Consumer attitudes toward blogger's sponsored recommendations and purchase intention: The effect of sponsorship type, product type, and brand awareness

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ABSTRACT

Sponsored recommendation blog posts, a form of online consumer review, are blog articles written by bloggers who receive benefits from sponsoring marketers to review and promote products on their personal blog. Because national regulations require that marketer sponsorship must be revealed in the blog post, sponsored recommendation posts can no longer conceal their marketing intent. Consumer's attitudes toward sponsored recommendation posts are thus a vital issue in assessing the effectiveness of the advertisement. This study uses a 2(sponsorship type) × 2(product type) × 2(brand awareness) experimental design and a total of 613 valid samples to examine consumer attitudes toward sponsored recommendation posts and purchase intention. The results show that when products recommended in blog posts are search goods or have high brand awareness, consumers have highly positive attitudes toward sponsored recommendation posts, which improves purchase intention. The directly-monetary/indirect-monetary benefits received by the bloggers have no significant effect on readership attitudes. Using these features in blog writings appears to improve online readers' trust toward and the credibility of sponsored recommendation posts and thus can be a vital online marketing tool for marketers.

1. Introduction

Since the Internet has significantly changed the sources for delivery of information, seller-centric marketing messages are no longer as effective. Lee and Koo (2012) indicate that consumers trust peer consumers more than they trust corporations, and are likely to use information provided by fellow consumers to evaluate products/services before they make a purchase decision. Consumers can use Web 2.0 tools to share their purchase and experience information across different platforms; including retailer's websites, online communities, independent websites, and personal blogs (Lee & Youn, 2009). When experience-based product information is provided by online consumers, others can read these consumer reviews to evaluate the attributes of products/services before purchasing. Therefore, product information and evaluations shared by online peer users, so-called 'online consumer reviews', are a useful and influential medium for delivering product/service information rather than marketing strategies made by corporations.

In order to make marketing communication more effective, sponsored recommendation posts, one type of online consumer reviews, have been operated by marketers. Sellers can provide compensation for specific online users in exchange for posting a consumer review on the online platform, such as personal blogs (Forrest & Cao, 2010; Zhu & Tan, 2007). Zhu and Tan (2007) further suggest that sponsored recommendation posts on personal blogs should be considered advertisements because this kind of consumer review is perceived as having bias or providing messages with specific purposes other than consumer experiences and recommendations. Thus, while sponsored recommendation blog posts are an acceptable information communication media for online users, which marketers may use, the credibility of such reviews in the blogosphere is often questionable.

Although the credibility of reviews and acceptance in exploring review quantity, valence, and attribute have been explored (Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Klein & Ford, 2003; Park & Kim, 2008), previous studies on sponsored recommendation posts are limited. The effects of product attributes and the role of marketer...
sponsored recommendation posts have rarely been examined. For example, research indicates that there are differences in online product information search attitudes and behaviors when consumers look at different product types such as search goods or experience goods (Huang, Lurie, & Mitra, 2009). Smith and Wheeler (2002) suggest that high brand awareness improves trust in a brand and its advertisements. There is also an interest issue: are posts on a personal blog likely to be accepted by consumers when the writer is being compensated for the post? Therefore, since blogger recommendation posts are a useful marketing communication tool and a vital reference source in the process of consumer purchase decision making (Chen & Xie, 2008), understanding of how sponsorship type and product attributes (such as product type and brand awareness) influence consumer’s positive attitudes toward and trust of sponsored recommendation posts appears to be crucial in understanding the psychological processes of online review evaluation by consumers. This study also examines the effects of consumer attitudes toward sponsored recommendation posts on purchasing intention, even when consumers already know the blogger is being compensated by marketers for the post. If the relationship between consumer attitudes toward sponsored recommendation posts and purchasing intention is positive, bloggers’ sponsored recommendation posts would be an influential online medium and an important tool for marketers.

To address these questions, this study examines the influences of sponsorship type, product type, and brand awareness on online users’ attitude toward sponsored recommendation post. The relation between attitude and purchasing intention with regard to the promoted good in a sponsored recommendation post is also connected in the research model. Moreover, a 2(sponsorship type) × 2(product type) × 2(brand awareness) experimental design is presented to carry out the hypotheses testing. A covariate, propensity to trust, is also included in the stimulus in order to control unexpected variation between variables. Based on the findings of this study, we present theoretical and managerial implications for academics and marketers.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Online consumer review and sponsored recommendation post

Online consumer reviews, a type of product information created by users based on personal usage experience, can be strongly affected by users’ personal preferences and their usage situations (Chen & Xie, 2008). Whether the content of online consumer reviews varies from short to long or from subjective to objective (Chatterjee, 2001), online consumer reviews have a dual role: providing product information and making recommendations. Online users provide consumer-oriented and experience-centric product information, including the evaluations of the advantages and weaknesses of a product/service, through their consumer review postings (Lee, Park, & Han, 2008). These personal opinions and experiences are a useful cue for readers in evaluating products for purchase decisions (Park, Lee, & Han, 2007; Wei & Lu, 2013).

Forrest and Cao (2010) show that sponsored recommendations posted by consumers are a form of online consumer review. Sponsored recommendation posts which reveal the sponsorship information in the blog article may contain pictures of the product being used or hyperlinks that link to the product’s company (Zhu & Tan, 2007). One vital feature to distinguish sponsored recommendation posts from online consumer reviews is that sponsored recommendations are usually posted on a personal blog, but consumer reviews are posted on product or seller websites by consumers (Chen & Xie, 2008; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Park et al., 2007). Sponsored recommendation posts typically have a more positive attitude toward the product or service because such posts are motivated by the compensation the blogger is receiving from the marketer. Thus, this study defines a sponsored recommendation post as a blog article written by a blogger who is sponsored by the producers of any product or by a marketing agency that reviews and promotes products or services on their blog.

While a sponsored recommendation post is a kind of online consumer review, it should also be considered a type of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) since it has features similar to eWOM: it is fast, savable, and anonymous. Some consumers post product reviews online platforms where others can instantly read the information provided by peer consumers (Lee & Youn, 2009). However, online consumer reviews are often posted anonymously or somewhat ambiguously (Dou, Walden, Lee, & Lee, 2012). Consumer reviews can be written, read, and copied to other platforms by online users who can conceal their identities, meaning that divining the source’s identity is difficult (Lee & Koo, 2012). Bloggers can also conceal their true identity by assuming a blog-based persona to avoid revealing their true identity (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007). The source credibility of sponsored recommendation posts on a blog, ostensibly a customer–communicated product-related assertion, may then no longer be confidently attributed to consumer altruism (Doyle, Heslop, Ramirez, & Cray, 2012).

2.2. Source credibility and attitudes toward sponsored recommendation post

The term source credibility refers to whether an individual perceives a source of information as unbiased, believable, true, or factual (Hass, 1981). The positive characteristics of messages can enhance the value of the source and thus increase acceptance among readers. If receivers feel that a message has bias or is offered for other reasons than to provide consumer experiences and recommendations, they may downgrade the credibility of the source and resist the persuasive intent of the message (Lee & Koo, 2012).

Sponsored recommendation posts must disclose the connection between the blogger and the sponsoring company within the context of the article, which in turn can influence consumer beliefs about the credibility of the source information (Lee & Koo, 2012). Zhu and Tan (2007) further suggest that bloggers’ sponsored recommendation posts should be considered a form of online advertisement operated by marketers rather than just a consumer review of personal usage experiences by online users. Based on MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch (1986, p. 46), consumer attitudes toward advertisement are ‘a predisposition to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a particular exposure occasion.’ Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) also indicate that advertising is a general sense of paid non-personal commercial communication tool and define consumer skepticism toward advertising as a tendency toward disbelief regarding a particular advertising claim. Thus, this study defines consumer attitudes toward sponsored recommendation posts as a psychological tendency toward the source credibility regarding a particular sponsored recommendation post during a particular exposure occasion. If blog readers read the specific sponsored recommendation post in a specific time frame and believe that its claims are true, their attitudes toward the credibility of the sponsored recommendation post will be positive.

2.3. Sponsorship type

Sponsorship type in this study refers to the kinds of benefits provided by the sponsoring company to bloggers’ who write recommendation posts on their personal blogs. Many countries’ laws...
stipulate that sponsorship must be shown in the blog article to avoid non-disclosure problems that may lead to deception (Martin & Smith, 2008) and arouse ethical concerns (Rotfeld, 2008). The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the US and the Consumers Foundation in Taiwan have amended their regulations to cover the use of endorsements or testimonials in advertising. These are applicable to consumer generated media such as blogs. Thus, sponsorship type could be considered an explicit advertising intent.

According to the literature (Sprague & Wells, 2010; Sullivan, 2009), the compensation provided by the sponsor to stimulate bloggers to write a recommendation post takes many forms, including cash, coupons, free samples, and exclusive activity attendance. Although it is difficult to specify the sponsorship type due to the incompleteness of most sponsorship revelations in online recommendation posts, in general, this study categorizes these into two types, direct-monetary and indirect-monetary, to simplify classification. Direct-monetary benefits consist of cash compensation of any amount (such as, cash paying) provided by the sponsor, while for our purposes indirect-monetary benefits comprise any other form of benefit, such as product coupons, discounts, or free samples.

Petty and Andrews (2008) argue that consumers may consider bloggers who receive cash payments to be less credible than those taking free samples or coupons as compensation. Companies paying cash (direct-monetary benefits) to the blogger in exchange for a recommendation post is often seen as ‘buying’ an article, and the blogger could be seen to ‘sell’ the trust of readers to the company (Fu, 2010; Hsu, 2010). On the other hand, if the sponsor provides product samples or discount coupons (indirect-monetary benefits) as compensation, readers may see this as a product trial opportunity for the blogger and be more likely to consider this kind of activity acceptable (Fu, 2010; Hsu, 2010). Thus, we hypothesize:

**H1.** If consumers know a blogger has received direct-monetary compensation from a sponsor to write a recommendation post, their attitudes toward the post will be more negative than if the blogger receives indirect-monetary compensation.

### 2.4. Product type

Many scholars (Hsieh, Chiu, & Chiang, 2005; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Weathers, Sharma, & Wood, 2007) use the features of product to classify products into search goods and experience goods. If information about the dominant product attributes is easy to acquire (Hsieh et al., 2005), is objective, and is easily compared (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010) as well as is discoverable without interacting with the product (Huang et al., 2009) before purchase, the product is considered a search good. Another feature of search goods is that the product’s second-hand information is sufficient for the product is considered a search good. Another feature of search goods is that the product’s second-hand information is sufficient for consumers to adequately evaluate the good (Weathers et al., 2007). Examples of search goods include cameras, cell phones, and computers (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Conversely, for experience goods, information is relatively difficult and costly to obtain (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Consumers have a greater need to use their senses to evaluate experience goods (Weathers et al., 2007). Thus, the key attributes of experience goods are subjective and must be personally evaluated by the consumer through the experience of interaction with the goods (Hsieh et al., 2005). Video games and package tours are examples of experience goods (Weathers et al., 2007).

Online information search behaviors for search goods and experience goods are different. When consumers look for information on search goods online, they usually go through more web pages and blog articles than when searching for information on experience goods (Huang et al., 2009). Hsieh et al. (2005) state that compared to experience goods, the features and attributes for search goods are more stable. Mudambi and Schuff (2010) also indicate that consumers tend to believe less in recommendations about experience goods because they may think the relatively subjective and unstable nature of experience goods will make it difficult for the blogger to write a useful recommendation, even when the bloggers have personally experienced the products. Therefore, consumers may have better attitudes toward sponsored recommendation posts due to the more precise and more easily verifiable recommendation content of search goods. Based on the above discussion, this study hypothesizes:

**H2.** If the recommended product in the blog post is a search good, consumers will be more likely to have positive attitudes toward sponsored recommendation posts than if it is an experience good.

### 2.5. Brand awareness

Keller (1993) asserts that brand awareness is a component of brand knowledge. If consumers have the knowledge of a particular brand, whether this knowledge is actively or passively obtained, their brand awareness toward a certain product/service is high (Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005). Many scholars (Keller, 1993; Rossiter & Percy, 1997) use two dimensions, brand recognition and brand recall, to define the term brand awareness, and suggest that these two dimensions do not occur simultaneously when the level of brand awareness is evaluated. Brand recognition refers to a consumer’s ability to identify a brand when given the brand name as a clue, while brand recall is defined as consumer’s ability to recall a brand when given the product category (Keller, 1993). Furthermore, there are different levels of involvement between brand recognition and brand recall. Brand recall could be more likely to require the consumer to expend greater effort to retrieve a brand from memory than brand recognition, which only requires consumers to determine when the brand is seen or heard previously. Following these discussions, this study uses the definition of Aaker (1991) to assert that brand awareness is a buyer’s ability to recognize or recall that a specific brand name is a member of a certain product category.

Studies show that if consumers are more familiar with a brand, which implies that brand awareness is high, their confidence toward the brand will increase (Laroche, Kim, & Zhou, 1996) and they will be more likely to trust in that brand (Smith & Wheeler, 2002). Leong (1993) and Macdonald and Sharp (2000) state that consumers have a strong tendency to use brand awareness as a heuristic when choosing a product because consumers will feel that a well-known brand is more reliable than an unknown brand. Additionally, consumers tend to believe that marketers whose products have a high brand awareness would not use deceptive marketing tactics on them (Smith & Wheeler, 2002). Thus, they may have a better attitude toward their advertisements (Macdonald & Sharp, 2000). Many scholars have found that a credible advertising source is positively related to consumer attitudes toward advertisements (Brackett & Carr, 2001; Wang, Zhang, Choi, & Eredita, 2002). Therefore, this study proposes that if bloggers’ recommended goods have a high brand awareness, consumers will have positive attitudes toward a sponsored recommendation post on a blog whether or not the post is a type of advertising.

**H3.** When consumer brand awareness of the recommended product in the blog post is higher, their attitudes toward the sponsored recommendation post are more positive than when consumer brand awareness of the product in the post is low.

### 2.6. Purchase intention

Purchase intention is a consumer’s objective intention toward a product (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Spears and Singh (2004) define
purchase intention as a consumer’s conscious plan or intention to make an effort to purchase a product. In addition, online purchase intention focuses on whether consumers are willing and intending to buy a certain product via online transaction platforms (Pavlou, 2003). This study thus suggests that purchase intention is a consumers’ willingness to buy a given product at a specific time or in a specific situation (see Fig. 1).

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985) propose that consumer attitudes will directly affect their behavioral intention, which in turn will influence purchase behavior. Bouhlel, Mzoughi, Ghachem, and Negra (2010) indicate that the influence of consumer attitudes toward a blog on consumer purchase intention is significantly positive. Moreover, quality communication can create a more positive attitude toward the blog, which affects consumer willingness to purchase products (Chen, Ching, Tsai, & Kuo, 2008; Fiore, Jin, & Kim, 2005). This study thus proposes that if consumers are willing to believe the content of a sponsored recommendation post, they will be more likely to form a purchase intention regarding the product recommended by the blogger. The following hypothesis is proposed:

**H4.** The impact of attitudes toward sponsored recommendation posts on consumer purchase intention is significantly positive.

3. Methodology

To evaluate these hypotheses, this study designed a 2 (sponsorship type) × 2 (product type) × 2 (brand awareness) stimulus. Prior to the formal experiment, the authors conducted pretests to design the stimulus material of the manipulation variables and then created a total of eight sponsored recommendation posts to measure consumer attitudes toward the sponsored recommendation post (see Appendix A).

3.1. Stimulus material

**Sponsorship type design:** This study classified sponsorship types into two types: direct-monetary and indirect-monetary benefits. Direct-monetary benefits refer to only cash payment, while indirect-monetary benefits were defined as a 50% off discount coupon.

**Product selection:** The authors referred to the literature review and discussed the study with 20 EMBA students and 10 graduate students in Taiwan to select 20 different types of goods as pretest products. Fifty-seven university students in Taiwan were further asked to use a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to respectively indicate their ability to judge the performance and important attributes of the 20 products in the two situations, before and after purchasing or using a particular product. Products as experimental stimuli were chosen based on two criteria. First, according to Krishnan and Hartline (2001), if a product has a relatively high mean score on both scales, it should be considered a search good because consumers can easily evaluate the product’s performance or dominant attributes whether or not they have purchased it. If a product has a relatively low mean score on the before scale and a relatively high mean score on the after scale, it should be considered an experience good. Second, products have to appeal to online respondents and are easily accessed and purchased. For example, according to an online survey of blog usage in Taiwan (Pollster LTD, 2010), 3C products and travel reflections are popular topics on blogs. Therefore, this study selected cell phones (Mean before = 5.09, Mean after = 6.09) as search goods and used package tours (Mean before = 4.21, Mean after = 5.82) as experience goods, which satisfied these two conditions.

**Brand selection:** Ten real brands for cell phones and ten real brands for packaged tours were chosen from companies in the SOGI Internet Corporation (SOGI; http://www.sogi.com.tw/) and the Travel Quality Assurance Association (TQA; http://www.travel.org.tw/), respectively. SOGI is recognized by the media as the largest social network website in Taiwan that releases product information about cell phones and other telecommunications devices. TQA is an independent association organized by travel organizations in Taiwan, with a membership covering 90% of the travel agencies in Taiwan. Further, twenty brand names presented in a list and two questions developed by Laurent, Kapferer, and Roussel (1995) were used to measure brand awareness. Fifty-eight university students in Taiwan were asked to indicate their ability to recognize and recall the brands with a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). If the combined mean (Mean Q1+Q2) of two questions regarding a particular brand is high, the brand awareness is high; otherwise it is low. Finally, four brands were chosen based on the extremes of the combined mean scores. The high brand awareness search good was a Sony Ericsson (Mean Q1+Q2 = 4.93), while the low brand awareness search good was a DOOV (Mean Q1+Q2 = 1.73). For experience goods, the high brand awareness experience good was from Lion Travel (Mean Q1+Q2 = 4.16), while the low brand awareness experience good was from Da Wang Travel (Mean Q1+Q2 = 1.88).

**Sponsored recommendation post design:** Based on the foregoing discussion, a 2 (sponsorship type: direct-monetary or indirect-monetary benefits) × 2 (product type: search or experience goods) × 2 (brand awareness: high or low) stimulus was designed and eight versions of recommendation posts were created in Chinese by the authors in order to observe the reaction to the posts in

![Fig. 1. The research framework.](image-url)
the Taiwanese blogosphere. In addition to the text description, the content of each version included images, such as the pictures of products, scenery, and foods, in order to increase the authenticity of the articles and to help the participants to become more easily involved in the designed situation. After these eight sponsored recommendation posts were made, the 20 EMBA students and 10 graduate students in Taiwan were invited to verify and to amend each article and then the final version of the sponsored recommendation posts was completed.

3.2. Measurement

The construct of attitude toward sponsored recommendation posts was measured using the 4-item scales of Boush, Friestad, and Rose (1994) and Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998). A high score on each item denotes a positive high attitude toward the sponsored recommendation post. This study also uses the scale for purchase intention, which includes 5 items developed by Putrevu and Lord (1994) and Taylor and Baker (1994). Consumer purchase intention improves with stronger respondent agreement with each item. The participants were instructed to rate each item of these dependent variables on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

3.3. Procedures and participants

The authors posted an electronic survey through an online survey platform in order to sample from the mass population of online users. The web link was posted on the largest electronic bulletin board system in Taiwan, the PTT bulletin board system, and Facebook, the popular social networking site. After clicking on the link, respondents participating in the experiments were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental situations. After entering the questionnaire website, participants were first asked whether they read blog articles. If the answer was "no", they were led to read blog articles. If the answer was "yes", they began to read the description about the survey and the artificial sponsored recommendation post as well as answer the items.

The sample totaled 762 respondents. To ensure that respondent answers were authentic and reliable, the authors excluded respondents who give the same answer throughout the entire survey. Finally, the sample number of each experiment version was between 70 and 83 responses due to the random assignment of one of eight experimental situations to participants and thus a total of 613 subject responses were deemed valid for analysis. If the answer was "yes", they began to read the description about the survey and the artificial sponsored recommendation post as well as answer the items.

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As shown in Table 1, the gender proportion of this study, 48.8% male and 51.2% female, is nearly average. Most respondents in this study were aged 21–30 (65.1%) and had at least a bachelor’s degree (93.8%). Of the sample, 31.8% had more than 5 years experience of reading blogs. The sample profile is consistent with the findings from previous online surveys (Frost, Goode, & Hart, 2010; Yang, Chandrirees, Lin, & Chao, 2009) that e-customers are generally younger and better educated than conventional customers.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>51.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Under 15</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16–20</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21–30</td>
<td>65.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31–40</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Above 41</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Senior high school or below</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor/college degree</td>
<td>68.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master degree or above</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog using experience</td>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1–3 years</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3–5 years</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Above 5 years</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sample profile is consistent with the findings from previous online surveys (Frost, Goode, & Hart, 2010; Yang, Chandrirees, Lin, & Chao, 2009) that e-customers are generally younger and better educated than conventional customers.

3.4. Reliability

Cronbach’s α and item-to-total correlation of each scale were examined to ensure an acceptable level of internal consistency. The Cronbach’s α of each construct (0.805 for attitude toward sponsored recommendation post and 0.914 for purchase intention) exceeds 0.7, which is considered adequate for our analysis (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

4. Results

4.1. Manipulation checks

Several items were used to check the level of sponsorship type, product type, and brand awareness. First, respondents were asked ‘what kind of benefit did the blog post mention that the blogger has received from the sponsoring company’ on a 5-point Likert-type scale to check the manipulation for sponsorship type. The results from the t-test showed that posts from bloggers receiving direct-monetary benefits were rated higher than the sponsored posts for indirect-monetary benefits (Mean\(_{\text{direct-monetary}}\) = 4.17, Mean\(_{\text{indirect-monetary}}\) = 2.81, sample size\(_{\text{direct-monetary}}\) = 305, sample size\(_{\text{indirect-monetary}}\) = 308, p-value = 0.000).

Second, for the manipulation check for product type, the respondents were asked to rate two questions developed by Krishnan and Hartline (2001), on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The items assess the degree of consumer ability to judge product performance or assess important product attributes before and after purchasing or using it. Based on the results of the paired-samples t-test, the mean score of “after use” is higher than the mean score of “before use” (Mean\(_{\text{after}}\) = 3.99, Mean\(_{\text{before}}\) = 3.71, p-value = 0.000) for search goods (sample size = 294) while the mean score of “after use” is higher than the mean score of “before use” (Mean\(_{\text{after}}\) = 3.83, Mean\(_{\text{before}}\) = 3.40, p-value = 0.000) for experience goods (sample size = 319). The mean deviation (MD) of search goods (MD\(_{\text{search}}\) = 0.28) is lower than that of experience goods (MD\(_{\text{experience}}\) = 0.43). Based on the findings, the manipulation of product type is successful because the results are consistent with the contention of Mudambi and Schuff (2010), who argue that search goods are easier for consumers to evaluate without buying or using them than experience goods. Therefore, the mean deviation scores for search goods should be lower than the mean deviation scores for experience goods.

Finally, the 2-item scale of brand awareness was adapted from Laurent et al. (1995) to check the degree of consumer ability to recognize and recall a particular brand. Respondents were asked to rate each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The findings of the t-test indicate that sponsored posts with high brand awareness were rated significantly higher than those with low brand awareness (Mean\(_{\text{high}}\) = 4.17, Mean\(_{\text{low}}\) = 2.81, sample size\(_{\text{high}}\) = 309, sample size\(_{\text{low}}\) = 304, p-value = 0.000). These results suggest that the manipulations are successful.
4.2. Hypotheses testing

**ANCOVA analysis:** In order to control for factors that may lead to unexpected variation between variables, this study includes a covariate, propensity to trust, as a control variable in the testing model in order to remove extraneous influences from the dependent variable. Propensity to trust is the general willingness to trust other people (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Consumers with a high level of propensity to trust are more likely to trust other people than those with a low tendency to trust others (Gefen, 2000). This study suggests that propensity to trust could improve consumer attitudes toward sponsored recommendation posts because they are more likely to trust the bloggers and the content of the blog post. The 5-item scale of propensity to trust developed by Laurent et al. (1995) was used to measure by a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Therefore, because the covariate of propensity to trust is a metric independent variable, the design is then termed an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) design to test hypotheses 1, 2, and 3.

Table 2 shows that the effect of sponsorship type on attitude toward a sponsored recommendation post is not significant ($F(1,604) = 5.856$, $p$-value > 0.05). Attitude toward a sponsored recommendation post remains unaffected whether a blogger has received direct-monetary ($\text{Mean}_{\text{direct-monetary}} = 4.34$) or indirect-monetary compensation ($\text{Mean}_{\text{indirect-monetary}} = 4.35$) from a sponsor to write the blog article. Thus, H1 is not supported. Additionally, product type has a significant effect on attitude toward a sponsored recommendation post ($F(1,604) = 46.158$, $p$-value < 0.001). Consumers will have a more positive attitude toward a recommendation post if the product is a search good ($\text{Mean}_{\text{search}} = 4.58$) than if it is an experience good ($\text{Mean}_{\text{experience}} = 4.11$). This result supports H2. Finally, consumer attitude toward a sponsored recommendation post is also significantly influenced by brand awareness ($F(1,604) = 5.856$, $p$-value < 0.05). If consumers have a higher brand awareness of the goods recommended by the bloggers, they will tend to trust what the blog post says ($\text{Mean}_{\text{high}} = 4.43$). If brand awareness is lower, the attitude toward the sponsored recommendation post is lower ($\text{Mean}_{\text{high}} = 4.26$). Accordingly, H3 is supported by the results of this study.

**Correlation and regression analysis:** Because there is only one independent variable, this study tests hypothesis 4 using a bivariate correlation analysis. Based on the findings in Table 3, the relationship between attitude toward a sponsored recommendation post and purchase intention is positively significant (correlation coefficient = 0.524, $t$-value = 15.197, $p$-value < 0.001). This result is in line with the findings from regression analysis ($\beta = 0.524$, $t$-value = 15.197, $p$-value < 0.001).

### Table 2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sum of square</th>
<th>$F$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Corrected model</td>
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<td>16.197</td>
<td>21.929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propensity to trust</td>
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<td>68.944</td>
<td>93.344*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsorship type (A)</td>
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<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product type (B)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34.092</td>
<td>46.158*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand awareness (C)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.325</td>
<td>5.856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$A \times B$</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.457</td>
<td>0.619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$A \times C$</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.428</td>
<td>1.934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$B \times C$</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.993</td>
<td>2.698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$A \times B \times C$</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.212</td>
<td>0.287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>0.739</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>613</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dependent variable: Attitude toward sponsored recommendation post. $^*$ $p$-Value < 0.05. $^*$ $p$-Value < 0.001.

### Table 3
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pearson correlation</th>
<th>Attitude toward sponsored recommendation post</th>
<th>Purchase intention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$r$</td>
<td>0.524</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression analysis</th>
<th>Attitude toward sponsored recommendation post</th>
<th>Purchase intention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>Standardized beta</td>
<td>Standard error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$-value</td>
<td>230.934</td>
<td>0.274</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dependent variable: Purchase intention

$p$-Value < 0.001.

### 5. Conclusion

Since sponsored posts on blogs are often thought to be an effective marketing tool, examination of consumer attitudes toward blog posts written by the bloggers who receive benefits from a sponsor is important. This study thus conducts a 2 (sponsorship type) $\times$ 2 (product type) $\times$ 2 (brand awareness) experimental design under the control variable of propensity to trust. A valid sample of 613 respondents is used to examine consumer attitude toward sponsored recommendation posts and purchase intention. First, based on the results of the ANCOVA test, sponsorship type has no significant effect on attitude toward a sponsored recommendation post, which is contrary to H1. Whether bloggers receive direct-monetary (i.e., cash) or indirect-monetary (i.e., 50% off coupon) benefits to write a recommended post, consumer attitudes toward the blog post remain unaffected. Thus, though the material connection between the bloggers and the sponsor company is revealed in the blog posts, consumers do not have a negative attitude toward such recommended posts. One possible reason may be that consumers feel the blog post, which honestly reveals that it is a sponsored article, is not trying to mislead or cheat them, and thus what kind of benefits are received by the blogger is no longer important.

Second, there is a significant relationship between product type and attitude toward sponsored recommendation posts, the focus of H2. If the product in the post is a search good, consumers will be more likely to have a positive and high attitude toward the sponsored recommendation post than when the recommended goods are experience goods. This result is consistent with previous studies which indicate that the features for search goods are more stable, objective, and easy to evaluate than the features of experience goods (Hsieh et al., 2005). Thus, consumers believe that such bloggers can submit an objective recommendation of search goods (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Additionally, hypothesis 3, which suggests that attitude toward a sponsored recommendation post is affected by brand awareness, is supported by the results of this study. If consumers have high brand awareness of the brand of a product recommended in a blog article, their attitudes toward a sponsored recommendation post will become positive. These findings are supported by the work of Laroche et al. (1996), who suggest that consumers’ confidence and trust toward a brand increases if the brand awareness is high. Thus, consumers would be more likely to believe the claims of the post when they have high brand awareness.

Finally, this study also examines the effect of attitude toward a sponsored recommendation post on purchase intention (H4). The results show that if consumers believe the content of a recommendation post and have a positive attitude toward the blogger, they
will form the intention to purchase the product recommended in the blog post. Thus, a credible recommendation post should affect consumers' willingness to purchase products (Bouhlel et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2008).

6. Implication

Based on its findings, this study makes several theoretical contributions to the field of online marketing communication. First, because previous research examining sponsored blog posts recommending products is limited, this study submits a quantitative experimental research to understand consumer attitudes toward sponsored recommendation posts. The features of recommendation posts written by bloggers who received benefits from a sponsor are somewhat different than those of an online consumer review. Therefore, scholars should investigate bloggers' sponsored recommendation posts with a view to improve the effectiveness of online communication rather than focusing solely on the topic of online consumer reviews. Further research should extend the research model of this study in the context of sponsored recommendation posts. Second, few studies have examined the antecedent factors that affect consumer attitudes toward sponsored recommendation posts. This study considers the sponsorship type and the features of the recommended goods (such as product type and brand awareness) in its research framework in order to determine what improves consumer attitudes toward the claim in the blog post. These findings support a preliminary understanding of reader perceptions of blog articles as they evaluate a particular product before purchase. Finally, this study also incorporates the consequence factor of purchase intention in its research model. The effectiveness of a sponsored recommendation post in improving consumer willingness to purchase is a key issue for research.

From a marketing perspective, some practical suggestions are also revealed. Using blogger recommendations to foster positive eWOM, which in turn improves consumers' purchase intention, is important to marketers. This study finds that consumers do not feel the bloggers receiving direct-monetary or indirect-monetary benefits for the post are embarrassed and their attitudes toward such sponsored recommendation posts remain unaffected by the knowledge that the post is sponsored. Based on an honestly revealed relationship between the bloggers and the sponsor, the source credibility of sponsored recommendation posts appears to be considered true and believable to readers. Sponsored recommendation posts may thus be a useful online communication media to deliver experience-based product/service information. Additionally, this study suggests that if the recommended goods are search goods or have good brand awareness, consumers would be more likely to trust the blog post. Marketers should use these features of goods to improve the credibility of sponsored recommendation posts, which will raise the effectiveness of the advertisement. By the same token, bloggers who are willing to write a sponsored article must select the recommended goods carefully in order to avoid losing their readers' trust.

7. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Further studies may wish to expand on the model in this study. First, convenience sampling is used to obtain the sample of this study. Thus, individuals 16–30 years old comprise the bulk of respondents even though the sample characteristics are consistent with previous online surveys. Generalizability is also limited because the survey sample is obtained solely from Taiwan. Further study is needed to extend the sample profile by random sampling and to engage in cross-cultural comparison to improve understanding of sponsored recommendation posts and consumers' perceptions of goods recommended on a personal blog.

Second, although this study considers the construct of propensity to trust as a control variable to limit unexpected variation, consumers' prior experiences with the product brand may influence the results of this study since the four brands used in the experiments exist in real life. Further research should use more controls when manipulating factors in the experiment. Using virtual products or fictional brand names may reduce biases. Third, this study uses search and experience goods as its two product types. However, classifications such as tangible/intangible goods or hedonic/utilitarian goods may also be useful in examining consumer attitudes or purchase behaviors toward goods recommended in sponsored blog posts. Consumer involvement with a particular product is also a vital issue in the context of consumer behavior studies. Thus, scholars should extend the model of this study to examine the antecedents of consumer responses to sponsored recommendation posts. Finally, although the effect of brand awareness is statistically significant under the large sample size of 613 respondents, the mean difference of brand awareness between the “High” and “Low” group is just 0.17. For strong evidence of this relationship, further study on these two variables is needed.

Appendix A. The description of stimulus and its sample size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Version number</th>
<th>Sponsorship type</th>
<th>Product type</th>
<th>Brand awareness</th>
<th>Representative brand</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Direct-monetary</td>
<td>Search goods</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Sony Ericsson</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Direct-monetary</td>
<td>Search goods</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>DOOV</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Direct-monetary</td>
<td>Experience goods</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Liontravel</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Direct-monetary</td>
<td>Experience goods</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Da Wang travel</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Indirect-Monetary</td>
<td>Search goods</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Sony Ericsson</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Indirect-Monetary</td>
<td>Search goods</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>DOOV</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Indirect-Monetary</td>
<td>Experience goods</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Liontravel</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Indirect-Monetary</td>
<td>Experience goods</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Da Wang travel</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix B. The measures of variables

B.1. Product type

1. I have the ability to judge product performance or assess their important attributes before purchase or use it.
2. I have the ability to judge product performance or assess their important attributes after purchase or use it.
B.2. Brand awareness
1. I know this brand.
2. When it comes to (product), I can immediately recall the brand.

B.3. Attitude toward sponsored recommendation post
1. I think this article tells the truth.
2. I don’t believe in what the blogger wrote in this article. (R)
3. I can learn the real product information from this article.
4. After reading this article, I have been accurately informed about the product information.

B.4. Purchase intention
1. I would consider buying this product.
2. I have no intention to buy this product. (R)
3. It is possible that I would buy this product.
4. I will purchase (brand) the next time I need a (product).
5. If I am in need, I would buy this (product).

B.5. Propensity to trust
1. I generally trust other people.
2. It is easy for me to trust a person.
3. For me, trusting a person is not difficult.
4. My tendency to trust a person is high.
5. I tend to trust a person, even though I have little knowledge of him.

Note: (R) denotes the reverse item.

References