What Drives Free Sample Approvals: A Small TikTok Affiliate Perspective

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***Abstract*—This study examines factors influencing free sample approval rates for small TikTok affiliates using 149 applications from February 2025 to January 2026. With a 50.3% approval rate, analysis reveals engagement rate ($r = 0.328$, $p < 0.001$) positively correlates with approval, while branded content ratio ($r = -0.261$, $p < 0.001$) and cumulative GMV ($r = -0.283$, $p < 0.001$) show negative correlations. Statistical testing confirmed significant differences: approved applications showed higher engagement (7.06% vs. 6.52%, $t = 4.20$, $p < 0.001$), lower branded ratios (71.68% vs. 74.99%, $t = -3.42$, $p = 0.001$), and lower cumulative GMV (₱16,434.85 vs. ₱19,495.01, $t = -3.57$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest authentic audience engagement matters more than sales performance for small affiliates.**

***Index Terms*—TikTok affiliate, free samples, engagement metrics, t-test, correlation**

I. Introduction

The convergence of social media and e-commerce has transformed digital marketing, with social commerce sales reaching $1.298 billion globally in 2023 [3]. TikTok Shop, launched in late 2022, has democratized affiliate marketing by lowering barriers to entry—requiring only 1,000 followers compared to traditional influencer thresholds [4]. This accessibility has created opportunities for micro-influencers and small affiliates to monetize content through commission-based sales and product partnerships.

For small affiliates, securing free product samples from brands represents a critical growth mechanism. Samples enable authentic content creation, build credibility with audiences, and generate revenue through subsequent sales. However, the approval process remains opaque, with brands receiving numerous applications from creators across follower tiers. Understanding which factors predict approval success has become essential for emerging content creators navigating this competitive landscape.

Research on influencer marketing has extensively examined established creators with substantial followings. Studies demonstrate that micro-influencers (1,000-100,000 followers) achieve engagement rates between 6-10%, significantly outperforming macro-influencers at 2-4% [5]. TikTok nano-influencers specifically maintain 10.3% engagement rates, while micro-influencers achieve 8.7% [6]. Despite this performance advantage, limited research addresses how brands evaluate sample applications from small affiliates, particularly those in early growth stages.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing 149 free sample applications submitted by the resercher, a small TikTok affiliate (average 1,594 followers) over 12 months. The research examines whether quantifiable metrics—engagement rate, product price, branded content ratio, and cumulative gross merchandise value (GMV)—predict approval outcomes. The key analytical principle employed is retrospective evaluation: for each application, metrics represent what brands could observe at the request date, not arbitrary time windows or post-hoc groupings. The research questions guiding this investigation are: (1) Does engagement rate correlate with free sample approval for small affiliates? (2) Does product price influence approval likelihood? (3) Does maintaining consistent branded content improve approval success? (4) Does cumulative sales performance (GMV) correlate with approval decisions? Answering these questions provides actionable insights for emerging content creators while contributing to understanding of social commerce approval dynamics.

II. Literature Review

A. Engagement Metrics in Influencer Marketing

Engagement rate has emerged as the primary metric for evaluating influencer effectiveness, outperforming follower count as a predictor of audience connection. Campbell and Farrell [3] demonstrate that engagement metrics capture the functional components underlying influencer marketing success, with authentic audience interaction driving brand awareness and purchase intent more effectively than reach alone. Their research emphasizes that meaningful engagement—measured through likes, comments, shares, and saves—signals genuine influence over vanity metrics. TikTok-specific research reveals platform dynamics that amplify engagement's importance. Analysis of 10,000 TikTok accounts shows average engagement rates of 4.07% across all creator tiers, with micro-influencers achieving 8.7% and nano-influencers reaching 10.3% [4]. This inverse relationship between follower count and engagement rate challenges traditional influencer selection criteria, suggesting brands should prioritize audience quality over quantity when evaluating potential partners.

B. Influencer Credibility and Authenticity

Lou and Yuan [5] establish that influencer credibility and message value significantly affect consumer trust in branded

content on social media. Their research identifies three credibility dimensions—trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness—that mediate the relationship between influencer endorsements and purchase intentions. Critically, they find that perceived authenticity moderates these effects, with audiences responding more favorably to creators who maintain editorial independence and selective brand partnerships. Audrezet et al. [6] extend this framework by examining how social media influencers navigate authenticity threats when engaging in commercial activities. Their findings reveal that excessive branded content can undermine perceived authenticity, leading audiences to question influencers' genuine opinions. This suggests brands may prefer creators who balance promotional and organic content, valuing diverse content portfolios over heavily monetized accounts that risk appearing inauthentic.

III. Methodology

A. Participants

The participant in this study is the researcher, a small TikTok content creator specializing in pet product category, with an average follower count of 1,594 during the study period.

B. Data Collection

The data collection involved Google Sheets to maintain interconnected datasets, including daily GMV, follower counts, post engagement, and sample approval outcomes. The dataset covered a period from February 2025 to January 2026.

C. Operational Definitions

Variables were operationalized to reflect what brands could observe at each application date:

- **Approval Status**: Binary outcome variable (1 = approved, 0 = not approved).
- **Cumulative GMV**: Total gross merchandise value (₱) from all sales occurring before the application date. Represents historical sales performance visible to brands.
- **Cumulative Followers**: Total follower count.
- **Cumulative Posts**: Total number of videos posted before the application date.
- **Cumulative Views/Likes/Comments/Shares**: Total engagement metrics from all posts published before the application date.
- **Engagement Rate (%)**: Calculated as $\left[\frac{\text{Cumulative Likes+Cumulative Comments}}{\text{Cumulative Views}}\right] \times 100$. Measures audience interaction quality.
- **Branded Content Ratio (%)**: $\left(\frac{\text{Branded Posts}}{\text{Cumulative Posts}}\right) \times 100$. Indicates content monetization level.
- **Product Price (₱)**: Retail value of the requested sample in Philippine pesos.

D. Data Cleaning

Missing Data: The Content Performance dataset contained 64 missing values in the `Request_ID` field (posts unrelated to samples). These were retained as NaN values since they represented valid non-sample content. No other missing data were identified across datasets.

Outlier Detection: Price outliers were identified using the interquartile range (IQR) method. With Q1 = ₱126.00, Q3 = ₱369.00, and IQR = ₱243.00, values beyond [₱-238.50, ₱733.50] were flagged. Eight outliers (5.4%) were identified, ranging from ₱740.90 to ₱3,779.00. Seven of the eight outliers were rejected applications. All outliers were retained to preserve data integrity and real-world application patterns.

Data Integration: Approved and not approved datasets were merged into a master samples dataset (n = 149). Cumulative metrics were calculated by joining GMV, followers, and content datasets based on temporal precedence—only data occurring before each application's request date were included.

E. Statistical Analysis

Analysis employed Python 3.9 with `pandas` (data manipulation), `scipy.stats` (statistical testing), and `matplotlib/seaborn` (visualization). The analytical approach included:

- **Descriptive Statistics**: Means, standard deviations, and distributions were calculated for all continuous variables, stratified by approval status.
- **Independent t-tests**: Compared approved vs. not approved groups on continuous variables.
- **Pearson Correlations**: Examined linear relationships between continuous predictors and approval status.
- **Significance Level**: $\alpha = 0.05$ for all hypothesis tests. One-tailed tests were used for directional hypotheses (engagement positive, price negative).

TABLE I
Descriptive Statistics by Approval Status

Variable	Approved (n=75)	Not Approved (n=74)
Engagement Rate (%)	7.06	6.52
Product Price (₱)	275.70	382.34
Branded Ratio (%)	71.68	74.99
Cumulative GMV (₱)	16,434.85	19,495.01

IV. Results

The Engagement Rates distribution shows a significant difference between the Approved and Not Approved groups, with a p-value of 0.0000. The Approved group has a higher mean engagement rate (7.06%) compared to the Not Approved group (6.52%), with a t-statistic of 4.20, indicating that higher engagement is strongly linked to a higher likelihood of approval.

The Branded Ratio distribution shows a significant difference between the Approved and Not Approved groups, with a p-value of 0.0007. The Not Approved group has a higher mean branded ratio (74.99%) compared to the Approved group (71.68%), with a t-statistic of -3.42, indicating that higher branded content is associated with lower approval rates.

The Product Price distribution reveals that there is no significant difference between the approved and not approved groups in terms of product price (t-statistic = -1.35, p-value =

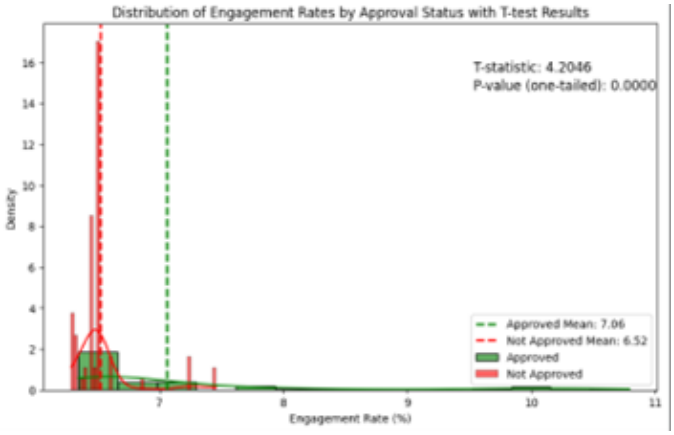

Fig. 1. Distribution of Engagement Rates by Approval Status with T-test Results.

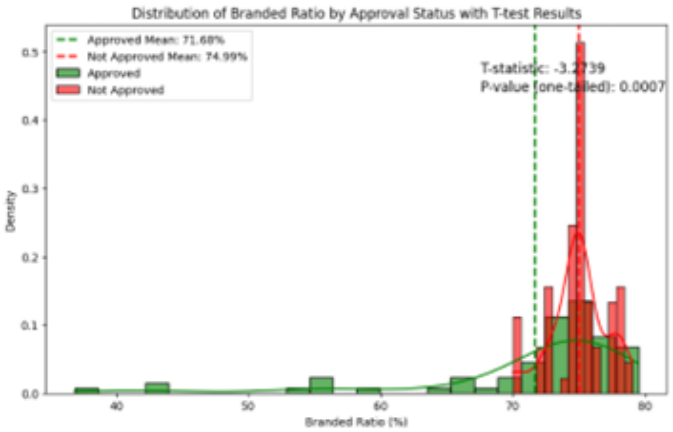

Fig. 2. Distribution of Branded Ratio by Approval Status with T-test Results.

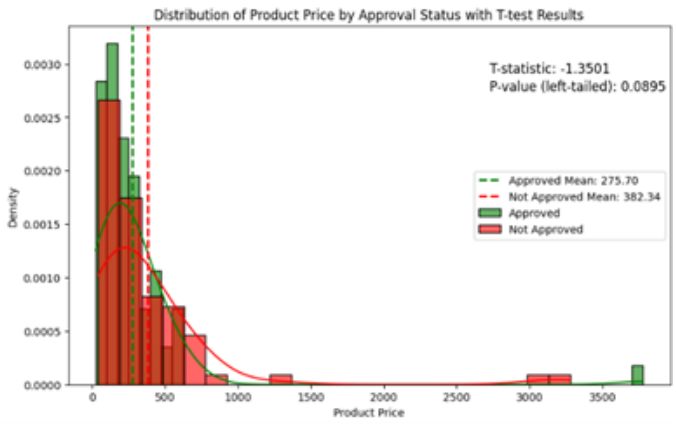

Fig. 3. Distribution of Product Price by Approval Status with T-test Results.

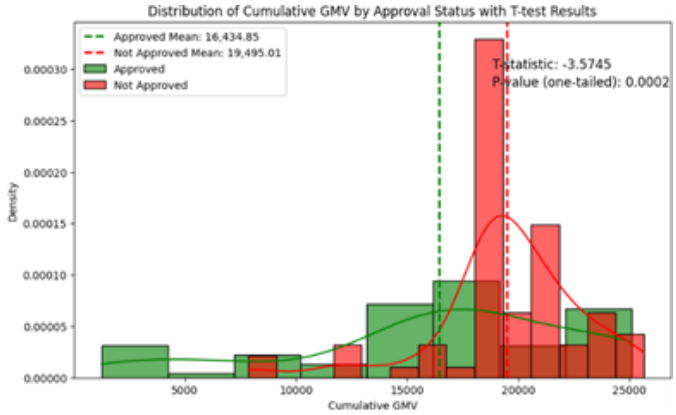

Fig. 4. Distribution of Cumulative GMV by Approval Status with T-test Results.

0.0895). While the Approved group has a lower mean price (₱275.70) compared to the Not Approved group (₱382.34), the p-value indicates that price does not significantly influence approval status.

The Cumulative GMV distribution shows a significant difference in the mean GMV between the Approved and Not Approved groups, with a t-statistic of -3.57 and p-value of 0.0002. The Approved group has a lower mean GMV (₱16,434.85) compared to the Not Approved group (₱19,495.01), suggesting that higher GMV is correlated with a lower likelihood of approval.

The correlation matrix indicates that the Engagement Rate is positively correlated with the Approval Status (0.33), suggesting that higher engagement increases the likelihood of approval. The Branded Ratio shows a strong negative correlation with the Engagement Rate (-0.94), which suggests that products with a higher branded ratio tend to have lower engagement rates. Additionally, the Branded Ratio has a negative correlation with Approval Status (-0.26), which indicates a negative correlation with the approval status.

V. Discussion

Engagement rate emerged as the primary approval predictor, aligning with research emphasizing authentic audience connection over follower count [5]. The positive correlation ($r = 0.328$, $p < 0.001$) and significant t-test result ($t = 4.20$, $p < 0.001$) suggest brands prioritize creators generating meaningful interactions. This finding supports Campbell and Farrell's framework identifying engagement as a functional component of influencer marketing effectiveness.

The negative correlation between branded content ratio and approval challenges conventional assumptions. Accounts with lower branded ratios showed higher approval rates ($t = -3.42$, $p = 0.001$), possibly because brands prefer creators maintaining authentic, diverse content. This aligns with Audrezet et al.'s [1] findings that excessive commercial activity threatens perceived authenticity. Brands may avoid creators appearing overly promotional, valuing editorial independence as a credibility signal.

Similarly, lower cumulative GMV correlated with higher approval ($t = -3.57$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting brands prioritize emerging creators with growth potential over established affiliates. This could reflect strategic seeding to build long-term partnerships or algorithmic preferences for accounts showing

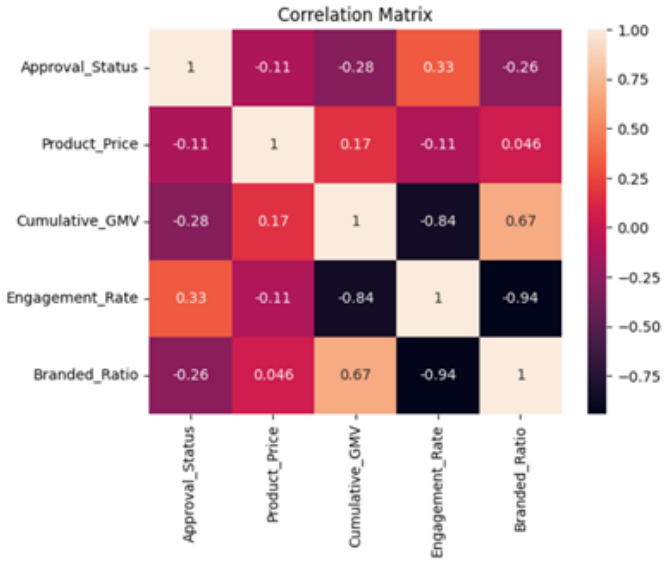

Fig. 5. Correlation Matrix showing the relationships between variables.

recent engagement growth rather than historical sales. The finding suggests that smaller creators' authenticity outweighs established creators' proven performance.

Product price showed no significant relationship with approval ($t = -1.35$, $p = 0.090$), indicating that brands evaluate creators based on engagement quality rather than the monetary value of requested samples.

A. Limitations

Single-account data ($n = 149$) limits generalizability. Results may not represent creators with different follower counts, content niches, or geographic markets. Qualitative factors—content quality, visual aesthetics, creator demographics, and brand-specific criteria—remain unmeasured. The 12-month period may not capture seasonal variations or policy changes. Self-report bias exists despite prospective logging.

B. Practical Implications

Small affiliates should prioritize genuine audience engagement over sales volume. Creating content that generates meaningful interactions—comments, sustained attention—appears more valuable than maximizing partnerships. Maintaining content diversity may signal authenticity to brands. Emerging creators shouldn't be discouraged by limited sales history; engagement quality matters more.

VI. Conclusion

This study analyzed 149 TikTok free sample applications, revealing engagement rate (r=0.328, p¡0.001) as the primary approval predictor for small affiliates. Contrary to expectations, branded content ratio and cumulative GMV showed significant negative correlations, suggesting brands value authentic engagement and growth potential over established sales performance. Product price showed no significant effect.

For emerging creators, these findings emphasize building genuine community connections through engaging content rather than pursuing aggressive monetization. Future research should examine multiple creators across follower tiers, incorporate qualitative brand decision-making factors, and investigate longitudinal patterns as accounts grow.

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