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# **“I love it” versus “I recommend it”: The Impact of Implicit and Explicit Endorsement Styles on Electronic Word-of-Mouth Persuasiveness**

Liao, J., He, S., Feng, W., & Filieri, R.

2024

## **Abstract**

Consumers usually endorse tourism products in different ways when sharing positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). This research aims to examine the relative persuasiveness of two eWOM endorsement styles, i.e., explicit endorsement (e.g., “I recommend it”) and implicit endorsement (e.g., “I love it”). Drawing on the persuasion knowledge model, we propose that explicit endorsements in eWOM are less persuasive than implicit endorsements because the former trigger higher persuasion knowledge. We further argue that source trustworthiness mitigates the persuasion difference between the two endorsement styles. The study assesses these hypotheses across different sources (anonymous reviewer, friend, influencer), channels (online community, social commerce platform, social networking app), and products (hotel, restaurant) using a binomial regression model with secondary data and two experiments. The findings reveal that explicit endorsements trigger stronger persuasion knowledge than implicit endorsements, diminishing persuasiveness, particularly when the source is not perceived as trustworthy. By revealing the relationship between endorsement styles and eWOM persuasiveness, this study offers insights into how language influences persuasion in eWOM and provides valuable theoretical and managerial implications.

**Keywords:** endorsement styles, electronic word-of-mouth, persuasion, source trustworthiness, persuasion knowledge, linguistic effects.

## **1. Introduction**

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is an important information source affecting tourists' attitudes and behaviors toward tourism services (Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Leung, 2021; Park & Nicolau, 2015; Sparks et al., 2013). However, promotional and fake reviews have been growing on consumer review platforms, increasing tourists' concern about the trustworthiness of eWOM (Filieri, 2016; Pyle et al., 2021). Tourists may perceive eWOM as misleading and even deceptive, given the increasing number of falsified reviews (Choi et al., 2017; Filieri, 2016; Luca & Zervas, 2016; Schuckert et al., 2016; Zhuang et al., 2018) and influencers' non-disclosed sponsorship deals (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). As a result, tourists usually carefully assess the trustworthiness of eWOM before making decisions, and thereby, the persuasiveness of positive eWOM is attenuated (Filieri, 2016).

Preliminary work has explored several factors that can enhance eWOM persuasion, including positive or negative review valence (Lu et al., 2013; Mauri & Minazzi, 2013; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Tsao et al., 2015), review rating/ranking scores (Filieri et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2015; Filieri & McLeay, 2014), review volume (Viglia et al., 2016), rating distribution (Fang et al., 2016), information quality (Filieri & McLeay, 2014), review length/depth (Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Park & Nicolau, 2015; Mariani & Borghi, 2021; Yang et al., 2017) and review breadth (Filieri, 2015; Leung, 2021). More recent research has focused on the role of linguistic features in persuasion (Bertele et al., 2020; Filieri, 2016).

Scholars argue that the writing style of a review is an important factor that affects eWOM persuasion in addition to content, and it involves the choice of words and language style that the reviewer adopts to convey information (Hu et al., 2012; Filieri, 2016; Shin et al., 2019; Schindler & Bickart, 2012; Wang et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2017). Consumers are aware of the rising number of promotional reviews and

some of them have learned to use language cues to distinguish authentic from fake reviews (Filiari, 2016). Extant research has examined various language characteristics, including emotionality and promotional style (Filiari, 2016; Wang et al., 2021), abstract *versus* concrete word use (Shin et al., 2019), boastful words (Packard et al., 2016), figurative language (Wu et al., 2017), and linguistic mimicry (Wang et al., 2019).

In this study, we focus on positive review valence (Mauri & Minazzi, 2013; Sparks & Browning, 2011) and investigate the endorsement style as a new linguistic feature of the persuasiveness of eWOM for travel and tourism services. eWOM senders may convey their recommendations through different writing styles (i.e., endorsement style): sometimes reviewers may endorse a service with “I recommend it” or “just buy it”, while others recommend the service using words like “I love it” or “I enjoy it”. The former reflects explicit endorsements, in which the sender explicitly declares that a product is suitable for others. In contrast, the latter represents implicit endorsements, which convey the senders’ personal positive experiences (Packard & Berger, 2017). However, little is known about the endorsement style that is more effective in persuading consumers.

Prior research has generally highlighted the merits of explicit endorsements (Packard & Berger, 2017). Scholars argued that individuals might interpret explicit endorsement as a cue signaling a reviewer's expertise and preference for the endorsed products, which is more likely to influence consumer purchase intentions than implicit endorsements (Packard & Berger, 2017). However, these findings were drawn on the assumption that individuals consider the sender a trustworthy information source (i.e., a friend). Nevertheless, tourists increasingly doubt the intent of eWOM senders (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). They may be concerned that the senders’ eWOM may be sponsored, hence, unauthentic and biased (Baker & Kim, 2019; Filiari, 2016). Drawing on the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), we propose that inferred persuasive intent by tourists can lead to resistance to an explicit eWOM endorsement; thus, an implicit eWOM endorsement is relatively more persuasive.

Besides, we argue that source trustworthiness moderates the relative effectiveness of implicit endorsements. When tourists have low trust in an eWOM sender, they are more likely to infer the sender's motivation for posting about the endorsed products or service. As a result, they are inclined to attribute the sender's motivation to persuasive intent when the sender adopts an explicit rather than implicit endorsement style. A mixed-method approach is used to test these hypotheses. The analysis of secondary data based on online reviews from TripAdvisor establishes that implicit endorsements are more helpful than explicit one. Two follow-up experiments validate this finding, demonstrating that source trustworthiness is an important moderator that alter the relative persuasiveness of the two endorsement styles.

The present research makes three contributions. First, we enrich the growing stream of research on consumer information processing of eWOM messages (e.g., Filieri, 2015; Luan et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2019; Siddiqi et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021) by directly comparing the relative persuasiveness of explicit and implicit endorsement in different *media* (i.e., social networking app, online community, social commerce platform), *sources* (i.e., anonymous reviewer, friend, influencer) and *products* (restaurants, hotels) rather than in the context of friends only (Packard & Berger, 2017). Second, while prior research has underlined the merits of explicit endorsements, we argue that such an endorsement style may not be effective if the consumer does not trust the eWOM sender. We use the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) to examine the mechanisms underlying the effect of endorsement language styles on persuasion and identify an important boundary condition (i.e., source trustworthiness) that decreases the persuasion gap between explicit and implicit endorsements. Third, we offer new practical implications in effective word-of-mouth communication.

## **2. Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development**

### *2.1 Linguistic effects in eWOM*

eWOM has become an influential information source for consumers' travel

decisions (Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Litvin et al., 2008; Mauri & Minazzi, 2013). Undoubtedly, eWOM benefits travelers by reducing their search costs (Leung, 2021), decreasing uncertainty and risks (Wen et al., 2021), and helping them in making the right purchase decision (Filieri, 2015; Fang et al., 2016). Prior research in hospitality and tourism has found three main factors that influence the effectiveness of eWOM (Chen & Law, 2016): (1) *eWOM-related characters*, including information quality (Filieri & McLeay, 2014), length of eWOM (Filieri, Raguseo, et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2017; Leung, 2021; Liu & Hu, 2021), review valance (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013; Park & Nicolau, 2015), rating and ranking scores (Filieri, 2015), emotional wording (Filieri, 2016; Li et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019). (2) *Sender-related characteristics*, such as the reviewer's reputation, trustworthiness, expertise and experience (Filieri, 2016; Filieri, McLeay, et al., 2018; Hlee et al., 2019; Li et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2017), (3) *Contextual features*, such as temporal distance (Huang et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2019), the submission device of eWOM (Mariani et al., 2019; März et al., 2017), and content acquisition channels (Berger & Iyengar, 2013; Chen & Berger, 2016). Research in marketing, information systems, and tourism recently suggests the relevancy of linguistic styles on eWOM trustworthiness and persuasion (Baker & Kim, 2019; Filieri, 2016; Hu et al., 2012; Shin et al., 2019; Schindler & Bickart, 2012; Wang et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2017). Language style influences customer perceptions of reviewers, websites and organizations' trustworthiness (Baker & Kim, 2019). Scholars have also investigated the language style in consumer reviews, trying to identify the cues used to assess message trustworthiness. Hence, research has analyzed emotional language, promotional *versus* consumer language, detailed *versus* vague information (Baker & Kim, 2019; Filieri, 2016; Wang et al., 2021), boastful eWOM (Filieri, 2016; Packard et al., 2016), review readability (Fang et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2017), cognitive language level (Hlee et al., 2021), language assertiveness (Huang et al., 2022), language mimicry (Wang et al., 2019) and figurative *versus* literal word use (Leung, 2021; Wu et al., 2017). Table 1 summarizes the studies examining language factors

that affect the effectiveness of eWOM.

Packard and Berger (2017) proposed that compared to implicit endorsements, explicit endorsements are more persuasive because they signal the eWOM senders' expertise and fondness for the endorsed products. However, such a conclusion is drawn from an experiment in the context of friend recommendations (Packard & Berger, 2017, study 3), based on the assumption that individuals consider the endorser a trustworthy source of information. However, qualitative research in the tourism literature established that consumers have different levels of trust toward different eWOM channels and sources, which might affect the persuasiveness of an endorsement (Filieri, 2016). Our study extends prior works (Packard & Berger, 2017) by examining the effect of explicit and implicit endorsements considering the moderation of trust across different sources (anonymous reviewer, friend, influencer), channels (social networking, online community, social commerce platform), and tourism products (i.e., restaurant, hotel).

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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## *2.2 Effects of Endorsement Styles on Persuasiveness*

An endorsement is a consumer's statement of support for a product or service (Packard & Berger, 2017). Online endorsements can include both explicit and implicit endorsements. An explicit endorsement is a claim in which the eWOM sender explicitly declares that the product is appropriate for others (e.g., "I recommend it"), whereas implicit endorsement refers to a statement of the sender's personal positive opinion about a product, i.e., their perceived attitude towards the object (e.g., "I love it") (Packard & Berger, 2017).

Tourists may evaluate whether the message is trustworthy based on linguistic cues such as endorsement styles (Filieri, 2016). Explicit endorsements use words such

as “recommendation,” so consumers easily perceive that there may be persuasive intent behind it and that the WOM message may not be sincere (Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004). They may perceive the endorsement as self-interested rather than altruistic, and therefore they distrust the WOM information and develop negative attitude towards it (Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012). Research has shown that consumers prefer nonforceful (e.g., “I’m loving it”) over imperative (e.g., “Just do it!”) brand messages (Kronrod et al., 2012). In contrast to explicit endorsements, implicit endorsements express the eWOM sender’s love for the product or service; these expressions may be regarded as authentic because they suggest the senders’ feelings and attitudes rather than what the customer would suggest doing. An implicit endorsement encourages tourists to believe that the sender prefers the product, which enhances the senders' perceived good intentions and further increases their recommendations' persuasiveness. Building on these arguments, we predict that explicit endorsements are less persuasive than implicit endorsements. Formally, we hypothesize the following:

**H1:** An implicit eWOM endorsement is more persuasive than an explicit endorsement.

### *2.3 Mediating Effect of Persuasion Knowledge*

The persuasion knowledge model suggests that consumers develop and use persuasion knowledge to cope with persuasion attempts by firms and their agents (e.g., marketers and salespeople) (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Consumers’ persuasion knowledge implies their understanding of the source’s intention to convince them of the necessity and importance of purchasing certain products (Ham et al., 2015; Lei et al., 2021). The fundamental idea of the persuasion knowledge model is that consumers use persuasion knowledge to identify an agent’s hidden persuasion intentions, such as sales intention (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000), to resist the agent’s persuasion efforts (Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004) and to develop negative attitudes toward the persuasion message (Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012). For example, Mohr



and Kühn (2021) found that the determinants of persuasion knowledge are consumers' beliefs about the appropriateness and effectiveness of the persuasion tactic.

Persuasion knowledge assists consumers in identifying marketers' manipulation attempts. A growing body of literature has examined how consumers process and respond to various social media messages (Dai et al., 2020; Luan et al., 2016; Javornik et al., 2020; Zemack et al., 2017). When consumers perceive persuasive intent, they typically resist persuasion attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994). For example, Lee et al. (2016) found that consumers with high levels of persuasion knowledge exhibit negative attitudes and behavioral responses to native advertisements on social media. Similarly, directive speech from celebrities in an advertisement may increase consumers' psychological reactance, decreasing their purchase intentions (Hwang & Zhang, 2018).

Explicit endorsements that use words such as "recommend" may alert consumers to persuasion intentions more than implicit endorsements that express influencers' opinions (Jung & Heo, 2019; Quinn & Wood, 2004). When the motivations for recommendations are obvious to attract consumers, they use persuasion knowledge to evaluate the message (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). The persuasion knowledge model argues that the recognition of persuasion attempts affects the effectiveness of persuasive messages (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Explicit endorsements that include directive intent are more likely to trigger consumers' persuasion knowledge than implicit endorsement messages that declare personal evaluations. Hence, compared with implicit endorsements (that use phrases such as "I like"), we argue that explicit endorsements that use words such as "recommend" are more likely to be perceived as persuasion attempts that activate persuasion knowledge, reducing the persuasiveness of the message (Dekker & van Reijmersdal, 2013) and increasing consumers' resistance to persuasion (van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). On this basis, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H2:** The effect of endorsement language styles on message persuasiveness is mediated by the activation of recipients' persuasion knowledge. Specifically, an

explicit endorsement induces more persuasion knowledge compared to an implicit endorsement.

#### *2.4 The Moderating Effect of Source Trustworthiness*

Source trustworthiness refers to consumers' perceptions that a source of communication is reliable, unbiased, and honest (Ohanian, 1990). eWOM is often released on the Internet by anonymous sources, and their motives are not always clear (Cheung et al., 2009), which creates uncertainty about the reliability of their feedback (Jensen et al., 2013). Therefore, consumers often assess eWOM source trustworthiness by checking the real/default profile picture, name, review activity, review valence, social distance, ethnicity, reputation and so forth in eWOM settings (Filieri, 2016; Lin & Xu, 2017; Smith et al., 2005). Perceived trustworthiness is based on consumers' assessment of the level of reliability of a source of communication. The more a source is trustworthy, the higher his/her influence will be on other consumers (Filieri et al., 2018).

Consumers, especially those experienced in the usage of online reviews, make use of various cues to distinguish fake/promotional reviews from authentic ones, and those judged as most trustworthy will have the highest level of persuasion (Filieri, 2016). Trustworthy eWOM messages and sources are also deemed to provide more useful information and recommendations (Chong et al., 2018; Filieri et al., 2018). Research has demonstrated that consumers who trust eWOM senders are less likely to think about their potential motivations and less likely to activate perceived skepticism (Packard et al., 2016). In a condition of high source trustworthiness, both types of endorsements allow consumers to perceive the information source as trustworthy and expert, which enhances eWOM persuasion through perceived message credibility. Therefore, we predict no significant difference in the persuasive effects of explicit and implicit endorsements in high source trustworthiness conditions. Conversely, untrustworthy eWOM generates resistance, suspicion (Filieri, 2016) and psychological discomfort, which leads to negative eWOM (Ahmad & Sun, 2018). In a

low source trustworthiness condition, endorsements that explicitly intend to persuade eWOM recipients can be perceived as more suspicious and are more likely to stimulate persuasion knowledge considering the growing number of fake online reviews and the issues around influencers not disclosing sponsorship information content (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). Drawing upon these arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H3:** Source trustworthiness moderates the effect of endorsement styles on their persuasiveness. In the low source trustworthiness condition, implicit endorsements are more persuasive than explicit endorsements, while in the high source trustworthiness, there is no significant difference in the persuasiveness of explicit and implicit endorsements.

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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### 3. Overview of studies

We conducted three studies to test our hypotheses. The first study was based on secondary data from TripAdvisor to examine the main effect proposed in H1. To generalize the results of H1 and test the mediating role of activated persuasion knowledge (H2) as well as the moderating role of source trustworthiness (H3), we conducted two experiments on Credamo.com and Wjx.com, the two most popular Chinese research participants' recruitment platform, which have been adopted in studies published by leading journals (Jin et al., 2023; Qiu et al., 2022). The three studies attempt to generalize the findings across different sources (i.e., anonymous reviewer, friend, influencer), channels (i.e., online community, TripAdvisor; social networking app, WeChat; social commerce platform, Mafengwo.com), and products (i.e., restaurant, hotel).

#### 4. Study 1

For Study 1, we collected consumer reviews from TripAdvisor to investigate the main effect of endorsement style. We chose TripAdvisor because it is one of the most popular travel review platforms, and the reviews hosted on the platform have been used extensively in prior studies (Banerjee & Chua, 2016; X. Cheng et al., 2019; Filieri et al., 2015; Taecharunroj & Mathayomchan, 2019). For this study, 12,358 reviews of 880 restaurants in Guangzhou were collected in November 2019. For each review, we collected the star rating (on a 5-point scale), restaurant name, review text, review date, number of “helpful” votes the review received, reviewers’ historical contribution (i.e., number of reviews written), and device on which the review was written (mobile or other). As we focused on product endorsement, we only retained the reviews with 4- or 5-star ratings, which are typically deemed positive, whereas reviews with 3 or fewer stars are deemed negative (Taecharunroj & Mathayomchan, 2019). A total of 11,405 reviews of 865 restaurants were obtained.

To examine the effect of endorsement style on persuasion, we followed the procedure recommended by Packard and Berger (2017) and used a keyword-based approach to identify reviews with explicit or implicit endorsements. Specifically, we first screened out potentially eligible reviews that might have an explicit-endorsement style by the keywords suggesting reviewers’ recommendation behaviors (Chinese: 推荐/建议). Notably, not all reviews qualify for the study as some customer reviews included comments such as “The waiter recommended a delicious dish to me.” Thus, to appropriately identify reviews with an explicit-endorsement style, a research assistant read these reviews to discern explicit endorsement only. This process generated 562 reviews with explicit endorsements. Using a similar approach, implicit endorsement reviews were identified using the keywords “like/love” (Chinese: 喜欢/喜爱) and “enjoy” (Chinese: 享受). This process generated 801 implicit-endorsement reviews. After closely examining the reviews, we found that some (N = 44) expressed both explicit-endorsement and implicit-endorsement. To ensure accuracy, these

ambiguous reviews were discarded, and our final research sample (N=1275) contained 518 explicit-endorsement and 757 implicit-endorsement reviews. A dummy variable (*Explicit*) was created to indicate whether a review was explicit.

#### 4.1 Measures

In terms of eWOM persuasiveness, we used the number of “helpful” votes (*Helpfulness*) a review received to measure it, as previous studies have indicated helpful reviews are more persuasive (Filieri, 2015; Laer et al., 2019; Li et al., 2020). To control for the possibility that review and reviewer variables influenced the proposed effect, we included several control variables, such as review valence (*Rating*), which was the rating in the review; review distance (*Distance*), calculated as the number of days between review posting and data collection (November 25, 2019); review length (*Reviewlength*), which was measured as the number of words in the review (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010); the reviewer’s historical contributions (*Contribution*) (Filieri, 2016); and device (*Device*) (Mariani et al., 2019). The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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#### 4.2 Results

To account for the non-negative and discrete nature of our dependent variable (helpful votes), whose variance exceeded its mean (mean = 1.834, variance = 118.85) with excess zeros (76.8%), we used a zero-inflated negative binomial regression model with robust standard errors. The results are shown in Table 3. As expected, explicit endorsement negatively affected helpfulness ( $\beta = -0.035^{***}$ ,  $p < .01$ ), suggesting that review readers deem reviews with an explicit endorsement less useful. Thus, H1 was supported. In addition, the results showed that rating and the mobile device had negative effects on persuasion, whereas review length and historical contribution had positive effects.

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Insert Table 3 about here  
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#### *4.3 Discussion*

Using TripAdvisor review data, we found that compared with reviews that contain implicit endorsements, consumers find reviews with explicit endorsements less helpful in choosing restaurants. This result provided preliminary evidence to support our proposed effect in H1. However, content helpfulness differs from message persuasiveness (Yin et al., 2021); therefore, we believe a new study should assess the effect of implicit and explicit endorsement styles on eWOM persuasiveness. In addition, this study could neither identify the mechanism underlying the proposed effect nor test the moderating role of trust. To achieve these goals, we conducted two follow-up studies using experiments to measure word-of-mouth persuasion and test the proposed effect in a more controlled environment.

### **5. Study 2**

In Study 2, we examined the effect of endorsement style on persuasion, whether activated persuasion knowledge mediated this effect, and if source trustworthiness moderated it. In this study, we manipulated endorsement types and the trustworthiness of the source. We predicted that implicit (vs. explicit) endorsement would be more persuasive because it may trigger weaker persuasion knowledge.

#### *5.1 Participants, design, and procedure*

Participants (N = 173, 68.2% female, Mage = 24.4, SD = 5.00) were recruited from Credamo.com and randomly assigned to a condition in our 2 (endorsement style: implicit vs. explicit) × 2 (source trustworthiness: high vs. low) between-subjects design.

Participants were first asked to imagine that they read a post from an acquaintance while browsing WeChat, the most popular social networking site in China. In the implicit-endorsement condition, the post reads as follows: *I went to a*

*great restaurant today. The food is very delicious, and the meals are varied, the price is fair and other aspects like the environment and the service are also good. I like this restaurant!* In the explicit-endorsement condition, a similar post was given: *I went to a great restaurant today. The food is very delicious, and the meals are varied, the price is fair and other aspects like the environment and the service are also good. I recommend trying this restaurant!* To manipulate source trustworthiness, in the high source trustworthiness condition, the poster was described as follows: “The message sender is a good friend of yours, and you often meet and chat together.” While in the low source trustworthiness condition, the poster claimed: “The message sender is an incidental acquaintance you rarely contact.”

Second, we measured message persuasion (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.87$ ) using items adapted from previous studies (Y. Cheng et al., 2019; Packard & Berger, 2017) and a 7-point scale (1 = “not at all,” 7 = “very likely”). Example items include the following: “Would you like this restaurant?”; “Would you look forward to trying this restaurant?”; and “How likely are you to choose to eat in this restaurant?” Then, we measured the manipulation of source trustworthiness (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.93$ ) using three items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”), adapted from Ohanian (1990): “I think the message sender is reliable,” “I think the message sender is honest,” and “I think the message sender is trustworthy”. Finally, we measured attitude perceptions with items adapted from Packard and Berger (2017): “In your opinion, how much does your friend like this restaurant?” and a 7-point scale (1 = “strongly dislike,” 7 = “strongly like”). Activated persuasion knowledge was measured using items adapted from Kirmani and Zhu (2007). The measure consists of two items: “The message sender aimed to obtain benefits by sharing this message” and “The person shared this message because he wanted to get a referral reward from the restaurant” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.78$ ). Finally, we collected demographic information, including gender and age. Please see Appendix A for the experimental stimuli.

## 5.2 Results

*Manipulation check.* A manipulation check was conducted to examine the

validity of the manipulation of source trustworthiness. The results showed that our manipulation was successful ( $F(1, 171) = 27.69, p < 0.001, \text{Cohen's } d = 0.8$ ). The participants in the high source trustworthiness condition perceived the message sender as more trustworthy ( $M_{\text{high trust}} = 5.18, SD_{\text{high trust}} = 0.75$ ) than those in the low source trustworthiness condition ( $M_{\text{low trust}} = 4.51, SD_{\text{low trust}} = 0.93$ ).

One-way ANOVA showed a significant effect of endorsement style on persuasion ( $F(1, 171) = 10.95, p = 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.06$ ). Compared with those in the explicit-endorsement condition, participants in the implicit-endorsement condition had a more favorable attitude toward the restaurant ( $M_{\text{implicit endorsement}} = 5.39$  vs.  $M_{\text{explicit endorsement}} = 4.94$ ), supporting H1. Additionally, the interaction effect of endorsement style and source trustworthiness was significant ( $F(1, 169) = 11.01, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.16$ ). We conducted a simple effect analysis, and the result evidenced that in the low source trustworthiness condition, the participants showed a more positive attitude toward the restaurant after reading an implicit rather than an explicit endorsement ( $M_{\text{implicit endorsement}} = 5.31, SD_{\text{implicit endorsement}} = 0.82; M_{\text{explicit endorsement}} = 4.50, SD_{\text{explicit endorsement}} = 0.85; F(1, 169) = 19.92, p < 0.001$ ). In the high source trustworthiness condition, there was no significant difference between the implicit-endorsement and explicit-endorsement conditions for persuasion ( $F(1, 169) = 0.98, p = 0.32$ ), as shown in Figure 2. The results supported H3.

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Insert Figure 2 about here  
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*Moderated mediation.* To test whether persuasion knowledge mediated the effect of endorsement on persuasion, we used a moderated mediation model (Preacher et al., 2007). Specifically, we ran PROCESS model 7 with 5,000 bootstrap samples using endorsement style as the independent variable (explicit endorsements coded 1, implicit endorsements coded 0) (Hayes, 2017), persuasion as the dependent variable, persuasion knowledge as a mediator, and source trustworthiness as the moderator. The results revealed a main effect of endorsement style on persuasion ( $\beta = -0.38, SE =$



0.13,  $p = 0.030$ ) and a main effect of source trustworthiness on persuasion ( $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, the conditional indirect effect analysis confirmed that source trustworthiness significantly moderated the effect of endorsement on persuasion ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ , 95% CI: [0.08, 0.36]). In the low source trustworthiness condition, the explicit-endorsement style fostered higher persuasion knowledge and lower persuasion than the implicit endorsement, evidenced by the negative coefficient ( $\beta = -0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% CI: [-0.30, -0.03]). However, in the high source trustworthiness condition, the explicit endorsement had no significant difference between implicit endorsement style in terms of persuasion knowledge and persuasion ( $\beta = 0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI: [-0.05, 0.11]). This result supported H3.

### *5.3 Discussion*

Study 2 validated the effect of endorsement style on persuasion. The one-way ANOVA results confirmed the effect of endorsement style on persuasion. An implicit endorsement was more likely to increase consumers' likelihood and willingness to purchase the endorsed product than an explicit endorsement. Hence, implicit endorsements are not more helpful but also more persuasive than explicit endorsement styles.

We also supported our hypotheses regarding the mediating role of persuasion knowledge by applying this construct in the eWOM context. The role of persuasion knowledge has been proved in previous studies in influencer advertising contexts (e.g., Boerman et al., 2017). Thirdly, the study result further indicated the moderating role of source trustworthiness. In the low source trustworthiness condition, the mediating effect of persuasion knowledge was significant, and the explicit eWOM endorsement activated consumers' persuasion knowledge and thus weakened its persuasiveness. However, in the high source trustworthiness condition, there was no significant difference in persuasion and no mediating effect of persuasion knowledge for either endorsement style.

To enhance the generalizability and robustness of these findings, we used a

different product category and source of communication (influencer) in study 3's scenario. We also used a more direct trust cue to further explore consumers' reactions to posts with the two endorsement styles.

## **6. Study 3**

The purpose of Study 3 was to revalidate the moderating effect of source trustworthiness in the social media influencer context. In contrast to Studies 1 and 2, Study 3 adopted social media influencers as eWOM senders and used hotel booking as the scenario. In addition, Study 3 used a different approach to manipulating source trustworthiness to enhance the internal validity of the results. While trust was manipulated using relationship strength in Study 2, we manipulated source trustworthiness by eWOM sender expertise and revalidated the results.

### *6.1 Participants, design, and procedure*

Study 3 used a 2 (endorsement style: implicit vs. explicit)  $\times$  2 (eWOM sender expertise: high vs. low) between-subjects experiment. A total of 196 participants were recruited from wjx.com (%female = 46.4%,  $M_{\text{age}} = 32.96$  years), one of the largest professional survey platforms, and were randomly assigned to one of four groups. 66.8% of the participants worked as corporate employees.

Unlike study 1 and study 2, we used hotels as stimuli and a fictitious hotel name to avoid the potential effects of prior knowledge of actual hotel brands. First, participants were asked to imagine they were planning a vacation in Sanya, one of the most popular destinations in China. The scenario described that they were browsing hotels on Mafengwo.com, a social commerce platform, and considering booking a hotel named "XZ Ocean View Hotel". Then they were told to read a review about this hotel written by an influencer who creates travel content in the online community. Endorsement styles were manipulated using the same procedure in Study 2. Moreover, we manipulated source trustworthiness through the influencer's expertise, using a method adapted from the study of Chen et al. (2020). In the high source trustworthiness condition, the influencer traveled to more than 149 cities, posted more

than 200 hotel reviews, and had more than 3,000 followers in the travel community. In the low source trustworthiness condition, the influencer had only 10 followers, traveled to one city, and posted five reviews. Finally, we measured persuasion (*Cronbach's*  $\alpha = 0.791$ ) and persuasion knowledge (*Cronbach's*  $\alpha = 0.911$ ) and performed a manipulation check of source trustworthiness (*Cronbach's*  $\alpha = 0.853$ ) using the same items as in Study 2.

## 6.2 Results

*Manipulation check.* Compared with the participants in the low source trustworthiness condition ( $M_{low\ trust} = 4.53, SD_{low\ trust} = 1.25$ ), those in the high source trustworthiness condition showed significantly higher levels of trust in the influencer who shared eWOM ( $M_{high\ trust} = 5.28, SD_{high\ trust} = 0.80; F(1, 184) = 25.38, p < 0.001$ ).

*ANOVA.* A two-way ANOVA on persuasion indicated a significant main effect of endorsement style on persuasion ( $F(1, 192) = 75.51, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.11$ ) and an interaction effect between endorsement style and source trustworthiness ( $F(1, 192) = 14.76, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.07$ ). Participants showed a more favorable attitude toward the hotel in the implicit-endorsement condition than in the explicit-endorsement condition ( $M_{implicit\ endorsement} = 5.57, M_{explicit\ endorsement} = 5.02, p < 0.001$ ). As shown in Figure 4, in the high source trustworthiness condition, the participants in the implicit- and explicit-endorsement conditions exhibited no significant difference in persuasion ( $M_{implicit + high\ trust} = 5.82, M_{explicit + high\ trust} = 5.71, p = 0.493$ ). In contrast, in the low level of source trustworthiness condition, persuasion was significantly higher for the participants in the implicit-endorsement condition ( $M_{implicit + low\ trust} = 5.30$ ) than for those in the explicit-endorsement condition ( $M_{explicit + low\ trust} = 4.37, p < 0.001$ ). Thus, H1 and H3 were supported.

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Insert Figure 3 about here  
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*Mediation analysis.* To investigate the mediating effect of persuasion knowledge,

we conducted a moderated mediation analysis using the SPSS-PROCESS (Model 7, bootstrap sample = 10,000) procedure suggested by Hayes (2017). The results indicated a significant moderated mediation effect ( $\beta = 0.309$ ,  $SE = 0.128$ , 95% CI: [0.075, 0.576]) but no significant direct effect ( $\beta = -0.134$ ,  $SE = 0.122$ , 95% CI: [-0.373, 0.106]). Specifically, compared with the high level of source trustworthiness condition ( $\beta = -0.243$ ,  $SE = 0.102$ , 95% CI: [-0.445, -0.047]), the mediating effect of persuasion knowledge was more salient in the low level of source trustworthiness condition ( $\beta = -0.552$ ,  $SE = 0.098$ , 95% CI: [-0.760, -0.375]). Thus, H2 was supported.

### 6.3 Discussion

The results of study 3 confirm the results of prior studies but with a different source (i.e., influencer) and product type (hotel), thus further enhancing the generalizability of the research findings. In addition, Study 3 used reviewers' expertise to manipulate source trustworthiness.

## 7. General Discussion

Our research reveals that different eWOM endorsement styles play a different impact on message persuasiveness. Specifically, an explicit endorsement (vs. an implicit endorsement) increases consumers' persuasion knowledge and thus negatively affects the persuasiveness of eWOM. Using a zero-inflated negative binomial regression model, Study 1 revealed that implicit endorsements are more helpful than explicit ones. Study 2 replicated the results and investigated the underlying psychological mechanism on a social networking app and for eWOM shared by an acquaintance or a friend. Moreover, consumers' trust in the sender attenuates the negative effect of explicit endorsements because persuasion knowledge is less activated when the source is not perceived as trustworthy. In Study 3, we revalidated the results using a different manipulation of source trustworthiness (i.e., expertise), a different product (hotel), and a different source (i.e., influencers). Interestingly, the relative effectiveness of implicit endorsement persisted across the

three studies. For instance, the results are consistent in conditions where the source is an anonymous reviewer sharing eWOM about a restaurant on an online travel community or when the source is an influencer sharing eWOM about a hotel on a social commerce platform. Hence, the study tested the proposed hypotheses across three different sources of eWOM (i.e., anonymous reviewer (Study 1), friends or acquaintances (Study 2), and social media influencers (Study 3) to enhance the theoretical robustness of our predictions.

### *7.1 Theoretical Contributions*

This study makes important theoretical contributions. First, we advance the eWOM literature on tourism products by highlighting the role of endorsement styles and directly comparing the relative persuasiveness of explicit and implicit endorsement across different channels (online community, social networking app, and social commerce platform), and sources (anonymous reviewer, friend/acquaintance, and influencer). While prior Tourism research shed light on the impact of language used in eWOM on its effectiveness and trustworthiness (Filieri, 2016; Baker and Kim, 2019; Hlee et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2022), this is the first study that assessed the influence of explicit and implicit endorsement styles on persuasion. Though previous research highlighted the merits of explicit endorsement in marketing research (Packard & Berger, 2017), this study indicates otherwise. Specifically, we reveal that explicit endorsements trigger stronger persuasion knowledge than implicit endorsements, thereby diminishing its persuasiveness, particularly when the receiver does not trust the source. This result can be explained by the growing travelers' concerns about the trustworthiness of positive eWOM due to high-profile scandals (Filieri, 2016; Baker and Kim, 2019; Lee et al., 2022).

Second, this research contributes to the literature by highlighting persuasion knowledge as an important mechanism underlying tourists' reactions to eWOM. Prior studies generally consider eWOM as an information source and explain tourists' decisions due to a passive information-processing process (Lu et al., 2018;

Narangajavana et al., 2017). However, our study reveals that tourists may actively interpret the possible motivation behind eWOM and evaluate the senders' persuasive intent. While other tourism literature uses information processing as an underlying psychological mechanism to explain tourists' behavior (Filieri, 2016; Hlee et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2018), this research takes a different perspective by adopting the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Considering endorsements as a persuasion strategy, we propose and verify that explicit endorsement is less persuasive because it induces stronger persuasion knowledge. As such, we identified explicit endorsement as an important driver of persuasion knowledge. Our research extends persuasion knowledge theory in the eWOM context and sheds light on the role of persuasion knowledge in assessing eWOM effectiveness.

Previous literature on persuasion knowledge generally emphasized the negative main effects of persuasion knowledge in the influencer marketing literature (Boerman et al., 2017; Hwang & Zhang, 2018), yet there are relatively few insights on the factors moderating the negative effects of persuasion knowledge. In this study, our results reveal that source trustworthiness is an important boundary condition for the negative effects of persuasion knowledge. By exploring the interactive effect of source trustworthiness and endorsement style, we find that when the source is perceived as trustworthy, this attenuates the negative impacts of persuasion knowledge. Hence, we contribute to the persuasion knowledge literature (e.g., Gong and Tung, 2017; Ahmad & Guzmán, 2020) by introducing source trustworthiness as a moderator.

## *7.2 Managerial Implications*

Hospitality managers can benefit from the results of our study. First, since an implicit endorsement is perceived as more persuasive to readers, hotel and restaurant managers could identify these reviews and highlight them on their platforms. Considering the results of Packard & Berger (2017) and this research comprehensively, we recommend marketers identify senders' trustworthiness signals

first through their characteristics, such as real/default profile picture, review activity, and the like (Filiari, 2016). For instance, online travel communities and sites are advised to provide users with a profile that clearly communicates their trustworthiness (e.g., content sponsorship, expertise, and received helpful votes). This approach will help visitors to assess the authenticity and helpfulness of user-generated content in such travel platforms and make smart choices accordingly.

Second, the current findings provide managers with implications for cost-effective eWOM marketing strategies. Given the importance of eWOM, marketers are investing extensively in influential senders, such as influencers or celebrities, to promote on social media (Zhang & Huang, 2022). Drawing inferences from our findings, we argue that marketers must be careful when influencers use an explicit endorsement style, especially when tourists do not trust the influencer. In contrast, fostering value co-creation with users sharing their love for the tourism products they appreciate can be an effective and cost-efficient strategy.

Finally, our research has implications for review websites, such as review sites and online travel agencies. As forum managers are recommended to provide relevant guidance for online review writing, especially for those reviewers who have little expertise (Wu et al., 2017), this study indicates that managers should encourage low-expertise and low-reputation reviewers to write authentic reviews that reflect their authentic consumption experience but avoid making arbitrary recommendations for prospective customers.

### *7.3 Limitations and Further Research*

This study has limitations that could be addressed in further research. First, although we focus on the linguistic style of the endorser, we do not consider the effects of endorser characteristics (e.g., product–endorser fit and attractiveness), type of product, brand identity, and brand familiarity. Furthermore, we did not consider other aspects related to the message (e.g., information richness), which were found to be important in influencing the perceived trustworthiness of eWOM messages (Filiari, 2016).

Future studies could explore how such factors interact with endorsement language style to influence eWOM message effectiveness and occupancy rates (De Pelsmacker et al., 2018; Kizildag et al., 2017; Viglia et al., 2016). Second, source trustworthiness may differ depending on the social platforms ( Smith et al., 2012). Future research could explore the role of platforms in the persuasiveness of eWOM. Further, our study focuses on three types of media (channels): social commerce platforms, social networking app, and online travel community. While different platforms vary in their characteristics and forms of user interaction (Phua et al., 2017), future research could consider multi-platform studies to provide managers with insights into how to allocate resources across platforms.



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