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Ethics in social media marketing

How should sponsorship information be disclosed in online product reviews?

Ethics in
social media
marketing

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Abstract

Purpose – Consumer-generated online product reviews (OPRs) have become a crucial source of information for consumers; however, OPRs are increasingly being incentivized. The purpose of this paper is to find a method of sponsorship and disclosure that could be considered ethically sound.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopted a quasi-experimental approach to clarifying how the method of sponsorship impacts reader perceptions of OPRs in terms of helpfulness, credibility and purchase intention. Two experiments were performed on an online platform using data from 480 participants. Hypotheses were tested using analysis of covariance.

Findings – Meaning under the premise that sponsorship information is disclosed and not withheld from the readers, Study 1 revealed that experiential sponsorship is the best sponsorship. Study 2 revealed that featuring reviewers with greater influence in the online community increases the positive influence of disclosing experiential sponsorship on OPR persuasiveness.

Originality/value – The findings in this study provide rational incentives for firms to disclose sponsorship information, i.e. demonstrate high ethical standards in marketing. This was shown to create a win-win-win situation for consumers, firms and reviewers. Managerial implications for online marketing managers are also discussed.

Keywords Online product reviews, Marketing ethics, Experience goods, Online community influence, Sponsored reviews, Sponsorship type

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is the sharing of relevant knowledge and opinions (positive or negative) about the products and/or services of a firm among potential or actual customers (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin, 2015; Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen, 2015; Chen *et al.*, 2017). In Web 2.0, consumers actively receive information through networks and also act as the main entity spreading information. This has prompted explosive growth in online forums, blogs and social media, which allow consumers to share their thoughts on products or services quickly and conveniently (Kuo, 2015; Kim and Song, 2018). Consumer-generated online product reviews (OPRs) are growing in popularity and importance (Jonas, 2010; Stephen *et al.*, 2012; Lee and Choeh, 2018). OPRs contain the opinions and ratings of users with regard to the attributes, performance and use of products. They are generally found on platforms that present an extensive range of information, such as blogs (Forrest and Cao, 2010; Tsao and Hsieh, 2015; Yu, 2017).

OPRs should in no way be connected with firms (to avoid ethical conflict); however, many studies have reported that firms can influence OPRs in an indirect manner. This calls into question the impartiality and credibility of OPRs (Chu, 2010). Many firms are operating under the belief that the voluntary disclosure of sponsorships would undermine the effectiveness of OPRs, prompting them to devise methods to hide the sponsorship information (Stephen *et al.*, 2012). The concealment of sponsorship information is essentially



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an attempt to deceive consumers. It is clearly a violation of corporate ethics and is even illegal in many countries (Forrest and Cao, 2010; Fair Trade Commission, 2017).

Previous studies on the persuasiveness of eWOM and OPRs explored content properties (e.g. quality, quantity, focus or valence) (Park *et al.*, 2007; Park and Kim, 2008; Zhang *et al.*, 2010; Qiu *et al.*, 2012; Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin, 2015; Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen, 2015; Chakraborty and Bhat, 2018), whereas others investigated product type (e.g. search, experience and credence goods) or eWOM platform (e.g. independent or corporate platform). Still, others attempted to enhance eWOM persuasiveness by separating and combining various product types and eWOM platform variables (Park and Lee, 2009; Tsao and Hsieh, 2015). Researchers have used the technology acceptance model to examine the influence of eWOM trust on consumer willingness to purchase tourism products (Chen *et al.*, 2017). Other researchers have used big data to determine how eWOM impacts the growth of consumer finance (Shen *et al.*, 2017). Still, others adopted used experiential models to verify how blog characteristics and experiential value induces purchase intentions in consumers (Wang, 2017; Lee, 2016). However, most previous studies were conducted from the perspective of the firm and how marketing communications and OPR design could benefit them. Very few studies touched on the issue of ethical business practices in the operation of OPRs. This issue is of particular importance in countries where sponsorship disclosure is regulated by law.

Very few studies have discussed the disclosure of sponsorship information by reviewers. Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin (2015) and Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen (2015) verified the deliberate withholding of sponsorship information could have a devastating impact on the persuasiveness of OPRs in the event that this situation became known. Hwang and Jeong (2016) investigated the relationship honesty in sponsorship disclosure on blogs (such as simple disclosure and “honest opinions” disclosure) and the credibility of the source. Lu *et al.* (2014) examined how various types of sponsorship influence consumer attitudes toward the recommendations; however, they focused only on the provision of financial incentives by sponsors. Kim and Song (2018) explored the influence of content sponsorship (organic vs sponsored) and content type (promotional vs experience centric) on the inference of manipulative intent, brand attitude and click intention among Twitter users. All of these studies discussed the influence of sponsorship type on OPRs or eWOM persuasiveness; however, none of them explored the reasons for favoring one strategy over another. Nor did any previous study take into consideration how the traits of the reviewer (such as community influence) could affect the outcomes of sponsorship disclosure. In this study, we employed non-disclosure as the control variable to identify the best sponsorship disclosure policy while taking into account the sponsorship type and the influence of reviewers in the community. In other words, this study sought to identify the types of sponsorship that would be most beneficial to the firm, the reviewer and the consumers.

In this study, we endeavored to provide firms with suggestions on dealing with sponsorship and disclosure issues. Our objective was to identify strategies that would comply with high ethical standards in marketing as well as relevant legal regulations without compromising the persuasiveness of their recommendations or the credibility of the source. Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin (2015) and Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen (2015) reported that disclosing sponsorship messages in blogs would significantly decrease the persuasiveness of OPRs by undermining the credibility of the blogger, resulting in a notable decrease in purchase intention. In this study, we conducted two sub-studies: first, an investigation into the type of sponsorship disclosure strategies best able to preserve the persuasiveness of OPRs; and second, an investigation into the degree to which the influence of the reviewer in the community could alter the outcomes of sponsorship disclosure. The most significant contribution of this study was the identification of rational incentives for firms to abide by marketing ethics.

2. Theoretical background, and literature review

Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin (2015) and Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen (2015) conducted an experiment using two scenarios with one group of participants. The participants first read a blog post with no disclosure of sponsorship information. The researchers then told them that the reviewer received financial sponsorship from the firm, and examined how this revelation affected the influence of the review. They found that a failure to disclose sponsorship information greatly undermined the persuasiveness of the OPR, including the helpfulness and credibility of the reviews as well as the purchase intention of the readers. However, that study failed to provide a solution to the problem of information disclosure. Lu *et al.* (2014) examined the sponsored recommendations of bloggers; however, they focused only on financial rewards. Sponsorship can also be provided using non-monetary methods (Chu, 2010; Stephen *et al.*, 2012). Hwang and Jeong (2016) discussed the ethical implication of sponsorship disclosure (e.g. disclosure and “honest opinions” disclosure), rather than the types of sponsorship that are actually employed by firms. Kim and Song (2018) divided content sponsorship into two categories: organic (i.e. unpaid) and sponsored (i.e. paid). Their primary focus was on OPR content (promotional vs experience centric); however, they did not touch on the issue of how firms could be motivated to proactively disclose sponsorship. In this study, we divided the types of sponsorship into financial, non-financial and dual sponsorship. This study also adopted the evaluation index used in previous eWOM researches, using helpfulness, credibility and purchase intention to determine the persuasiveness of OPR (Li *et al.*, 2013; Tsao and Hsieh, 2015; Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin, 2015; Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen, 2015). This study also examined sponsorship disclosure within the context of blogs, due to their growing popularity and influence in the online community (Fullwood *et al.*, 2009).

2.1 Disclosure of sponsorship information

Information disclosure is a term that was first used in corporate finance, wherein firms communicate with the public, stakeholders and their investors through the disclosure of financial information. In some cases, the disclosure of information is voluntary, whereas in other cases, it is mandated by the law (Brounen *et al.*, 2001). The issue of information disclosure is becoming important in internet marketing as well. Community website posts that are remunerated by the manufacturer or distributor (in any way) are deemed to be sponsored (Hwang and Jeong, 2016). In the case of blogs, numerous countries including the USA, UK, Taiwan and South Korea have clear laws stipulating that any paid endorsements from firms related to reviewed products must be disclosed by the blogger (Stephen *et al.*, 2012; Lu *et al.*, 2014; Jensen and Yetgin, 2017; Fair Trade Commission, 2017). Regardless of the legal ramifications, ethical business practices dictate that firms be encouraged to disclose sponsorship information. Unfortunately, many firms are concerned that knowledge of sponsorship could alter the opinions of consumers. They fear that the review would not be considered honest or regard it simply as a crass marketing tool. There remains a dearth of research pertaining to the outcomes of sponsorship disclosure and the credibility of sponsored reviewers.

2.2 Online product reviews and sponsored reviews

OPRs include opinions and experiences with products or services, which are shared via the internet to assist others in making purchase decisions (Stephen *et al.*, 2012; Li *et al.*, 2013; Kim and Song, 2018). OPRs are becoming a significant factor in the success of internet marketing (Kwon and Sung, 2012). Non-commercial OPRs that are involved with the source firm should be designated as sponsored reviews (Jensen and Yetgin, 2017). Marketers use network analysis (communications traffic and content analysis) to identify key consumers who could be recruited as agents (Forrest and Cao, 2010). Agents (i.e. professional reviewers)

are often active on major retailer websites (such as Amazon.com or Twitter) or social network platforms (such as blogs) and silently perform eWOM communication for other firms (Forrest and Cao, 2010; Chu, 2010; Floyd *et al.*, 2014; Kim and Song, 2018). The main criticism aimed at this type of communication is the way it emulates conventional (i.e. objective) eWOM by failing to disclose sponsorship information. In fact, many firms actively seek to disguise or conceal their sponsorship, which in many cases is seen as an attempt to skirt the law.

2.3 OPR persuasiveness

Researchers have sought to gauge the persuasiveness of eWOM, with a particular focus on the cognitive aspect of assessments, i.e. the perceived helpfulness and credibility of reviews (Li *et al.*, 2013; Tsao and Hsieh, 2015; Tsao and Lin, 2017; Hwang and Jeong, 2016; Chakraborty and Bhat, 2018; Hajli, 2018). Other researchers have focused on the behavioral aspect, including purchase intention, booking intention, movie selection or adoption intention (Tsao, 2014; Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin, 2015; Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen, 2015; Tsao and Hsieh, 2015; Chakraborty and Bhat, 2018; Hajli, 2018; Tsao and Lin, 2017). Thus, this study also included helpfulness, credibility and purchase intention to describe the persuasiveness of OPR.

2.3.1 OPR helpfulness. Li *et al.* (2013) examined OPR helpfulness from the perspective of helping behavior, believing that with limited time and resources, consumers would use the internet to search for information and reduce uncertainty. OPRs from customers or experts can help potential consumers to make purchase decisions. When consumers come into contact with this kind of information, it is generally assumed to be a non-commercial endorsement from another consumer who simply wants to help others. Potential consumers, therefore, believe that OPRs will benefit them in making purchase decisions (Li *et al.*, 2013; Pan and Zhang, 2011). The degree to which the content of an OPR informs the reader is a crucial factor in characterizing helpfulness (Stephen *et al.*, 2012). Lee and Choeh (2018) reported that the helpfulness of a review can help reinforce the influence of review quantity, valence and length on movie box office results. OPRs that are more helpful tend to increase OPR adoption, thereby assisting consumers to decide which brand/product to purchase, i.e. guiding future consumption scenarios (Hajli, 2018).

2.3.2 OPR credibility. Credibility is widely cited by researchers in the assessment of information and information sources. It has recently been included in research models on the effects of eWOM and social WOM (Tsao and Hsieh, 2015; Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin, 2015; Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen, 2015; Chakraborty and Bhat, 2018; Hajli, 2018). Cheung *et al.* (2009) defined OPR credibility as the degree to which readers view the content of a recommendation/review to be believable, true or factual, whereas Qiu *et al.* (2012) defined it as the degree to which a review is considered true and valid. The identity and activeness of the reviewer are two of the clues that readers use to assess OPR credibility. In online communities where anonymity is possible, readers are more likely to trust and accept the views of reviewers whose real identities are more easily known and credit said reviewers with their contribution of knowledge (Ma and Agarwal, 2007). This shows that when the OPR source has more professional or notary certification (such as more identifying labels and certification marks or a high popularity index) or is named, the credibility of the OPR is higher.

2.3.3 Purchase intention. When a consumer shows personal action tendencies toward a certain product/brand, then it means that they have purchase intention (Spears and Singh, 2004). Spears and Singh (2004) explained purchase intention as a consumer's conscious efforts and plans to purchase a product. Dodds *et al.* (1991) defined purchase intention as the

likelihood that a consumer will purchase a product based on their attitude or assessment of said product after being stimulated by an external factor. Hence, greater likelihood implies a higher purchase intention (Tsao, 2014).

3. Study 1: influence of sponsorship type on OPR persuasiveness

A review of the literature revealed that concealing sponsorship information can enhance the persuasiveness of OPRs (Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin, 2015; Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen, 2015); however, it is a direct violation of marketing ethics and is outright illegal in some countries. Thus, in sub-study 1, this study sought to identify the type of sponsorship best suited to the disclosure of sponsorship information.

3.1 *Sponsorship type*

Customers are offered numerous types of incentive in exchange for OPRs; however, they can be broken down into two major categories: monetary and non-monetary. Monetary incentives include money, raffles, discounts, points that can be redeemed for free products, and partial refunds or rebates. Non-monetary incentives involve the provision of free products or services experiences (Stephen *et al.*, 2012; Chu, 2010). Blogs are among the most popular OPRs because they encompass text, pictures, video files and links to other sites as well as responses from reviewers (i.e. high in richness and interactivity). The unique style of a blogger can have a profound impact on others and gain a considerable number of followers (Fullwood *et al.*, 2009). In in-depth interviews with bloggers, Chu (2010) found that firms provide a variety of incentives to obtain recommendations for products. Based on the online influence of the blogger, the incentives could range from free products to gifts or even monetary rewards. Based on the classification of incentives and the characteristics of blogs, we divided sponsorship into three types: monetary sponsorship, experiential sponsorship (based on free trials of products) and dual sponsorship (a combination of the two).

3.2 *Research hypotheses*

eWOM is characterized by actual use or experiences of consumers. As for their commercial nature, no transactions exist between the reviewers and firms, so OPRs are essentially different from commercial advertisements (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). These two characteristics also make OPRs more persuasive than conventional advertisements. However, in practice, eWOM, particularly OPRs, is showing a trend of being incentivized (Stephen *et al.*, 2012; Chu, 2010; Floyd *et al.*, 2014; Lu *et al.*, 2014). In some countries, incentivized OPRs are considered another form of advertising and are similar to the testimonial commercials on television (Stephen *et al.*, 2012).

In terms of experiential sponsorship, the blogger actually uses the product before writing an OPR. This means that the review contains personal experiences. Researchers have discovered that when consumers read OPRs, they pay attention to whether the blogger has actually experienced the product that they recommend, and this affects their perception of the authenticity and credibility of the review (Lin *et al.*, 2011; Stephen *et al.*, 2012). For some researchers, free products are seen as a type of reward. When experts or opinion leaders try out and endorse a product, they can make the product sound more interesting. It is also possible that receiving exclusive offers may enhance their engagement with the product (Oberhofer *et al.*, 2014). In view of the above, this study infers that consumers tend to regard sponsored products as the firm trying to encourage consumer participation with the aim of more fully and accurately conveying product performance. Thus, it would be reasonable to expect that the persuasiveness of reviews based on experiential sponsorship should be on par with that of reviews for which sponsorship information is not disclosed.

Tong *et al.* (2007) discovered that when reviewers accept economic rewards from a sponsor, it is harder for them to say what they really feel in their reviews. This type of review is likely to favor the firm, which is why they are referred to as professional fake reviews (Schneiderman, 2013). By paying, firms are seeking to control the reviewer directly and imperceptibly to produce messages that are favorable to their company/product. Readers who know that a recommendation was paid for tend to question the fairness and authenticity of the review process, which can lower their expectation of the quality of the product and may even negatively affect the persuasiveness of the review (Stephen *et al.*, 2012). Thus, readers see paid reviews as professional fake reviews, even in cases where the product experience process is described. Thus, the persuasiveness of such reviews is considerably weaker than that of reviews with experiential sponsorship. Reviews with purely monetary sponsorship cannot be considered eWOM (i.e. they are no longer non-commercial and are no longer based on personal experience). From this, this study infers that this greatly undermines the persuasiveness of such reviews (Stephen *et al.*, 2012; Schneiderman, 2013). Thus:

- H1. Compared to non-disclosure, the disclosure of monetary or dual sponsorship exerts a significantly negative influence on (a) OPR helpfulness, (b) OPR credibility and (c) purchase intention, whereas the disclosure of experiential sponsorship does not have a significant influence.

3.3 Methods

3.3.1 Design and participants. Study 1 deals exclusively with the influence of sponsorship type (independent variable) on OPR persuasiveness (dependent variable), i.e. the other variables were excluded. The experimental design adopted in this study provided control over other factors. Thus, the researchers needed only to manipulate the independent variables (i.e. factors) and observe the resulting changes in the dependent variables. When an experiment cannot be conducted in a laboratory, or when the study samples cannot be randomly assigned, the experimental design is called a quasi-experimental design (Pimperl *et al.*, 2017).

The participants took part in the experiment in places that were familiar to them and allowed them to be at ease, such as their offices, schools or homes, which made this a field experiment (Wu and Lin, 2001). Difficulty in obtaining a register of consumer populations precluded the random assignment of participants. Thus, in Study 1, we adopted a one-factor quasi-experimental design focusing on sponsorship type: monetary/experiential/dual/non-disclosure with non-disclosure serving as a control. By manipulating these four scenarios, this study examined how OPR persuasiveness varied among the four scenarios. The participants were recruited on a community website. Participants were presented four hyperlinks, each of which led to one of four scenarios. The participants were free to choose from among the hyperlinks, i.e., they were not randomly assigned to the scenarios.

All of the participants reported reading online restaurant reviews in the past. A total of 180 participants completed the experiment, which yielded 160 valid samples. The statistics of the participants were as follows. Males 45.6 percent, between the age of 21 and 30 (80.0 percent), students (38.8 percent), working in the service industry (24.4 percent). The participants reported reading blogs every month as follows: 6–10 times per month (53.8 percent) and 1–5 times per month (28.1 percent). The most common types of blog were travel blogs (22.5 percent) and restaurant blogs (18.8 percent).

3.3.2 Development of stimuli and measures. Peng *et al.* (2011) observed that restaurant blogs are very common on community websites. The photos and vivid descriptions help readers to form a sense of presence and encourage them to give it a try. Thus, the study used

blogs to represent OPRs in this study. Consumers wishing to buy experience or credence goods tend to rely more on the opinions of experts or experienced consumers as their source of information, in order to reduce uncertainty and perceived risk (Park and Lee, 2009; Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin, 2015; Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen, 2015). In previous studies, restaurants are widely regarded as representative of experience goods (Peng *et al.*, 2013; Tsao, 2014; Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin, 2015; Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen, 2015). We, therefore, focused on restaurants in this study. The use of a known brand is the easiest way to enhance the authenticity of an experiment. However, the study sought to avoid the potential moderating effect of corporate awareness on the results. The research, therefore, selected a newly established restaurant (de reve café), as the subject of this experiment. This French-style café is modeled on the Eiffel Tower and offers mainly afternoon tea.

This study used an actual blog article for the experiment to enhance authenticity. Following a review of blogs with suitable photos and text, we selected the review of de reve café on the blog Farmer, listed on Holiday PaPaGo in Taiwan. The article described the location, facilities and menu of the restaurant, i.e. it was an informed review. It earned a recommendation from the reviewer. The article included 38 photos inserted throughout the text. To prevent interference from the reputation of the blogger, we omitted any mention of the blogger's identity from the article.

The independent variable in this experiment was the type of sponsorship disclosed to the public (participants): monetary sponsorship, experiential sponsorship and dual sponsorship. Non-disclosure was used as a control group. The dependent variables were the various aspects of OPR persuasiveness, which were represented using three constructs: OPR helpfulness, OPR credibility and purchase intention. OPR helpfulness refers to the degree to which the OPR can help consumers understand the firm and product, provide guidance for future consumption scenarios, and assist in making judgments and decisions (Li *et al.*, 2010; Pan and Zhang, 2011). This study used nine question items in three sub-constructs (perceived source credibility, perceived content diagnosticity and perceived vicarious expression) to measure OPR helpfulness. OPR credibility refers to the degree to which consumers perceive that the OPR content is true, valid and believable (Cheung *et al.*, 2009; Qiu *et al.*, 2012). This study designed four question items to measure OPR credibility. A total of 13 items of OPR helpfulness and OPR credibility were measured via responses to questionnaires using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Purchase intention is defined as the likelihood that a consumer will dine in this restaurant (Dodds *et al.*, 1991). Three items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very low probability) to 7 (very high probability). Question content and related references are provided in the Appendix.

3.3.3 Experimental procedure. The implementation of this experiment and the collection of opinions were all performed online. Invitations to participate in the experiment were posted on various community websites with the aim of recruiting participants who had previously read restaurant reviews. Participants arbitrarily clicked on one hyperlink, which led to one of four scenarios, thereby initiating the experiment process (see Figure 1).

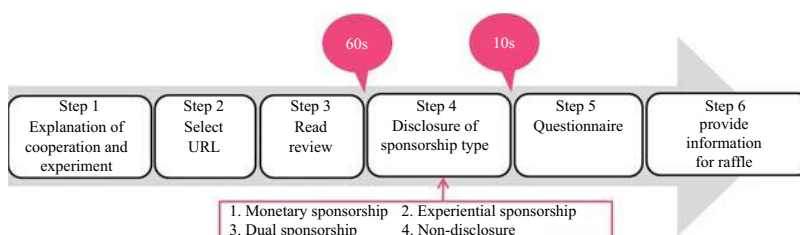


Figure 1.
The comprehensive
experimental
procedure in
the Study 1

Of special note is the manipulation of the disclosure statements provided each of the review scenarios in Step 4: experiential sponsorship (this review was solicited by the restaurant in exchange for a free meal); monetary sponsorship (this review was solicited by the restaurant in exchange for financial remuneration); dual sponsorship (this review was solicited by the restaurant in exchange for a free meal and financial remuneration). The control group did not receive a disclosure statement.

3.4 Results and discussion

3.4.1 Manipulation check and hypothesis testing. The validity of the samples was verified by manipulating two of the questions: first, confirming the type of sponsorship; and second, a negatively worded item related to attitude. This resulted in 160 valid samples. Cronbach's α of OPR helpfulness, OPR credibility and purchase intention were 0.972, 0.971 and 0.931, respectively. This indicates a high degree of internal consistency among the four dependent constructs (Wortzel, 1979). These results demonstrate the success of the manipulations in this experiment and the suitability of the resulting experiment data for subsequent analysis.

The hypothesis was tested using one-way analysis of variance. According to the literature, gender and reading behavior (number and types of blog read each month) could influence OPR persuasiveness. Thus, we included both of these items as covariables in the model (InsightXplorer, 2014). As shown in Table I, the main effect of type of disclosed sponsorship revealed significant differences in OPR helpfulness ($F_{(3, 153)} = 58.643$, $p < 0.001$), OPR credibility ($F_{(3, 153)} = 73.269$, $p < 0.001$) and purchase intention ($F_{(3, 153)} = 27.360$, $p < 0.001$). This is a clear indication that the type of disclosed sponsorship influences the persuasiveness of OPR.

Scheffe's procedure is the most popular *post hoc* procedure, providing a high degree of flexibility and conservative results. Scheffe's test was performed to further evaluate the hypothesis and explore differences between the mean of non-disclosure and the mean values of the other three types of sponsorship.

As shown in Table II, the mean of OPR helpfulness resulting from non-disclosure was significantly higher than those resulting from monetary sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis.}} = 4.969$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{monetary}} = 2.539$, $p < 0.001$) and dual sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis.}} = 4.969$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{dual}} = 3.161$, $p < 0.001$). However, we did not observe a significant difference between the mean non-disclosure values and those of experiential sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis.}} = 4.969$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{experiential}} = 4.629$, $p > 0.05$). Thus, *H1a* is supported. The mean of OPR credibility resulting from non-disclosure was significantly higher than those of monetary sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis.}} = 5.981$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{monetary}} = 2.831$, $p < 0.001$) and dual sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis.}} = 5.981$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{dual}} = 3.100$, $p < 0.001$). Again, we did not observe a significant difference between the mean non-disclosure values and those of experiential sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis.}} = 5.981$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{experiential}} = 5.613$, $p > 0.05$). Thus, *H1b* is supported. The mean of purchase intention resulting from non-disclosure was significantly higher than those resulting from monetary sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis.}} = 5.383$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{monetary}} = 3.075$, $p < 0.001$) and dual

Source/dependent variable	OPR helpfulness		OPR credibility		Purchase intention	
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender	0.520	0.472	0.748	0.388	0.103	0.749
Number of blogs read	5.042	0.026	3.198	0.076	3.659	0.058
Type of blogs read	0.511	0.459	0.567	0.453	2.196	0.140
Type of sponsorship disclosed	58.643	0.000***	73.269	0.000***	27.360	0.000**

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table I.
ANCOVA results

Control group	Sponsorship type	Mean	Mean difference (I-J)	p-value
<i>OPR helpfulness</i>				
Non-disclosure (I) ($M = 4.969$)	Experiential sponsorship (J)	4.629	0.340	0.480
	Monetary sponsorship (J)	2.539	2.431	0.000***
	Dual sponsorship (J)	3.161	1.808	0.000***
<i>OPR credibility</i>				
Non-disclosure (I) ($M = 5.981$)	Experiential sponsorship (J)	5.613	0.369	0.615
	Monetary sponsorship (J)	2.831	3.150	0.000***
	Dual sponsorship (J)	3.100	2.881	0.000***
<i>Purchase intention</i>				
Non-disclosure (I) ($M = 5.383$)	Experiential sponsorship (J)	4.942	0.442	0.548
	Monetary sponsorship (J)	3.075	2.308	0.000***
	Dual sponsorship (J)	3.592	1.792	0.000***

Table II.
Scheffe' test
results for OPR
persuasiveness

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis.}} = 5.383$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{dual}} = 3.592$, $p < 0.001$). Once again, we did not observe a significant difference between the mean non-disclosure values and those of experiential sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis.}} = 5.383$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{experiential}} = 4.942$, $p < 0.548$). Consequently, *H1c* is supported.

3.4.2 Discussion. Our objective in Study 1 was to identify the best type of sponsorship in cases where disclosure is promoted or expected. Experiential sponsorship was shown to be the best method of sponsorship due to the fact that the persuasiveness of these reviews does not diminish, even after being disclosed. Another significant finding of this study was that any type of sponsorship involving money had a negative influence on OPR persuasiveness, and the effects were most pronounced when using pure monetary sponsorship. The addition of experiential sponsorship (i.e. dual sponsorship) somewhat mitigated the negative effects of monetary rewards. This is a clear indication that in OPR communication, the experience users have with a product/service plays a crucial role in the positive conversion of communication or persuasiveness.

4. Study 2: application of online community influence on OPR management

Opinion leaders and professional critics are generally experts in their fields; therefore, their knowledge, opinions or actions are valued highly by others (Fenner, 2012). Individuals in this position can have a profound impact (direct or indirect) on the purchase decisions of consumers, particularly when it comes to experience goods, restaurants, movies and tourist activities (Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin, 2015; Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen, 2015; Tsao, 2014). Their reviews also tend to receive strong responses from followers (Fenner, 2012; Tsao, 2014). Response indicators include ratings, the number of page views, comments, shares and awards. These accomplishments are commonly displayed on web pages as an indirect of the influence the reviewer has in the online community (Lu *et al.*, 2014). These indicators can add to the fame and reputation of the reviewer and further influence the decisions and intentions of the followers (Pixnet, 2014). Study 2 extended the analysis in study 1 to include the influence of the online community in the research framework with the aim of finding an advantageous approach to sponsoring opinion leaders under the premise of full disclosure.

4.1 Influence of online communities

The internet serves as a nexus of interpersonal relationships (Ridings and Gefen, 2004). Online communities have become prominent platforms allowing novices and experts alike to

share information in an informal setting. The sharing of information had a profound impact on the way that online consumers collect product information and make purchase decisions (Lee *et al.*, 2003; Pollster, 2012). The influence of prominent online community members has not gone unnoticed in the corporate world. Prominent internet personalities are increasingly being used by corporations to guide the behavioral intentions of those within their sphere of influence (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010).

4.2 Research hypotheses

Social influence refers to the altering of one's opinions in response to the opinions of others. Researchers have defined two categories of influence: normative and informational (Cheung *et al.*, 2009). Normative influence is the pressure of submission that an individual feels when wanting to meet the expectations of a group, such as agreeing with a reviewer's recommendation or rating of a product. As can be seen, social influence takes place in community aggregations where OPRs exist. The indicators of response that reviewers display can also be considered a source of normative influence.

Many online consumers also share consumption information with others on their own websites or blogs (Hwang and Jeong, 2016). Bloggers often describe the characteristics and functions of a product based on personal experience and even rate the product as a consumer reference. They may be driven by an altruistic desire to help others and/or a selfish desire to gain attention from advertisers or other corporate entities (Li and Du, 2011). Many bloggers with strong community influence make an effort to provide professional content to assist readers in making purchase decisions. They also work hard to interact with their followers to build their credibility and the value of their OPRs. Websites that have been operating for an extended period are more easily found, and their articles are widely disseminated. This means that they have a greater chance of influencing consumer decisions. This study, therefore, infers that the OPRs of bloggers with greater influence in an online community possess stronger credibility and stronger influence in the purchase intention of their readers. Accordingly, the hypothesis is proposed:

- H2. Influence in an online community has a positive impact on (a) OPR helpfulness, (b) OPR credibility and (c) purchase intention.

In evaluating the value of OPRs, consumers often take into account whether the reviewer has actually used the product or service in question. This kind of experience is valued far more highly than simply reposting the experiences of others or providing a simple description (Lin *et al.*, 2011; Stephen *et al.*, 2012). Experiential sponsorship is an incentive provided by a firm; however, many people regard free products of this kind as a form of trial sample, similar to those provided to consumers. As a result, consumer perceptions of experiential sponsorship differ somewhat from their perceptions of monetary sponsorship. The source of this difference lies in whether the description in the OPR is based on the personal experience of the reviewer, which is viewed as more authentic (Verlegh *et al.*, 2013; Carr and Hayes, 2014).

The operation of blogs has recently been changing. In the past, many bloggers positioned their platforms as venues for the sharing of opinions on products and brands; however, this often turned into aimless chats in the comment sections. Popular fashion bloggers are increasingly establishing themselves as tastemakers, which involves strategically using their sense of taste to gain followers and their opinions to influence them. Many popular bloggers place a monetary value on their taste/opinions, and view free products as fair exchange for the service they provide (Fenner, 2012). Thus, the study believes that strong community influence can have a direct impact on the persuasiveness of OPRs (as asserted in H2). This study also believes that the positive influence of

non-disclosure and experiential sponsorship on OPR persuasiveness mentioned in *H1* will be augmented. Hence, the hypothesis is suggested:

- H3.* The influence of bloggers over an online community strengthens the positive influence of non-disclosure and disclosing experiential sponsorship on (a) OPR helpfulness, (b) OPR credibility, and (c) the purchase intention of readers.

4.3 Methods

4.3.1 Design and participants. Again, we adopted a quasi-experimental design for Study 2. A field experiment was similarly adopted, for which participants were openly recruited on a community website. In this study, we manipulated two factors: sponsorship type and the influence of online communities. The hypotheses were tested by conducting a 4 (sponsorship type: monetary/experiential/dual/non-disclosure) \times 2 (online community influence: high/low) between-subjects factorial design. The participants selected one hyperlink from among eight, each of which led participants to one of eight experiment scenarios (i.e. non-random assignment).

All of the participants had previously read online reviews of restaurants. Invitations to participate in the experiment were posted on various community website platforms. A total of 357 participants completed the experiment, which resulted in 320 valid samples. The statistics of the participants were as follows. Males (45.9 percent), between the ages of 21 and 30 (79.1 percent), students (39.1 percent), working in the service industry (25.0 percent). The participants reported reading blogs every month as follows: 6–10 times per month (54.1 percent) and 1–5 times per month (27.8 percent). The most common types of blog were travel blogs (20.3 percent) and restaurant blogs (20.0 percent).

4.3.2 Development of stimuli and measures. In Study 2, we again employed the article that was used in Study 1. Again, the article mentioned the type of sponsorship that was disclosed; however, it also included the influence of online communities, which was defined as the degree of activity and searchability in the community website as perceived by consumers. Activity was measured in terms of update frequency, the number of page views and diffusion capacity. Searchability indicated the ease with which the website could be found and accessed (Lee *et al.*, 2003; Pixnet, 2014). We then created profiles for two virtual bloggers who were tasked with manipulating the degree of online community influence, which was divided into high and low. To verify that the manipulations were suitable, we also designed four question items for this construct, based on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) (see Appendix). The definition and measurement of OPR persuasiveness were the same as those in Study 1.

4.3.3 Experiment procedure. As shown in Figure 2, the experimental procedure of Study 2 was the same as that of Study 1. Note the manipulation of the “influence of the blogger on the online community” in Step 3. The situation involving high influence in the online community was illustrated by showing participants (in the blogger introduction) that the blog had been operating for 3,967 days, had 3,325 subscribers and 569 friends, included

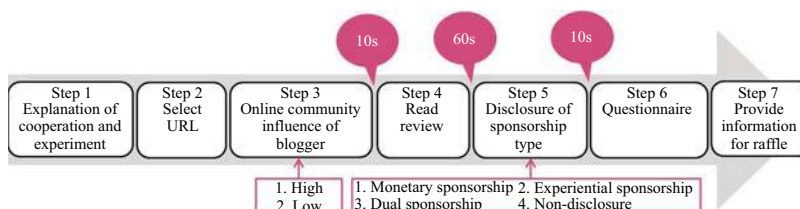


Figure 2.
The comprehensive
experimental
procedure in
the study 2

3,158 articles, was ranked No. 1 in the cuisine category, had won seven medals, and had previously been visited 36,195,263 times. The situation involving low influence in the online community was illustrated by showing participants (in the blogger introduction) that the blog had been operating for 797 days, had 3 subscribers, 0 friends, 5 articles, 56 visits and no medals for accomplishments. The manipulation of sponsorship disclosure appears in Step 5 (Figure 2). In accordance with the scenario, the participants were shown the following sentences below the review: experiential sponsorship (this review was solicited by the restaurant in exchange for a free meal); monetary sponsorship (this review was solicited by the restaurant in exchange for financial remuneration); dual sponsorship (this review was solicited by the restaurant in exchange for a free meal and financial remuneration). The control group did not receive a disclosure statement.

4.4 Results and discussion

4.4.1 Manipulation check. Preliminary screening left 320 valid participants who correctly answered the question item related to the type of sponsorship. Cronbach's α values for the four constructs were as follows: OPR helpfulness (0.964), OPR credibility (0.909), purchase intention (0.935) and influence in online community (0.982), indicating a high degree of internal consistency (Wortzel, 1979). With regard to the manipulation check for online community influence, the results indicated that the mean given to online community influence by the participants in the high online community influence group (160 participants) was significantly higher than those given by participants in the low online community influence group (160 participants) ($\text{Mean}_{\text{high}} = 5.968$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{low}} = 2.057$; $t = 31.554^{***}$, $p < 0.001$). These results indicate that manipulation of the two factors in this experiment was successful and found to be effective in the following study.

The two hypotheses were tested using 2×2 analysis of covariance. As shown in Table III, the main effect of the type of disclosed sponsorship revealed significant differences in OPR helpfulness ($F_{(3, 309)} = 33.677$, $p < 0.001$), OPR credibility ($F_{(3, 309)} = 36.613$, $p < 0.001$), and purchase intention ($F_{(3, 309)} = 416.891$, $p < 0.001$). The results for the main effects of the type of disclosed sponsorship on these three dependent variables were the same as those in the study 1. This demonstrates that the designs of the two studies provided sufficient stability and reliability.

4.4.2 Hypothesis 2 testing. Table III shows that the main effect of influence on the online community showed significant differences in OPR helpfulness ($F_{(1, 309)} = 117.492$, $p < 0.001$), OPR credibility ($F_{(1, 309)} = 97.849$, $p < 0.001$), and purchase intention ($F_{(1, 309)} = 66.475$, $p < 0.001$). Further mean difference testing revealed significantly higher scores for these three variables in the group that encountered high influence in the online community, compared to the group that encountered low influence (see Table IV). Thus, $H2a-H2c$ are all supported. As indicated in the test results above, online community influence has a direct positive influence on OPR helpfulness, OPR credibility and purchase intention.

Source/dependent variable	OPR helpfulness		OPR credibility		Purchase intention	
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender	1.470	0.226	2.414	0.121	0.026	0.873
Number of blogs read	3.051	0.082	1.887	0.171	4.655	0.032*
Type of blogs read	3.109	0.079	1.717	0.191	0.007	0.934
Type of sponsorship disclosed (A)	33.667	0.000***	36.613	0.000***	416.891	0.000***
Online community influence (B)	117.492	0.000***	97.849	0.000***	66.475	0.000***
$A \times B$	19.170	0.000***	26.252	0.000***	10.320	0.000***

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table III.
Two-way ANCOVA
test results

4.4.3 H3 testing. The interaction effects between the type of sponsorship disclosed and online community influence on OPR persuasiveness were examined. Table III shows that the interaction effect between the type of sponsorship disclosed and online community influence had a significant influence on OPR helpfulness ($F_{(3, 309)} = 19.170, p < 0.001$), OPR credibility ($F_{(3, 309)} = 26.252, p < 0.001$), and purchase intention ($F_{(3, 309)} = 10.320, p < 0.001$). Comprehensive graphical analysis and mean testing was then performed.

As shown in Table V and Figure 3, the influence of experiential sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{experiential, high}} = 4.629, \text{Mean}_{\text{experiential, low}} = 2.747, t = 10.832, p < 0.001$), dual sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{dual, high}} = 3.161, \text{Mean}_{\text{dual, low}} = 2.472, t = 2.674, p < 0.05$) and non-disclosure ($\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis., high}} = 4.969, \text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis., low}} = 2.767, t = 13.531, p < 0.001$) on OPR helpfulness was significantly strengthened by high online community influence. However, this phenomenon was not apparent with monetary sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{monetary, high}} = 2.539, \text{Mean}_{\text{monetary, low}} = 2.438, t = 0.348, p > 0.05$). Hence, H3a is partially supported.

As shown in Table V and Figure 4, the influence of experiential sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{experiential, high}} = 5.613, \text{Mean}_{\text{experiential, low}} = 3.094, t = 11.057, p < 0.001$) and

Independent variable	Level	OPR helpfulness		OPR credibility		Purchase intention	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Online community influence	High	3.825	1.390	4.381	1.876	4.248	1.643
	Low	2.606	1.072	2.945	1.386	3.025	1.362
Mean difference		1.219		1.436		1.223	
Independent-sample <i>t</i> -test (<i>p</i> -value)		7.786*** (0.000)		8.414*** (0.000)		7.248*** (0.000)	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table IV.
The mean OPR
persuasiveness of
online community
influence

Factor A Sponsorship type	Factor B Community influence	OPR helpfulness Mean (SD)	OPR credibility Mean (SD)	Purchase intention Mean (SD)
Monetary sponsorship	High	2.539 (1.384)	2.831 (1.607)	3.075 (1.552)
	Low	2.438 (1.217)	2.769 (1.418)	2.792 (1.519)
Experiential sponsorship	High	4.629 (0.515)	5.613 (0.790)	4.942 (0.515)
	Low	2.747 (0.971)	3.094 (1.205)	2.900 (0.971)
Dual sponsorship	High	3.161 (1.156)	3.100 (1.458)	3.592 (1.497)
	Low	2.472 (1.148)	2.863 (1.517)	3.083 (1.434)
Non-disclosure	High	4.969 (0.457)	5.981 (0.835)	5.383 (1.202)
	Low	2.767 (0.923)	3.056 (1.411)	3.325 (1.246)

Table V.
The mean OPR
persuasiveness of the
two factors

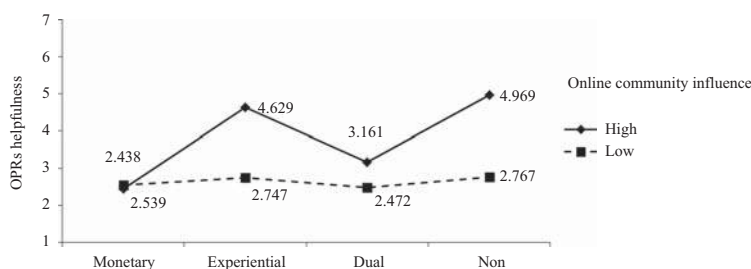


Figure 3.
Interaction effect
between sponsorship
type and community
influence on OPR
helpfulness

non-disclosure ($\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis., high}} = 5.981$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis., low}} = 3.056$, $t = 11.282$, $p < 0.001$) on OPR credibility was strengthened by high online community influence, but this phenomenon was not apparent with dual sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{dual, high}} = 3.100$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{dual, low}} = 2.863$, $t = 0.714$, $p > 0.05$) or monetary sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{monetary, high}} = 2.831$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{monetary, low}} = 2.769$, $t = 0.184$, $p > 0.05$). As a result, *H3b* is supported.

As shown in Table V and Figure 5, the influence of experiential sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{experiential, high}} = 4.942$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{experiential, low}} = 2.900$, $t = 7.823$, $p < 0.001$) and non-disclosure ($\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis., high}} = 5.383$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{non-dis., low}} = 3.325$, $t = 7.519$, $p < 0.001$) on purchase intention is strengthened by high online community influence. Similarly, this phenomenon was not apparent with dual sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{dual, high}} = 3.592$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{dual, low}} = 3.083$, $t = 1.551$, $p > 0.05$) or monetary sponsorship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{monetary, high}} = 3.075$, $\text{Mean}_{\text{monetary, low}} = 2.792$, $t = 0.825$, $p > 0.05$). Consequently, *H3c* is supported.

4.4.4 Discussion. The establishment of *H2a–H2c* shows that a positive relationship exists between online community influence and OPR persuasiveness, which means that if a reviewer's website has higher update frequencies, page views and diffusion capacity and can easily be found via search engines, then it will enhance the reviewer's influence on reader perceptions of their OPRs and the subsequent behavioral intentions of the readers. Furthermore, the support or partial support of *H3a–H3c* indicates that online community influence plays a strengthening role on persuasiveness with non-disclosure and experiential sponsorship. On the premise that the sponsorship information is disclosed, then offering experiential sponsorship to reviewers with high community influence will result in the best OPR persuasiveness.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1 Conclusions

In response to the importance of marketing ethics, this study conducted two experiments to clarify the differences between eWOM and advertising, and to disclose the sponsorship type. This study proposed a means by which incentivized OPRs can be turned into

Figure 4.
Interaction effect
between sponsorship
type and community
influence on
OPR credibility

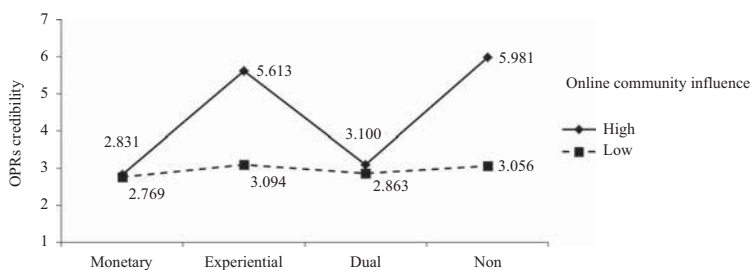
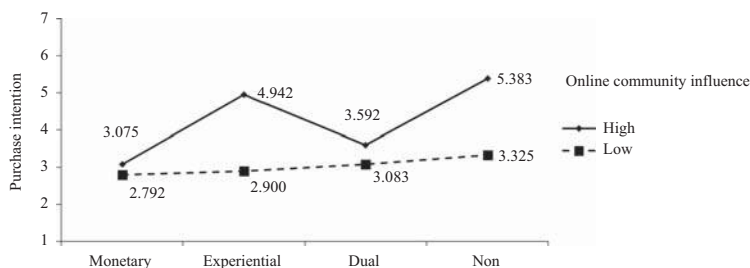


Figure 5.
Interaction effect
between sponsorship
type and community
influence on
purchase intention



testimonial advertising and provide the same communication effects. The results of this study could assist firms in formulating morally acceptable communication strategies in accordance with current internet trends.

The results of Study 1 indicate that disclosing information on sponsorship involving money (purely monetary or dual sponsorship) has an adverse impact while disclosing that the review received experiential sponsorship did not have a significant negative effect. For this reason, experiential sponsorship is the best choice for sponsorship disclosure. This study verified that the personal experiences of the reviewer regarding the product are crucial to whether consumers accept and believe the review (Lin *et al.*, 2011). Regardless of the financial incentives that a free product implies, recommendations made by reviewers that have actually experienced using the product seem to make consumers more understanding of the firm's motives behind the sponsorship than those that were simply paid for with money.

Study 1 found that monetary rewards have an adverse impact on the helpfulness and credibility of the review, especially the latter. This supports the findings of previous studies (Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin, 2015; Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen, 2015; Stephen *et al.*, 2012). However, unlike previous research, this study used non-disclosure as a control group to compare with the three types of sponsorship one-by-one and confirmed that experiential sponsorship is the most beneficial for honest disclosure. The persuasiveness of this type of sponsorship is close to that of non-disclosure, which makes a compelling reason for firms to engage in honest disclosure. This study also proposed three types of financial and non-financial sponsorship types that could explain why Lu *et al.* (2014) found that the influence of sponsorship type on consumer attitudes toward sponsored recommendations were not significant in their study, i.e. they only considered financial incentives. Furthermore, the studies conducted by Stephen *et al.* (2012), Lu *et al.* (2014) and Hwang and Jeong (2016) only used single variables to measure the effects or persuasiveness of reviews. In contrast, this study interpreted OPR persuasiveness using three constructs: helpfulness, credibility and purchase intention, which gives a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of disclosure. Furthermore, while Kim and Song (2018) mentioned sponsorship type in their study, they only addressed whether the sponsorship was paid or unpaid and overlooked non-monetary sponsorship methods. These are what set this study apart from past studies regarding its uniqueness, and contributions.

The results of Study 2 indicate that consumers perceived higher degrees of OPR helpfulness and OPR credibility in the articles written by bloggers with strong influence in the online community compared to those written by bloggers with less influence. Their purchase intention is significantly increased as well. Sponsored cooperation with influential reviewers is, thus, likely to have greater persuasiveness. The interaction effects also revealed that the influence of non-disclosure and the disclosure of experiential sponsorship on persuasiveness are strengthened by the online community influence of the endorser. A deeper implication is that offering experiential sponsorship to reviewers with strong influence in the online community produces the best disclosure effects. However, if the sponsorship involves money, influence in the online community does not have any positive effects.

Blogs allow the individual to express their opinions and feelings regarding people, matters and things. With their distinctive styles in writing and photography, they vary in charm or appeal (Leshed and Kaye, 2006; Li and Du, 2011). Thus, the personal traits of the bloggers are also crucial to whether the disclosure of sponsorship information influences their reviews. With the exception of Tsao and Hsieh (2015) in their discussion on the types of eWOM platforms, no other researcher has examined the community influence of reviewers on sponsorship disclosure. Hwang and Jeong (2016) discovered that skepticism interferes with the influence of the type of sponsorship disclosed on source credibility. In all fairness, skepticism is a personal trait of the consumer and cannot be controlled by

reviewers or firms. However, firms can choose the reviewers they want to sponsor, so the findings of this study are still feasible in practice. This also gives this study more practical value compared to previous studies.

5.2 *Marketing implications and contributions*

The implications of our findings in this study are two-fold: first, our primary objective was to minimize the negative effect of disclosing information pertaining to sponsorship. It appears that exchanging free products for consumer reviews is the sponsorship method that is most likely to be accepted by consumers. Free products provide an indirect financial benefit to the recipient; however, consumption psychology has revealed that consumers are willing to overlook this if the items are ostensibly means as a trial sample (Lin *et al.*, 2011). In the minds of consumers, this is sufficient to retain the personal experience of eWOM and dilute the commercial overtones. Second, this study discovered that the influence of reviewers in the online community moderates the effect of disclosure. This study also determined that inviting popular bloggers to experience products free of charge before endorsing them is the most effective method of disclosing sponsorship information. This approach makes it possible for firms to provide bloggers with detailed product information, thereby enhancing the quality and helpfulness of the review. More importantly, consumers infer from this a willingness on the part of the firm to make their sponsorship public. This implies that the firm has confidence in their product, which makes the consumers less suspicious of the sponsorship process. These effects are particularly pronounced when the endorsements are from influential bloggers.

The most notable contribution of this study is our provision of an effective method for the management of OPRs, which abides by ethical marketing standards. It is hoped that our results in this study will provide firms with a rational incentive to follow ethical marketing standards and the law. This could create a win-win-win situation for firms, consumers and reviewers, rather than forcing them to operate in the gray zone by manipulating OPRs and potentially cheating consumers. Finally, this study fills previous gaps in the research on the relationship between eWOM/OPRs and ethics. It also positions the issue of ethical business practices as an issue of importance issue in the field of eWOM.

5.3 *Limitations and directions for further research*

Despite the rigor of the experiment method, it was not without limitations. First, based on the manipulation requirements of the experimental design, blogs were the only platform explored in this study, i.e. we did not take into account other types of community website. Second, the experiments in this study were conducted via the internet, which proved highly efficient but raises a number of concerns in terms of effectiveness. Our primary concern is that many of the respondents may have used cell phones or tablets to complete our questionnaire, which would have raised browsing issues that could affect the test results. To increase the validity of our results, we offered incentives to gain genuine cooperation. Each experiment also included a strict screening process to eliminate invalid samples. Third, due to the difficulty of performing random sampling of internet populations, this study randomly altered the sequence of hyperlinks used in the experiment scenarios with the aim of overcoming preference bias and to make sampling process as random as possible. Fourth, the gender ratio in this study is nearly 1:1, and the main age group was between 20 and 30 years of age. The sample characteristics in this study are compatible with the recent studies based on internet samples (Lu *et al.*, 2014; Tsao, Hsieh, Shih and Lin, 2015; Tsao, Mau, Hsieh and Chen, 2015; Tsao *et al.*, 2016). The 2016 internet user behavior survey in Taiwan found that individuals in the 20–30 year bracket, students and service employees are the groups with the highest network utilization (Taiwan Network Information Center, 2016). This supports the representativeness of the sample in this study.

Based on the limitations listed above, this study proposes the following suggestions for future research. First, OPRs could be presented in increasingly diverse ways, such as the currently popular unboxing videos (Mau *et al.*, 2013). Future studies could also include other internet platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Weibo or YouTube (Kim and Song, 2018). Second, future studies could examine different types of products and include an in-depth analysis of the relationship between product type and the method of sponsorship (Tsao and Hsieh, 2015). It might also prove effective if researchers were to include experts or endorsers in the research (Kim and Song, 2018) or consider the location in which sponsorship information is disclosed (Jensen and Yetgin, 2017).

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Further reading

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Appendix. Questionnaire

OPR helpfulness (Adapted from Pan and Zhang, 2011 and Li *et al.*, 2013) (Seven-point Likert scale; strongly agree to strongly disagree)

Perceived Source Credibility (PSC)

I perceive that the reviewer is...

PSC1: reputable

PSC2: good

PSC3: trustworthy

Perceived Content Diagnosticity (PCD)

The reviews helped me to ... the restaurant

PCD1: familiarize myself with

PCD2: evaluate

PCD3: understand the performance of

Perceived Vicarious Expression (PVE)

By reading this product review, I can...what the author is trying to say about the dining vibe of the restaurant.

PVE1: feel

PVE2: imagine

PVE3: envision

OPR credibility (Adapted from Cheung *et al.*, 2009; Qiu *et al.*, 2012) (Seven-point Likert scale; strongly agree to strongly disagree)

I think the product review is...

RC1: trustworthy

RC2: factual

RC3: accurate

RC4: reliable

Purchase intention (Adapted from Dodds *et al.*, 1991) (Seven-point Likert scale; very high to very low)

PI1: The likelihood of that I will dine in this restaurant.

PI2: The probability that I will consider dining in this restaurant.

PI3: My willingness to dine in this restaurant.

Online community influence (Adapted from PIXNET, 2014) (Seven-point Likert scale; strongly agree to strongly disagree)

I think the blog is...

OCI1: Frequently updated

OCI2: High number of page views

OCI3: Highly diffusive

OCI4: Easy to be reached by search engine

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