



# 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.

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## 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

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sponsorship on consumer attitudes toward 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 by marketers 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  $2(\text{sponsorship type}) \times 2(\text{product type}) \times 2(\text{brand awareness})$  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 on 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

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