

Unveiling Deceptive Practices in Digital Affiliation: an Descriptive Qualitative Study on Tadlis and Maqashid Shariah

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Abstract

The rise of affiliate marketing as a popular profession in the digital era is not without the potential for practices that deviate from Islamic business ethics, ultimately harming consumers. This paper aims to examine instances of tadlis (manipulation) within affiliate marketing through the lens of Islamic economics, grounded in the framework of maqashid syariah (the objectives of Islamic law). Employing a qualitative descriptive design, primary data was gathered through in-depth interviews with eight Muslim affiliates, exploring how they navigate ethical dilemmas—specifically tadlis—within digital marketing. The study identifies five forms of manipulation (tadlis) in affiliate marketing: fake reviews, ragebait, overclaiming, affiliate hijacking, and cookie stuffing. From the perspective of maqashid syariah, these practices violate Sharia compliance principles; they undermine the protection of wealth (hifdz al-mal) through non-transparent transactions and the illicit acquisition of commissions, while also threatening the protection of the intellect (hifdz al-'aql) by manipulating information and disseminating falsehoods to the public. This research contributes theoretically to the growing body of literature on Islamic business ethics in the digital age, while offering practical insights for Muslim affiliates, Islamic economics scholars, and regulators to help formulate ethical guidelines and preventive policies aimed at minimizing tadlis within the affiliate marketing ecosystem.

Keywords: *Gig Economy; Affiliate Marketing; Maqashid Shariah; Islamic Economics; Tadlis*

Introduction

The digital economy creates new opportunities for individuals to engage in economic activities, allowing them to develop their creativity and personal potential to generate income through various digital platforms. Creativity serves as a vital strength for surviving amidst highly dynamic market shifts. Within this digital economic landscape, the "gig economy" has emerged as a labor market model that leverages digital platforms and social networks to generate income through flexible economic activities. This model is driven by rapid technological advancements that have enhanced the accessibility of digital infrastructure. Participants within the gig economy ecosystem must possess a solid understanding of algorithmic management mechanisms, foster innovation, and adaptively identify market needs—all of which are essential for increasing earning potential and strengthening one's competitive position (Rajput et al., 2026).

One segment of the gig economy consists of affiliate marketers, who act as independent partners promoting products in exchange for commissions (Rajput et al., 2026). Affiliate marketing offers individuals the opportunity to participate in product sales without the need to hold inventory. However, the ease provided by this model also presents challenges regarding the application of Islamic ethics in promotions and the integrity of information disseminated across digital platforms. Persuasive narratives and strategies employed to secure larger commissions carry the potential for deception and various forms of *tadlis* (fraud or misrepresentation). Consequently, the ethical challenges within Islamic affiliate marketing extend beyond the *halal* or *haram* status of the products themselves; they also encompass the responsibility to conduct affiliate marketing practices in a manner grounded in *maqashid shariah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law).

The rapid growth of business models utilizing digital platforms has triggered an increase in fraudulent or manipulative practices that harm both consumers and affiliates. In Islamic economics, this phenomenon is known as *tadlis* (deception). Some affiliates fail to conduct their work in accordance with Islamic principles, producing content that is manipulative or conceals information regarding the goods and services being promoted. Such **tadlis** practices within affiliate marketing are fundamentally contrary to the public interest (*maslahah*), as they undermine the protection of both consumers'

and affiliates' assets, as well as the preservation of their rational judgment.

Affiliate marketing activities must uphold integrity by avoiding *tadlis* (deception)—practices that distort consumer transaction preferences and negatively impact other parties involved. Furthermore, *maqashid shariah* (the objectives of Islamic law) can serve as a benchmark for evaluating the legitimacy of the goals behind economic activities. Specifically, *hifdz al-mal* (the preservation of wealth) and *hifdz al-aql* (the preservation of the intellect) are highly relevant to affiliate marketing. *Hifdz al-mal* necessitates that affiliate marketing protects consumers from detrimental or manipulative financial decisions resulting from harmful information or actions, while *hifdz al-aql* requires that such activities avoid deliberate manipulation and instead foster rational decision-making. From an Islamic economic perspective, the "gig economy" ecosystem must align with Islamic business ethics—incorporating the principles of *siddiq* (truthfulness), *amanah* (trustworthiness), *tabligh* (transparency/conveying information), and *fatonah* (intelligence/wisdom). Prohibitions against *tadlis* (deception), *gharar* (uncertainty/ambiguity), and *maysir* (gambling/speculation) must also be strictly observed, as these constitute deviations from Islamic business ethics. Within the framework of *maqashid shariah*, the preservation of wealth (*hifdz al-mal*) and the intellect (*hifdz al-aql*) are essential for preventing deception, manipulation, and other practices that contradict Islamic business ethics. While existing literature extensively covers Islamic business ethics, there is a notable scarcity of research addressing the gig economy—specifically regarding the practices of affiliate marketers. Consequently, a gap exists between current real-world phenomena and the guidance provided by *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence).

Nevertheless, the flexibility and freedom offered by promoting products through digital platforms have the potential to reduce costs within the digital supply chain. These advantages of affiliate marketing must be balanced with preventive measures and an awareness of **tadlis** (deceptive practices) that should be avoided. From an Islamic perspective, this requires in-depth examination to ensure consistent adherence to Sharia principles. Meanwhile, there is limited existing research on the forms of manipulative practices (*tadlis*) within the framework of *maqashid shariah* (the objectives of

Sharia) as they relate to affiliate marketing. Given this context, this study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to enrich academic discourse on affiliate marketing that aligns with Islamic business ethics. This paper contributes to bridging the gap between Islamic economics and Islamic law, on the one hand, and the gig economy ecosystem—specifically regarding affiliate marketers—on the other.

Literature review

Affiliate Marketing from an Islamic Perspective

Affiliate marketing is a performance-based marketing model that has flourished within the gig economy ecosystem. It involves affiliates who promote the products or services of other parties, earning a commission based on predetermined marketing outcomes. While this model offers efficiency in the dissemination of information and the expansion of market reach, it also introduces risks—such as information asymmetry and digital manipulation—stemming from unequal access. Consequently, the effectiveness of affiliate marketing cannot be measured solely by an increase in financial profit; it also requires evaluation based on the integrity of information, fairness in commission attribution, consumer protection, and transparency.

In the context of digital marketing, marketing channels serve to connect businesses with consumers through mechanisms for communication, promotion, and the distribution of product information (Neslin et al., 2006). In affiliate marketing, affiliate networks and digital platforms play a role in promotion and commission attribution. Affiliates are responsible for promoting another party's products or services through content, links, and specific mechanisms, in exchange for a predetermined commission (Patrick & Hee, 2021).

In affiliate marketing, manipulation is categorized into two types based on the perpetrator's identity and their modus operandi: non-influencer falsity and influencer falsity (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022). Mangiò, F., & Di Domenico, G. (2022) provide an explanation regarding manipulation in affiliate marketing (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022). "Non-influencer falsity" refers to a type of manipulation that exploits technical loopholes in automated tracking and commission attribution systems, often by employing software or bots. This form of manipulation directly impacts brand owners,

typically without the consumers' knowledge. Examples of such practices include cookie stuffing, attribution fraud, typosquatting, and click fraud. In contrast, "influencer falsity" involves manipulating social media dynamics to deceive both brands and audiences. The consequences of this type of manipulation are both direct—in terms of financial loss—and indirect—in terms of reputational damage. This category includes practices such as engagement manipulation and the omission of disclosures.

In the study of Islamic economics, manipulation (*tadlis*) involves concealing information or providing false information regarding products and services, which can influence purchasing decisions. *Maqashid shariah* (the objectives of Islamic law) elucidates the purpose of shariah in realizing public welfare (*maslahah*) (Hartanto et al., 2026). *Maqashid Shariah* is oriented toward the objectives of Islamic law as an embodiment of social justice and community empowerment (Hermawan et al., 2026).

The application of *maqashid shariah* is operationalized through the integration of ethical values such as honesty, justice, responsibility, and so forth (Sofyan & Sofyan, 2026). *Maqashid Shariah* focuses on five main pillars: religion, life, intellect, property, and lineage (Aisah et al., 2024). These five objectives can serve as a foundation for evaluating the impact of affiliate marketing practices in alignment with the principles of Islamic economics. Integrating the values found within *maqashid shariah* (the objectives of Islamic law) has the potential to strengthen trust in governance (Hadi et al., 2024). *Maqashid sharia* is rooted in the principles of justice, trust and benefit (Asutay & Harningtyas, 2015).

Research methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design to explore in depth the dynamics of the perceptions and experiences of Muslim affiliates as they navigate Islamic ethical dilemmas within the digital marketing ecosystem. Primary data were collected using a purposive sampling technique, selecting eight Muslim affiliates who met specific criteria: having at least six months of experience in digital marketing across various digital platforms and having posted content indicative of *tadlis* (deceptive practices). This selection process was specifically designed to obtain empirical data relevant to the research questions. To enhance the quality of the

analysis, the study also incorporated input from experts in Islamic economics and Islamic law. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, exploring the informants' perspectives on digital marketing, Islamic economic values, *tadlis* practices, and *maqashid shariah* (the objectives of Islamic law). The data were subsequently analyzed through a process of data reduction, data presentation, and the drawing and verification of conclusions. To ensure the validity of the data, a source triangulation method was applied.

Results and discussion

1. Identification of Tadlis (Deceptive) Practices in Affiliate Marketing

Based on an analysis of semi-structured interviews, this study identifies five forms of practice in affiliate marketing that may involve elements of manipulation: fake reviews, *ragebait*, overclaiming, affiliate hijacking, and cookie stuffing. These practices emerge due to the potential of affiliate marketing to enhance consumer purchase intentions toward the promoted products (Rishi et al., 2026). These five practices of *tadlis* (deception) demonstrate that the risk of manipulation in affiliate marketing is not limited to the misuse of technical mechanisms to obtain commissions; it can also occur through promotional content, the presentation of information regarding products or services, and the management of marketing performance attribution (see Figure 1).

Fake reviews, *ragebait*, and overclaiming are examples of *tadlis* (deceptive practices) concerning promotional communication and the shaping of consumer perception, while affiliate hijacking and cookie stuffing are examples of *tadlis* involving the integrity of attribution systems and commission distribution. All five of these practices have the potential to cause harm to the affected parties.

The findings in this study can be explained as follows:

1. Fake Review

Fake reviews are carried out with several main motives, namely social concern to help people (prosocial), financial rewards (monetary reward), and getting a product (product as a reward) (Thukral et al., 2026).

The following is an excerpt from an interview with one of the informants:

"As an affiliate, I have indeed received product samples—for instance, a chili sauce. Naturally, there's an obligation to review the item. Since the product is provided for the purpose of promotion, I'm expected to highlight its positive aspects. Even if the chili sauce isn't actually recommendable—perhaps because it tastes bad—I still have to give it a good review. I can't disparage the brand; after all, they want the product promoted so it sells, not to have it criticized or subjected to 'constructive' feedback that might end up scaring off potential buyers."

"There was another instance involving a beauty product—I received a sample early on in my content-creation journey, but when I opened the pouch, I found a small, louse-like insect inside. It really put me off the brand. Since I had already accepted the sample, I was still expected to produce affiliate content promoting the product—which, incidentally, came as a full set, including a facial wash, toner, day cream, and night cream. As an affiliate, this made it impossible for me to provide a proper review; I couldn't be honest about the actual condition of the product. I also opted not to try it on my face, testing it only on my hand instead—fortunately, the brief didn't include any specific requirements regarding how the product had to be demonstrated."

2. Ragebait

Ragebait is used to create a situation that provokes those who view the content (Reynolds & John, 2026).

The following is an excerpt from interviews with the informants:

When creating this affiliate content, the most effective way to attract views is by starting with an engaging hook—even if it doesn't always perfectly align with the product being promoted. For example, one such hook is: "you should buy this deodorant so your neighbors don't talk about you."

3. Overclaim

Marketing strategies should be designed with an emphasis on credibility to build market trust, while avoiding overclaims (Alfitri et al., 2026).

The following is an excerpt from interviews with informants:

"There are products—including skincare items for both mothers and children—that are marketed using exaggerated claims. For example, When I market or review an "instant tone-up" product, I might say:

"Wow, this is truly amazing! Just one spray and you get an instant glow that lasts all day—it doesn't wear off at all!"

4. Affiliate Hijacking

Affiliate hijacking is a form of fraudulent practice in affiliate marketing that necessitates effective prevention strategies and protection mechanisms against such fraud within the commission attribution process (Lampe, 2025).

The following is an excerpt from an interview with the informants:

"Regarding commissions, I suspect something might be going on—whether it's some kind of foul play or just a drop in traffic. I feel like the quality of my content is at its best, yet for some reason, the commissions have become increasingly scarce and have seen a massive decline."

5. Cookie stuffing

Cookie stuffing is a form of digital fraud that exploits technical vulnerabilities in the tracking and attribution mechanisms of affiliate marketing systems by surreptitiously inserting third-party tracking cookies into a user's browser (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022). The surreptitious placement of third-party advertiser tracking files into a user's browser. This manipulation can occur through the embedding of hidden links within decoy images or via redirect links (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022).

The following is an excerpt from an interview with the informants:

"There have been instances in groups where people share links that appear to be for claiming vouchers, but in reality, they are a way to plant cookies."

2. A Maqasid Shariah Perspective on the Practice of Tadlis (Deception) in Affiliate Marketing

From the perspective of *maqasid shariah* (the objectives of Islamic law), an exploration of *tadlis* (deception) in affiliate marketing requires an analysis that goes beyond mere contractual and considerations; it must also account for the resulting harm *mudlarat*, grounded in Islamic economic principles. The phenomenon of manipulation in affiliate marketing has shifted traditional marketing models toward more complex, technology-driven schemes. This research provides a comprehensive examination of such *tadlis* practices and their relationship to *maqasid shariah*. In the context of affiliate marketing, *tadlis* occurs when there is information asymmetry—deliberately created by an affiliate or a fraudulent party—during transactions on digital platforms. Affiliates may consciously and intentionally manipulate content or product links to secure commissions or rewards. As illustrated in Figure 1, the *maqasid shariah* framework applied in this study encompasses five forms of *tadlis*. This analysis considers the potential mechanisms of manipulation and their implications for the protection of wealth (*hifdz al-mal*) and the protection of the intellect (*hifdz al-aql*) within the *maqasid shariah* paradigm. Protection of property (*hifdz mal*) is crucial in preventing fraudulent manipulation by perpetrators to claim sales commissions that they never actually directed (misattribution of sales) (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022).

According to research findings, product reviews created by affiliates are used to influence consumer purchasing decisions. When consumers are not yet fully familiar with a product, they often seek information through content produced by affiliates. There are three key motives to consider when examining these product or service reviews: a prosocial desire to help others, financial incentives (monetary rewards), and rewards in the form of products (Thukral et al., 2026). These three motives create an opening for the practice of fake reviews. From the perspective of **maqasid shariah** (the objectives of Islamic law), fake reviews not only violate business ethics but also undermine the preservation of the intellect (*hifdz al-aql*) and the protection of property (*hifdz al-mal*).

In the framework of *maqasid shariah* (the objectives of Islamic law), the protection of the intellect (*aql*) is essential, requiring it to be safeguarded against all forms of deviation, misguidance, and manipulation. The intellect is a vital human faculty, necessary for consumers to weigh information, evaluate options, and make rational purchasing decisions. The practice of fake reviews can

impair critical thinking by creating an information asymmetry; such content presents falsehoods disguised as truth. This issue is also inherent in various forms of *tadlis* (deception)—including fake reviews, *ragebait*, overclaiming, affiliate hijacking, and cookie stuffing—which disrupt rational consumer behavior through manipulative tactics that can trigger phenomena such as the fear of missing out (FOMO).

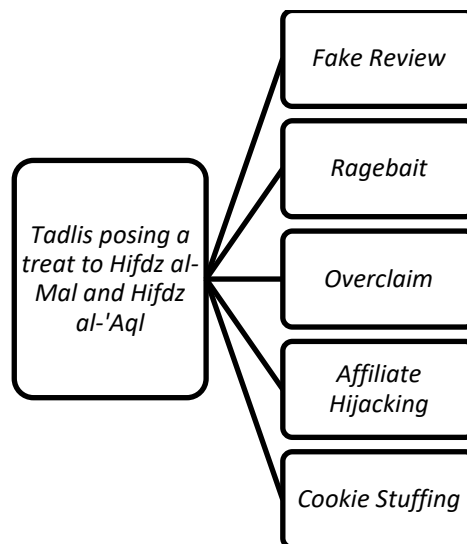
The protection of wealth (*hifdz al-mal*) is essential because any transaction facilitated through affiliate marketing must be based on mutual consent; the acquisition or transfer of wealth through unjust or illegitimate means (*bathil*) is strictly prohibited. When a consumer allocates funds to purchase a product via an affiliate, the transaction must be rooted in voluntary consent, in accordance with Islamic law. This serves to safeguard the consumer's wealth against purchases that fail to meet the expectations established during the affiliate marketing process. Practices involving deception (*tadlis*) lead to financial loss, the squandering of resources, and the receipt of goods that do not provide the intended utility. This stands in contrast to the situation of the affiliate—or any third party—who gains financially from such deceptive transactions; in such cases, the wealth acquired is classified as *haram*.

The practice of *tadlis* in affiliate marketing by hiding defects in goods and services can be categorized as *tadlis bi al-'ayb*, a form of manipulation that entails providing false information while concealing the flaws or defects of a product (Karim & Sifat, 2018). Affiliates may deliberately conceal the weaknesses of a product or service to maintain an image of perfection for potential consumers. Furthermore, artificial intelligence is sometimes employed to manipulate information in a way that hides defects in the product or service.

Ragebait in the perspective of *maqashid shariah* has a close relationship with the protection of reason (*hifdz al-aql*) and protection of property (*hifdz al-mal*). In affiliate marketing, *ragebait* is a strategy that involves manipulating content to trigger negative emotions in the public, thereby generating high levels of engagement—which, in turn, makes it easier for affiliates to market products or services. Within the framework of *maqasid al-shari'ah* (the objectives of Islamic law), *ragebait* constitutes a form of harm to the preservation of the intellect (*hifdz al-aql*). The manipulative mechanisms employed in *ragebait* impair one's critical faculties;

consumers are provoked into experiencing negative emotions—such as anxiety or anger—which diminishes their capacity for rational thought. Affiliates deliberately push consumers toward impulsive buying, driven by the nature of the content presented.

This is because the impact of this practice hinders the rational judgment of consumers and encourages purchases based on false claims, resulting in economic losses. Overclaim is a practice that needs to be analyzed from the perspective of maqashid shariah because false claims will lead to purchases that do not correspond to the actual benefits or conditions of the product. Affiliate Hijacking is a form of manipulation that can be categorized as the practice of *akl amwal al-nas bil batil*. *Akl amwal al-nas bil batil* is the distribution of wealth without a basis in Islamic law and is a prohibited act (illegal) (Abdul-Rahim, 2011).



• **Figure 1.** *Tadlis Practices in Affiliate Marketing Threatening Hifdz al-Mal and Hifdz al-'Aql*

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, there are five forms of *tadlis* (deception) that may occur in affiliate marketing: fake reviews, ragebait, overclaiming, affiliate hijacking, and cookie stuffing. Fake reviews can be categorized as *tadlis bi al-‘ayb*—a form of manipulation that involves providing false information while concealing a product's flaws or defects. These five practices demonstrate that the risk of *tadlis* in affiliate marketing relates not only to the information conveyed in promotions but also to the integrity of tracking mechanisms, commission distribution, and performance attribution. This study contributes by linking the classification of *tadlis* practices in affiliate marketing with an analysis based on the perspective of *maqashid syariah* (the objectives of Islamic law). In practical terms, these findings highlight the importance of strengthening promotional transparency, auditing commission attribution, and ensuring responsible oversight. A limitation of this study is its focus on interpreting phenomena based on the data collected; therefore, future research should incorporate a broader scope of information to develop a more detailed and operational evaluation framework.

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