Consumer’s blog credibility and attitude toward blogger’s recommended brand:
The effects of perceived blogger’s expertise, trustworthiness, and product type

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Abstract

Background/Objectives: The current study examined the effects of product type, blogger’s trustworthiness, and expertise on consumer’s blog credibility, attitude toward the recommended brand and purchase intention.

Methods/Statistical analysis: This study used a product type (experience goods/search goods) x trustworthiness (high/low) x expertise (high/low) experimental design and a total 371 college student samples (33% male, 67% female, mean age = 22.5) to examine consumer’s blog credibility, attitude toward the recommended product, and purchase intention. Data analysis was conducted using the SPSS window package 20.0 version and M-plus 6.02 version.

Findings: The results suggest sponsorship itself does not affect blog’s trustworthiness, and perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the blog post affect to blog credibility. Although sponsored blog posts are often considered to be ineffective because of low believability, the results of this study revealed that there is no significant difference on trustworthiness between sponsored blog post and
non-sponsored blog post. Consumers are influenced not by sponsorship itself but by perception of the degree of trustworthiness of the blog post. Also, for both product types, blog trustworthiness has a greater impact on blog credibility than expertise does. This means that the genuineness of the blog’s message is more important than expertise for consumers to trust blogs. More importantly, trustworthiness has more effect than expertise on blog credibility, attitude toward recommended brand, and purchase intention in experience goods than search goods.

**Improvements/Applications:** It is important for bloggers to appeal that they are providing honest reviews and accurate information about the products regardless of the sponsorship rather than hiding the fact about sponsorship.

**Key Words:** Blog marketing, Trustworthiness, Expertise, Blog credibility, Attitude toward recommended brand, Purchase intention.

1 Introduction

Along with the development of the internet, blogs have developed as well. Because blogs have a strong electronic word of mouse (e-WOM) effect, blogs are now more than just a space for recording and sharing personal interests and have further become an effective marketing tool for companies. Since 2014, the South Korean government requires that blogs state its sponsorship by companies in their posts. Some researchers have claimed that the sponsored blogs are not as effective due to a doubt of their authenticity [1]. In the viewpoint of persuasion theory, the persuasiveness of message is determined by the credibility of message source, and blogs sponsored by companies can be suspected of their credibility which is formed by perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the message source. Thus, the persuasion effect of sponsored blog posts is questionable [2]. Once the authenticity of sponsored blogs which are given monetary or non-monetary reward from company can be doubted by consumers, the persuasiveness of sponsored blogs is expected to be determined by the degrees of expertise. That is, the credibility of blog post depends on the consumer’s perception of blogger’s trustworthiness and expertise. Blog credibility would influence the formation
of positive attitude toward the recommended brand and purchase intention. In online shopping situation, there are already a lot of studies that ordinary consumers’ online review has a stronger persuasion effect than a review provided by a company[3]. As factors related to the effectiveness of the online reviews, the valence of the review (positive/negative content), quantity of reviews, and more have been studied [4]. If the persuasion effect of individual’s non-sponsored blogs is stronger than the reviews provided by companies because the individual’s blogposts are perceived as more truthful by online users, then the persuasiveness of sponsored blog posts is expected to be determined more by expertise than trustworthiness. However, the relative effect of trustworthiness and expertise on blog post’s persuasiveness still remains untested. This study examines the effect of blog post’s perceived expertise and trustworthiness on blog credibility and attitude toward the recommended brand. However, blog’s persuasion effect is expected to vary depending on product type. Product type is a variable that affects online consumer behavior, and consumers have more favorable attitude toward blog posts of search goods than experience goods [2]. So, we expect that blog posts’ persuasion effect of expertise and trustworthiness will be moderated by product type.

Source credibility can be defined as the degree of receiver’s acceptance of a message affected by certain characteristics of the message source [5,6]. Factors that form source credibility are expertise and trustworthiness, and because the way consumers perceive source credibility influences their attitude and behavioral intention, researchers have considered source credibility an important factor. Once consumers realize a message source is providing information for its beneficial gain, they begin to doubt the source’s trustworthiness. Thus, consumers are more likely to consider sponsored blogs less trustworthy and form low source credibility [7]. Because the trustworthiness of sponsored blogs is already weakened for online consumers, expertise of the blogs will have a relatively stronger effect on blog credibility formation. As another factor influencing the formation of blog credibility, it is important that the online consumers perceive blogger’s expertise. Source expertise can be defined as receiver’s judgment of how knowledgeable the message source is [8]. The higher the perceived source expertise, the higher is source credibility, and so is the receiver’s acceptance of message. However,
the anonymous nature of online context can make it hard to evaluate a blogger’s expertise. Therefore, consumers will perceive the degree of the blogger’s expertise by the blog contents. According to the studies on online consumer reviews, which have similar marketing effect as blog posts, the credibility of the online reviews increases as consumers perceive the reviews to be more objective and expert, and this higher credibility increases marketing effect [2, 9, 10]. As shown, online reviews and blog posts create e-WOM effects by providing their personal usage experience to other consumers and affect consumer’s brand attitude and purchase intention[11, 12]. As company’s blog marketing is becoming increasingly prevalent, this study wants to further investigate whether consumers trust sponsored blogs and whether trustworthiness or expertise of blog posts has a stronger effect on persuasiveness of the blog. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H1. Consumers’ perception of the trustworthiness of blog post will be different depending on the sponsorship. That is, sponsored blog post has been perceived lower trustworthiness than non-sponsored blog post.

H2-1. Perceived trustworthiness of the blog will positively affect blog persuasiveness (blog credibility, attitude towards recommended brand, and purchase intention).

H2-2. Perceived expertise of the blog will positively affect blog persuasiveness (blog credibility, attitude towards recommended brand, and purchase intention).

There are many study results that show product type affects purchase decision when consumers shop online [2,13,14]. Generally, product type can be classified as either search goods or experience goods depending on whether consumers can gather information about the product’s quality and attributes. For search goods, the information of product’s attribute is objective and easy to attain, so the evaluation of search goods is possible before purchase [13]. Camera, cellphone, and other electronic devices are good examples of search goods. On the other hand, the information and objective evaluation of experience goods are hard to attain until purchase and usage [14]. Clothing, perfume, and package tours are typical examples of experience goods. Consumer’s online informa-
tion search behavior differ greatly for search goods and experience goods. Based on previous studies, consumers rely more on online reviews and blog posts when searching for search goods information than for experience goods [2]. These study results demonstrate that because the features and characteristics of search goods are more objective than those of experience goods, consumers assume these online reviews and usage experience will be more objective and generalized. In addition, since the features of search goods are more objective and consistent than experience goods, consumers will perceive that the online blog posts of search goods can provide more objective information than those of experience goods. Therefore, the more accurate information on the blog is, the higher is the degree of perceived expertise, and the more consumer will trust the blog. However, for experience goods, message source’s personal and subjective experience of the product can greatly influence the evaluation of product. Therefore, how influential online reviews or blog posts are will depend on online consumers’ perceived trustworthiness of these reviews. Consumers need to rely on subjective evaluations of individual bloggers because they do not have objective information about the products. Therefore, not only consumers’ perceiving the expertise of blog posts, but also perceived trustworthiness of blog posts on product review will be crucial in forming blog credibility especially for experience goods. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H3. The effect of the blog’s expertise and trustworthiness on blog credibility will be different by the product type. That is, for experience goods, blogger’s trustworthiness will affect the blog credibility more than blogger’s expertise. But, for search goods, the blog credibility will be more influenced by blogger’s expertise than trustworthiness.

Recent studies on e-WOM argue that source credibility is a major determinant of persuasion effect [3, 13, 15]. Source credibility is the degree to which consumers accept the message while believing that the source is providing unbiased and truthful information and opinions [16]. Because the internet is open to any uncertain and untrustworthy information, source credibility is considered especially important in online context. Consumers perceived that blog
post was credible, which plays an important role in consumer’s attitude towards the recommended brand and purchase intention. In online shopping context, as the antecedent factor of brand attitude formation, the credibility of the social media is the mediating variable to brand attitude and purchase intention. For online shopping, consumer’s attitude toward blog post has an effect on the attitude toward a recommended brand and purchase intention[9,17]. Thus, we hypothesize:

H4. Blog credibility will mediate the relationship of blog’s expertise, trustworthiness, and attitude toward the recommended brand, and thus affect attitude towards the recommended brand and purchase intention.

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Materials & Experiment Design

2.1.1 Stimulus Materials

Based on pretest (n=50), search good was selected as smart phone, and experience good was selected as sunscreen. Blog’s trustworthiness is manipulated by the recommendation post’s sponsorship, and blog posts’ expertise is manipulated by the contents of recommendation message.

2.1.2 Experimental Design

This study used a product type (experience goods/ search goods) × trustworthiness (high/low) × expertise (high/low) experimental design and a total 371 college student samples (33% male, 67% female, mean age= 22.5) to examine consumer’s blog credibility, attitude toward the recommended brand, and purchase intention. Participants characteristics can be seen in Table 1.
2.2 Measurement & Analysis

2.2.1 Measurement

The construct of blog post’s expertise was measured using 3-item scales made by authors based on previous study [18]. Blog post’s trustworthiness was measured using 3-item scales, blog credibility was also measured using 3-item scales [19,20]. Attitude toward recommended brand and purchase intention were measured with 3-item scales [21]. Product involvement, as covariate variable, was measured by 5-items of Personal Involvement Inventory [22]. All measurements used 7 point likert scale. All measurements items and related statistics were presented in table 2.

2.2.2 Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the SPSS window package 20.0 version and M-plus 6.02 version.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Manipulation Check

To check the manipulation of the levels of the respondents’ perception of expertise, three items were used with 7-point likert scale. Results from the t-test revealed that the group exposed high expertise blog posts rated the expertise higher than the group exposed to low expertise blog posts ($M_{\text{high}}=4.34$, $M_{\text{low}}=3.09$, $t=9.74$, $p<.001$). Also, to check the manipulation of the respondents’ recognition of blog sponsorship, one item was used with 7-point likert scale. The question was “Did you notice that this post had been written after using the product received from a company?” in case of sponsored blog. In case of non-sponsored blog, the question item was “Did
you notice that this post had been written after using the product personally purchased by the blogger? Results from the one sample t-test showed that the sponsored group recognized that blog had been sponsored ($M_{spon}=5.34$, $t(1, 186)=7.925$, $p<.001$) and that the non-sponsored group recognized that blog had not sponsored ($M_{non-spon}=4.97$, $t(1,183)=6.293$, $p<.001$). These results suggest that the expertise manipulation and sponsorship manipulation were successful. Also, to control the levels of product involvement of each group, five items were used with semantic differential scale. Results from the ANOVA showed that the eight groups did not differ in their involvement level ($F(1, 362)=3.33$, $p>.05$).

### 3.2 Hypothesis Testing

T-test, correlation analysis, and M-plus structural equation model were used to test the proposed hypotheses. T-test was performed to test H1, which predicted that sponsored blog post will be perceived to have lower trustworthiness than non-sponsored blog post.
There is no statistically significant difference in respondents’ perception of the blog’s trustworthiness depending on between two conditions of sponsorship ($t(1, 369)=1.869, p>.05$). It means that the respondents didn’t perceive of the blog’s trustworthiness as higher on non-sponsored blog posts ($M=3.64$) than sponsored blog posts ($M=3.43$) regardless of product type. Thus, H1 is rejected.

H2 proposed that the perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the blog will positively correlate with blog persuasiveness. Table 3 presents the correlation result and shows that the trustworthiness and expertise of blog correlate with blog credibility, attitude towards the recommended brand, and purchase intention. This result supports H2-1 and H2-2.

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* $p<.01$

H3 predicted that the effect of the blog’s expertise and trustworthiness on blog credibility will be different by the product type. M-plus structural equation model result shown in Table 4 demonstrates that the blog trustworthiness and expertise would affect consumers’ blog credibility. For each structural equation models of experience goods and search goods, the theoretical model fit was acceptable as seen in table 4. The result of structural equation model in experience goods, the ratio of chi square to degrees of freedom ($x^2/df$) was 1.64, RMSEA was .059, CFI was .979, SRMR was .049. The result of search goods, the ratio of chi square to degrees of freedom ($x^2/df$) was 2.32, RMSEA was .084, CFI was .959, SRMR was .051. A good data-model fit in the structural equation is required to meet at least two of the following four criteria: goodness-of-fit index (GFI) >.90, comparative fit index (CFI) >.90, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) <.05, and ratio of chi square to degrees of freedom ($x^2/df$) < 2.0 [23]. RMSEA < .05 indicates a good fit, between .05 and .08 indicates a relatively good fit, and between .08 and .10 indicates an ordinary fit [24]. Results from structural equation model in this study were met these cri-
teria, so these two structural equation models of experience goods and search goods are acceptable. As it can be seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2, for experience goods, the effect of trustworthiness ($r = .720, p < .001$) on blog credibility is higher than the effect of expertise ($r = .321, p < .001$) on blog credibility. Also, for search goods, the effect of trustworthiness ($r = .560, p < .001$) on blog credibility is higher than the effect of expertise ($r = .371, p < .001$) on blog credibility. Accordingly, H3 is partially supported by the results of this study.

H4 expected that blog credibility will mediate the relationship of the blog’s expertise, trustworthiness, and recommended product, and thus also affect attitude towards the product and its purchase intention. Table 5 shows that the effects of blog trustworthiness and expertise on attitude towards recommended brand are mediated by blog credibility. As shown in figure 1 and 2, in the case of both experience and search goods, the relative effect of trustworthiness on blog credibility is higher ($beta = .433, p < .0001; beta = .327, p < .0001$) than the effect of expertise ($beta = .204, p < .001; beta = .179, p < .001$). Another important result is that the paths to the brand attitude and purchase intention without passing through blog credibility are not significant. The results of this study confirm that attitude towards recommended brand is formed favorably, and purchase intention is formed by blog credibility. Accordingly, H4 is supported.

4 Conclusion

In order to examine the persuasion effect of blog post, this research investigated whether the trustworthiness of sponsored blog post is
perceived more negatively than that of non-sponsored blog post. In addition, we investigated the relative effect of perceived trustworthiness and expertise on blog credibility and also how the relative effect differs depending on product type.

First, Previous studies have claimed that sponsored blogs are ineffective because they are perceived as untrustworthy by consumers. However, the results of this study revealed that there is no significant difference in perceived trustworthiness between sponsored blog post and non-sponsored blog post. That is, previous researches conceptualized company’s sponsorship of blogs as immediate loss of authenticity, but it seems that consumers separately perceive the trustworthiness of blogs from the fact that blogs received sponsorship. Because sponsored blogs state that they have received some monetary or non-monetary reward from a company in their blog contents, consumers do not always perceive the sponsored blog
asuntruthful. It means that consumers are influenced not by sponsorship itself but by the perceived degree of trustworthiness of the blog post.

Second, perceived trustworthiness and expertise of blog posts have a positive effect on blog credibility. Also, for both product types, blog trustworthiness has a greater impact on blog credibility than expertise does. This means that the genuineness of the blog’s message is more important than expertise for consumers to trust blogs. Furthermore, the influence of expertise and trustworthiness on blog credibility varied according to the product type. Specifically, for experience goods, trustworthiness (beta = .720) has more effect than expertise (beta = .321) on blog credibility, attitude toward recommended brand, and purchase intention. For search goods, the difference of persuasion effect between trustworthiness (beta = .560) and expertise (beta = .371) is lower than experience goods. These results suggest that the effect of trustworthiness is less influential for search goods in comparison to experience goods because the performance of search goods can be judged more objectively. Unlike search goods, experience goods can be difficult to assess objectively, so the blogger’s subjective experience and evaluation of the product vary. Thus, the trustworthiness of its review seems to affect blog credibility more.

Third, for both experience goods and search goods, the direct effects of expertise and trustworthiness on forming an attitude towards the recommended brand were not significant, but only indirect effects through blog credibility were significant. That is, it is very important to ensure blog credibility in order to build a purchase intention with a positive attitude toward the recommended brand. According to these results, it is important for blog marketers and personal bloggers to appeal that they are providing honest reviews and accurate information about the products regardless of the sponsorship rather than hiding the fact about sponsorship.

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References


