

# How to motivate opinion leaders to spread e-WoM on social media: monetary vs non-monetary incentives

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Opinion leaders are increasingly important as a source of information, with consumers judging them to be more credible than other media and more influential than other consumers. Thus, companies have an interest in engaging opinion leaders to post about products and brands, and we analyse different incentives for encouraging them to spread the word on social media (via electronic word-of-mouth [e-WoM]).

**Design/methodology** – A 2 × 3 between-subjects experimental design was developed in which 359 technological opinion leaders (bloggers) participated. We manipulated the monetary incentive (money vs no money) and non-monetary incentives (information only vs return product vs keep product) offered in exchange for a post.

**Findings** – Various techniques for approaching opinion leaders are effective, but to differing degrees. Providing a product free of charge increases the likelihood that opinion leaders will post about it, and the highest intention to post is observed when they are allowed to keep the product. In contrast, giving money to opinion leaders has an indirect negative impact on their intention to post through the expected negative reaction of followers.

**Originality/value** – It remains unclear how opinion leaders can best be encouraged to spread e-WoM, as incentives used for consumers may work differently for opinion leaders, who have followers that they want to maintain. The main contribution of this paper lies in its explanation of why opinion leaders react differently to monetary versus non-monetary incentives.

**Keywords** Opinion leaders, Social media, Disclosure, Monetary incentives, Non-monetary incentives, Influencers, bloggers, e-WoM

## 1. Introduction

The development of social media has provided a platform via which opinion leaders can easily interact with their followers (Corrêa *et al.*, 2020). Given the unprecedented interactivity of social media, opinion leaders usually end up building strong relationships with their followers (Delbaere *et al.*, 2021). As a result, many opinion leaders have created a community with their followers based on trust and friendship, where followers are likely to trust the opinion leader and act on their advice (Akdevelioglu and Kara, 2020).

Opinion leaders are also increasingly interacting with brands as developments in social media create new opportunities for marketers to co-opt the power of promoting products and brands via sponsored posts (Wang, 2021). The opinion leader is becoming a kind of a human brand; that is, a well-known person who is the subject of marketing communication efforts (Corrêa *et al.*, 2020). For that reason, opinion leaders have to make decisions about the positioning they want to adopt regarding their collaboration with brands while ensuring that they do not damage their relationship with their followers.

Opinion leaders can receive either monetary or non-monetary incentives in exchange for a post (Pongjit and Beise-Zee, 2015). Previous studies on consumer behaviour have shown that monetary incentives increase individuals' intention to spread electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM; Reimer and Benkenstein, 2016). Non-monetary incentives such as product trials are also effective in generating e-WoM (Libai *et al.*, 2013) and seem to have a less negative impact on attitudes toward the company compared to monetary incentives (Reimer and Benkenstein, 2018).

The decision as to which incentive to offer opinion leaders represents an interesting issue from a managerial point of view. Previous research has analysed incentives offered to consumers; however, the unique characteristics of opinion leaders as a target population could affect how they react to marketers' attempts at persuasion. Although followers' overall tolerance toward sponsored posts has increased (Lou, 2021), when companies approach

opinion leaders they still risk damaging the relationships those opinion leaders have with their followers (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, common techniques used by companies to engage consumers to spread e-WoM could be ineffective when it comes to opinion leaders. Additionally, beyond the decision to post, opinion leaders have to decide whether to disclose to their followers that the post has been written in return for an incentive. The action of revealing that a company has approached an opinion leader is referred to as disclosure (Tuk *et al.*, 2009). Previous studies have shown that disclosure reduces the effectiveness of the message (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020); however, these studies examined disclosure from the receiver's point of view. To date, very few studies have analysed the effect of incentives on opinion leaders' decisions to post or to disclose (Hudders *et al.*, 2021), and, to the best of our knowledge, the prior studies that do exist have adopted a qualitative approach.

Therefore, this study seeks to shed light on the strategies that companies should use to engage opinion leaders to spread e-WoM. The paper's contribution to the literature is twofold. First, we extend the interactive marketing literature by proposing that the expected reaction of followers will shape opinion leaders' reactions to company incentives. Second, we provide a rationale for the fact that the reaction of opinion leaders in terms of their intention to post and to disclose depends on the type of incentive used by the company. The key to understanding opinion leaders' decisions is their interest in not damaging the relationship they have built with their followers. Drawing on social influence theory and attribution theory, we propose that opinion leaders will react more favourably to non-monetary than to monetary incentives because they expect that their followers will react negatively to the latter.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. *Opinion leaders and their relationship with followers*

People that influence others through social media are usually referred to as influencers (Gerrath and Usrey, 2020). Al-Emadi and Yahia (2020) identified two main groups of influencers: established influencers, who are celebrities that are known in other areas outside social media; and ordinary influencers, who are unknown offline but have become famous through their self-branding activities on the Internet. Because ordinary influencers are able to influence the opinions of others on social media, these non-celebrity consumers are seen as opinion leaders (Bamakan *et al.*, 2019). In the marketing literature, opinion leaders have traditionally been referred to as “individuals who exert an unequal amount of influence on the decisions of others” (Rogers and Cartano, 1962, p. 435). Compared with consumers who seek their advice, opinion leaders frequently possess more knowledge, experience, expertise, and involvement with a product category (Lyons and Henderson, 2005). This specialised knowledge, along with their personal appeal or connection with consumers, explains their great influence (Lin *et al.*, 2018).

Opinion leaders on social media share their experience with a particular product or industry having become experts on it and thereby building credibility (Merriweather, 2013). Similarly, honesty, authenticity, transparency, and openness are crucial for opinion leaders (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020; Lou 2021). Additionally, opinion leaders try to provoke emotions in their followers (Bamakan *et al.*, 2019), usually by sharing details of their lives with their audience, thus creating a sense of connection with them (Hunter, 2016). Followers may respond to that content, providing feedback to the opinion leaders (Lou, 2021). As a result, it is highly likely that a social relationship between opinion leaders and their followers exists in which followers feel a sense of friendship with opinion leaders (Delbaere *et al.*, 2021).

Given this special relationship, some tension may arise when opinion leaders are approached by companies to spread e-WoM (Wellman *et al.*, 2020). Opinion leaders are

recruited as marketers who can transform interpersonal communication into persuasion (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). Thus, the traditional social contract that keeps marketplace relationships at a distance from the opinion leader–followers relationship may be violated (Pongjit and Beise-Zee, 2015).

It is also important for opinion leaders to decide whether to disclose that they have been approached by marketers. Disclosure has both legal and ethical implications. From a legal perspective, some countries, including the United Kingdom and the United States, have regulated this practice so that opinion leaders from these countries have to disclose any promoted action on social media (Electronic Code of Federal Regulation, 2021). However, not all countries have done this, and not all opinion leaders follow regulations, even where these are in place. Most Spanish-speaking countries do not specifically regulate this issue; for instance, Spain has only a general law in place to govern advertising. Thus, in these countries, opinion leaders have more freedom to choose whether to disclose that a company has approached them compared to opinion leaders from countries in which disclosure is subject to greater regulation.

In terms of ethical implications, opinion leaders are credible and influential because of their lack of commercial interest (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). When they provide an opinion that is not totally independent, they must decide whether to disclose that this opinion is being posited based on a commercial arrangement. If they disclose, the effectiveness of the message could be reduced (Boerman *et al.*, 2017); however, if they do not disclose, they may be deceiving their audience (Lou, 2021). As a result, what followers will think about the opinion leader's action is likely to be taken into consideration in the decision on whether to disclose.

## *2.2. Opinion leader decisions based on the expected reactions of followers*

Companies can pay opinion leaders directly in exchange for a post or can use a range of different non-monetary incentives. A typical non-monetary incentive consists of giving opinion leaders a new product so that they will spread e-WoM (Libai *et al.*, 2013). Under this

strategy, the company can either allow the opinion leaders to keep the product or ask them to return it once it has been tested. Another non-monetary incentive involves giving opinion leaders valuable information about the characteristics of the product or its availability on the market. In the rest of this section, we draw on two theoretical frameworks to explain how opinion leaders may act when approached by a company.

### *2.2.1. Social influence theory*

Social influence (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975) refers to how an individual is encouraged by the behaviour of others to conform to community behaviour patterns. Chu and Kim (2011) observed that people are affected by social influence when spreading e-WoM. Opinion leaders can be particularly affected by normative influence, which is the tendency to conform to the expectations of others (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975). Because of the duty that opinion leaders have to their followers (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010), they may be reluctant to spread the intended opinion about a product or brand when they receive an incentive in return. According to normative influence, individuals follow the expectations of other people or groups in order to achieve rewards or avoid punishment (Chu and Kim, 2011). In this particular case, the punishment could be social disapproval if opinion leaders fail to convey the desired impressions or if they convey impressions that are undesired by their target audiences (Wooten and Reed, 2004). Thus, opinion leaders may react negatively to companies' attempts to incentivise them, owing to the normative influence perceived from their followers.

### *2.2.2. Attribution theory*

Attribution theory suggests that people make causal inferences about the events they observe and experience (Kelley, 1973). Individuals infer the cause of an actor's behaviour, and these perceived causes influence subsequent behaviours (Calder and Burnkrant, 1977). In this context, opinion leaders think that their followers may make inferences about a post written in exchange for an incentive (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020), and such perceived inferences may affect their decisions to post and to disclose.

Attribution theory also posits that people attribute the behaviours of others either to external factors, which extrinsically motivate individuals to carry out a specific behaviour, or to internal factors, which lead to intrinsic motivations. Extrinsic motivation pertains to a wide variety of behaviours where the goals of an action extend beyond those inherent in the activity itself. In contrast, intrinsically motivated behaviours are engaged in for their own sake – in other words, for the pleasure and satisfaction of performing them (Deci, 1975).

Opinion leaders are usually intrinsically motivated to write a post about a product or a brand because of their personal interest in or admiration for it (Gerrath and Usrey, 2020). When an internal attribution is made, the cause of the given behaviour is assigned to the individual's characteristics, such as ability, effort, or disposition (Myers, 2010). This internal attribution may also be expected to occur when an opinion leader is offered a non-monetary incentive, either a product or valuable information. The opinion leader's effort and ability in providing a favourable assessment of the product, or disposition to share valuable information, may be reasonable attributions that followers could make.

In contrast, in case of monetary incentive, the intrinsic attribution is less likely to be plausible to followers. In such a case, the opinion leader is extrinsically motivated to write a post (Gerrath and Usrey, 2020). Therefore, opinion leaders may expect their readers to infer that there is an extrinsic motivation behind their decision to post. In fact, previous studies have shown that when individuals receive a salient incentive in exchange for a behaviour, their intrinsic motivation to enact the behaviour decreases and is replaced by extrinsic motivation (Deci *et al.*, 1999).

## 2.3. *Hypothesis formulation*

### 2.3.1. *The effects of using monetary incentives*

According to social influence theory, the decision to post in exchange for money may entail followers' disapproval (Wooten and Reed, 2004). Indeed, consumers used to social media are very empowered, and try to protect their rights (Tajurahim *et al.*, 2020). For instance, some followers have rejected their favourite opinion leaders on social media because they

no longer approve of the commercialisation of their profiles and/or sites (Hunter, 2016).

Recent research has also shown that recognition of advertising in an opinion leaders' profile causes consumers to develop distrusting beliefs about the opinion leader and his/her posts (van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, according to attribution theory, opinion leaders are aware of the fact that followers will make inferences about why a post has been written (Kelley, 1973). When opinion leaders write a post in exchange for money, they may feel that followers will attribute the post to motivations other than personal interest or admiration for the product or brand (Gerrath and Usrey, 2020). Unlike intrinsic motivations, external motivations can be attributed to self-centred motives, which are perceived as egoistic, and consumers tend to respond negatively to them (Ellen *et al.*, 2006). Opinion leaders are sensitive to the attributions they expect their followers to make (Calder and Burnkrant, 1977); as the attributions derived from obtaining money may lead to negative perceptions about the opinion leader they may expect a negative reaction from their followers. This negative reaction could be cognitive or behavioural (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). On the one hand, cognitive reactions could consist of consumers perceiving the opinion leader as less credible as they may question the opinion leader partiality for posting promoted information (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020). In the same vein, followers' attitude toward the opinion leader could be reduced (Van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, followers could behave against the opinion leader, for example stopping following their profile on social media or even could write negative opinions about the opinion leader (Hunter, 2016). Such an expected negative reaction of followers makes opinion leaders less likely to post. Thus, we propose:

**H1: The negative effect of monetary incentives on opinion leaders' intention to post is mediated by the expected reaction of followers.**

Once opinion leaders are motivated to write a post, they need to decide whether to disclose that they are posting in exchange for money. According to both social influence and attribution theories, the decision to disclose will be affected by the expected reaction of



followers. As opinion leaders are wary of negative reactions from their followers to incentivised posts, they often struggle to disclose sponsorship in a way that is both ethical and helpful in reducing negative responses. Although signalling a post as promoted may reduce its effect in terms of engagement, attitudes, and intentions (Boerman *et al.*, 2017; van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2020), it can be helpful in avoiding a negative reaction from followers. When opinion leaders explicitly disclose that they are writing a post because of a company incentive, followers no longer have to make inferences; they know the reason behind the post, and this knowledge contributes to an increase in their perception of the opinion leader as honest and credible (Lou, 2021).

When an opinion leader discloses that s/he has posted due to a collaboration with a brand or company, followers may perceive the opinion leader as more credible, mitigating the negative reactions that they are likely to have because of such collaboration (Sah *et al.*, 2018). A recent study has shown that, comparing with a promoted post that was not formally disclosed, followers reported more positive attitudes toward a promoted post that had been formally disclosed (Breves *et al.*, 2021). They perceived higher levels of opinion leader's authenticity due to the honest admission and perceived transparency of the promotional intentions (Breves *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, when opinion leaders write a post in exchange for money, their decision on whether to disclose will take into account the reaction of their followers, thereby increasing their intention to disclose the reason for posting in order to mitigate the negative reaction of followers by trying to be seen as more honest and credible:

**H2: The positive effect of monetary incentives on opinion leaders' intention to disclose is mediated by the expected reaction of followers.**

### *2.3.2. The effects of using non-monetary incentives*

Receiving a product or valuable information in exchange for a post could be considered by opinion leaders as less aggressive than receiving a monetary incentive. Thus, according to social influence theory, opinion leaders will be less likely to expect their followers to see their action as a violation of their established relationship norms. Similarly, according to attribution

theory, when opinion leaders write a post in exchange for a product or valuable information, they may expect their followers to attribute the post to intrinsic motives, as in this case the action of posting is related to their task of getting to know a product before recommending it or providing valuable information to their followers (Gerrath and Usrey, 2020). In fact, two common practices used by opinion leaders are looking for valuable information that can be posted (Huang *et al.*, 2007) and testing new products (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020). Thus, companies may facilitate the work of opinion leaders by offering them information about products or by providing them with the products themselves.

As followers value exclusive information about new products (Al-Emadi and Yahia, 2020), opinion leaders may decide to post about a product or brand after receiving such information from the marketer. In this case, their post will be limited to the specific information they have been given. In contrast, if the company offers the product to the opinion leader, the opinion leader will be able to try it for themselves and post in greater detail about their real experiences with it (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020). Previous studies have shown that as their confidence in their ability to provide interesting or useful information to others increases, individuals have a greater intention to share information (Lu and Hsiao, 2007). A product trial enables them to post a more detailed opinion about the product, as well as avoiding the social risk inherent in giving an opinion that is based purely on information provided by the company (Smith, 1993). Therefore, the opinion leader will have a higher intention to post when the non-monetary incentive is a product than when the incentive is only information:

**H3: Opinion leaders will show a greater intention to post when receiving a product than when receiving only information.**

Previous studies have demonstrated the difficulty experienced by individuals in taking a neutral and objective perspective when they have a personal interest in arriving at a specific behaviour (Babcock *et al.*, 1995). This issue has been widely studied in the context of the relationship between medical practitioners and the pharmaceutical industry when the

latter rewards the prescription of products (Dana and Loewenstein, 2003). Even when individuals try to be objective their judgements are subject to an unconscious and unintentional self-serving bias. When they have a stake in enacting a particular behaviour, they weigh arguments in a biased fashion that favours a particular conclusion (Babcock *et al.*, 1995). In addition, as they are generally unaware of the bias that gifts generate, they do not make efforts to correct for that bias (Dana and Loewenstein, 2003).

A similar phenomenon has been reported in the marketing literature. Friedman and Rahman (2011) demonstrated that giving a gift to consumers who entered a shop increased their spend considerably, leading them to rate the store higher on performance and triggering a greater intention to recommend it. Similar reasoning may be applied to opinion leaders. When a company allows opinion leaders to keep the product, they may perceive themselves as free to decide whether to post about it. Nevertheless, they may unintentionally and unconsciously succumb to bias by showing a higher intention to spread e-WoM when they can keep the product. Therefore, we propose:

**H4: Opinion leaders will show a greater intention to post when they can keep the product than when they have to return it.**

Previous studies have shown that where there is no disclosure, there is uncertainty about the real motives for posting (Tuk *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, individuals are rated as more credible when they reveal that they are giving an opinion because a company has approached them (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019). Thus, although opinion leaders may consider receiving the product as part of their job rather than as an incentive, they may want to make sure that their followers are aware of the reward obtained – in this case, the product received. In contrast, when they have received information only, their intention to disclose that the company has approached them may be lower, since no risk is perceived from this type of non-monetary incentive (Merriweather, 2013). If opinion leaders hide the fact that a company has given them a product, it could be inferred that they have ulterior motives for

non-disclosure. In order to maintain their reputation and honesty, they may prefer to disclose that the company has given them a product if they are able to keep it. Thus, we propose:

**H5: Opinion leaders will show a greater intention to disclose when receiving a product than when receiving information only.**

**H6: Opinion leaders will show a greater intention to disclose when they can keep the product than when they have to return it.**

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Study design*

An experiment was developed to test the proposed hypotheses by manipulating the type of incentive used by the company. A 2 monetary incentive (money vs no money) × 3 non-monetary incentive (product information only vs keep the product vs return the product) between-subjects experimental design was developed, with opinion leaders as participants. A control condition in which the opinion leader was aware of the product without the company's intervention was also introduced. Seven scenarios were created for the study.

#### *3.2. Product category*

We selected technology as a product category because it is difficult for individuals with no knowledge in this area to become opinion leaders (Lyons and Henderson, 2005). In addition, according to SocialPubli (2019), one of the industries in which campaigns with opinion leaders have the most potential is technology. A tablet was chosen as the target product, and to avoid biasing the results we did not provide any information about the tablet's brand or characteristics.

#### *3.3. Bloggers as opinion leaders*

We used bloggers as opinion leaders. Bloggers represent the main characteristics of opinion leaders, and both have influence on their followers and are valued by them (Hughes et al., 2019). In addition, blogs offer more resources to express knowledge; since they allow more

detail to be shared, they are more capable of providing useful information compared to many other social media channels (Lin *et al.*, 2018). Opinion leaders tend to express their knowledge via blogs (Hsu *et al.*, 2013). In addition, opinion leaders usually have profiles on a range of social media platforms, and bloggers also have a presence on social network sites. By selecting bloggers, then, we ensured that the study was not limited to the blogosphere (Lin *et al.*, 2018). Given all these advantages, it is unsurprising that other recent studies of opinion leaders have also focused on bloggers (Gerrath and Usrey, 2020; Hughes *et al.*, 2019).

#### *3.4. Sample, data collection, and procedure*

A database of Spanish-language technology blogs was created for this study. As disclosure is almost unregulated in Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries, these opinion leaders were particularly appropriate for our study; they have more freedom compared to opinion leaders in other countries to decide whether to disclose that they have been approached by a company.

We used the two most important Spanish-language blog directories, Bitácoras and La Blogoteca, to create the database. The following information was registered for each blog: URL, name(s), nationality, and contact information of the blogger(s). Contact information consisted of an email address, the URL of the contact form located on the blog, or the social network site profile of either the blog or the blogger. Blogs without any contact information or blogs without any posts in the last year were excluded. The final database included 1,120 blogs.

Data were collected through an online survey. Contact information provided by the bloggers was used to invite them to participate in the study. The link to the survey was sent via email, social network sites, or the form included in the blog, and was accompanied by a message explaining the aim of the study. To make the message more inviting, we personalised it with the name of the blogger to which it was addressed and used colloquial language. All respondents were offered a summary of the results.

Once they had agreed to participate, they were assigned at random to one of the seven scenarios we had created for the study (six experimental conditions and one control condition; see Appendix 1). In the experimental scenarios, the bloggers were instructed to imagine that a company had approached them to promote a new tablet and that they would receive an incentive in exchange for a post about the new tablet. In the control condition, bloggers were told that they could see the new tablet in a store and try it there. After exposure to the scenarios, the bloggers filled out the questionnaire. The questionnaire for the control condition was adapted to the absence of incentive; intention to disclose and expected negative reaction from followers were not included, as these variables are not applicable when no incentive is offered. Thus, intention to post was the only dependent variable measured.

Initially, 262 valid questionnaires were collected, giving an initial response rate of 23.39%. A second message was sent between one and two weeks after the first one as a reminder to participate in the study, and this led to 97 additional valid questionnaires. In total, 359 valid questionnaires were collected, giving a final response rate of 32.05%.

### 3.5. *Measurement*

We measured intention to post by asking the participants how likely they would be to blog about the product. We used an existing four-item scale (Tan *et al.*, 2009) to ask them about the negative reactions they would expect from their followers (Cronbach's alpha = 0.919). We elaborated a three-item scale (see Appendix 2) to assess intention to disclose (Cronbach's alpha = 0.864). Responses were measured on an 11-point Likert scale to reduce the level of extreme responses from Spanish samples (Hui and Triandis, 1989). We also included two questions to assess whether participants recalled the condition they had been allocated to. In the first question we asked them whether the company had offered them a monetary incentive to blog about the new tablet. In the second question we asked the participants who had been offered a product whether the company was allowing them to keep the tablet after they had tested it. For the conditions in which the product was not

given, participants were asked whether the company had given them any information about the new product. At the end of the questionnaire, some information about the blog was requested (e.g., duration (years) of posting, country of origin, and number of followers). The number of followers was measured by asking participants how many unique readers per month their blogs had.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *Sample characteristics*

Of the final sample, 70% were opinion leaders from Spain, 28% from Latin America, and 2% from other countries. As shown in Table I, their blogs had a mean value of more than 46,000 unique readers per month, and their authors had been blogging for five-and-a-half years on average. Regarding previous experience of receiving incentives, nearly 70% of participants had previously been approached by a company, and so they had some experience in receiving incentives. In addition, the majority of individuals in each condition correctly remembered the scenario they were allocated to (ranging from 64.5% to 91%).

**Table I.** Sample characteristics

### 4.2. *Results for the control condition*

In order to test the effectiveness of giving an incentive to opinion leaders, we compared the intention to post for the different strategies used with a control condition (no incentive offered). The two strategies that obtained the worst results for companies were those in which the type of non-monetary incentive consisted of product information. These two strategies generated a similar intention to post compared to the control condition ( $M_{\text{Money+Information}}=5.57$  vs  $M_{\text{Control}}=5.59$ ,  $p>0.10$ ;  $M_{\text{No money+Information}}=5.97$  vs  $M_{\text{Control}}=5.59$ ,  $p>0.10$ ). In contrast, the four strategies in which the product was offered as non-monetary incentive generated a higher intention to post compared to the control condition ( $M_{\text{Money+Keep product}}=7.62$  vs  $M_{\text{Control}}=5.59$ ,  $p<0.05$ ;  $M_{\text{No money+Keep product}}=8.09$  vs  $M_{\text{Control}}=5.59$ ,

$p < 0.01$ ;  $M_{\text{No money+Keep product}} = 7.02$  vs  $M_{\text{Control}} = 5.59$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ;  $M_{\text{Money+Return product}} = 6.90$  vs  $M_{\text{Control}} = 5.59$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ).

### 4.3. Hypothesis testing

Analyses of variance were performed to test the hypotheses. Because intention to post and to disclose were highly correlated, a MANOVA was used, in line with previous studies that have considered opinion leaders and have used experimental designs (Lam and Schaubroeck, 2000). Since the number of followers each opinion leader has may affect the results, we developed a MANCOVA test, introducing this variable as a covariate. The number of followers had a wide range, and therefore we transformed it into a logarithmic variable, as recommended by Weisberg (2005). The MANCOVA tests showed that the number of followers had no effect on the intention to post ( $F = 0.000$ ,  $p = 0.998$ ), nor on the intention to disclose ( $F = 1.018$ ,  $p = 0.314$ ) when both factors were introduced into the model (monetary and non-monetary incentives). Therefore, this covariate was eliminated in subsequent analyses.

#### 4.3.1. Results for monetary incentives

Table II shows the means of the variables for each condition. First, we tested the main effect of the factor monetary incentive (money vs no money) on the dependent variables. The presence of a monetary incentive did not affect the blogger's intention to post ( $M_{\text{No-money}} = 6.84$  vs  $M_{\text{Money}} = 6.76$ ;  $F = 0.059$ ,  $p > 0.10$ ) or to disclose ( $M_{\text{No-money}} = 6.00$  vs  $M_{\text{Money}} = 6.14$ ;  $F = 0.132$ ,  $p > 0.10$ ).

**Table II.** Cell means for dependent variables (DV)

We ran regressions to test the indirect effects of using a monetary incentive on intentions to post and to disclose through the negative reaction that opinion leaders expected from followers. We also used the regressions to check the direct effect of using a monetary incentive on both dependent variables. We included the monetary incentive as a dichotomous variable (0=no money, 1=money). The indirect effects and significance levels



were based on bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals, as proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2004) and used in recent experimental studies (Boerman *et al.*, 2017; De Veirman and Hudders, 2020).

As Table III shows, the regressions indicated that monetary incentives have no direct effect on either intention to post ( $\beta=0.143$ ;  $p=0.66$ ) or intention to disclose ( $\beta=-0.037$ ;  $p=0.92$ ). However, there is a significant and negative indirect effect of using a monetary incentive on intention to post through expected negative reactions of followers ( $\beta=-0.226$ , [-0.50, -0.020]). Expected negative reactions of followers also mediated the relationship between using a monetary incentive strategy and intention to disclose ( $\beta=0.168$ , [0.015, 0.359]). Thus, H1 and H2 are both supported.

**Table III.** Regression results for monetary incentives

#### 4.3.2. Results for non-monetary incentives

In order to test H3 and H5, a new variable, called “product”, was created. This variable took into account whether opinion leaders were offered a product (by adding individuals in the keep-the-product and return-the-product conditions) or information only. Opinion leaders showed a higher intention to post when the company offered them the product than when only information was offered ( $M_{\text{Product}}=7.42$  vs  $M_{\text{Information}}=5.77$ ;  $F=23.066$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). In addition, opinion leaders were found to have a higher intention to disclose when they received the product than when they received only information ( $M_{\text{Product}}=6.43$  vs  $M_{\text{Information}}=5.47$ ;  $F=6.774$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). These results support H3 and H5.

Regarding H4, intention to post was higher when opinion leaders were allowed to keep the product than when they were not ( $M_{\text{Keep-product}}=7.87$  vs  $M_{\text{Return-product}}=6.96$ ;  $F=4.714$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This result supports H4. However, their intention to disclose was similar regardless of whether they had to return the product ( $M_{\text{Keep-product}}=6.09$  vs  $M_{\text{Return-product}}=6.78$ ;  $F=2.322$ ,  $p>0.10$ ). Therefore, H6 is not supported.

## 5. Discussion

This research can help both academics and practitioners to understand which strategies may be most effective in encouraging opinion leaders to spread e-WoM. Although some studies have analysed the effect of incentives on consumers (e.g., Reimer and Benkenstein, 2016), their results cannot be generalised to opinion leaders. They are not like other consumers; they have a relationship with their followers, in which interactions between the two entities are reciprocal (Lou, 2021). As a result, followers develop a sense of friendship and intimacy with opinion leaders (Delbaere et al., 2021), and opinion leaders need to protect this when they are approached by companies.

### 5.1. *Theoretical contributions*

The main theoretical contribution of this paper lies in its explanation of why opinion leaders react differently to monetary versus non-monetary incentives. According to social influence theory, opinion leaders will act in accordance with the expectations of their audience in order to avoid negative reactions (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975). In addition, according to attribution theory (Calder and Burnkrant, 1977), opinion leaders will be sensitive to the attributions their followers may make, leading opinion leaders to act in such a way as to produce the most desirable attributions. Since the attributions of followers could be determined by the type of incentive the company offers, the behaviour of opinion leaders will be different in each case.

Regarding monetary incentives, we have demonstrated a negative indirect effect on opinion leaders' intention to post through the expected negative reaction of their followers. According to social influence theory, accepting money may entail community disapproval (Hunter, 2016; van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, an opinion leader's decision to post in exchange for a monetary incentive could be attributed to external factors, such as a desire to make money (Gerrath and Usrey, 2020). Followers will probably react negatively towards this external motivation, as they consider it egoistic (Ellen *et al.*, 2006). As opinion

leaders are aware of the attributions their followers can infer from such behaviour, they will expect a negative reaction from their followers. This expectation of a negative reaction will reduce their intention to post.

If they decide to post, they face a further decision as to whether to disclose. Our results show that opinion leaders will again take into account the expected negative reactions of their followers. This corroborates the findings of Tuk *et al.* (2009), who showed that early disclosure leads to more favourable evaluations of the sender compared to finding out later that the sender received an incentive to spread the word. Similarly, a more recent study established that disclosure can be an effective tool for achieving transparency (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019).

Although there is an indirect effect of monetary incentives on opinion leaders' behaviour, it is interesting to note that we found no direct effect of monetary incentives on intention to post or intention to disclose. Given that a positive effect of giving money on the intention to spread e-WoM has been identified for consumers (Reimer and Benkenstein, 2016), our findings confirm that incentivising consumers is not the same as incentivising opinion leaders. The singularity of opinion leaders as a target population can explain this result. Consumers may be more motivated by a monetary incentive because they do not have an established relationship with followers who could react against them for doing so. This result is also consistent with previous qualitative studies on opinion leaders that have referred to ethical dilemmas that arise from the acceptance of incentives (Wellman *et al.*, 2020).

A different reaction may be expected for non-monetary incentives. According to attribution theory, opinion leaders may expect that followers will attribute the post to intrinsic motives (Gerrath and Usrey, 2020), as opinion leaders seek to share valuable information (Huang *et al.*, 2007) and to test new products (Audrezet *et al.*, 2021). As internal attributions are perceived by individuals as more honest (Ellen *et al.*, 2006), opinion leaders will not expect their followers to react negatively to this type of incentive. A more detailed analysis of

non-monetary incentives reveals that the strategy of giving the product to opinion leaders provides better results than giving them only information about the product. This result is in line with a recent study by Audrezet *et al.* (2020), which found that opinion leaders are motivated to post about a new product that they have previously tested, thereby helping followers in their future purchases.

Moreover, our study shows that it is more effective to allow opinion leaders to keep the product than to ask them to return it. This result may be attributed to self-serving bias. Since individuals are generally unaware of the bias a gift generates, they do not take steps to correct for it (Dana and Loewenstein, 2003). This finding is consistent with previous marketing studies that have shown how gifts affect behaviour (Friedman and Rahman, 2011).

The possibility of trying the product also triggers a higher intention to disclose compared to receiving information only. Although opinion leaders do not expect negative reactions from their followers for receiving a product, they may not want their followers to make inferences about why the post has been written. In fact, transparency about the commercial nature of the post is important for minimising feelings of deception and, consequently, negative consumer responses (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020).

## *5.2. Managerial implications*

The results of this study have several interesting implications for marketers. Incentivisation seems to be effective, and this study can help managers to decide which incentives to use.

Companies must take into account the fact that opinion leaders function differently from the mass media and from other consumers. They post to gain attention, and to maintain a community of loyal followers. Thus, the actions of the company should not go against these objectives. Accordingly, this study discourages companies from giving monetary incentives to opinion leaders in exchange for posts, as this strategy may provoke a negative reaction among followers. Giving only information about a product is also

ineffective in terms of engaging opinion leaders in spreading e-WoM. Therefore, companies seeking to encourage posts about a product should give the product to opinion leaders and allow them to keep it once tested. This strategy will increase opinion leaders' intention to post, resulting in more posts.

Companies should also bear in mind that opinion leaders who have been given a product are likely to disclose why they have written a post about it. Although this strategy will generate more posts, it is possible that disclosure will reduce the impact of these posts on consumers. If companies do not wish their campaign to be disclosed, we recommend that they offer information only, even if this means that the number of posts written about the product will be lower compared to other strategies.

Companies should also be aware that giving a product to opinion leaders does not mean that they will write a positive review about it. Honesty and reputation are very much appreciated by opinion leaders and their followers. Therefore, companies should be prepared to receive criticism as well as praise; they should acknowledge that this strategy may increase the number of posts written about their products without improving the valence of such posts. Thus, in order to enhance the likelihood that the post will be positive, it is very important that the products given to opinion leaders are strategically selected.

## **6. Limitations and future research**

This study has a number of limitations that should be recognised. It uses an experimental methodology, and many experiments suffer from external validation issues (Winer, 1999). The opinion leaders did not receive any product, but they were instructed to imagine that they had received a product from a company and to answer the questionnaire accordingly. In order to address this issue, future research should ask opinion leaders about their reaction toward a company approach that has already occurred.

In addition, although we measured the opinion leaders' perceptions about how their followers would react to a post written in exchange for money, we did not ask about their

own interest in earning money in exchange for posting. However, the existence of such interest might explain why we did not find a main effect of monetary incentives on the intention to post. Future research should analyse the trade-off between opinion leaders' concern for their followers and their own interest in earning money. Moreover, we did not measure the honesty of opinion leaders in writing about a product. It would be interesting to explore whether giving them an incentive would affect not only their intention to post but also the content of the post.

Finally, this study focused on opinion leaders from countries in which disclosure is not fully regulated. It would be useful to supplement our findings with an analysis of what opinion leaders think about obligations to disclose and methods of disclosure.

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**Table I. Sample characteristics**

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	SD
Number of readers	46,242	20	1,500,000	166,764.37
Years posting	5.5	0	17	2.94
		N	%	
Opinion leaders' Country of origin	Spain	251	70	
	Latin America	101	28	
	Others	7	2	

**Table II. Cell means for dependent variables (DV)**

<b>DV: Intention to post</b>				
		Monetary incentive		Total
		No money	Money	
Non-monetary incentive	Keep the product	8.09	7.62	7.87
	Return the product	7.02	6.90	6.96
	Product information only	5.97	5.57	5.77
Total		6.84	6.76	
<b>DV: Intention to disclose</b>				
		Monetary incentive		Total
		No money	Money	
Non-monetary incentive	Keep the product	6.15	6.02	6.09
	Return the product	7.03	6.53	6.78
	Product information only	5.01	5.92	5.47
		6.00	6.14	

**Table III. Regressions results for monetary incentives**

<b>DV: Intention to post</b>				
<b>Direct effects</b>				
Path	Coefficient	Standard Error	Confidence Interval	P
Monetary incentive → Intention to post	0.143	0.331	-0.51-0.79	0.66
Monetary incentive → Negative reactions of followers	0.586	0.269	0.057-1.11	0.03
Negative reactions of readers → Intention to post	-0.386	0.067	-0.52-(-0.25)	0.00
<b>Indirect effects</b>				
Path	Coefficient	Standard Error	Confidence Interval	
Monetary incentive → Negative reactions of followers → Intention to post	-0.226	0.120	-0.50-(-0.02)	
<b>DV: Intention to disclose</b>				
<b>Direct effects</b>				
Path	Coefficient	Standard Error	Confidence Interval	P
Monetary incentive → Intention to disclose	-0.037	0.355	-0.74-0.66	0.92
Monetary incentive → Negative reactions of followers	0.586	0.269	0.057-1.11	0.03
Negative reactions of followers → Intention to disclose	0.286	0.072	0.14-0.43	0.00
<b>Indirect effects</b>				
Path	Coefficient	Standard Error	Confidence Interval	
Monetary incentive → Negative reactions of followers → Intention to disclose	0.168	0.089	0.015-0.359	