perceived trust. In short the future of affiliate marketing is to a greater extent affected by the consumer's perception of affiliate program usefulness and control over it. This study recommends a need for direct marketers to develop more innovative affiliate links that will elicit a more positive response from the consumers.

**Keywords:** perception; informativeness; perceived trust; incentive; consumers

## **Affiliate marketing programs: A study of consumer attitude towards affiliate marketing programs among Indian users**

### **1. Introduction**

Today the field of internet advertising is going through fundamental changes. Rapid technological advancements have led to the digitalization of the media, which in turn has resulted in fierce marketing promotion competition among commercial ventures. Internet advertising has gained prominence with the high growth rate of online media penetration at global level because it offers richer possibilities to directly target global consumers and among the online available options. Affiliate marketing has emerged as one of the choicest promotional tools for lead generation the digital promotion Affiliate programs began in 1996 when Amazon began to pay websites for referring customers to join their site.

In an online affiliate program advertising website offers their affiliates revenues based on provided website traffic and associated leads and sales. If a website decides to join another websites affiliate program, it has to host a coded link on its website that directs a visitor to the parent website. If the customer makes a purchase from the parent website through this affiliate link, the host website will get a percentage of that sale. The most common type of affiliate program is the commission based program that offers websites a chance to make a percentage of sake resulting from referrals. Commission typically ranges from 1% to 15%. In 2011 NMA published a research report conducted by the ID factor, surveying the attitudes of 105 UK affiliate advertisers. The results revealed many advertisers expect budgets for affiliate marketing to increase or stay same even in the times of recession (Amazon.com, 2011).

According to affiliate future UK network review 2008, Affiliate future UK, a company specialized in affiliate marketing consultancy and services has around 70 affiliate programs in 50 categories. According to a report published in Articles dashboard, the reason affiliate marketing is gaining a momentum in growth and popularity worldwide is because of the reason that it has so many advantages over traditional advertising practices. Previous research findings reveal that most search engines including the most popular ones like Google, MSN, and Yahoo confirm analyzing the presence and characteristics of hyperlinks on the World Wide Web to determine the relevance of a URL to a specific search query (Cutts, 2005). Affiliate marketing potential is almost the best kept secret in the internet advertising, Jupiter research projected almost 14 percent consecutive yearly increase through 2012 in the gross affiliate ad space revenue (Jupiter, 2007). Online affiliate marketing program is estimated at almost a 7 billion business pie, putting it at the fastest growing among online ad selling segments (Marketing Sherpa, 2007). Data regarding online retailer business shows about 80 percent of the top 100 online retailers outsource their affiliate programs (eBay, 2007).

In order to fully exploit the potential of affiliate marketing programs as an online advertising option, marketing must understand the unique characteristics related to it, the attitude of consumers towards it and the ways consumers' are influenced by its content. In this study we would like to explore the underlying factors which characterize the attitudes of consumers towards affiliate marketing programs. This paper will also explore the impact of layout of the affiliate link on the website and its impact on the effectiveness of the program. Furthermore some of the paper will come up with the first hand information on the affiliate program links.

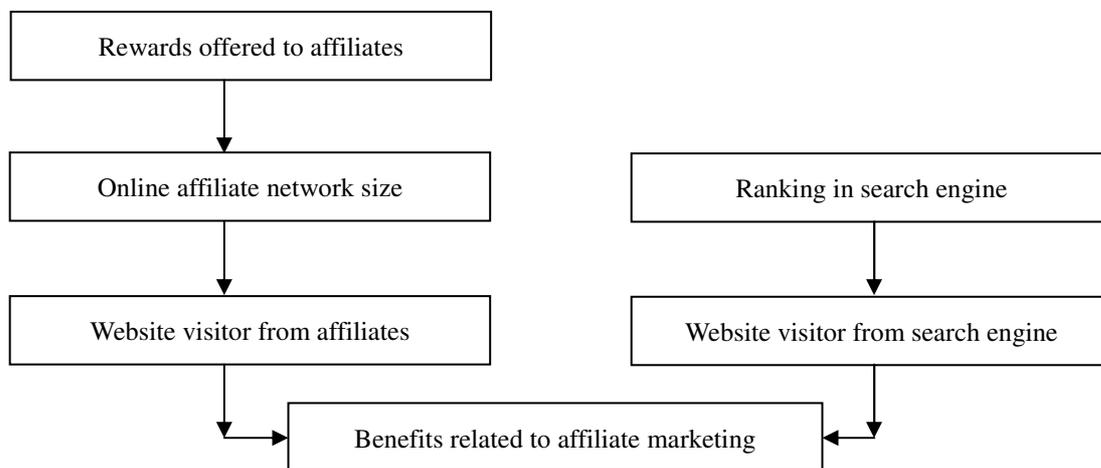
### **2. Literature review**

#### *2.1 Internet user demographics and Attitude towards internet advertising in general*

Internet users' population is predominantly male, young, well educated and affluent despite the lack of

consistency across research reports (GVU, 1999). It was found that such demographic characteristics also affect the attitude towards advertising. One of the important indicators of effectiveness of internet advertising consists of the beliefs of consumers' (Mehta, 2000). Previous researchers have argued that attitude towards internet advertising consists of both cognitive and affective antecedents (Ducoffe, 1996; Shimp 1981). Pollay and Mittals model (1993) presented seven belief factors underlying consumers' beliefs and classified those factors into two categories.

The first category labeled as personal use consists of factors including product information, social role and image and entertainment. The second category labeled as social effect, includes value corruption, falsity, good for economy and materialism. In today's competitive advertising environment, it is increasingly impossible to stand out of the crowd. In addition consumers easily ignore advertising and consider it to have little value (Wang et al, 2002). Also the media costs are too high forcing the advertisers to search for the factors that contribute to effective advertising. Ultimately, the goal of advertising is to influence consumer behavior (Petty & Cacioppo, 1983). An inspection of survey data revealed on an average 75 percent of consumers think that advertising is untruthful however the consumers find that advertising is informative (Calfee & Ringold, 1994). Entertainment, information and enjoyment are the important antecedents of advertising attitude (Coulter, 2001).



**Figure 1.** Network of online affiliate marketing programs  
(Adopted from Jenssen and Van Heck, ERIM report, 2007)

## 2.2 Informativeness

The quality of information placed on a company's web site shows a direct influence on the customers' perceptions of the company and the company's products. Accordingly, information delivered to them via e-mails also needs to show qualitative features, such as accuracy, timeliness and usefulness for the consumer (Siau & Shen, 2003). Apart from this, the user needs quick access to the information(s) he is looking for his / her current content of use. There is even the possibility that information may be delivered automatically to the consumer (Kaasinen, 2003). In any event, consumers want the content of e-mail services to be tailored to their interest (Robins, 2003). On top of this, they are interested in getting messages that are relevant for them (Milne & Gordon, 1993). Information is thus considered a very valuable incentive in e-mail marketing because recipients react very positively to ad that transfers incentives (Varshney & Vittal 2000). Not surprisingly, informativeness of advertising information is therefore strongly related to the advertising value when it is transferred via traditional media vehicles (Ducoffe 1995).

### 2.3 Incentive

By offering incentives for the visitors, advertising websites will attract affiliates which in turn will provide them with website visitors. The better the incentives offered by the website to its visitors the more affiliates will post their affiliate advertising links on it. Affiliates place links on their WebPages to provide the advertising website with a large number of visitors for which they are being offered revenues (Enquiro, 2008; Hoffman & Novak, 2000). Increase in incentive leads to an increase in the number of inbound affiliate links of the advertising website (Brin & Lawrence, 1998). People are interested in deriving some monetary benefit from direct marketing programs (Milne & Gordon, 1993). In a Nokia-sponsored survey, conducted by HPI Research Group, almost nine out of ten participants (86%) agreed that there must be a tradeoff for accepting advertisements on their devices (Pastore, 2002).

A survey from the United States showed that 66% of consumers will accept cell online ads if they are paid to accept them and 59 percent would want at least \$1.00 or more per online advertising (Hanley et al., 2006). The main advantage of this approach is that the online users are provided with a tangible reason. Incentive based advertising is an approach that provides specific financial rewards to consumers who agree to accept ads into their gadgets (Pietz & Storbacka, 2007). By posting incentive based advertising, advertisers create the value to ad links. Thus, they make the message activate and create good feeling for customer (Iddris, 2006). Prior research proposes that price discounts are particularly effective in inducing effects, such as purchase acceleration and product trial (Shi, Cheung, & Prendergast, 2005). Previous studies have shown that retail price promotions change consumers' purchase decisions and that retailers use price promotions more frequently to boost store sales (Chen, Monroe, & Lou, 1998).

### 2.4 Perceived trust

Site quality, establishment of trust and creation of positive affect during internet use are the most essential website characteristics (Lengert, 2000). Trust building is a process of positive internet experiences, which also apply to internet advertising (Tan, 1999). Advertising could be seen as trustworthiness or usefulness depends on the religiosity and consumers' perception of advertising message (Hofstede, 1991). Consumers vary in their attitudes depending on the recognition of specific products, brands, illustrates the usefulness of information search and consumers' trust of product quality (Chaudhri & Holbrook, 2011; Geisser, 2001; Tse, 1999).

### 2.5 Perceived usefulness

Perceived usefulness is defined here as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance". This follows from the definition of the word useful: "capable of being used advantageously". Within an organizational context, people are generally reinforced for good performance by raises, promotions, bonuses, and other rewards (Pfeffer, 1982; Schein, 1980; Vroom, 1964). A system high in perceived usefulness, in turn, is one for which a user believes in the existence of a positive use-performance relationship.

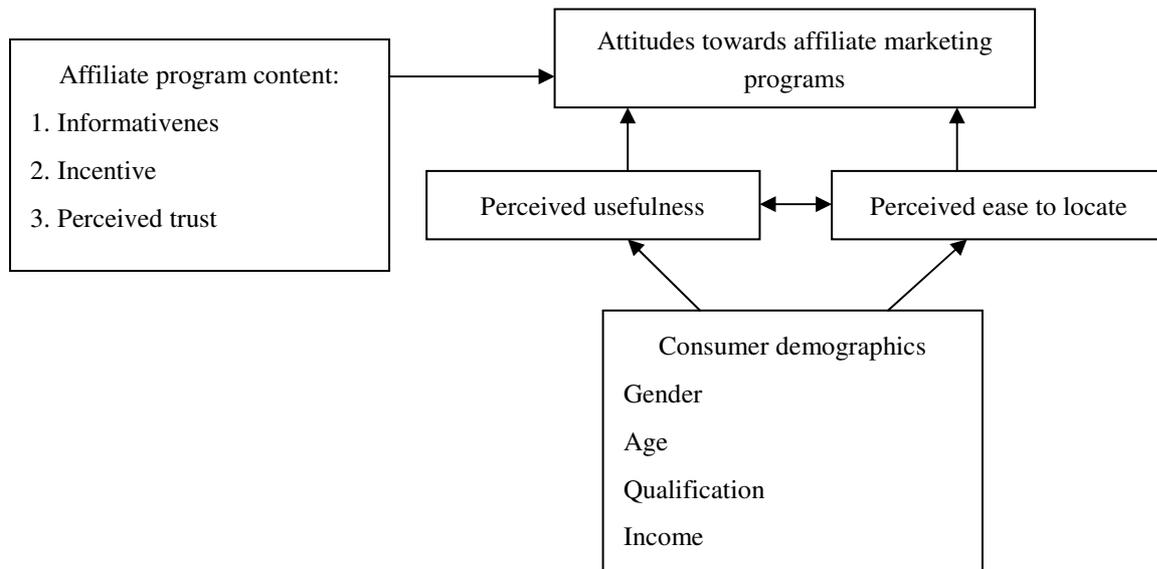
### 2.6 Perceived ease to locate

Certain locations tend to draw more viewers, as illustrated by Google's AdSense Heat Map (Google.com, 2008). There is a positive attitudes toward the ad, positive attitudes toward the brand, and higher purchase intentions in response to banner ads placed on product-relevant Web sites (Shamadasani, Stanaland, & Tan, 2001). Placement of the online banner was found to be a main reason for the degree of banner advertising blindness (Albert, 2002). The banner advertisement located below the branding/ search areas were viewed for longer and by more participants that the ones placed above the search area of the site (Albert, 2002). Most of the participants ignore the advertisements located on the right side of the webpage, which typically consists of the image ads and affiliate links (Cooke, 2008). The advertisement links located at the center of the webpage tend to

get more attraction than the ones located at sides of the webpage (Rayner, 1998).

### 3. Method

To achieve the research objectives of this study as already explained, i.e. understanding the factors that determine the consumer attitude towards online affiliate programs. There has been negligible research available on this topic and based upon the review of limited literature available on this topic, some related online advertising models have been modified and hypothesized for this research. Based on the theoretical support and review of related literature reviews the following hypotheses are tested in this paper.



**Figure 2.** Proposed model for the study (Model 1)

**H1-** The consumer's perceived usefulness of an affiliate link will have a positive impact on his attitude towards affiliate link.

**H2-** The consumer's ease to Locate of an affiliate link will have a positive impact on his attitude towards affiliate link.

**H3-** The consumer's perceived informativeness of an affiliate link will have a positive impact on his attitude towards affiliate link.

**H4-** The consumer's perceived incentive of an affiliate link will have a positive impact on his attitude towards affiliate link.

**H5-** The consumer's perceived trust of an affiliate link will have a positive impact on his attitude towards affiliate link.

#### 3.1 Data collection

The data for this survey was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire. Questionnaire consisted of two parts, first one consisted of demographic information of the respondents and second part consists of questions related to respondents' attitude towards affiliate programs or affiliate marketing, the factors affecting respondents' attitude towards affiliate marketing and test whether there is any relationship between these factors and users' attitude towards affiliate programs. A total of 300 were distributed for a period of two months among the respondents from the cities of Hyderabad, Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai in India among internet knowing ones. The scales were reverse coded wherever necessary.

**Table 1***Description of the respondents*

Demographic variable	N	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	165	55
Female	135	45
<b>Age</b>		
16-21	15	5
22-25	60	20
26-30	90	30
31-35	40	13
36-40	25	8
41-45	24	8
46-50	20	7
51-above	26	9
<b>Qualification</b>		
Under college	60	20
College degree	110	37
Masters degree	80	27
Doctorate	36	12
Others	14	4
<b>Income (INR)</b>		
Below 10,000	50	17
10,000 to 20,000	60	20
20,000 to 30,000	100	33
30,000 to 40,000	60	20
40,000 and above	30	10

### 3.2 Reliability

The survey was run among 25 respondents to check the reliability of the measures. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was checked to treat the results with credibility using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The value of the coefficient was above 0.7 which is the minimum value for reliability (Pallant, 2002). Then overall Cronbach's alpha value was 0.80, making the questionnaire an internally consistent and suitable for gathering the data for the main research. The Indian market shows one of the highest penetration rates of internet users in Asia and is therefore very suitable for the study of affiliate marketing programs. All measures were assessed on a Likert type scale ranging from 'strongly agree' (1) to 'strongly disagree' (5).

**Table 2***Properties of purified measures*

Variables	Items	Range	Mean	Cronbach's Coefficient
Usefulness	4	1-5	3.81	0.85
Ease to Locate	3	1-5	3.71	0.77
Attitude towards AM	4	1-5	3.12	0.81
Information	4	1-5	2.70	0.82
Perceived trust	3	1-5	3.01	0.75
Incentive	3	1-5	2.60	0.81

#### 4. Data analysis

As shown in table1 respondents were asked questions regarding their personal characteristics. Gender wise 55% of the respondents in the sample were males and the remaining 45% of the respondents were females. Age wise most of the respondents were young i.e. 30% of the total sample were in the age group of 26-30 and 20% were of the age of 22-25. In total 50% of the total respondents were of the age group of 22-30 years. Additionally 5% were of the age group 16-21, 13% were of 31-35, both age groups 36-40 and 41-45 were of 8% each, 46-50 consisted of 07 percent and finally 9% of the of the total respondents were 51 years and above. The academic background of the respondents saw a good representation from all the strata i.e. 20 % of the total sample consisted of under college degrees, 37 % of the total sample size were having a college degree , 27 % holds a masters degree in one or the another field, 12 holds doctorate and 4% of the total sample size were having some kind of homely education or just religious education like Madrassa education in Muslims and some knowledge e.g. Gita among Hindus, this 4% also consists of the respondents who had some non-formal vocational training in some technical areas.

The large number of respondents i.e. 33% for this survey consisted of the income group of 20-30K Indian national rupees, rest 17% were of the income of below 10k INR a month, 20% were having an income of 10-20k, 20% of the respondents with the income of 30-40k and just 10% with the income of above 40k.as the respondents in this survey were only the ones with the knowledge of internet, the respondents upon being asked whether they have any idea of affiliate marketing, almost 88.8% of the respondents showed that they have noticed affiliate marketing links and remaining 11.2% responded negatively about any idea of the affiliate links. The purpose of this question was to know the experience of the respondents about this topic.

##### 4.1 Results of hypothesis testing

The correlation between the factors hypothesized to impact users' attitude towards affiliate programs are shown in table 3 below:

**Table 3**

*Pearson correlations*

Hypotheses	PC of attitude towards affiliate marketing programs	Significance 2 tailed
H1-Perceived Usefulness	.689**	.000
H2-Perceived Ease to Locate	.522**	.000
H3-Perceived Informativeness	.501**	.000
H4-Perceived Incentive	-.224**	.006
H5-Perceived Trust	.460**	.000

\*\* $p < .01$ , level (2-tailed)

Hypothesis H1, Perceived Usefulness was predicted to have a positive relationship with consumer's attitude towards affiliate marketing programs was confirmed by this study. Usefulness is based on the extent to which consumers believe that the marketer has the expertise and honest to perform a transaction effectively and honestly (Ganesan, 1994). As the hypothesis is supported by the data analysis; suggesting that there is a relationship between perceived Usefulness and the user's attitude towards using an affiliate program. This is further supported by the higher correlation coefficient of ( $r = .689$ ), that indicates that there is a strong positive relationship between the two.

The second hypothesis was tested by implementing a correlation between perceived ease to locate and the attitude towards using the affiliate program link on the website. As the significance value is .000 ( $p < .01$ ), the hypothesis is also accepted and it is concluded that there is a positive relationship between perceived ease to locate the online marketer and the attitude towards affiliate marketing link on the website. The correlation

coefficient ( $r = .522$ ) also suggests that there exists a positive relationship with large strength between the two.

Hypothesis H3, that is aimed at checking whether there exists relationship between the user's attitude towards affiliate marketing programs and informativeness. The candidness, clarity and completeness of information were predicted to have a positive relationship with the consumer's attitude towards online affiliate marketing programs. The correlation coefficient ( $r = .501$ ), indicates a positive relationship between I and ATAP. As many marketers consist affiliate programs as closely linked with online advertising, the results of this study are confirmed by others in their previous studies (Ducoffe, 1996; Bracket & Carr, 2001) as well, and who come to same conclusions while investigating web advertising.

Hypothesis H4, perceived incentive was not supported. There is a negative relationship between the perceived incentive and the consumers' attitude towards affiliate marketing programs. As the correlation coefficient ( $r = -.224$ ), shows a negative relationship and small strength between perceived incentive and the attitude towards advertising.

Hypothesis H5, perceived trust was predicted to have a positive relationship with consumer's attitude towards online affiliate marketing programs. The hypothesis is supported and the significance coefficient value of ( $r = .460$ ) suggests a medium strength of the relationship between the customers perceived trust and the ATAP.

#### 4.2 Multiple regressions

The first analysis by using Carl Pearson correlation led to the conclusion that perceived usefulness, perceived ease to locate, informativeness, perceived trust are significantly correlated with the consumers attitude towards the online marketing affiliate programs. All variables were included into multiple regressions to check, how well these variables predict such attitude and which of these variables makes the best prediction

**Table 4**

#### *Multiple regressions*

Items	Standardized coefficient Beta	t	Sig.	Co-linearity Statistics	
				Tolerance	VIF
Constant)		2.001	.056		
Perceived Usefulness	.522	6.109	.000	.510	1.951
Perceived Ease to Locate	.057	0.801	.460	.540	1.900
Perceived Informativeness	.160	2.301	.025	.710	1.399
Perceived Trust	.139	2.099	.033	.704	1.400
Perceived Incentive	.121	-2.036	.042	.899	1.100

All the variables were included in the multiple regression models since the operative variables referred in this study were correlated against the dependent variables of the consumer attitude towards online affiliate marketing programs. It was necessary that the correlation should not overtake the mark of 0.7 in order to follow the assumption of multi co-linearity. The correlation ranged from 0.224 to 0.689 in this study for the studied variables. After checking the significance value for statistical significance perceived usefulness, perceived informativeness, perceived trust and perceived incentive were found to be the primary predictors of consumer attitude towards online affiliate marketing programs. The table above shows usefulness as the highest contributor with a beta value of 0.522 followed by perceived informativeness with a beta value of 0.160. Perceived trust and perceived interest ranked third and fourth with a beta value of 0.139 and 0.121 respectively. Perceived ease to locate the affiliate marketing link on the host website was not found to be any significant predictor of the attitude towards affiliate marketing programs. Except for the variable PEL the multiple regression analysis also supports the results of the hypothesis testing.

## 5. Recommendations and Managerial Implications

The results of this research conclude that the consumers' attitude towards online affiliate marketing programs is clearly affected by the studied variables in this paper. Most of the respondents agreed that perceived usefulness, perceived trust, perceived informativeness and perceived incentive are important factors affecting consumers' attitude towards online affiliate marketing programs. In fact, perceived usefulness was found to be strongest related factor towards attitude for the affiliate marketing programs. Perceived incentive and trust were also found to be positively related to attitude towards affiliate marketing programs. The consumers are likely to use affiliate links if they feel they will get some benefits in the form of incentives and if the levels of trust towards affiliate links are higher.

This research has huge implications as the internet users are expanding day by day and the world is shifting from a conventional towards e-commerce at a very faster pace. India is also emerging as a hub for e-marketers and online retailers because of its huge internet population of 90 million users (Miniwatts, 2010). With Flipkart emerging as India's leading online retailer, Amazon has also started its commercial operations in India with other leading e-retailers intending to enter the race in future. This huge e-competition will sour the online advertising budgets of the companies and companies will also try to host their affiliate marketing links on some leading websites to generate leads and evade direct competition. Our research gives all direct e-marketers an overview of the factors that have an impact on the consumers' attitude. Managerial implications of this research can vary from using affiliate program links as a new lead generator for their businesses and empowering the managers to design affiliate programs that can be employed to influence consumers.

### 5.1 Limitations

The recommendations and managerial implications presented in the above section were based on the primary data collected and analyzed for this research. The generalizability of the findings of this research should be taken with caution as the research bears little limitation. Firstly the resources and the limited sample size of 300, which cannot be considered as an absolute representative of the whole population of India. The majority of the respondents i.e. 50% were between 22-30 years old and for the reason the results cannot be generalized. This research has been undertaken in India, a broader research scope is there where a multinational sample can be taken to make research findings more general. The attitudes of consumers may vary from country to country due to various personal and environmental factors also hinder in absolutely generalizing the research findings.

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