

How Opinion Leaders Persuade Consumers: Fashion Opinion Leaders' Narrative Strategies for Creating eWOM on Chinese Social Media

Shuang Zhou^{1,*}, Helen McCormick¹, Marta Blazquez cano¹, Liz Barnes¹

¹The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK

*Corresponding author's email: shuang.zhou@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Abstract

The success of eWOM marketing depends on opinion leaders interpreting the meanings of marketing messages to consumers through their narrative strategies. Yet, there still remains a lack of understanding of opinion leaders' narrative strategies in the literature. Given by the facts that China's luxury market serves as a significant contributory factor to global luxury consumption and Chinese consumers' luxury purchases are increasingly influenced by eWOM messages shared on social media, this research aims to address this gap to investigate fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies to create eWOM messages about luxury brands on Chinese social media.

This research carried out a netnography on the naturally occurring social media messages created by China's Top 10 fashion bloggers. Rhetorical analysis and semiotic analysis were employed to identify bloggers' narrative strategies. The results show six distinct narrative strategies and highlight the differences between them in transferring the meanings of brands or products and in persuading consumers to accept these meanings. This research is one of the first to explore fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies in a non-Western cultural context. This study also contributes to the literature of eWOM by giving a definition on narrative strategy and developing a conceptual framework about the formation of opinion leaders' narrative strategy for creating eWOM messages. Moreover, the results of this research provide insights for opinion leaders and companies concerning how to effectively create eWOM messages on Chinese social media to engage and persuade consumers. Therefore, this study offers significant findings for academic and practical applications regarding fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies.

Keywords: eWOM communication, fashion opinion leaders, social media, narrative strategy, interpersonal influence

Introduction

The advances of Web 2.0 technologies provide rich and easily accessible platforms for electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication, which is about sharing and exchanging of both positive and negative product-related or brand-related information among former, actual, and potential consumers without time and geographic constraints (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). eWOM has become an influential and dominant force for impacting consumer perceptions, attitudes, and purchase intentions (Packard & Berger, 2017). Marketers thus take advantage of the credibility of eWOM to overcome consumer resistance to marketer-generated messages and integrate eWOM into marketing campaigns (Kozinets et al., 2010). The fashion industry particularly shows a growing demand for harnessing the power of eWOM marketing to target knowledge-seeking and digitally savvy consumers who are engaging with product

recommendations and reviews shared on social media to enhance their knowledge (The Business of Fashion and McKinsey & Company, 2016).

Opinion leaders play vital roles in eWOM marketing campaigns because the success of an eWOM marketing campaign depends on opinion leaders transforming market-generated messages into more believable, useful, and desirable eWOM messages to consumers (Kozinets et al., 2010). In the alteration of marketing messages into eWOM messages, opinion leaders not only serve as the people who infuse their reputation and reliability on the marketing messages, but also interpret the meanings of marketing messages through their narrative strategies to conform to cultural conventions, social norms, and consumer expectations. Despite recent efforts to advance the knowledge of eWOM messages (e.g. Wang, Cunningham & Eastin, 2015; Packard & Berger, 2017; Kulmala, Mesiranta & Tuominen, 2013) and online opinion leadership (e.g. Lyons & Henderson, 2005; Haenlein & Libai, 2013), there still lacks a fully developed and culturally informed theoretical perspective that illuminates the narrative strategies used by opinion leaders for shaping eWOM messages. In particular, comparatively limited studies have shed light on how opinion leaders employ language, signs, and symbols to communicate the meanings of products or brands to consumers and how they attempt to persuade consumers to accept these meanings.

Because previous eWOM studies are mostly conducted in Western settings, literature still calls for investigation on eWOM behaviour in non-Western cultural contexts (Chu & Choi, 2011; Kasabov, 2016). This research adopts a Chinese cultural context and a luxury product context. This research intends to address the gap in the literature by answering a main research question with three sub-questions: What are the narrative strategies used by fashion opinion leaders to create eWOM messages?

- What kind of meanings associated with brands or products do fashion opinion leaders attempt to interpret and express to consumers?
- How are these meanings transferred to brands?
- How do fashion opinion leaders persuade consumers to accept these meanings?

This paper begins by reviewing the literature concerning Chinese luxury consumption, eWOM, fashion opinion leadership, social media, and narrative strategy. It then details the empirical investigation of narrative strategies used by fashion opinion leaders for creating eWOM messages on the two most popular Chinese social media platforms. It closes by indicating significant findings for academic and practical applications regarding fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies.

Literature Review

Luxury consumption, eWOM, and Chinese cultural context

As a significant contributory factor to global luxury consumption, Chinese consumers put more emphasis on the social value of luxury products compared with consumers in the Western countries and make their evaluation and selection of luxury products in the light of community norms (Zhan & He, 2012). According to Kozinets et al. (2010), eWOM can be influenced and governed by social norms regarding expressing, transmitting, comprehending, and adopting eWOM messages. As a typical Eastern culture, Chinese collective culture shapes social norms and affects consumers' eWOM

behaviours. For example, the structure and content of eWOM messages and the ways that eWOM is shaped and shared are different from those in a Western cultural context that dominates previous eWOM studies (Ma, 2013; Chu & Choi, 2011). Hence, an understanding of Chinese fashion opinion leaders' eWOM behaviours takes on both theoretical and practical significance. The Chinese cultural context within a luxury context is a promising and appropriate research context for this study.

Fashion opinion leader and social media

Fashion opinion leaders now have achieved and demonstrated the ability to influence consumers and represented a new and significant press platform in the industry. This research proposes to view fashion opinion leaders as the individuals who are highly interested in fashion trends and goods, have confidence in their own fashion taste and styles, and are willing to express their thoughts, ideas, and knowledge about fashion, products, and brands through spreading eWOM on social media (Kulmala, Mesiranta & Tuominen, 2013). Social media provides fashion opinion leaders with the way of blogging for exhibiting fashion opinion leadership (Barnes, 2013). As an increasingly important tool of communication in the fashion industry, fashion blogs can offer fashion opinion leaders the opportunities for identity construction, accessibility to large groups of followers, and the possibility of interacting with these followers (Kretz & de Valck, 2010).

Narrative strategies

Through individuals' consumption behaviour, the products or brands as their possessions can convey the images, styles, and cultural meanings to their identities (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). The cyberspace allows people to present themselves and form multiple identities by using digital-presented products and brands (e.g. text, images, videos), rather than the physical-presented forms in the real world (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Opinion leaders portraying their leadership roles in relation to goods consumption on social media requires strategies of manipulating the languages, signs and symbols that stands for products and brands. However, there still lacks a clear definition on narrative strategy. In this research, opinion leaders' narrative strategies are defined as the way they are using language, tone, practices, signs, symbols, and substance to connect brands and products in expressing eWOM messages, with the association of their physical identities, inner thoughts and feelings, ideas, cultural backgrounds, economic and social positions, and social roles.

Methodology

This research explored the opinion leaders' narrative strategies in a naturalistic context using a netnography method. This research followed four netnographic methodological stages that were put forward by Kozinets (2010): entrée, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Non-participant observation was carried out on the naturally occurring messages posted by China's Top 10 fashion bloggers on the two most popular and influential Chinese social media platforms Weibo and WeChat (Exane BNP Paribas, 2017). These bloggers consisted of 7 males and 3 females who have a huge amount of followers, have been active in social media for several years, and have great influences on consumers' preference, attitudes and perceptions towards luxury fashion brands and products (Exane BNP Paribas, 2017).

The naturally occurring three months of messages posted by these 10 fashion bloggers from the beginning of March 2017 to the end of May 2017 were downloaded, copied, sorted, and classified into individual blogger files. The message selection criterion is being relevant to luxury fashion products including ready to wear, leather goods, shoes, fine jewellery, watches, and accessories. The observational data totalled 1007 postings, including 913,816 words and a large additional amount of visual and audiovisual data. This research took the amount and time-scale of data collected in previous eWOM studies using netnography method (e.g. Xun & Reynolds, 2010; Kulmala, Mesiranta & Tuominen, 2013; Kretz & de Valck, 2010; Kozinets et al., 2010) as guidance and references. The total amount of data collected in this research can be justified for making in-depth analysis and enriching the effort to answer the research questions and develop findings.

A combination of semiotic analysis and rhetorical analysis was used to identify the narrative strategies used by these 10 bloggers for creating eWOM messages. The semiotic analysis used in this research adopted the theory of structural semiotics (Saussure, 1983), which is grounded in structural linguistics and widely used in marketing semiotic research (Oswald, 2015). The key notion of structural semiotics is a sign, which is made up by a signifier and a signified (Saussure, 1983). The signifier is about the physical form of the sign like spoken words, written words, vocal tones, images, gestures, and objects while the signified refers to the concept or meanings expressed by the sign. The dialectical relation of the signifier and the signified is called signification. It has been identified two analytical distinct terms for discerning meanings of a sign: denotation and connotation (Chandler, 2007, p.137). Denotation describes the literal, obvious, or common sense meaning of a sign from a culturally well-adjusted perspective. Connotation refers to the ideological and emotional types of socio-cultural and individual associations that are connected to a sign. These associations are typically derived from cultural values, social norms, and personal beliefs of a specific target market. Since opinion leaders make extensive use of signs and symbols in order to affect cultural meaning of brands and persuade consumers, hence, semiotic analysis is the appropriate tool for this research to explore the connotative meanings of luxury fashion brands introduced and interpreted by fashion bloggers and how these meanings are produced in the Chinese social media context.

Rhetorical analysis, which is used here in combination with semiotic analysis, is useful for an assessment of the manners in which eWOM messages are presented and delivered by opinion leaders so as to persuade consumers. This analysis method emphasises a message's argumentation structure, language style, and symbolic forms rather than the content (Eyman, 2015, p.68-70). The rhetorical analysis used in this research is grounded in the 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 word-of-mouth studies (e.g. Hamilton, Vohs & McGill, 2014; Xun & Reynolds, 2010). Ethos, which is regarded by Aristotle as the most significant means of persuasion, leverages a communicator's authority and accounts for ways to convince the trustworthiness and credibility of the communicator. To contrast, pathos signifies the emotional appeals of communicators, which is important in terms of their ability to persuade others. The notion of pathos explains communicators' intention for getting readers emotionally involved in the process of communication. Finally, logos refers to the logical arguments in the context of communication. Using these three distinct dimensions of persuasion

as analytical tools, this research can explore the intentional ways by which the opinion leaders persuade consumers to accept their viewpoints and claims embedded in eWOM messages.

To sum up, in this research semiotic analysis seeks to understand hidden and latent connotative meanings of the luxury brands discussed by fashion opinion leaders and how these meanings are produced and transferred to consumers. Rhetorical analysis aims to explore the modes of persuasion used by opinion leaders to convince consumers to believe in these meanings given to luxury brands in the context of eWOM. The relationships between the results from using these two methods are identified to generate the findings about opinion leaders' narrative strategies, moving the analysis stage toward a direction for theory building. Opinion leaders' narrative strategies were identified and interpreted using a hermeneutic method (Thompson, 1997). The overall data analysis and interpretation approaches of this research are in line with the methodological stages of a netnographic study (Kozinets, 2010).

Findings

The data analysis reveals that opinion leaders organise and generate eWOM messages by using a range of narrative strategies, which are profoundly influenced by the cultural, social, and contextual settings in which eWOM communications take place. Before elaborating on the findings of narrative strategies, it is necessary to present and discuss the key elements of opinion leaders' narrative strategy. Figure 1 illustrates the formation of opinion leaders' narrative strategy to create eWOM messages. The following sections will discuss these elements identified by semiotic analysis and rhetorical analysis with the selected coding examples.

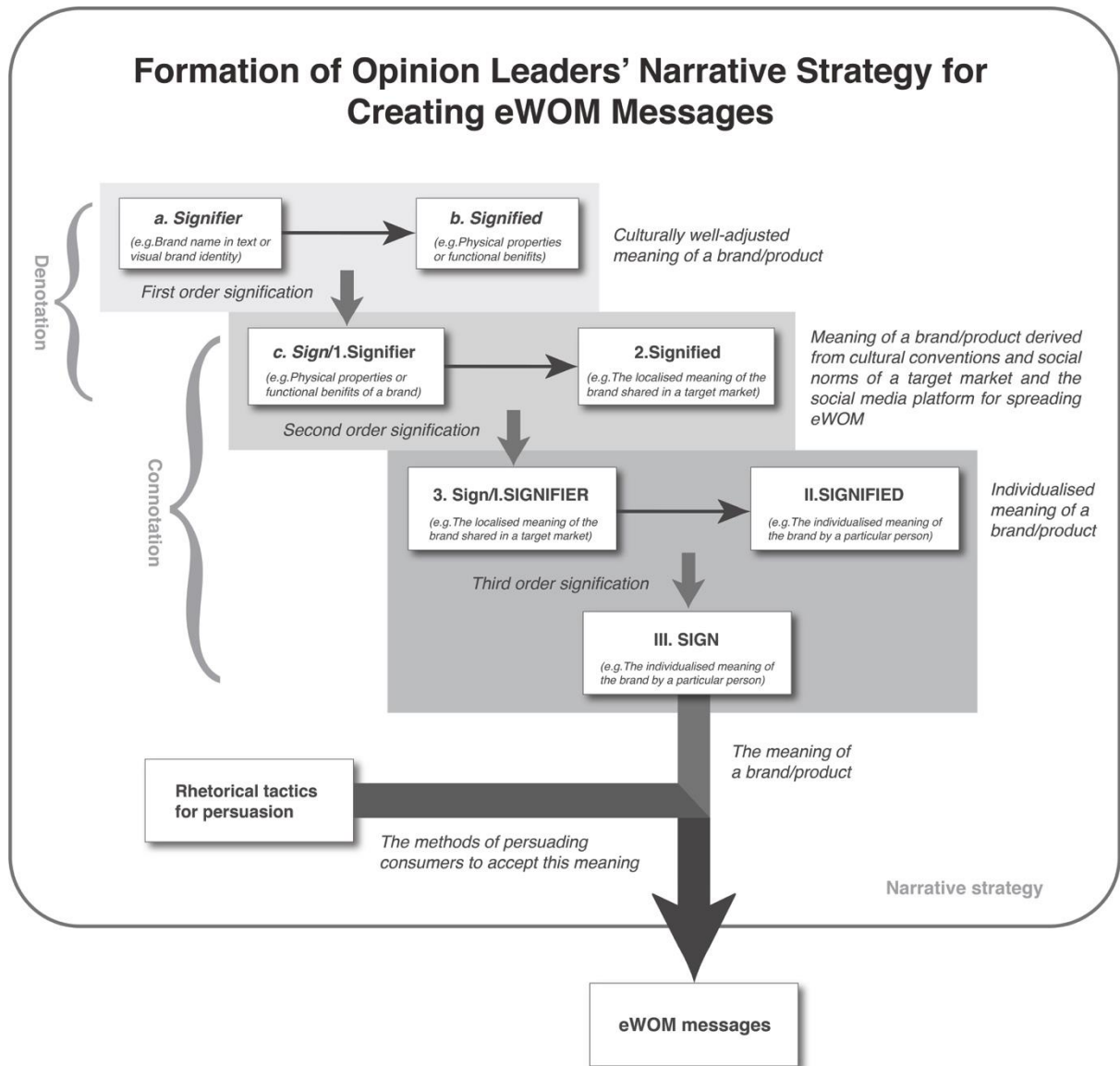


Fig.1 Conceptual Framework for Formation of Opinion Leaders' Narrative Strategy

Semiotic analysis

For opinion leaders to introduce and promote a brand to a particular consumer segment, their eWOM messages must reflect an alignment of meanings of the brand with the multiple cultural categories in which the brand is embedded, from the popular culture to consumer culture of that market. The semiotic analysis hence was used to identify the multiple levels of which, and how meanings are produced and assigned to the brands discussed by opinion leaders in their eWOM messages. A theory of orders of signification (Chandler, 2007, p.139-140), which is the key notion of semiotics, was adopted to analyse and interpret the identified meanings.

First order signification

The first level of meanings is about the original meanings of a product or a brand, which are official company-determined and used to build the product's brand identity and brand equity. Launching a product into the marketplace normally requires informing

consumers about usage benefits and the intended meanings associated with this product, which make this product recognisable and appealing over other alternatives (Kotler & Keller, 2012). This level of meaning is universal and commonly shared across cultures and contexts.

Second order signification

The second order signification refers to a connotation meaning embraced in opinion leaders' eWOM that uses the denotative meanings of a brand as its signifier and attaches it with an additional and conventionally shared symbolic meaning of this brand. This level of meanings is about myths or rituals that are moderated by cultural codes and conventions as well as prevailing social norms in a target market or a platform for eWOM communication.

Third order signification

The third order signification is also about the additional, connoted, symbolic meanings attached to a brand in opinion leaders' eWOM. However, compared with the second level of meanings that is derived from local interpretations of the message, this level of meanings is more personalised and cultivated by individuals such as celebrities, consumers, opinion leaders, models, and designers of brands. This kind of meanings contains idiosyncratic elements that derived from personal values and characteristics or personal experiences with the brands or products.

Rhetorical analysis

The rhetorical analysis drew from traditional rhetorical theory (Aristotle, 2007, p.14) aims to understand how opinion leaders use the appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos to frame eWOM messages to persuade consumers to accept the brands meanings claimed by them. Table 1 indicates the main code categories identified based on rhetorical analysis.

Table 1 Rhetorical analysis—main code categories

	Logos	Ethos	Pathos
Attention-attracting	Attracting consumers' attention on arguments	Building source attractiveness	
Claiming expertise	Logical arguments highlighting meanings or reasons	Building source authority and credibility	
Meaningfulness	Intensifying the encoding penetration of eWOM messages		
Mood affecting			Inducing affective states in consumers
Interactivity seeking			Increasing consumer engagement in eWOM communication
Collaboration	Linking arguments with consumer generated contents so that increasing argument credibility		Enhancing consumer emotional involvement in eWOM messages

Opinion leaders' narrative strategies for creating eWOM messages

Data analysis unveiled six opinion leaders' narrative strategies: prescribing, enthusing, fostering, designating, amusing, and assembling.

Prescribing

Opinion leaders use the prescribing strategy to communicate the social shared brand meanings or individualised meanings developed by themselves, celebrities, or consumers to advise and authorise the use of particular brands or products to solve issues faced by consumers. The problems discussed by opinion leaders may be on going with consumers or potentially occur in the future. The quotes below are examples of opinion leaders' eWOM messages using the prescribing strategy (see Table 2).

Table 2 Relevant quotes for prescribing strategy

Prescribing
Illustrative quotation
<p>“Some enthusiastic readers recently asked me a hard question: how to deal with a fat face? I thought... the best solution is choosing suitable glasses! Except the benefit of making your face look slimmer, it also can be used as the best item to highlight your outfit for any occasion whilst going out without makeup. I won’t talk about normal style of glasses, today I will introduce the four most stylish glasses to you...items recommendation: Miumiu...Burberry...(OL10, 4.17.w)</p> <p>“So the question is, are you ready for the new Celine bags released in 2017? For now, the Celine Clasp, which is full retro style 1950s, very stylish, and will not go out of date, is the ideal Celine handbag that girls who love bags must give exclusive attention in 2017.” (OL7, 4.6.w)</p> <p>“Messages from readers: Purchase new bags for feeling cool in this summer. The most wanted bag before summer is a white small bag~ Reader A: This Dior bag with white patent leather feels like snowflakes and ice and makes me feel cool. I bought it in Sydney, Australia, at the price of 5000 AU\$ that equivalent to 25000 RMB. The white colour is also suitable for large bags. Reader B: I purchased it (a Gucci bag) in Hokkaido at a quite high price of 13000 RMB. This bag is easily matched. Matching it with a white t-shirt and a jeans in summer can make a fresh and comfortable outlook.” (OL1, 5.26)</p>

In order to enhance eWOM persuasiveness, opinion leaders strategically adopt four rhetorical tactics: claiming expertise, attention attracting, interactivity seeking, and collaboration. Opinion leaders’ eWOM messages that give logical explanations on the solutions adopt a logos appeal, which emphasises the brand and product meanings and an ethos appeal, which convinces source knowledgeability to enhance eWOM persuasive impact. Consumers’ attentions are expected to be attracted by these arguments, increasing the probability of the eWOM messages being centrally, rather than peripherally, processed (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Moreover, opinion leaders take and gather the relevant consumption experiences from consumers and thus achieve the behaviours that collaborating with consumers on framing eWOM messages. These messages thus use a logos appeal that embraces consumer generated content to enhance argument credibility to increase the likelihood of consumers accepting the brand meanings claimed as well as a mode of pathos that makes consumers feeling emotionally involved in the eWOM.

Enthusing

The entusing strategy frames the messages that deliver meanings derived from the emotional fancy of social groups or opinion leaders toward particular brands or products. These brands and products are considered as the objects of desire by these meaning makers (see Table 3).

Table 3 Relevant quotes for entusing strategy

Enthusing
Illustrative quotation
<p>“Kelly Himalaya, Himalaya Crocodile Leather Pattern</p> <p>The ultimate quality pursued by many girls, the best bag in the world, which is scarce and difficult to buy...</p> <p>A portable Kelly, square and small, has become the most favourite handbag of the rich girls.” (OL8, 3.8.w)</p> <p>“#Fashion icon# Weizhou Xu×Louis Vuitton Spending time on appreciating this gorgeous boy on working days before vocation. Moreover, I really want to buy the Louis Vuitton×fragment design collection...(OL3, 4.28.1)</p> <p>“At that time, Karlito was limited edition. It attracted multiple people to purchase it when it was not on selling...People who could own it were famous fashion bloggers, supermodels, stars, etc... FENDI also released accessory items for the “Karlito” collection, which sold out immediately.” (OL10, 3.6.w)</p>

The purpose of this strategy might be using the means of utilitarian interpersonal influence (Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel, 1989) to operate a process of compliance that consumers endeavouring to comply with others’ norms and values to gain rewards or to avert punishments. In this way, opinion leaders’ messages express a great fanship or worship of brands from themselves or the potential reference group perceived by consumers, such as celebrities, models, brand communities, or subcultural tribes. The rhetorical methods used by opinion leaders here are mood affecting and attention attracting. Through facilitating consumers’ attention to, and enthusiasm toward, the product, opinion leaders motivate consumers to adopt the reference groups’ norms and values and cultivate a strong desire of ownership toward this product so as to catch up to or keep up with their reference groups.

Fostering

Sometimes opinion leaders take the role of teacher and aim to encourage the development of consumers’ knowledge, understandings, or aesthetic on brands and products. Brands or products thus serve as teaching aids in the process of knowledge education. By this means of fostering, opinion leaders’ messages interpret the company or marketers created meanings of a product or a brand (Allen, Fournier & Miller, 2008) to consumers, such as the design of product, quality, craftsmanship, and innovation (see Table 4).

Table 4 Relevant quotes for fostering strategy

Fostering
<p>Illustrative quotation</p> <p>“Anthony Vaccarello’s resolution to bring Saint Laurent back to the modern times when the old man was alive is obvious. The A/W 2017 collection features lots of elements left by previous generations. Especially, Anthony Vaccarello placed a great emphasis on the clear-cut clippings and soft-but-not-weak lines, which are in line with the styles of both Saint Laurent and himself. Vaccarello does have a strong ability in the design of silhouettes and is adept in choosing fabrics. He is a talent.” (OL5, 3.1)</p> <p>“In contrast with the luxuriousness of the French royal court, costumes in Austria were much simpler...Austrian fashion was really plain compared with the luxuriousness of the French royal court. The most delicate royal life in that era was fascinating. Moreover, Marie Antoinette was extremely favoured by Louis XVI. She led a dream-like life almost every day. Everything used by her was delicate and complicated, which was dazzling. Nowadays, Fendi’s Kan I collection inherited the complicated and delicate craftsmanship in royal courts. Every item under the collection was made as delicate as possible, to realise their buyers’ dream of leading a luxurious life as Marie Antoinette. Each of the flowers and buds is full and solid. Studding by hands and embroidery are both time-consuming. Therefore, it takes a lot of time to make each bag. The softness of spring and brilliance of summer are separated through colours and craft. Therefore, each bag is an artwork.” (OL5, 3.3.w)</p>

These brands and products’ meanings are persuaded by the rhetorical means of claiming expertise and mood affecting. Opinion leaders use their profound knowledge and penetrating insight to logically interpret these meanings to consumers to reinforce their trustworthiness and portray a sequence of consumers’ interest, expectancy, and resolution in product purchases. Moreover, using rhetorical tropes such as elegant figures to put consumers into an aesthetically pleasurable state, making them more accepting of meanings.

Designating

The designating method stresses the meanings derived from opinion leaders’ experiences with products. Opinion leaders designate assignment to products and then judge the products’ practical performance from different perspectives (Kretz & de Valck, 2010) (see Table 5).

Table 5 Relevant quotes for designating strategy

Designating
Illustrative quotation
<p>“As for myself, I love the olive green pattern above, although it is not a common colour, but it feels very good matching to clean blue or black, in fact, the colour is not very vibrant ones, and easily matched with basic colours.” (OL8, 3.8.w)</p> <p>“I was totally in love with this Celine Clasp once I got it. Carrying it on the back, the long bag elongates the line and makes me look thinner. In fact, the bag can be folded in such a way that it can be used as a large handbag. There are a lot of different ways to carry this bag. It’s especially cool to carry it like this on your shoulders or in your hands. But my favourite is the way the models carry them on the show, with only one shoulder strap on the shoulder, then another naturally flowing, it feels specially casual, just like walking with the wind.” (OL7, 3.6.w).</p>

By this means, opinion leaders’ eWOM messages are similar to product evaluation messages or reviews. However, unlike consumer-generated reviews, opinion leaders’ eWOM messages are infused with their authority and expected to provide efficient demonstration to justify their affective attitude and support evaluative arguments. Thus, opinion leaders adopt a rhetorical method of claiming expertise to persuade consumers.

Amusing

The purpose of the amusing strategy is to frame opinion leaders’ eWOM messages in a creative and dramatic way to satisfy the consumers who are entertainment seekers or imagined empathetic audiences. In the dramatized eWOM messages, brands and products are characters, acting within the context of the plot that claiming the brands or products’ meanings (see Table 6).

Table 6 Relevant quotes for amusing strategy

Amusing

Illustrative quotation

“I know here is a woman soldier.
 She can play triathlon whilst wearing a mini skirt on a street.
 She is all muscle, hard strong muscle.
 She was even fine after getting hit by a car.
 She still kept an amazing physical strength after this accident and chased a thief across eight streets with no difficulty.
 Who can understand that she put up a desperate fight for~
 A bag.
 Eventually, even the thief was afraid of her performance.
 The thief gave up as he asked her:
 “Is a bag worth you making a such desperate effort?”
 The woman soldier gave a meaningful response:
 “This is not a common bag. This is Prada!”
 (OL10, 5.25)

“In fact, except the dreamlike live-action fairy tale “Beauty and the Beast” there are some blockbusters that worth watching... “Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets” might be the most beautiful science fiction film... Cara Delevingne starred in this film, female soldier uniform temptation, really cool. She also co-acted in a blockbuster called “New bags are waiting for you to purchase” with Kristen Stewart, the French supermodel Caroline de Maigret, and Pharrell Williams. Although this film will be released on the 3rd April, they are supporting roles. The leading role is what they called, the new Chanel Gabrielle handbag. It is called Gabrielle and comes from the Chanel Spring/Summer 2017 show. It is in tribute to Miss Gabrielle Chanel and in accordance with her principle of “being gorgeous and practical, being elegant but not too feminine.” (OL10, 3.23.w)

The genre or type of the dramatized messages can be various, from comedy, action to science fiction. Similarly, the meanings of brands or products being claimed in messages are diverse, from marker-created meanings, social groups generated meanings to individualised meanings. Opinion leaders use the mood affecting and attention-attracting rhetoric means to frame messages to evoke more consumers’ feelings of enjoyment and pleasantly entertaining, less direct elicitation of belief, and less counter-arguments than occurs with logical arguments. By this means, their messages can build an empathic bond between consumers and the concerns of brand meanings.

Assembling

According to Thompson and Hirschman (1995, p. 151), products or brands as possessions can convey the images, styles, and cultural meanings to individuals’ identities. In this way, brands and products could contribute to identity construction and self-defining behaviour (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Opinion leaders use the assembling strategy to link the brand and product value with personal identities or personality traits and highlight the transformation of brand meanings (see Table 7). Thus the brand or product meanings claimed in their messages are individualised meanings.

Table 7 Relevant quotes for assembling strategy

Assembling
Illustrative quotation
<p>“The Hadid sisters starred in commercial for this collection. The handbags are miraculous. Even Bella, who always looks serious, looks cute with them. While Gigi looks like a Rococo princess in the 18th Century in satin and luxurious clothes, looking gorgeous and romantic. It seems that users of such handbags can go for a dream-like afternoon tea at a royal court at any time.” (OL5, 3.8.w)</p> <p>“Emporio Armani and Mr. Hu Ge complement each other... Mr. Hu Ge is indeed a person with warm heart, but he is also a decisive person. He considers the feelings of others, but not because of stooping to compromise. This is also the style of Emporio Armani — Fashion is to serve people rather than stand high above the masses; but it never blindly follows popularity to lose its own style.” (OL5, 3.4.w)</p>

The rhetoric mode of meaningfulness is used by opinion leaders to convince consumers to accept the brand myths. Opinion leaders associate themselves or celebrities with the symbols and signs communicated by products or brands to construct archetypes. The meaningful rhetorical figures such as nostalgia and biographies are used to evoke consumer positive resonance toward brands and products to enhance eWOM message persuasiveness.

Conclusion

This research intends to address the gap in the literature by identifying fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies for creating eWOM messages on Chinese social media. This study is one of the first to explore fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies in a non-Western cultural context. A definition on narrative strategy was given and a conceptual framework about formatting opinion leaders' narrative strategy for creating eWOM messages was developed, which can be utilised by academics and practitioners in different cultural contexts for different product categories. Six distinct opinion leaders' narrative strategies were identified by using a combination of semiotic analysis and rhetorical analysis. These six opinion leaders' narrative strategies are different in linking the ways of interpersonal influence, transferring the meanings associated with brands or products and using modes of persuasion to convince consumers to accept these meanings.

Through comparison of these six narrative strategies with the findings of previous similar studies in a Western context, insights about the similarities and differences among fashion opinion leaders' narrative strategies in different cultural contexts were generated. 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 & de Valck, 2010) while the narrative strategies 'prescribing', 'fostering', and 'amusing' have relatively weak connections with other Western studies. Moreover, this study finds that Chinese fashion opinion leaders rarely link their self-identities with the brand or product being introduced or recommended by them. They emphasise on their emotions and thoughts about the product and interaction with their

readers. On the contrary, Western fashion opinion leaders like sharing personal stories about brands and products (Kretz & de Valck, 2010).

This study has numerous practical implications. High-quality content of eWOM messages is important for bloggers to increase traffic, uphold the opinion leader role and maintain influences. Armed with a knowledge of narrative strategies for creating eWOM messages, bloggers can be better informed on what kinds of meanings of products or brands can be introduced and interpreted to readers and how to effectively tailor language in their eWOM messages to engage and persuade readers to accept these meanings and achieve impacts on readers' attitudes or behaviours. From a marketer perspective, the results of this study can help to understand a range of brands or products narrative strategies to develop specific guidelines on how to improve effectiveness in online communication through social media tools or company blogs. Moreover, in the new era of networked coproduction of brand meanings, eWOM marketing campaigns need a careful cultivation of the right language and points framed with the most appropriate narrative strategies. In particular, in the China's luxury market, consumers are still eager for more information about brands and products (McKinsey & Company, 2017) due perhaps to traditional advertising for Western luxury brands do not fulfill their needs for brand relationships and self-expression or communicating the values, meanings, and rituals consumers expect of luxury goods (Oswald, 2010). The results of this research have specific implications for luxury brand marketers fostering and encouraging particular opinion leaders' narrative strategies that are ideal for their eWOM marketing campaigns thereby facilitate future growth in the China's luxury sector.

The limitations of this study are the characteristics of study design that adopting a non-Western cultural context and a luxury product context. This study supports and encourages the development of knowledge about comparing opinion leaders' narrative strategies from a cross-cultural perspective or a different product category. Further investigation can be conducted on how consumers interact with opinion leaders within an eWOM marketing campaign from an online community perspective or a person-brand community perspective and how consumers response to and internalise opinion leaders' eWOM messages framed with particular narrative strategies, which may provide valuable insights for opinion leaders and companies concerning how to effectively develop eWOM marketing campaigns to achieve greater impacts.

References

- Aristotle (2007). *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, translated by G. A. Kennedy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barns, L. (2013). Fashion marketing. *Textile Progress*, 45(2-3), 182-207.
- Bearden, W., Netemeyer, R., & Teel, J. (1989). Measurement of Consumer Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15(4), 473-481.
- Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics: The Basics*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Chu, S., & Choi, S. M. (2011). Electronic word-of-mouth in social networking sites: A cross-cultural study of the United States and China'. *Journal of Global Marketing*, 24(3), 263-281.

Exane BNP Paribas (2017). *The Shopping Guide: Bloggers in China*. Exane BNP Paribas. Retrieved from <http://www.exane.com/Link!docExternal.action?cmd=69723331263d6c3d646135396c316f356f3d333067266734>

Eyman, D. (2015). *Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, Practice*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Haenlein, M., & Libai, B. (2013). Targeting Revenue Leaders for a New Product. *Journal of Marketing*, 77(3), 65-80.

Hamilton, R., Vohs, K. D., & McGill, A. (2014). We'll Be Honest, This Won't Be the Best Article You'll Ever Read: The Use of Dispreferred Markers in Word-of-Mouth Communication. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41(1), 197-212.

Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K.P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D.D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: what motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet? *Journal of interactive marketing*, 18(1), 38-52.

Kasabov, E. (2016). Unknown, surprising, and economically significant: The realities of electronic word of mouth in Chinese social networking sites. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(2), 242-252.

Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L. (2012). *Marketing Management*. London: Pearson.

Kozinets, R. V. (2010). *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. London: Sage.

Kozinets, R. V, de Valck, K., Wojnicki, A. C., & Wilner, S. J. (2010). Networked Narratives: Understanding Word-of-Mouth Marketing in Online Communities. *Journal of Marketing*, 74(2), 71-89.

Kretz, G., & de Valck, K. (2010). 'Pixelize me!': digital storytelling and the creation of archetypal myths through explicit and implicit self-brand association in fashion and luxury blogs. In Belk, R.W. (Ed.), *Research in Consumer Behavior*, Emerald Group Publishing Ltd, Bingley, 313-329.

Kulmala, M., Mesiranta, N., & Tuominen, P. (2013). Organic and amplified e-WOM in consumer fashion blogs. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 17(1), 20-37.

Lyons, B., & Henderson, K. (2005). Opinion leadership in a computer-mediated environment. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 4(5), 319-329.

Ma, L. (2013). Electronic word-of-mouth on microblogs: A cross-cultural content analysis of Twitter and Weibo. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 22(3), 18-42.

- McKinsey & Company. (2017). *Chinese luxury consumers: The 1 trillion renminbi opportunity*. McKinsey & Company. Retrieved from https://www.mckinsey.de/files/china_luxury_report.pdf
- Oswald, L. R. (2010). Developing Brand Literacy Among Affluent Chinese Consumers: a Semiotic Perspective. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 37, 413-419.
- Oswald, L. R. (2015). *Creating Value: The Theory and Practice of Marketing Semiotics Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Packard, G., & Berger, J. (2017). How Language Shapes Word of Mouth's Impact. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 54(4), 572-588.
- Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). *Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Saussure, F. (1983). *Course in General Linguistics*. Chicago: Open Court.
- Schau, H. J., & Gilly, M. C. (2003). We Are What We Post? Self-Presentation in Personal Web Space. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30(3), 385-404.
- The Business of Fashion and McKinsey & Company. (2016). The State of Fashion 2017. *The Business of Fashion*. Retrieved from https://images.businessoffashion.com/site/uploads/2016/11/The_State_of_Fashion_2017.pdf
- Thompson, C. (1997). Interpreting Consumers: A Hermeneutical Framework for Deriving Marketing Insights from the Texts of Consumers' Consumption Stories. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(4), 438-455.
- Thompson, C. J., & Hirschman, E. C. (1995). Understanding the socialized body: A poststructuralist analysis of consumers' self-conceptions, body images, and self-care practices. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22(2), 139-153.
- Toder-Alon, A., Brunel, F. F., & Fournier, S. (2014). Word-of-mouth rhetorics in social media talk. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 20(1-2), 42-64.
- Wang, S., Cunningham, N. R., & Eastin, M. S. (2015). The Impact of eWOM Message Characteristics on the Perceived Effectiveness of Online Consumer Reviews. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 15(2), 151-159.
- Xun, J., & Reynolds, J. (2010). Applying netnography to market research: The case of the online forum. *Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing*, 18(1), 17-31.
- Zhan, L. J., & He, Y. Q. (2012). Understanding luxury consumption in China: Consumer perceptions of best-known brands. *Journal of Business Research*, 65(10), 1452-1460.