

**#sponsored on Instagram - The effect of sponsorship disclosure and
blogger-product congruency on consumer responses**

Master's Thesis

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Date: 2nd February 2018

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Abstract

Influencer marketing is a growing movement in marketing that provides fast, targeted access to engaged audiences on social media. Despite many benefits of influencer marketing for brands, it has also received criticism due to the possibility of paid brand endorsements masquerading as unadulterated opinion in terms of unpaid posts. Therefore, marketers and influencers are required to disclose paid content. Consequently, the disclosure of sponsored content might change the effectiveness of influencer marketing, which requires new research in this field.

Consumer responses toward sponsorship disclosure are thus a vital issue in assessing the effectiveness of influencer marketing. This study examined how sponsorship disclosure and blogger-product congruency on Instagram influence consumer responses such as brand attitude, purchase intention and blogger credibility. Moreover, we tested whether perceived persuasive intent mediates the effect of sponsorship disclosure on consumer responses. By conducting an experiment (N = 128) we found that sponsorship disclosure indirectly resulted in less favorable consumer responses through higher rates of perceived persuasive intent. Furthermore, results showed that when exposed to a blogger congruent product in an Instagram post, this led to more positive consumer responses than when exposed to a blogger incongruent product. The findings indicate that influencer marketing entails risks in terms of degrading brand attitudes, purchase intentions and blogger credibility. Also, cooperating with bloggers who are congruent with the product evokes more positive outcomes than with bloggers who are incongruent with the product.

Introduction

The social network site Instagram¹ is a relevant tool for companies and brands to reach consumers online. Especially Instagram-based influencer marketing is a growing industry in marketing due to its ability to reach a large segment of people and to provide fast, targeted access to consumers for lower costs compared to traditional advertising (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). Influencer marketing refers to the identification and targeting of influencers or bloggers, who have the ability to influence potential customers of products or brands and therefore support the marketing activities as an effective instrument (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Scott, 2015). In prior research, influencer marketing and its use of bloggers have been found to increase consumer responses positively (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Influencers act as brand advocates as a result of former experiences with a specific brand or product and communication is unpaid and natural (Carr & Hayes, 2014). This leads to a high credibility of influencers and bloggers, which in return is effective in influencing public perceptions (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Due to the possibility of paid brand endorsements masked as editorial, organic content, influencer marketing has also received criticism, because consumers sometimes do not understand that they are consuming advertisement (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). As there is often no distinction between commercial content and real or authentic opinions or experiences of influencer, product posts of influencers might be perceived as honest and unbiased consumer opinions without any form of compensation of the brand, although they are paid (Hwang & Jeong, 2016; Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). This can be misleading and unethical from a consumer's view (Cain, 2011). Therefore guidelines were implemented that require marketers and influencers to disclose sponsored content on social media sites, including Instagram, to help consumers recognize these forms of advertising (FTC, 2015).

¹ Instagram: A photo- and video-sharing mobile-based social media application with 800 million monthly active people in September 2017 (Statista, 2017).

Literature shows that, based on the persuasion knowledge model, sponsorship disclosures can increase perceived persuasive intent, that is, disclosures activate people's understanding of the persuasive intent of a sponsored post or content (van Reijmersdal et al., 2016; Boerman, Willemsen, & van der Aa, 2017; Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012; Boerman, 2014), but that in turn can affect consumer responses negatively (van Reijmersdal et al., 2016; Boerman et al., 2012).

Whereas the commercial use of bloggers is increasing (MediaKix, 2016), research on sponsorship disclosure on consumer responses via perceived persuasive intent on Instagram is scarce. This study will focus on the effect of sponsorship disclosure on consumer responses in the context of Instagram posts to investigate whether influencer marketing can be a vital online marketing tool in the future. Therefore, the first aim of this study is to assess the effect of sponsorship disclosure on brand attitude, purchase intention and blogger credibility, and secondly, based on prior research (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017) whether this effect is mediated by perceived persuasive intent.

In addition, since brands' efforts are increasingly focused on alliances with Instagram bloggers to endorse their products among their followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), the effectiveness of sponsorship disclosure in posts containing blogger congruent products versus blogger incongruent products will be investigated. It is expected that the effect of sponsorship disclosure will be different for products that are in line with the bloggers Instagram profile (blogger congruent product) compared to products that are not in line with the profile (blogger incongruent product). Prior research on advertising and congruency suggests that an ad in an ad-congruent context generates more favorable responses than those in an incongruent context (Segev, Wang, & Fernandes, 2014; Kirmani & Shiv, 1998). However, insights into the role of congruency in social media advertising are lacking. Therefore the second aim of this study is to examine the moderating role of blogger-product congruency in the relationship between sponsorship disclosure and consumer

responses. Hence, this study adds value by providing an understanding on how new regulations of sponsorship disclosure on Instagram affect consumer responses. Insights are of general relevance for the practice of influencer marketing. Theoretically, the study contributes to literature about sponsored content and congruency on social media. Moreover, it sheds more light on whether people recognize a sponsorship disclosure and if this, in turn, has an effect on consumer responses.

Theoretical framework

Main effects of sponsorship disclosure on consumer responses

In the following section, the possible effects of sponsorship disclosure on brand attitude, purchase intention and blogger credibility will be discussed.

Brand attitude. Although influencers on social media are required to disclose sponsorship information in their sponsored posts – many bloggers do not (FTC, 2013). A reason for that might be that sponsorship disclosure is expected to have negative effects on persuasion. Campbell et al. (2013) found that when sponsorship in a blog was disclosed, attitudes toward the sponsored brand became less favorable. Other research, although not related to social media, has also shown that sponsorship disclosure could decrease the attitude towards a brand. Boerman, van Reijmersdal and Neijens (2012) found that sponsorship disclosure of TV contents resulted in more negative brand attitude than no sponsorship disclosure. Also, Wei, Fischer and Main (2008) showed that sponsorship disclosure of radio programming resulted in more negative attitudes towards the sponsored brand.

But there are also contrasting findings. Lu, Chang and Chang (2014) made a difference between direct-monetary and indirect-monetary sponsorship disclosure and its effect on attitude toward a sponsored recommendation post about a specific brand. According to them, receiving money or a discount to write a post about a product or brand does not affect consumers' attitudes. Consequently sponsorship disclosure does not necessarily lead to

negative consumer attitude. A possible explanation may be that when influencers honestly reveal a sponsorship, consumers think that the blogger is not trying to mislead them (Lu et al., 2014). Those findings are partially in line with a study of Hwang and Jeong (2016). They used different types of sponsorship disclosure in their study on blogs: some bloggers simply included sponsorship information only (i.e., “simple” sponsorship disclosure), others explained that the opinions in the post are honest although it is a sponsored post (i.e., “honest opinions” sponsorship disclosure). Compared to the no sponsorship disclosure condition, attitudes became negative in the “simple” sponsorship condition. However, the negative effects of sponsorship disclosure in the ‘simple’ sponsorship disclosure condition on consumer responses disappeared in the ‘honest opinion’ condition. Since this study only differentiates between a present or absent sponsorship disclosure, we base our expectation on Hwang and Jeong’s (2016) finding of the negative effects of sponsorship disclosure compared to no sponsorship disclosure on attitudes, which are in line with the findings of most of the studies, and hypothesize therefore:

H1a: Sponsorship disclosure will lead to more negative brand attitude than no sponsorship disclosure.

Purchase intention. Regarding the relationship between sponsorship disclosure and purchase intention, research has shown that sponsorship disclosure can also have negative effects on a consumer’s intention to make an effort to purchase a specific brand or product (Liljander & Gummerus, 2015; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016; Tessitore & Geuens, 2013). In addition, it is expected that the attitude threshold needed for an individual to indicate a behavioral intent is lower than the threshold for the actual behavior, we expect a link between brand attitude and purchase intention. Although it has often been shown that peoples’ attitude towards a brand can predict their intention to purchase the product or brand (Hansen, Jensen,

& Solgaard, 2004; Kalafatis, Pollard, East, & Tsogas, 1999; Lu, Chang, & Chang, 2014), brand attitude and purchase intention do exist as separate but correlated dimensions (Spears and Singh, 2004). Therefore the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1b: Sponsorship disclosure will lead to lower purchase intention than no sponsorship disclosure.

Blogger credibility. Blogger credibility relies mainly on the bloggers' expertise and trustworthiness. When bloggers are perceived as credible, their arguments and comments will be accepted more likely as honest than when the perceived credibility of the influencer is low (Chu & Kamal, 2008). As influencers collaborate more and more with brands and share more sponsored content, their posts may be lacking credibility.

Regarding the relationship between sponsorship disclosure and blogger credibility, a disclosure of sponsored content might lead to a lower credibility of the influencer when the content is overtly labeled as compensated (Carr & Hayes, 2014). Hwang and Jeong (2016) found in their study about sponsorship disclosure in blog posts that the disclosure condition had negative effects on source credibility perceptions compared to the no disclosure condition. Carr and Hayes (2014) showed that participants perceived a blog and a blogger less credible when there was a sponsorship disclosure compared to no disclosure. A reason for those findings may be that the credibility of blogs is based on the bloggers' personal, unbiased opinions toward the products or services that they tested (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). These are neutral blog posts without any sort of sponsorship or influence from companies.

This is also adaptable for Instagram: consumers assume that the content of bloggers on Instagram is consumer generated and not biased by monetary compensation and thus perceive the content and the blogger as credible. Their own taste, credibility and trustworthiness are found to make them successful and to make them to effective brand promoters (Abidin & Ots,

2015; Chu & Kamal, 2008). Consequently, when readers recognize that a post is sponsored, that may lead to a lower credibility of the blogger. Therefore we expect that when influencers disclose their content on Instagram as sponsored, their credibility may decrease.

H1c: Sponsorship disclosure will lead to less blogger credibility than no sponsorship disclosure.

Mediating effect of perceived persuasive intent

In the following section, the role of perceived persuasive intent will be explained. In general people are skeptical when it comes to company provided information or advertising (Calfée & Ringold, 1994; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 2000). When a sponsored post on Instagram is disclosed it intends to inform people about the commercial purpose of the post and the relationship between influencer and marketer (FTC, 2013). This sponsorship disclosure aims to help consumers to recognize advertising and leads to the activation of their persuasion knowledge, as stated by Friestad and Wright (1994). According to the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), people can use this knowledge to identify a persuasion attempt of an advertisement and that changes the meaning of a neutral message to a goal-directed persuasion message. When this change takes place, consumers have a lower motivation to process the message or have a greater motivation to discount the message (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Thus sponsorship disclosure can lead to this change of meaning by increasing the perceived persuasive intent of a message and consequently evoke negative responses of people to sponsored contents (Friestad and Wright 1994; Van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit 2010; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016; Boerman et al., 2012). When a resistance of a persuasion message occurs as a result of the activation of perceived persuasive intent, it is unlikely that attitudes become favorable (Tormala & Petty, 2002).

If a message is not perceived as persuasive, this results in more positive consumer responses (Van Reijmersdal, Neijens, and Smit 2010).

Regarding brand attitude, one recent study of Evans et al. (2017) on the effect of disclosure language on brand attitude and purchase intention on Instagram found that disclosure language (“Paid Ad”) positively influenced perceived persuasive intent (measured as ad recognition), which mediated the effect of disclosure language on brand attitude. In addition, although not tested in the context of Instagram, van Reijmersdal et al. (2015) found that sponsorship disclosure in regard to advergame activated persuasion knowledge, which resulted in more negative brand attitudes.

Regarding purchase intention, van Reijmersdal et al. (2016) showed in their study about effects of disclosing sponsored content in blogs that people indeed activated persuasion knowledge in response to disclosures and that this partially explained the negative effect of sponsorship disclosure on brand attitude and purchase intention. The absence of a disclosure is likely to leave the reader with the assumption that no sponsor is involved (Carr & Hayes, 2014). When consumers do not identify that the message is an ad, persuasion knowledge may not be activated (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017).

Additionally, the relation between sponsorship disclosure and blogger credibility can also be explained by perceived persuasion intent. After activating their persuasion knowledge, consumers will not only critically process the message, but also the source they receive the message from. This may lead to a downgrade of the credibility of the source, in the study at hand the influencer (Lee & Koo, 2012). Fransen and Fennis (2014) argue that perceived persuasive intent, activated through sponsorship disclosure, can result in source derogation and affect the perception of reliability, which is often used as an item to measure source credibility (Whitehead, 1968) or blogger credibility (Kang, 2010).

Based on these findings we hypothesize that perceived persuasive intent mediates the negative effect of sponsorship disclosure on brand attitude, purchase intention and blogger credibility:

H2: Sponsorship disclosure will lead to (a) more negative brand attitude, (b) lower purchase intention and (c) less blogger credibility than no sponsorship disclosure, because the perceived persuasive intent will be higher.

Moderating effect of blogger-product congruency

In this section, the term (in)congruency will be clarified first so that the interaction between sponsorship disclosure and blogger-product (in)congruency in Instagram posts can be explained better. As there is no prior research on blogger-product congruency as moderator of the effect of sponsorship disclosure on Instagram the present study investigates whether the effect of sponsorship disclosure varies by blogger-product congruency.

In general, when information is *congruent* with one's personal expectations this may lead to a positive evaluation and feelings of familiarity and acceptability (Mandler, 1982). *Incongruency* originates from an interruption of our expectations and predictions. This can lead to either positive or negative emotions and judgements (Mandler, 1982). According to Mandler (1982), the smaller the difference in incongruency, the more likely people will build a positive evaluation about the object. When there is a large discrepancy, the positive or negative emotion will generally depend on a more elaborate evaluation of the context of the incongruency (Mandler, 1982). Incongruency can be managed in two ways. Individuals can either ignore it or try to solve it. In the first case, there is no effect why it is better to have congruency. In the other case, when individuals try to solve the incongruency, there is a stronger cognitive activity and an influence on the evaluation of that incongruency. People find it more difficult to resolve this information, because it does not match with prior

knowledge or expectations of the context. They need more effort to resolve this incongruity. When individuals cannot solve this incongruity, it will lead to a more negative evaluation of the information or the ad and may result in frustration (Mandler, 1982; Jeong & King, 2010; Segev, Wang, & Fernandes, 2014). But an incongruity that can be solved will lead to a positive evaluation (Mandler, 1982).

Many studies suggest that congruency is more effective than incongruity. Mandler (1982) however argues that the degree to which something is interesting depends on its incongruity. This can be positive or negative. Within this context, moderate incongruity would be better to draw attention and would lead to a more intense treatment than strong or weak (in)congruity (Mandler, 1982). Also, Meyers-Levy and Tybout (1989) argue that products that are moderately incongruent with their context will lead to a more positive evaluation than products that are congruent or extremely incongruent.

Prior research on ad-context congruency in traditional media and the web found positive effects of ad-context congruency (Segev, Wang, & Fernandes, 2014). Ad-context congruency refers to the degree to which advertising information is similar to the editorial content of the media vehicle (Zanjani et al., 2011). The study showed that when the topic is fitting to the context it led to positive reactions to the ad, brand attitude and purchase intention (Choi & Rifon, 2002; Jeong & King, 2010). Additionally, research on congruency and celebrity endorsement found that brand promotion is more effective when there is congruency between the celebrity endorser and the brand (Farhat & Khan, 2011). In contrast, a lack of congruency led to negative effects on consumer responses (Lee & Mason, 1999). Segev, Wang and Fernandes' (2014) findings suggest that ad-context congruency is especially important, when targeting audiences who feel the issue is very relevant to them. Moreover, Kozinets et al. (2010) suggest that the congruency of communicator and product in marketing promotion in consumer generated content contexts such as Instagram, does play a role. On Instagram, people follow bloggers they are interested in or bloggers who post about things

that are align with their interests. Therefore, blogger-product congruency is expected to also play a role in this research.

In the study at hand, blogger-product congruency refers to the degree to which the praised product in an Instagram post is in line with the overall content of the Instagram profile of the influencer. It is differentiated in blogger congruent product and blogger incongruent product. People expect in general that product reviews, product information and photos a blogger posts about be in line with the overall topic of the bloggers' Instagram profile.

Regarding the moderating effect of blogger-product congruency on the relationship between sponsorship disclosure and consumer responses, we expect that when exposed to a blogger congruent product, a sponsorship disclosure will lead to negative consumer responses. Based on the findings of *congruency* (Jeong & King, 2010; Farhat & Khan, 2011; Segev, Wang, & Fernandes, 2014) it is expected that a blogger congruent product that is in line with the overall content of the bloggers' profile will lead to rather positive post evaluations. In this case, based on the before-mentioned information to sponsorship disclosure, we expect that a sponsorship disclosure could turn those positive evaluations negative, because "when Instagram users recognize sponsored advertising by an individual endorser on Instagram as a threat to their choice of freedom, this can induce reactance coping for consuming the undesirable persuasion attempt" (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017, p. 5). Therefore the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: When exposed to a blogger congruent product, sponsorship disclosure will lead to (a) more negative brand attitude, (b) lower purchase intention and (c) less blogger credibility than no sponsorship disclosure.

When users are exposed to a blogger incongruent product on Instagram, which is not in line with the overall context of the influencers' profile, they may evaluate the post and the

product more negatively as explained above, because they have difficulties to solve this incongruency. In this case, a sponsorship disclosure could help to solve this incongruency and its negative effects may disappear in the sponsorship disclosure condition. Consequently a sponsorship disclosure could work better in an incongruent context and the following hypothesis is formulated:

H4: When exposed to a blogger incongruent product, sponsorship disclosure will lead to (a) more positive brand attitude, (b) higher purchase intention and (c) more blogger credibility than no sponsorship disclosure.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of this study with all hypotheses presented.

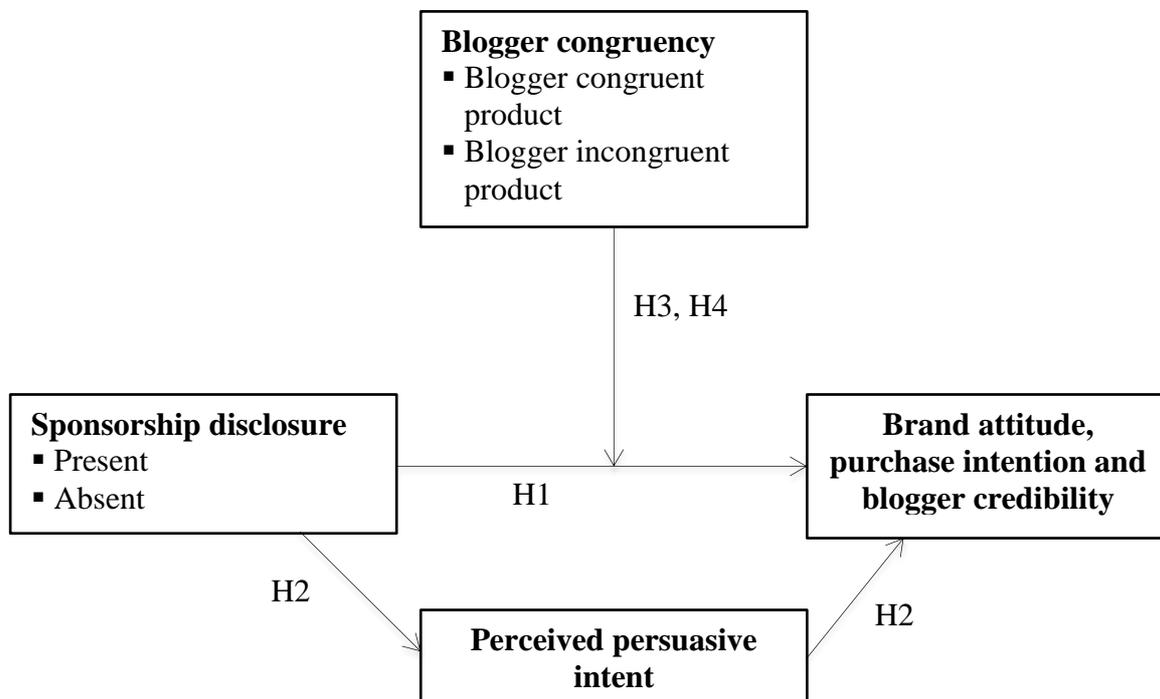


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model with mediator and moderator: Effect of sponsorship disclosure on brand attitude, purchase intention and blogger credibility via perceived persuasive intent; and effect of sponsorship disclosure on brand attitude, purchase intention and blogger credibility moderated by blogger-product congruency.

Method

Design

To evaluate the hypotheses, this study used a 2 (sponsorship disclosure: absent vs present) x 2 (blogger-product congruency: blogger congruent product vs blogger incongruent product) between-subjects factorial design. The experiment was embedded in a self-completion web-based questionnaire, and the participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions ($N = 32$ in Group 1, $N = 32$ in Group 2, $N = 29$ in Group 3 and $N = 35$ in Group 4) (see Figure 2).

Blogger-product congruency	Sponsorship disclosure	
	Absent	Present
Blogger congruent product	Group 1: No sponsorship disclosure x blogger congruent product	Group 2: Sponsorship disclosure x blogger congruent product
Blogger incongruent product	Group 3: No sponsorship disclosure x blogger incongruent product	Group 4: Sponsorship disclosure x blogger incongruent product

Figure 2. 2x2 between-subjects factorial design: Sponsorship disclosure (2 levels) x blogger-product congruency (2 levels)

Participants

All participants for this research were selected by a mix of convenience and snowball sampling strategy. The experiment was distributed via weblink over social media such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn and via email using the profile of the author. Two filter questions right in the beginning of the online questionnaire ensured that participants were above 18 years and in possession of an Instagram account.

A total of $N = 158$ respondents entered the experiment. Participants were excluded when they did not complete the survey questions, which led to a total of $N = 128$ with 70.3% females and 29.7% males. The overall mean age was $M = 25.87$ years ($N = 128$, $SD = 4.16$). Most respondents in this study were from Germany (56.3%) and the Netherlands (7.8%), while in total 19 nationalities were represented. Furthermore, 76.5% graduated from university, with 48.4% finishing with an undergraduate degree and 28.1% with a postgraduate degree.

Stimuli

The two independent variables sponsorship disclosure and blogger-product congruency served as basis for the stimulus material, and different characteristics according to the four conditions had to be combined into four different Instagram posts; one Instagram post per condition (see Appendix 1). For the purpose of this study, a fake Instagram account of a design blogger, named “hellodesignlife”, and four posts from this blogger were developed. All four mock-up Instagram posts consisted of the same photo, which shows a cupboard standing in a room. In two conditions an energy drink was put on top of the cupboard with photo shop, whereas in the other two conditions, only the cupboard was present.

For the independent variable sponsorship disclosure, a short text below each post was formulated. This caption included, inspired by existing Instagram posts, the brand name of

each product as well as a positive aspect of the product. In the sponsorship disclosure conditions the hashtags #ad and #sponsored were added to the caption. In the no disclosure condition the hashtags were left out.

Regarding blogger-product congruency, a pretest was conducted prior to the formal experiment to help decide what blogger not congruent product to choose. The participants ($N = 12$) were asked to imagine that they would follow the blogger “hellodesignlife” on Instagram for some time and they were informed that some pictures of the bloggers design profile will be shown to them to get an idea about the content of the Instagram account. Consequently a screenshot of the Instagram profile with pictures of interior design items, mostly furniture, were shown. Following, the participants were given four different products, namely an energy drink, a camera, sunscreen and a smoothie. For each product the participants were asked to answer a single-item measure, “To what extent do you think the product fits to the overall content of the blogger’s Instagram profile?” using a 5-point bi-polar scale reaching from ‘The product fits not at all’ to ‘The product fits perfectly’. The pretest revealed to use an energy drink from “Rockstar Energy” as blogger incongruent product. For the blogger congruent product a cupboard from the brand “Hay design” was chosen, as this is an obviously common product to post for a design blogger.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of four parts. Firstly, participants were asked to answer questions related to their demographic characteristics such as age or gender. In the second part, pictures of the design blogger “hellodesignlife” were shown to the participants in order to have an impression of the Instagram profile. After that, one of the four stimuli was shown to the participants and they were requested to answer questions related to the perceived persuasive intent, their brand attitude, purchase intentions and blogger credibility. The last part focused on the manipulation checks to see whether the manipulations did work.

Measures

Attitude toward the brand. Participants were asked, “How did you feel about the brand advertised?” using six 7-point semantic differential scales: Unappealing/Appealing, Unpleasant/Pleasant, Boring/Interesting, Dislike/Like, Negative/Positive, and Bad/Good (Spears & Singh, 2004) ($\alpha = .97$, $M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.83$).

Purchase intention. Participants’ purchase intention (Barber, Kuo, Bishop, & Goodman Jr., 2012) was measured by asking them to assess on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) the following four statements: “I would consider purchasing this product”, “I intend to try this product”, “I plan on buying this product”, and “I am interested in testing this product” ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.12$).

Perceived persuasive intent. Participants were asked to answer a single-item measure using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) to “indicate the extent in which you think the Instagram post is advertising” (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012; Boerman, Willemsen, & Van der Aa, 2017) ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.92$).

Blogger credibility. In order to measure blogger credibility, a scale from Kang (2010) with five items was used to indicate the extent the participants thought the blogger is knowledgeable; influential; passionate; transparent; and reliable on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Two items were added from the trustworthiness scale from McCroskey & Teven (1999): Untrustworthy/Trustworthy and Phoney/Genuine. This seven-item scale proved to be more reliable ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.31$) than the five-item measure ($\alpha = .84$). Therefore this scale was used to measure blogger credibility.

Manipulation checks. In order to test whether the experimental manipulations worked, two manipulation checks were carried out. For sponsorship disclosure, participants were asked if the post was labeled as sponsored and had to disagree or agree on a 5-point Likert scale. For blogger-product congruency, participants were asked if the posted product

was in line with the blog content on a 5-point Likert scale also ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Results

Manipulation checks

Both manipulation checks were tested using a one-way ANOVA. For sponsorship disclosure, significant differences could be found between the disclosure condition ($M = 3.94, SD = 1.25$) and the no disclosure condition ($M = 2.17, SD = 1.36$); $F(3,125) = 16.01, p < .01$. Consequently, it can be assumed that the manipulation succeeded.

For blogger-product congruency significant differences could be found between the blogger congruent product group ($M = 4.61, SD = 0.80$) and the blogger incongruent product group ($M = 1.37, SD = 0.84$); $F(3,125) = 88.67, p < .01$. Consequently, the manipulation was successful.

Randomization checks

Investigating whether the randomization was successful, randomization checks were conducted. Chi-square tests for the demographic characteristics in this study indicated that no significant differences between the participant groups were apparent in terms of gender ($\chi^2(3) = 1.35, p = .72$) and level of education ($\chi^2(12) = 9.26, p = .68$). Since country of origin had too many categories, the cell counts were too small for a Chi-square test. Hence, all countries except Germany and the Netherlands, which were the categories with the highest cell counts, were recoded into one value in order to conduct a Chi-square test for country of origin, which showed that there were no significant differences between the four groups ($\chi^2(6) = 5.26, p = .51$). A one-way ANOVA indicated that also for age there was no significant difference between the four groups apparent, $F(3, 124) = 0.16, p = .92$. Therefore, the randomization was successful and we did not need to control for these variables in our further analyses.

Main and interaction effects

Three ANOVAs were conducted in order to test the main effects (H1a-c) and interaction effects (H3 and H4) of sponsorship disclosure and blogger-product congruency on brand attitude, purchase intention and blogger credibility.

Brand attitude. The ANOVA for brand attitude revealed that there was no significant main effect between sponsorship disclosure and brand attitude, $F(1,122) = 1.97, p = .163$. However, a significant main effect of blogger-product congruency was found on brand attitude. This means that people had a more positive brand attitude when exposed to a blogger congruent product ($M = 4.76, SD = 1.75$) than when exposed to a blogger incongruent product ($M = 3.40, SD = 1.66$), $F(1,122) = 22.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$. Furthermore, there was a significant interaction effect between sponsorship disclosure and blogger-product congruency,

$F(1,122) = 7.50, p = .007, \eta^2 = .05$. To further investigate this interaction, a simple effects analysis was used (Field, 2013). It showed that people who were exposed to the blogger congruent product had a more negative brand attitude when sponsorship disclosure was present ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.77$) than when it was absent ($M = 5.38, SD = 1.52$), $F(1,122) = 8.61, p = .004$. For the blogger incongruent product, sponsorship disclosure had no effect, $F(1,122) = 0.89, p = .348$. Thus, H1a cannot be confirmed, because there is no relation between sponsorship disclosure and brand attitude. H3 (a) can be confirmed meaning that the relationship between sponsorship disclosure and brand attitude depends on the blogger-product congruency such that when exposed to a blogger congruent product, sponsorship disclosure will lead to a more negative brand attitude than no sponsorship disclosure. H4 (a) cannot be confirmed, which means that when exposed to a blogger incongruent product, it does not matter whether there is a sponsorship disclosure or not.

Purchase intention. There was no significant main effect between sponsorship disclosure and purchase intention, $F(1,123) = 0.68, p = .413$, but a significant main effect of blogger-product congruency and purchase intention, $F(1,123) = 27.54, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$.

People had a higher purchase intention when exposed to a blogger congruent product ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.10$) and a lower purchase intention when exposed to a blogger incongruent product ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.93$). A significant interaction effect occurred between sponsorship disclosure and blogger-product congruency, $F(1,123) = 6.14$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2 = .04$. A simple effects analysis showed that respondents who were exposed to the blogger congruent product had a lower purchase intention when sponsorship disclosure was present ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 0.96$) than when it was absent ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.17$), $F(1,123) = 5.42$, $p = .021$. However, for the blogger incongruent product, sponsorship disclosure had no effect, $F(1,123) = 1.38$, $p = .243$. Thus, the results do not support H1b, as sponsorship disclosure has no effect on purchase intention. H3 (b) is supported meaning that when exposed to a blogger congruent product, sponsorship disclosure will lead to a lower purchase intention. H4 (b) is not confirmed, which means that when exposed to a blogger incongruent product, it does not matter if there is a sponsorship disclosure or not.

Blogger credibility. The tests revealed no significant effect of sponsorship disclosure on blogger credibility, $F(1,124) = 0.81$, $p = .37$. A significant main effect was found between blogger-product congruency and blogger credibility. This means that people who were exposed to the blogger congruent product found the blogger to be more credible ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.28$) than people who were exposed to the blogger incongruent product ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.29$), $F(1,124) = 8.53$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .06$. The ANOVA also showed significant results for the interaction of sponsorship disclosure and blogger-product congruency, $F(1,124) = 16.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. A simple effects analysis showed that respondents who were exposed to the blogger congruent product and sponsorship disclosure found the blogger to be less credible ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.23$) than without sponsorship disclosure ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.12$), $F(1,124) = 12.54$, $p = .001$. When exposed to the blogger incongruent product, people found the blogger more credible when there was a sponsorship disclosure ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.20$)

than when there was no sponsorship disclosure ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.32$), $F(1,124) = 5.10$, $p = .026$. These results do not support H1c but support H3 (c) as well as H4 (c)

Mediation analysis

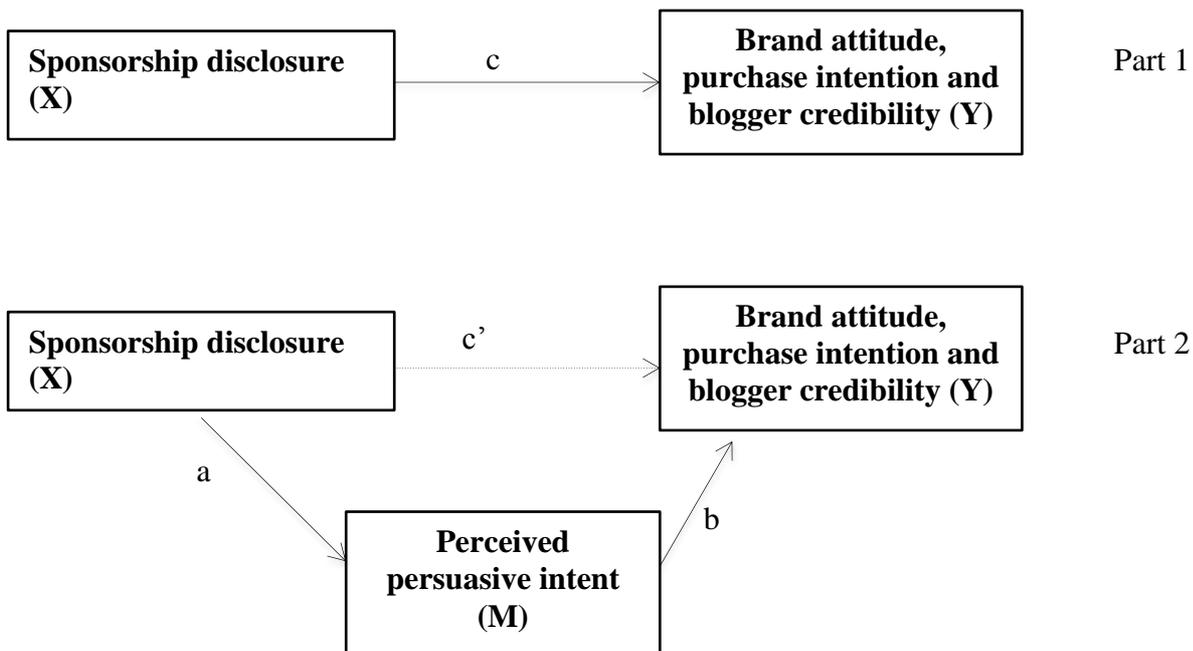


Figure 3. Path models showing total effect (c in Part 1) and mediated effect (Part 2) of X on Y with c' as direct effect and a and b as indirect effect. When mediation occurs, the c' path in Part 2 is smaller than the c path in Part 1.

In the following section, we will discuss the effect of perceived persuasive intent as a mediator between the relationship of sponsorship disclosure and brand attitude, purchase intention and blogger credibility.

According to Baron and Kenny's (1986) guidelines for assessing mediation, they described several steps that should be taken. Variable M is considered a mediator if (1) X significantly predicts Y (c in Figure 3), (2) X significantly predicts M (a in Figure 3), and (3) M significantly predicts Y controlling for X (b in Figure 3) (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). The authors conclude that mediation is not possible or likely if the total effect is not significant, as it is the case for all three dependent variables in the study at hand. Nevertheless there are

other approaches to test the mediation effect. In fact, there is relatively large consensus among statisticians that the total effect should not be used as a ‘gatekeeper’ for tests of mediation (Hayes, 2009; Hayes, & Rockwood, 2017; Shrout, & Bolger, 2002).

An alternative, and preferable, approach, is to calculate the indirect effect, which means that the independent variable affects the dependent variable through the compound pathway of a and b , and test it for significance. Bootstrap tests detect that the sampling distribution is skewed away from 0 and argue that Baron and Kenny’s (1986) guidelines of first testing the $X \rightarrow Y$ relation for statistical significance should not be a requirement but that a more powerful strategy for the assessment of mediation may be to require only (1) that there exists an effect to be mediated ($c \neq 0$) and (2) that the indirect effect is significant in the direction of the proposed mediation hypothesis (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

Therefore, this approach is used to test H2, proposing that the effect of sponsorship disclosure on the dependent variables is mediated by perceived persuasive intent. For each dependent variable, analyses of direct and indirect effects were performed by means of model 4 of the PROCESS Macro plug-in for SPSS with a number of 5,000 bootstrap resamples to estimate the bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (BCBCI) (Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Hayes, 2013).

The relationship between sponsorship disclosure and brand attitude ($c = -0.46$) was smaller after controlling for perceived persuasive intent ($c' = -0.19$) and the indirect effect supportive of mediation was statistically significant, as it does not include zero (Indirect effect = -0.27 , 95% BCBCI [$-0.611, -0.069$]). This means that a sponsorship disclosure increased the perceived persuasive intent ($B = .96$, $p = .009$), which consequently led to lower brand attitude ($B = -0.31$, $p = .002$). The effect of sponsorship disclosure on brand attitude was thus mediated by perceived persuasive intent, supporting H2 (a).

Furthermore, the relationship between sponsorship disclosure and purchase intention ($c = -0.19$) was smaller after controlling for perceived persuasive intent ($c' = -0.01$) and the

indirect effect supportive of mediation was statistically significant, as it does not include zero (Indirect effect = $-.21$, 95% BCBCI [$-.485$, $-.049$]). A sponsorship disclosure compared to no sponsorship disclosure led to a higher perceived persuasive intent ($B = .94$, $p = .006$), which consequently led to lower purchase intention ($B = -.22$, $p = .001$). The effect of sponsorship disclosure on purchase intention was thus mediated by perceived persuasive intent, supporting H2 (b).

Moreover, the relationship between sponsorship disclosure and blogger credibility ($c = -0.23$) was smaller after controlling for perceived persuasive intent ($c' = -0.05$) and the indirect effect supportive of mediation was statistically significant, as it does not include zero (Indirect effect = $-.18$, 95% BCBCI [$-.475$, $-.027$]). Sponsorship disclosure increased the perceived persuasive intent ($B = .96$, $p = .005$) and this led to less blogger credibility ($B = -.19$, $p = .019$). Thus, the effect of sponsorship disclosure on blogger credibility was mediated by perceived persuasive intent, supporting H2 (c).

Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the impact of sponsorship disclosure and blogger-product congruency on brand attitude, purchase intention and blogger credibility. In addition, the role of perceived persuasive intent as a mediator of the relationship between sponsorship disclosure and consumer responses was tested. In the following, the findings will be discussed.

Our outcomes emphasize that sponsorship disclosure has no main effect on consumer responses, but affect perceived persuasive intent, which in turn affects consumer responses. When bloggers overtly label their posts as sponsored, the perceived persuasive intent increases and consequently affects brand responses and blogger credibility negatively. This is in line with the argumentation of Friestad and Wright (1994), based on the persuasion knowledge model, which - applied to this research - argues that the disclosures in an

Instagram post activate persuasion knowledge, which then consequently leads to a negative response of people to the sponsored content.

Another finding of this study is the importance of blogger-product congruency, which has a main effect on consumer responses. The results show that a blogger congruent product in an Instagram post results in more positive brand attitude, purchase intention and blogger credibility than a blogger incongruent product. The conclusion that congruent products that are in line with the overall content of the bloggers' Instagram profile work better than incongruent products is in line with earlier research in advertising and celebrity endorsement (Choi & Rifon, 2002; Jeong & King, 2010; Farhat & Khan, 2011; Segev, Wang, & Fernandes, 2014). When the content is fitting to the context or when a celebrity endorser is congruent with the brand this will generate more positive consumer responses. Similarly, in this study, a design blogger who posts about a cupboard is assessed more favorable than a design blogger who posts about an energy drink.

Regarding the moderating role of blogger-product congruency in the relationship between sponsorship disclosure and brand attitude as well as purchase intention, the analyses showed that when people are exposed to a *blogger congruent* product, sponsorship disclosure indeed leads to more negative brand responses compared to no sponsorship disclosure. This is in line with what was expected. This means that, as the cupboard fits to the overall content of the design blog, there is no incongruency that has to be solved by a disclosure and consequently, the presence of a sponsorship disclosure leads to negative consumer responses (Campbell et al., 2013; Boerman et al., 2012; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016).

When people are exposed to a *blogger incongruent product*, it makes no difference if there is a sponsorship disclosure or not. It was expected that a sponsorship disclosure would help solving the incongruency of the post and consequently lead to more positive perceptions. An explanation for the rejection of this proposed effect, might be that, as the energy drink

does not fit to the design content of the profile, users already think that the post is sponsored and therefore a disclosure or not makes no difference.

Regarding the moderating role of blogger-product congruency in the relationship between sponsorship disclosure and blogger credibility, the findings are completely in line with the expectations. A sponsorship disclosure in a post about a *blogger congruent* product leads to less blogger credibility than without a sponsorship disclosure. A sponsorship disclosure in a post about a *blogger incongruent product* leads to more credibility of the blogger compared to no disclosure, because - as mentioned above - the energy drink is obviously not in line with the usual blogger content and gives the impression that the blogger got compensated for the post. In that case the disclosure of the sponsorship confers the blogger more credibility.

It is important to mention that out of the four conditions, the condition with the blogger congruent product (cupboard) and no sponsorship disclosure generated the most positive outcome. The most negative condition regarding consumer perceptions was the one with the blogger incongruent product (energy drink) and no sponsorship disclosure. Those findings are in line with what was expected. This study confirms prior theory about the mediating effect of perceived persuasive intent in the relationship between sponsorship disclosure and consumer responses (van Reijmersdal et al. 2016; Boerman et al., 2012; Boerman, 2014; Boerman et al., 2017) and indicates that disclosures have a positive impact on perceived persuasive intent, which in turn can negatively impact brand attitudes, purchase intentions and blogger credibility. Moreover, this research adds to existing findings by giving information about the importance of blogger-product congruency in regard to consumer responses. Blogger-product congruency has more positive effects on brand attitude, purchase intentions and blogger credibility than blogger-product incongruency, and has also an interaction effect with sponsorship disclosure on consumer responses.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The current study is not without some limitations. First, blogger-product congruency had only two levels, namely blogger-product congruent and blogger-product incongruent, which could be a threat to validity. Future research might examine the impact of more than two levels of blogger-product congruency by including a moderate level of blogger-product congruency (e.g. congruent, moderate, extremely incongruent). For example, Meyers-Levy and Tybout (1989) argue that products that are moderately incongruent with their context will stimulate the processing of incongruity and will therefore lead to a more positive evaluation than products that are congruent or extremely incongruent. Future research might find different results based on different levels of congruency, which would be interesting for marketers, who promote their products through influencer marketing.

Similarly, the current study used only two different brands for the experiment. Lu, Chang and Chang (2014) examined the effect of sponsorship disclosure and brand awareness on blogs on attitudes and purchase intention and found that for products with higher brand awareness the purchase intention was higher than with lower brand awareness, although sponsorship was disclosed. The brand of the blogger incongruent product “Rockstar Energy” might be perceived differently than the brand of the blogger congruent product “Hay Design” due to their brand awareness and not only because of their different levels of congruency. A future study that uses more brands could disentangle that and test the effect of sponsorship disclosure, blogger-product congruency and brand awareness on brand attitude, purchase intention and blogger credibility.

It should be noted that the insignificant results in this study are marginally insignificant (Pritschet, Powell, & Horne, 2016). Hence in order to validate those results, it would be meaningful to replicate this research.

Practical implications

Influencer marketing is growing and provides fast, targeted access to audiences that are engaged. Additionally it is less expensive than traditional advertising. Nevertheless, the controversy about the ethics of this marketing tool is ongoing as consumers might not be able to differentiate between “paid” advertisement and truthful free opinion (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). Therefore guidelines were implemented that require marketers and influencers to disclose paid content on Instagram (FTC, 2015). The findings of the current study show that sponsorship disclosure indeed leads to a higher perceived persuasive intent, but in turn potentially risks a degrading of brand attitudes, purchase intentions and the credibility of the blogger. In addition, the findings suggest that managers and practitioners who use influencer marketing as a tool should choose influencers based on the blogger-product congruency. As the results show, it is important that the product is in line with the content of the blogger’s Instagram profile. When the product is not in line with the content, a sponsorship disclosure is important to maintain the bloggers credibility.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Stimuli for experimental conditions



♡ 💬 📌 📌
hellodesignlife Love my new cupboard from
@haydesign

Condition 1: No sponsorship disclosure x blogger congruent product



♡ 💬 📌 📌
hellodesignlife Love my new cupboard from
@haydesign #ad #sponsored

Condition 2: Sponsorship disclosure x blogger congruent product



hellodesignlife Love this energy drink from @rockstarenergy. Makes me feel so energized that I cleaned up at home 🍷

Condition 3: No sponsorship disclosure x blogger incongruent product



hellodesignlife Love this energy drink from @rockstarenergy. Makes me feel so energized that I cleaned up at home 🍷 #ad #sponsored

Condition 4: Sponsorship disclosure x blogger incongruent product