# From a Marketing Communication Perspective to Identify Fashion Opinion Leaders' Narrative Strategies to Create eWOM: A Theoretical and Methodological Contribution

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## Introduction

The concept 'narrative strategy' has been well studied and interpreted in marketing and consumer scenarios to understand the methods of structuring narratives for marketing communication (Brechman & Purvis, 2015) and illustrating consumption experiences (Shankar, Elliott & Goulding, 2001). However, limited research has explored the narrative strategies used by opinion leaders, who now have achieved and demonstrated the ability to influence consumers. Opinion leaders' eWOM messages are infused with their reputation and reliability and have become a significant source of information regarding brands for consumers and an effective channel for marketing communication in the fashion industry (Bendoni, 2017). As a crucial factor that determines the success of the eWOM marketing campaigns, opinion leaders' messages are expected to be framed in a way that captures the meanings of the brands, adapts for local markets while maintain a consistent sense of brand identity, and fulfils the purposes of interpersonal influence and persuasion towards the adoption of brands and products. However, the current literature lacks an explanation and in-depth understanding of the narrative strategies used by opinion leaders for creating eWOM messages. This research aimed to fill this gap by taking a theoretical perspective of marketing communication, using lenses of eWOM marketing models (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010), and adopting a semiotic and rhetorical way to identify fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies. The main findings are six distinct narrative strategies used by fashion opinion leaders to create eWOM messages on social media platforms. This research also developed a definition of opinion leaders' narrative strategy and a model that explains the structure of the narrative strategies used by opinion leaders to create eWOM messages. This research addressed theoretical and methodological contributions to the development of theory on opinion leaders' narrative strategies, and also the further development of eWOM marketing theories.

This paper starts by reviewing the literature on social media, eWOM, fashion opinion leaders, and narrative strategy to understand the research problem and lay bases for theory development about fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies for creating eWOM messages. Following this is an indication of the theoretical perspective and lenses through which to identify opinion leaders' narrative strategies and the adopted methods used for data collection and analysis. It then presents and discusses the key findings from this research and closes by a conclusion of the significance and implications of research findings as well as an indication of limitations of this research and possible areas for further research.

**Literature Review**

*Social media, eWOM, and fashion opinion leaders*

The advent of social media has speeded up the democratisation of fashion opinion leaders (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and provides fashion opinion leaders with the way of blogging for exhibiting fashion opinion leadership (Barnes, 2013). Fashion blogging is used by fashion opinion leaders to get accesses to large groups of followers and spread eWOM to express their thoughts, ideas, and knowledge about fashion, products, and brands that are considered to be of interest or relevant to them (Kulmala, Mesiranta & Tuominen, 2013). This research views fashion opinion leaders as the group of people who are highly interested in fashion and are motivated to influencing other consumers' attitudes and behaviours toward fashion products and brands through the way of blogging on social media. Their eWOM messages contain consumption or branded narratives, which can help build personal identities as well as cultivate consumer culture and consumerist values through brand mentioning or conspicuous consumption (Kretz, 2010; Zhao & Belk, 2007).

*Fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies*

Appendix 1 shows a summary of gaps in the literature about opinion leaders' narrative strategies. Prior studies on the methods used by fashion opinion leaders for self-presentation or elaborating narratives, which come from a Western context, mostly took perspectives of legitimating expertise and reputation, traffic growth, followers accumulation, and building personal brands (Rocamora, 2011; Logan, Hamilton & Hewer, 2013; Delisle & Parmentier, 2016; Logan, 2015; Kretz & de Valck, 2010). However, much remains to be understood about the narrative strategies used by them to create eWOM messages to introduce and recommend brands and products to consumers. Although prior research has shed light on this area, such as the studies by Kozinets et al. (2010) and Kretz and de Valck (2010), there still lacks a clear definition and a holistic and culturally informed view to explain the narrative strategies used by opinion leaders for structuring eWOM messages, which are significant for informing the brand values and generating positive brand attitudes and consumption.

*Theoretical Perspective and Lenses for Identifying Fashion Opinion Leaders' Narrative Strategies*

In this research, opinion leaders' narrative strategies are defined as the ways they use language, tone, practices, signs, symbols, and substance to connect brands and products in creating eWOM messages, with the association of their physical identities, inner thoughts and feelings, ideas, cultural backgrounds, economic and social positions, and social roles. The eWOM marketing models (Kozinets et al., 2010) (see Appendix 2), including the Organic Interconsumer Influence Model, the Linear Marketer Influence Model, and the Network Coproduction Model, were adopted as lenses through which to evaluate the research problem and research questions concerning opinion leaders' narrative strategies, thereby underpinning the use of a marketing communication perspective. These models currently coexist in practice,

illustrate three forms of eWOM marketing, and signify the vital role of opinion leaders' eWOM messages in transferring marketing messages, values, and meanings to consumers. These eWOM messages can be either occurred spontaneously without marketers' influences or be created under the indirect and direct influence from marketers. Taking a marketing communication perspective, which was rarely adopted by prior studies, could be necessity and valuable for exploring opinion leaders' narrative strategies, especially for understanding how their messages are structured to interpret marketing messages and meanings to conform with cultural conventions and social norms and to meet consumer expectations. Moreover, opinion leaders' messages are expected to persuade and convince consumers' brand adoption and brand advocacy and to influence their consumption behaviours (Kozinets et al., 2010). Opinion leaders' eWOM messages thus should involve both of brand and product-related values and meanings as well as persuasive appeals that increase the potential of influencing consumers' attitudes and behaviours. Accordingly, two analytical tools in the disciplines of semiotics and rhetoric were selected to explore these elements.

**Research Methodology**

The purpose of this research was to identify fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies for creating eWOM messages concerning luxury brands on social media in a non-Western context. The characteristics of China's luxury market and the dominant collective culture make it an appropriate context for this research. This research carried out a netnography in the form of non-participant observation on the naturally occurring three months of messages created by China's Top 10 fashion bloggers (Exane BNP Paribas, 2017) on Weibo and WeChat. A total of 1007 postings related to luxury fashion products, including 913,816 words and a large additional amount of visual and audiovisual data, were directly downloaded and copied into files. The semiotic analysis adopted the theory of structural semiotics (Saussure, 1983), which is grounded in structural linguistics and widely used in marketing semiotic research (Oswald, 2015). The rhetorical analysis was grounded in Aristotle's theory about three classical rhetorical forms of persuasive appeal: ethos, pathos, and logos (Aristotle, 2007, p.14), which render a text to be powerful to persuade the target readers and have been adapted in WOM studies (Xun & Reynolds, 2010). The data was coded and analysed through three processes, including a). a first cycle coding process that used an open coding method was conducted to label the data for indicating the topics discussed in eWOM messages; b). a second cycle coding process of using axial coding to find the relationships among the identified topics to integrate and synthesise code categories and using theoretical coding that re-read each piece of data along with the adoption of semiotic analysis and rhetorical analysis respectively; c). a final process of identifying the relationships among the results from axial coding and theoretical coding to generate the findings of opinion leaders' narrative strategies, thereby moving the analysis stage toward a direction for theory building.

**Main Findings and Discussion**

A model (see Appendix 3) was developed to illustrate two main elements composing an opinion leaders' narrative strategy: the semiotic meanings of brands or products and the rhetorical

tactics for persuading consumers' acceptance and adoption of these meanings. It provides a theoretical base and rationale for this study identifying and understanding opinion leaders' narrative strategies and can be used by academics and practitioners in different cultural contexts for different product categories. The main research findings are six narrative strategies used by fashion opinion leaders to create eWOM messages, including prescribing, amusing, fostering, designating, amusing, and assembling. Appendix 4 shows a summary of the characteristics of these six narrative strategies. The differences among these six narrative strategies are in their purpose when used for creating eWOM messages, the roles assigned to brands and products, the semiotic meanings of brands and products introduced to consumers, and the rhetorical tactics used for persuading consumers' acceptance and adoption of these meanings. Through comparison of these six narrative strategies with the findings of previous similar studies, in particular, the studies concerning opinion leaders' narrative strategies in a Western context, it has been found that the narrative strategies 'enthusing', 'designating', and 'assembling' have similarities with the findings of other studies conducted in a Western context (e.g. Kretz and de Valck, 2010; Rocamora, 2011; Delisle and Parmentier, 2016) while the narrative strategies 'prescribing', 'fostering', and 'amusing' have relatively weak connections with other Western studies. Although there are a few similarities, the perspectives used to interpret, and depth of understandings of, fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies between this research and prior research, are still different. These prior studies report behaviour patterns of fashion opinion leaders organising eWOM messages. This study goes beyond understanding these behaviour patterns by making a deeper investigation of the structure of fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies for creating eWOM messages, including introducing and discussing what brand meanings to consumers and use what rhetorical tactics for persuasion.

**Conclusion**

This research contributes to the knowledge on the creation of eWOM for marketing communication and further develops the understanding already captured in the eWOM marketing models through identifying and explaining opinion leaders' narrative strategies for creating eWOM messages (Kozinets et al., 2010). This research also contributes to the theory of opinion leaders' narrative strategies by adopting a marketing communication perspective. The methodological contribution of the research is introducing a combination and application of semiotic and rhetorical analysis to identify opinion leaders' narrative strategies. Through a comparison of research findings with the results of previous similar studies conducted in a Western context, this research found that the differences exist in fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies. This research thus also contributes to the literature on fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies in a Chinese context, which is different from the context of similar study by Kretz and de Valck (2010). The identified six narrative strategies can be used by bloggers to effectively tailor eWOM messages to engage and persuade readers. Marketers can adopt these strategies to develop specific guidelines on improving effectiveness in online communication with consumers through owned media. They can also gain useful insight into fostering and encouraging particular opinion leaders' narrative strategies that are ideal for their eWOM marketing campaigns. The limitations of this research are the adopted Chinese cultural

context and a luxury product context. This research supports and encourages the development of knowledge about comparing opinion leaders' narrative strategies from a cross-cultural perspective or a different product category.

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Zhao, X., & Belk, R.W. (2007). Live From Shopping Malls: Blogs and Chinese Consumer Desire. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 34, 131-137. Retrieved from http://acrwebsite.org/volumes/12946/volumes/v34/NA-34

**Appendix 1.** Gaps in the Literature Concerning Opinion Leaders' Narrative Strategies

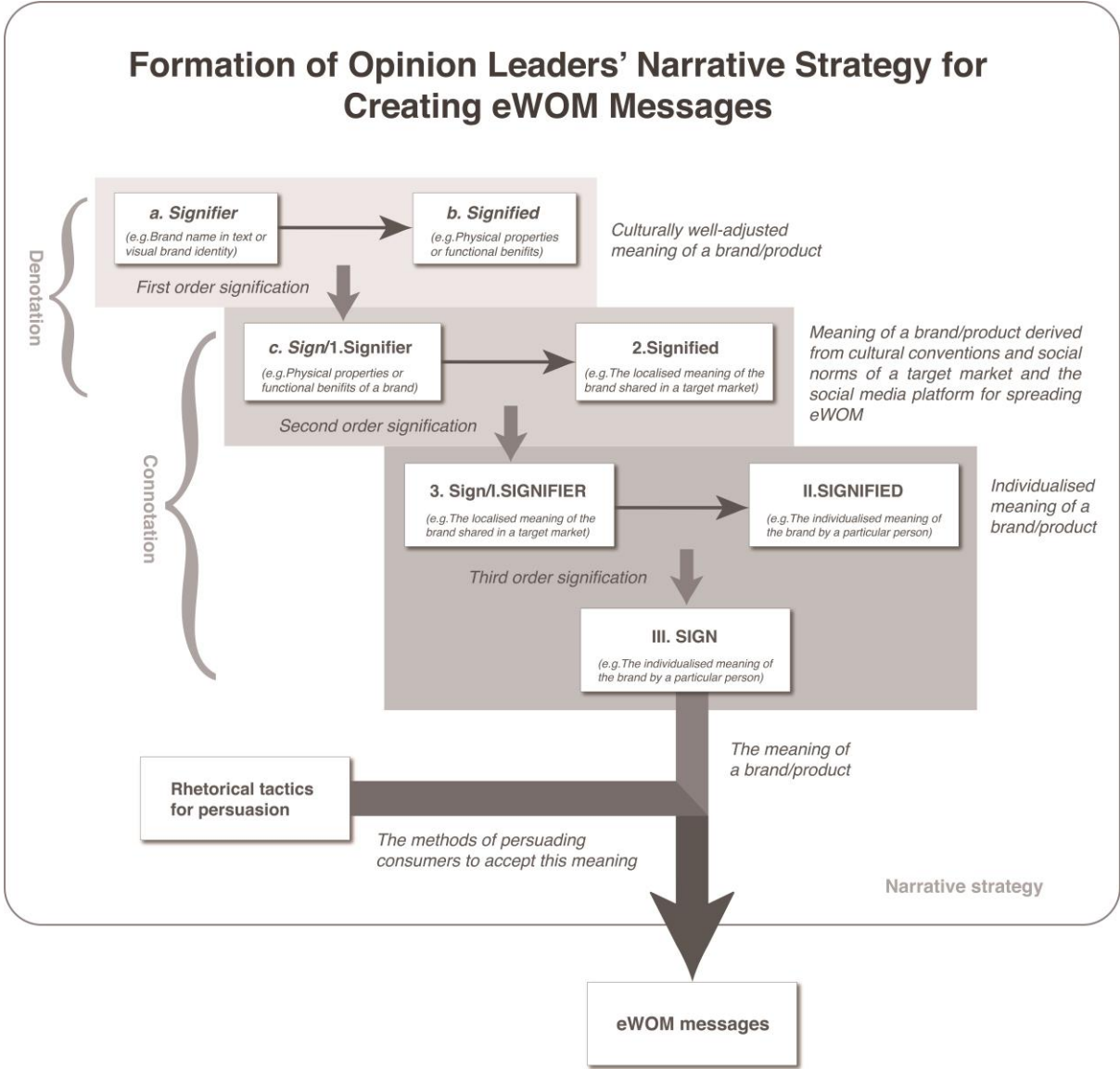| | |
|---|---|
| **Definition of opinion leaders' narrative strategies** | |
| *Existing Literature* | Prior studies describe narrative strategies as the ways used by opinion leaders to express messages about consumption practices or convert the marketing message through language, tone, or objects to balance commercial–communal tensions and maintain consistency with the characters they play on the online communication platforms (Kretz & de Valck, 2010; Kozinets et al., 2010). |
| *The Gap in the Literature* | A clear definition of opinion leaders' narrative strategy |
| **Theoretical perspectives adopted in prior similar studies** | |
| *Existing Literature* | Adopting the perspectives of legitimating expertise and reputation, traffic growth, followers accumulation, impression management, and building personal brands to investigate the methods used by opinion leaders for self-presentation and communicating with consumers<br><br>(Rocamora, 2011; Logan, Hamilton & Hewer, 2013; Delisle & Parmentier, 2016; Logan, 2015; Kretz & de Valck, 2010) |
| *The Gap in the Literature* | Adopting a marketing communication perspective to identify opinion leaders' narrative strategies |
| **Key references 1. Kozinets et al. (2010)** | |
| *Existing Literature* | This research observed an online seeding campaign about a new technology device to explore the narrative strategies used by bloggers who are involved in this campaign. |
| *The Gap in the Literature* | There remains much to be understood about spontaneous narrative strategies used by bloggers for expressing eWOM regardless of a seeding campaign, and also for expressing eWOM about fashion products. |
| **Key references 2. Kretz and de Valck, (2010)** | |
| *Existing Literature* | This research explored fashion bloggers' storytelling strategies along with using explicit and implicit self-brand association in a Western cultural context. |
| *The Gap in the Literature* | An understanding of fashion bloggers' narrative strategies in non-Western contexts |

*Source: adapted from the authors listed in the table*

**Appendix 2.** eWOM Marketing Models
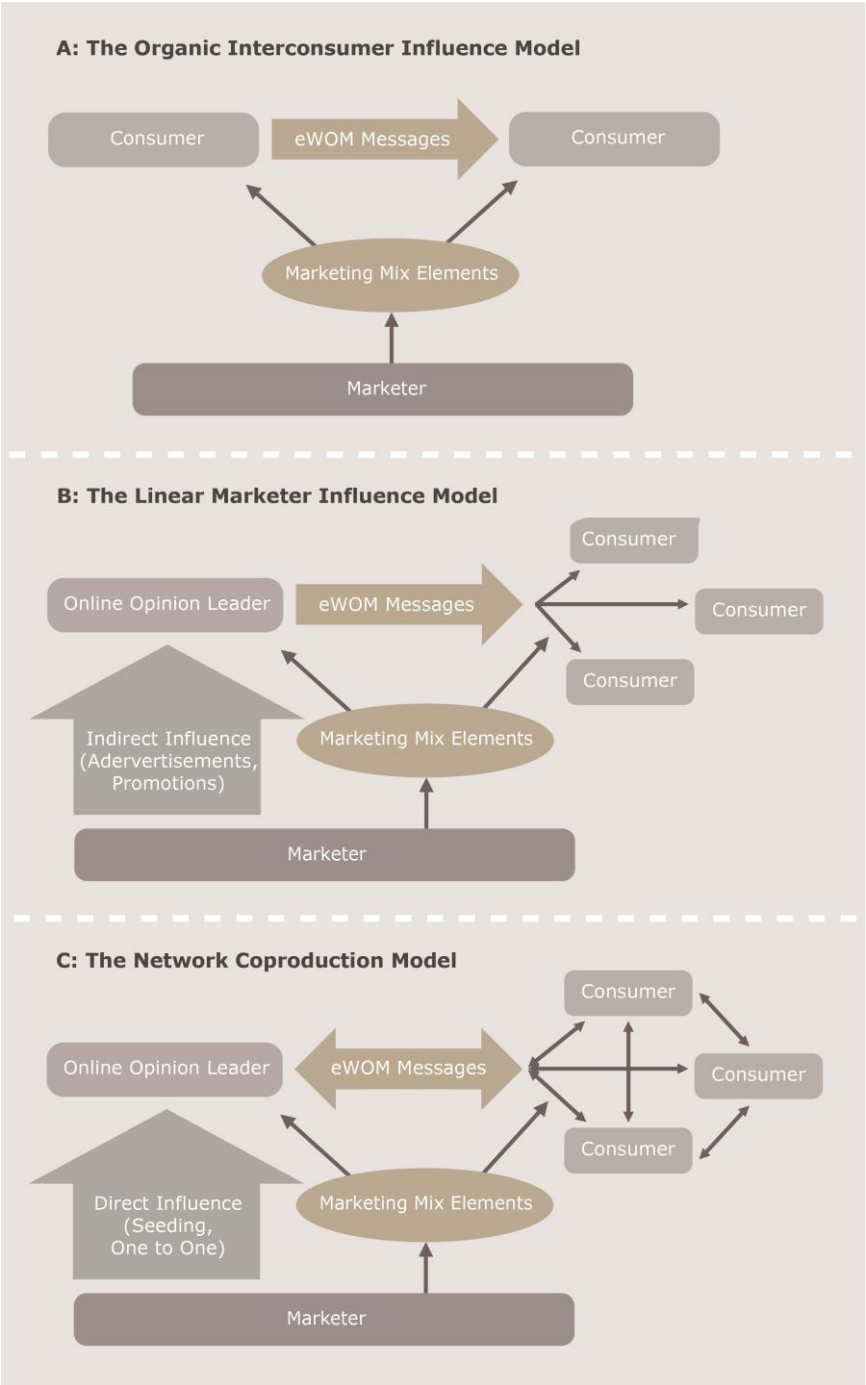


*Source: adapted from Kozinets et al. (2010)*

**Appendix 3**. A Theoretical Model about Formation of Opinion Leaders' Narrative Strategy



## Formation of Opinion Leaders' Narrative Strategy for Creating eWOM Messages

**Denotation**

**a. Signifier**
*(e.g.Brand name in text or visual brand identity)*

**b. Signified**
*(e.g.Physical properties or functional benifits)*

Culturally well-adjusted meaning of a brand/product

*First order signification*

**c. Sign/1.Signifier**
*(e.g.Physical properties or functional benifits of a brand)*

**2.Signified**
*(e.g.The localised meaning of the brand shared in a target market)*

Meaning of a brand/product derived from cultural conventions and social norms of a target market and the social media platform for spreading eWOM

*Second order signification*

**Connotation**

**3. Sign/I.SIGNIFIER**
*(e.g.The localised meaning of the brand shared in a target market)*

**II.SIGNIFIED**
*(e.g.The individualised meaning of the brand by a particular person)*

Individualised meaning of a brand/product

*Third order signification*

**III. SIGN**
*(e.g.The individualised meaning of the brand by a particular person)*

The meaning of a brand/product

**Rhetorical tactics for persuasion**

The methods of persuading consumers to accept this meaning

Narrative strategy

**eWOM messages**

*Source: Author's own*

**Appendix 4.** A Summary of Six Narrative Strategies Used by Fashion Opinion Leaders for Creating eWOM Messages

## Six Narrative Strategies

### Prescribing

| | |
|---|---|
| *Purpose* | To give advice on the use of particular brands or products to solve the issues faced by consumers or the potential issues that might occur in the future |
| *Role of Brands* | Brands/products as solution partners |
| *Semiotic Meanings* | Second order signification: socialised meanings shared by consumer groups |
| | Third order signification: individualised meanings developed by opinion leaders, celebrities, or consumers |
| *Rhetorical Tactics* | Claiming expertise, attention attracting, interactivity seeking, and collaboration |

### Enthusing

| | |
|---|---|
| *Purpose* | To express reference groups' intense fanship or worship of a brand to motivate consumers to adopt the norms and values and cultivate a strong desire for ownership of this brand |
| *Role of Brands* | Brands/products as objects of desire |
| *Semiotic Meanings* | Second order signification: socialised meanings shared by reference groups, such as brand communities or subcultural tribes |
| | Third order signification: individualised meanings developed by opinion leaders, celebrities, models, or consumers |
| *Rhetorical Tactics* | Mood affecting and attention attracting |

### Fostering

| | |
|---|---|
| *Purpose* | To improve consumers' knowledge, understandings, and aesthetic on brands or products |
| *Role of Brands* | Brands/products as teaching aids |
| *Semiotic Meanings* | First order signification: company or marketers created meanings of a brand or a product |
| *Rhetorical Tactics* | Claiming expertise and mood affecting |

## Designating

| | |
|---|---|
| *Purpose* | To designate assignment to a product to judge this product's performance from different perspectives |
| *Role of Brands* | Brands/products as task performers |
| *Semiotic Meanings* | Third order signification: individualised meanings derived from opinion leaders or consumers' experiences with products |
| *Rhetorical Tactics* | Claiming expertise and collaboration |

## Amusing

| | |
|---|---|
| *Purpose* | To create eWOM messages in a creative and dramatic way to satisfy the consumers who are entertainment seekers or imagined empathetic audiences |
| *Role of Brands* | Brands/products as actors |
| *Semiotic Meanings* | First order signification: marketer-created meanings |
| | Second order signification: social groups generated meanings |
| | Third order signification: individualised meanings associated with opinion leaders, consumers, or celebrities |
| *Rhetorical Tactics* | Mood affecting and attention-attracting |

## Assembling

| | |
|---|---|
| *Purpose* | To highlight the value of a brand or a product for identity construction and self-defining behaviour |
| *Role of Brands* | Brands/products as identity construction partners |
| *Semiotic Meanings* | Third order signification: individualised meanings associated with opinion leaders or celebrities |
| *Rhetorical Tactics* | Meaningfulness |

*Source: Author's own*