



How social media influencers' narrative strategies benefit cultivating influencer marketing: Tackling issues of cultural barriers, commercialised content, and sponsorship disclosure

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ABSTRACT

Social media influencers (SMIs) are increasingly involving in influencer marketing to promote products. However, there are both opportunities and issues with influencer marketing. SMIs' narrative strategies can be of great value as high-quality eWOM content is vital to maintain influencer marketing effectiveness. This paper adopts the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework to explore the value of SMIs' narrative strategies to overcome potential influencer marketing issues within the context of China's luxury market. A qualitative approach is applied to explore Chinese consumer perceptions toward capabilities of three SMIs' narrative strategies (brand attribute evaluation, brand love inspiration, self-identity construction) to deal with the issues of cultural barriers, commercial–personal tension, and sponsorship disclosure in SMIs' eWOM. Based on the research findings, this paper develops a conceptual model to illustrate how SMIs' narrative strategies benefit the cultivation of influencer marketing on social media.

1. Introduction

Collaborating with social media influencers (SMIs) to leverage their electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has been utilised by brands as a strategic marketing communication instrument (Audrezet, De Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020). SMIs are knowledgeable and expert in particular topics, and their eWOM concerning brands and products is perceived by consumers as authentic and more trustworthy than marketer created messages (Kim & Kim, 2021). As a significantly growing industry, the global influencer marketing market size is expected to exceed US\$373.5 million by 2027 (Statista, 2020). Extant research has confirmed the effectiveness of SMIs in boosting brand awareness, encouraging adoption of innovation, building strong relationships and emotional intimacy with consumers, and maximising campaign reach through their social network (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020a; Lou & Yuan, 2019). However, there are also issues and challenges with influencer marketing, identified in both academic research and industry practice.

An ongoing stream of research adopts quantitative approaches to examine the influence of characteristics of SMIs and SMIs' eWOM on

influencer marketing effectiveness. They found that low-quality content, commercial orientation, and sponsorship disclosure in SMIs' eWOM can cause negative consumer responses (De Cicco, Iacobucci, & Pagliaro, 2020; Audrezet et al., 2020). However, very limited research has explored how to overcome problems with influencer marketing, indicating a necessity for more research in this area. The creation of SMIs' eWOM is vital for influencer marketing success (Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). SMIs' eWOM should maintain high-quality and persuasive performance without losing authenticity and credibility (Audrezet et al., 2020). Brands and SMIs need to pay great attention to the narrative strategies used to create eWOM to achieve ideal impact, whilst diminishing potential negative consumer response. Accordingly, this research intends to explore the value of SMIs' narrative strategies to overcome three potential influencer marketing issues: cultural barriers, tensions between commercial and personal content in SMIs' eWOM, and sponsorship disclosure, as they could lead to SMIs' eWOM losing effectiveness to persuade consumers' attitudes and behaviours (Halvorsen, Hoffmann, Coste-Manière, & Stankeviciute, 2013; Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). The following research

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questions are investigated:

- RQ1: What are consumers' perceptions of SMIs' narrative strategies?
- RQ2: How can SMIs' narrative strategies contribute to breaking cultural barriers to deliver cultural values to consumers and maintain a consistent international brand image?
- RQ3: How can SMIs' narrative strategies resolve commercial–personal tensions in SMIs' eWOM?
- RQ4: How can SMIs' narrative strategies make sponsorship disclosure in SMIs' eWOM more acceptable to consumers?

This research explicitly explores the value of SMIs' narrative strategies to overcome the three influencer marketing issues in China's luxury market. The cultural context in the Chinese market and the characteristics of local luxury consumers are unique, differing from counterparts in Western markets (Zhang & Kim, 2013; Zhan & He, 2012). The rapidly growing globalisation and modernisation in China have caused Chinese consumers' ways of thinking to be influenced by both their traditional collectivist culture and Westernised modern culture (Zhan & He, 2012; Bian & Forsythe, 2012). China's market has a substantial and youthful consumer base for Western luxury brands, and consumers rely heavily on SMIs' eWOM for obtaining brand-related information to inform purchase decisions (McKinsey & Company, 2019). In recent years, Western luxury brands increasingly use influencer marketing to penetrate China's market (Bain & Company, 2019). The cultural barriers and regulation on sponsorship disclosure in China's market (White, 2006) exert challenges for SMIs to create eWOM to persuade consumers. Therefore, China's luxury market is a promising and appropriate research context for exploring how SMIs' narrative strategies help to deal with influencer marketing issues.

The present research contributes to the literature on influencer marketing in three ways. First, this research adds to the knowledge of addressing potential issues with influencer marketing. It explores the value of SMIs' narrative strategies to cope with three potential issues regarding eWOM creation: cultural barriers, commercialised content, and sponsorship disclosure. Second, this study is one of the first to take an international perspective to investigate resolving influencer marketing problems to target foreign markets. Third, this study contributes to the theory development of influencer marketing by suggesting a qualitative approach to apply the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework to explore the surrounding factors interacting with the marketing campaigns and obtain an in-depth understanding of consumer responses to these factors. The findings of this research provide insights for harnessing the values of SMIs' narrative strategies to cultivate two types of influencer marketing: paid influencer marketing, which involves a high level of marketer control, and earned influencer marketing, which may be out of marketer control.

2. Theoretical background and research gap

2.1. SMIS

SMIs are certain social media personas exhibiting opinion leadership by producing and distributing eWOM concerning brands and products to influence consumers' attitudes and buying behaviours (Casaló et al., 2020a). This research adopts a multi-stakeholder co-creation theoretical perspective (Kazadi, Lievens, & Mahr, 2016) to regard SMIs as independent, third-party stakeholders and intermediaries between brands and consumers (Audrezet et al., 2020). They co-create and negotiate brand meanings and values with consumers and collaborate with brands on marketing activities (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Although SMIs behave as opinion leaders on social media (Casaló et al., 2020a), they differ from ordinary opinion leaders. They can develop a more substantial network of followers and build high quality, dynamic and intimate relationships with their followers (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). They can also establish status and reputation by acquiring

expertise in particular domains and achieve their fame as 'micro-celebrities' (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021). Their motivations to create and spread eWOM include: interaction and building relationship with followers, personal branding, monetising their activities, fame, and influential power, and acting as brand advocates and spokespersons (Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity, & Luoma-aho, 2020; Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

SMIs also differ from traditional celebrities who seek an accentuated distance from consumers (Jerslev, 2016). SMIs are considered by consumers as more accessible, credible, and similar to them (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020). SMIs' eWOM is perceived as more authentic and trustworthy than celebrities' messages (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Research found that SMIs have a more significant impact on young consumers' purchase decisions than celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

2.2. Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing has become an integral part of the marketing communication mix (Audrezet et al., 2020). It refers to businesses' strategic collaboration with SMIs to promote brands and products via producing and distributing eWOM on the social media platforms where SMIs have obtained significant reputations and built large social networks (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Brands provide SMIs with samples of new products or monetary compensation to disseminate branded eWOM to introduce and recommend products in the context of SMIs' personal lives.

Leveraging SMIs in strategic marketing campaigns is based on the belief that brands can harness the external capabilities of SMIs, such as content creation and distribution abilities, interaction abilities, public persona, ability to influence, and social networking and relationship development (Enke & Borchers, 2019). These external resources can render or enhance the effectiveness of SMIs' eWOM and interaction with consumers, thereby achieving marketing communication objectives. The objectives of influencer marketing can be diverse, ranging from increased brand awareness, improved brand recognition, and more social buzz around a brand to boost brand value and revenues (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Brands can collaborate with SMIs for long-term or one-off influencer marketing campaigns (Influencer Intelligence, 2019; Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014).

2.3. Problems with influencer marketing

Prior research has explored potential issues with influencer marketing. These issues are mainly derived from the recognition, characteristics, and behaviours of SMIs, and the creation, commercialisation, and quality of SMIs' eWOM. For example, brands may face the challenge of efficiently identifying and detecting the most suitable and influential SMIs to partner with (De Cicco et al., 2020). The mismatch between brands and SMIs could threaten SMIs credibility and negatively affect consumer attitudes and purchase intentions toward the endorsed brands (Breves, Liebers, Abt, & Kunze, 2019). There can also be a challenge of creating appealing and high-quality eWOM content. When SMIs collaborate with brands, the creation and authenticity of their eWOM could be influenced by brands' encroachment into their eWOM content (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). SMIs should incorporate commercial information into their messages and transform marketing content to reduce followers' suspicion of authenticity (Kozinets et al., 2010; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). When it comes to brands, there is a risk of losing control over SMIs' eWOM since SMIs serve as co-producers of content for campaigns and may have some freedom to create the content (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). SMIs' eWOM content out of brands' control can include harmful or inappropriate content, which may damage the brand image (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019).

Moreover, the external environment surrounding influencer marketing may create challenges to SMIs' eWOM creation and effectiveness.

For instance, the regulatory issues relating to sponsorship disclosure could cause negative consumer responses (Boerman et al., 2017). Social media platforms hiding the number of likes and views on users' posts might move people's focus to the content of posts, thereby giving SMIs pressure to create high-quality content (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Given these influencer marketing problems, it is necessary to explore approaches to address these problems, thereby advancing the theoretical understanding of influencer marketing and informing practitioners in the influencer marketing industry (Taylor, 2020).

There are three gaps in the existing literature on overcoming SMIs' eWOM creation issues. Previous studies have researched various communication strategies to overcome the negatives associated with SMIs' sponsored eWOM. Kozinets et al. (2010) found that bloggers utilise four narrative styles, including evaluation, embracing, endorsement, and explanation, to alter marketing messages in their sponsored eWOM to make the branded content more trustworthy, relevant, and useful to consumers. Hwang and Jeong (2016) found that emphasising 'honest opinions' in bloggers' sponsored posts could reduce negative consumer attitudes towards sponsorship disclosure. This result indicates the importance of underlining independent personal opinions in bloggers' posts to convey truthful and unbiased content to consumers. Despite these contributions to the knowledge of transforming marketing messages and formulating disclosure statements in sponsored eWOM, less is still understood about how SMIs create eWOM to recommend brands whilst diminishing negative consumer responses to sponsorship disclosure and promotional content in their eWOM. Thus, a gap in the literature is presented as exploring how SMIs create eWOM to minimise consumer backlash to sponsorship and commercial content.

Secondly, prior research on influencer marketing neglected the issue of cultural differences. Cultural contexts could influence customer values, consumption behaviours, and social media usage behaviours (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013). It is crucial to understand cultural differences to effectively make marketing messages adapted to local markets (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012). When using influencer marketing to target consumers in diverse cultures, SMIs' eWOM should be tailored to fit local consumers' cultural values. Research is needed to explore how to develop influencer marketing to overcome cultural barriers (Dwivedi et al., 2020). The third research gap is about the methodology used to explore consumer perceptions regarding influencer marketing. Most previous research used quantitative methods to measure consumer perceptions toward SMIs, SMIs' eWOM, and influencer marketing issues (e.g., Jin & Ryu, 2020; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Kay, Mulcahy, & Parkinson, 2020). In contrast, very few studies have adopted qualitative methods to explore the in-depth meanings of, and reasons behind, consumer perceptions and reactions (Ferguson, Brace-Govan, & Welsh, 2021), offering a limited understanding in this area.

This research attempts to address the above gaps identified in the literature and extend the understanding of how SMIs create eWOM to recommend brands whilst dealing with influencer marketing issues. By adopting a qualitative approach, this research takes the consumer perspective to explore the value of SMIs' narrative strategies to address three influencer marketing issues: cultural barriers, commercial–personal tension within SMIs' eWOM, and sponsorship disclosure. Although the results of using a qualitative approach cannot be representative of a broader population's views, the qualitative approach enables the present study to obtain more in-depth insights than a quantitative approach into consumer perceptions towards the value of SMIs' narrative strategies and the underlying reasons for them holding these perceptions.

2.4. The value of SMIs' narrative strategies to cope with influencer marketing issues

Narrative strategies are used by SMIs to create eWOM about brands and consumption practices whilst maintaining consistent characters on social media platforms (Zhou, Barnes, McCormick, & Blazquez Cano, 2020). SMIs infuse eWOM with their expertise, reputation, and

reliability to craft vivid and sophisticated content in the forms of stories, videos, and visuals (Audrezet et al., 2020). They spread eWOM to express evaluations on product performance, offer tips on product usage, and recommend brands to consumers (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Brands should encourage and foster certain SMIs' narrative strategies that align with their marketing campaigns (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Understanding the value of SMIs' narrative strategies is vital for international brands using influencer marketing to complement traditional marketing communication and reinforce the reach and power of marketer-created messages in foreign markets. SMIs' eWOM can be an effective communication channel to distribute localised and personalised marketing messages to target consumers since they are acquainted with consumers' characteristics and expectations, local cultural values, and social norms (Kozinets et al., 2010). This research adopts the viewpoint that SMIs' narrative strategies should concern a combination of standardisation and adaptation that create eWOM content consistent with other marketing outputs whilst adapting to the salient local market features. Given the above-mentioned problems with influencer marketing, SMIs' narrative strategies may offer opportunities for effective and strategic monitoring and management of SMIs' eWOM creation to cope with these difficulties. Hence, this research intends to understand the approaches to harness the inherent and instrumental values of SMIs' narrative strategies to resolve problems in cultivating influencer marketing.

3. Research context

Four factors make China's luxury market a unique and significant context for this research exploring how SMIs' narrative strategies can help address problems with influencer marketing. First, the rapidly growing globalisation and modernisation in China have caused Chinese consumers' ways of thinking to be influenced by traditional collectivist culture and modern Western cultures (e.g., hedonic consumption, individualism, and materialism) (Zhan & He, 2012). Thus, a blend of these distinct cultures has prompted the formation of unique Chinese consumerism, which is dissimilar to that of Western society (Zhang & Kim, 2013). The cultural values and social norms influencing Chinese luxury consumers is more diversified than before. Second, Chinese luxury consumers mainly involve the young rich (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). The youth of Chinese luxury consumers can be considered a distinct characteristic, differentiating them from their Western counterparts, most of whom are senior consumers (Liu, Perry, Moore, & Warnaby, 2016). They tend to enjoy a high-quality lifestyle, indulge in conspicuous consumption, and develop a taste and desire for luxury brands (Li, Li, & Kambele, 2012). Consequently, the changing and diversified cultural context and the unique characteristics of consumers raise difficulties in Western luxury brands targeting Chinese consumers.

Third, Chinese luxury consumers' product evaluation and purchase intention are now significantly influenced by SMIs (Bain & Company, 2017; McKinsey & Company, 2019). Influencer marketing thus could be an effective approach to reach them. Collaborations between Western luxury brands and SMIs who are well-informed about these luxury brands and familiarised with local cultural values and consumer characteristics are increasingly prevalent in China's market (Exane BNP Paribas, 2017; McKinsey & Company, 2019). SMIs' eWOM need to be carefully crafted to fit within consumers' values and belief systems, satisfy consumers' needs and desires, and persuade consumers' purchase intention to achieve ideal marketing objectives. Finally, China's regulations for online advertising (White, 2006) require that endorsement must be revealed in the sponsored blog messages to avoid misleading consumers, deceptive practices, and arousing ethical concerns. This regulation of sponsorship disclosure increases the difficulty for SMIs' eWOM creation. Hence, these four problematic factors clarify the importance and necessity to conduct this research to explore the value of SMIs' narrative strategies for dealing with issues within cultivating influencer marketing in China's luxury market.

4. Theoretical framework

4.1. The stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework

The present research is built upon the S-O-R framework formulated by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). This framework declares that environmental and informational cues (S) trigger an individual's internal cognitive and affective reactions to the stimuli (O), which in turn shape behavioural responses (R) (Bigne, Chatzipanagiotou, & Ruiz, 2020). It is grounded in environmental psychology and provides a theoretical basis for exploring consumer behaviour (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020b). Justification for using the S-O-R framework as the theoretical lens is twofold. First, this framework has been applied in research to investigate how brand-related content on social media triggers particular consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours, as shown in Table 1.

The literature suggests that this framework can help understand consumer cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses to eWOM communication (Bigne et al., 2020). For example, Fang (2014) used this framework to investigate how consumer eWOM adoption was aroused

Table 1
Prior studies using the S-O-R framework.

Djafarova and Bowes (2021)	<p>Research objective To investigate what types of Instagram marketing tools are the most effective in relation to UK Generation Z's impulse purchasing behaviour related to fashion brands.</p> <p>Approach to adopt the S-O-R framework S: Brand advertisements, opinion leaders, and user-generated content on Instagram. O: Consumer positive emotions such as pleasure and arousal. R: Consumer impulse purchases.</p> <p>Research method Qualitative focus groups</p>
Casaló et al. (2020b)	<p>Research objective To understand consumer engagement by analysing how consumer internal responses and behaviours are triggered by brand publications on Instagram.</p> <p>Approach to adopt the S-O-R framework S: Instagram brand publications. O: Consumer perceptions of creativity and positive emotions. R: Consumer affective commitment and interaction intentions.</p> <p>Research method Quantitative questionnaire</p>
Aljukhadar, Senecal, & Poirier (2020)	<p>Research objective This paper follows a qualitative theory building approach to extend the theory of consumption values and develop a framework based on the values social media delivers to consumers that explain their use outcomes.</p> <p>Approach to adopt the S-O-R framework S: Social media consumption O: The aesthetic, social and learning value R: Consumer responses to the attainment of these values</p> <p>Research method Semi-structured interviews</p>
Bigne, Chatzipanagiotou, and Ruiz (2020)	<p>Research objective This research explored how pictorial content interacts with the sequencing of conflict online reviews to influence consumer purchase intentions.</p> <p>Approach to adopt the S-O-R framework S: Consumer motivations for participation in brand communities on social media. O: Consumer participation in brands communities on social media R: Consumer brand trust, brand loyalty, and branding co-creation.</p> <p>Research method Eye-tracking experiment and online questionnaire</p>

by various eWOM source and information factors. The result showed that consumer adoption of eWOM was mediated by their cognitive and emotional responses, supporting the S-O-R relationship. A recent study (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021) adopted this framework to explore which marketing tools used on Instagram can trigger consumer impulse purchasing behaviour within the fashion industry. This study found that opinion leaders, promotional advertisements, and user-generated content can arouse positive consumer emotions and impulse purchasing behaviours. The findings of prior research support the applicability of the S-O-R framework to investigate how consumer responses are triggered by SMIs' eWOM created by using what narrative strategies.

Second, there is a need in exploring the applicability of the S-O-R framework to explore consumer behavioural responses to certain promotional activities endorsed by SMIs (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Previously, the understanding of consumer responses to SMIs' eWOM mainly was obtained from quantitative approaches (e.g., Casaló et al., 2020a; Breves et al., 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017). However, the qualitative studies using the S-O-R framework to investigate SMIs' eWOM as drivers to what specific consumer responses for what reasons are rare. Thus, this research intends to add new insights to this area by using the S-O-R framework in an influencer marketing context, to obtain a holistic understanding of consumer reactions associated with the capabilities of SMIs' narrative strategies to create eWOM to deal with influencer marketing issues.

4.2. Development of research framework

4.2.1. SMIs' narrative strategies

This research explores consumer perceptions related to three SMIs' narrative strategies to create eWOM about luxury brands, including brand attribute evaluation, brand love inspiration, and self-identity construction. These narrative strategies are identified in prior studies conducted in a Western context, helping this research to understand how to adapt and optimise these SMIs' narrative strategies to overcome influencer marketing issues in a foreign context of China's market. Table 2 lists the previous studies that have investigated these three strategies.

4.2.1.1. Brand attribute evaluation. Brand attribute evaluation is used by SMIs to create eWOM to present judgement on brand performance on specific attributes (Kretz & De Valck, 2010). SMIs' narrative strategies should be in line with the characters they have established, or they are trying to project (Kozinets et al., 2010). To function in the roles they want to be, SMIs' presentation of 'who they are' and the 'ought-self' is required to gain audiences' approval (Stehr, Rössler, Schönhardt, & Leissner, 2015). They have the obligation of sharing information and opinions about products and brands to express the ought-self to convey their opinion leader images to consumers. Thus, they use this narrative strategy to build and maintain opinion leadership by initiatively sharing knowledge and giving efficient arguments and evaluations to recommend brands and give suggestions on brand choices (Kretz & De Valck, 2010).

4.2.1.2. Brand love inspiration. Brand love is about passion-driven

Table 2
Three SMIs' narrative strategies.

SMIs' narrative strategies	References
Brand attribute evaluation	Kretz and De Valck (2010); Kulmala, Mesiranta, and Tuominen (2013); Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2018)
Brand love inspiration	Kulmala et al. (2013); Kretz and De Valck (2010)
Self-identity construction	Jin and Ryu (2020); Kretz and De Valck (2010); Delisle and Parmentier, (2016); Rocamora (2011); McFarlane and Samsioe (2020); Kulmala et al. (2013)

behaviours that reflect strong desires for brands and signify positive emotional connections with brands (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). To inspire consumers' brand love, SMIs use overwhelmingly enthusiastic language and emotional expressions to narrate personal experiences, passion, or fandom toward favourite brands and desired products (Kretz & De Valck, 2010). They present the desired-self or the ideal-self via digital association with the products and brands that have been or have not been physically owned by them (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003). The fandom of brands in SMIs' narratives can also come from others, revealing the ideal value brought by the ownership of a product or a brand. This narrative strategy is used by SMIs to trigger consumers' brand love and purchase intentions.

4.2.1.3. Self-identity construction. A central form of SMIs' narrative strategies is posting photographic portraits for documenting their outfits and styles and construction of identity (Delisle & Parmentier, 2016; McFarlane & Samsioe, 2020). Personal stories about the consumption and usage of products are narrated through their images with textual explanations and specific commercial information about these products, such as brands, prices, and purchasing links. Because luxury products are frequently associated with meanings, symbols, and status, they are of the utmost relevance to consumer self-concept and have capacities of identity reinforcement or self-expansion (De Kerviler & Rodriguez, 2019). SMIs who are intensely interested in luxury products seek to associate themselves with the symbolic meanings of products or brands to communicate their unique self-concepts with others on social media (Kretz & De Valck, 2010). These luxury products and brands can effectively build, reinforce, and express SMIs' tastes, skills, achievements, and other unique aspects of their identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

4.2.2. Issues with influencer marketing in China's luxury market

In this research, the value of SMIs' narrative strategies for cultivating influencer marketing is understood by examining these strategies' capabilities to overcome three issues: cultural barriers, commercial–personal tension within SMIs' eWOM content, and sponsorship disclosure. These issues will be discussed in detail by putting them in the context of China's luxury market.

4.2.2.1. Cultural barriers. Luxury brands face the dilemma of standardisation and localisation of brand communication in international markets (Yu & Hu, 2020). This challenge is especially notable in China's luxury markets. The Confucian collectivist culture in China profoundly influences luxury consumer behaviours, resulting in consumers paying more attention to social recognition and conformity and pursuing the social value of luxury brands (Zhan & He, 2012). However, the increased globalisation leads to cultural diversity in Chinese market and the emergence of luxury consumer segments that attach importance to self-related values and seeking uniqueness (Liang, Ghosh, & Oe, 2017). Consequently, Chinese luxury consumers embrace the socially-oriented ones who think highly of others' opinions and attitudes to gain social acceptance and the personally-oriented ones who focus on the self-related brand values and being opposed to others' opinions to stand out from the crowd (Bian & Forsythe, 2012).

Western luxury brands' marketing strategies used in China's market need to deal with cultural barriers carefully. The ban of Western social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) in China (Chen & Reese, 2015, p.4) leads to domestic social media platforms as the only channels for influencer marketing. This social media environment requires a high-level of local adaptation in marketing messages. Meanwhile, a consistent sense of luxury brands' consistent identities needs to be maintained in SMIs' eWOM to avoid over-localisation, which can cause consumer confusion in brand identity and country-of-origin (Liu et al., 2016). SMIs' eWOM thus should be framed to display luxury brands' meanings and values, adapt to the local market whilst maintaining a consistent sense of brand identities, and fulfil the purposes of

persuasion towards brand consumption. Accordingly, this research uses two dimensions of factors to measure whether SMIs' narrative strategies help break cultural barriers in delivering cultural values to Chinese consumers and maintaining luxury brand images and position in SMIs' eWOM (Table 3).

The dimension of delivering cultural values is examined to interpret consumer preferred luxury brand meanings and convey consumer desired values of luxury brands. Brands are attached with multiple meanings to differentiate them from competitors and add measurable values to their offerings (Allen, Fournier, & Miller, 2008). For SMIs to introduce and promote a brand to a particular consumer segment, their eWOM should indicate an alignment of brand meanings with the cultural contexts in which the brand is embedded. The contextualised meanings of luxury brands include social meanings and individualised meanings (Han, Nunes, & Dreze, 2010; Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2019). Social meanings are historically established cultural meanings that concern the shared attitudes, beliefs, customs, rules, and criteria that consumers may collectively adopt for interpreting and communicating luxury brands within a marketplace (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2019). Individualised meanings denote how luxury brand meanings are perceived and customised by individuals via their sense of personal interaction with brands (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). This study will investigate Chinese consumers' preferred luxury brand meanings, reasons for their preference, and perceptions of the meanings interpreted by SMIs using the three narrative strategies.

This research also investigates whether SMIs' narrative strategies help deliver self-expressive values and social values of luxury brands to consumers, which are favoured by Chinese luxury consumers (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012; Zhan & He, 2012; Liang et al., 2017; Bian & Forsythe, 2012). Self-expressive values concern linking self-identity and self-concept with luxury brand images. Social values relate to the social-influence dimension of luxury brand values, especially the prestigious values addressed and social status they display (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012; Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2019). Furthermore, the dimension of maintaining luxury brands' images and positions is examined through investigating consumers' perceptions about whether SMIs' narrative strategies help portray brand identities and positions and maintain consistency in brand images.

4.2.2.2. Commercial–personal tension. The second issue is balancing commercial–personal tensions in SMIs' eWOM. Because consumers resist marketer-created messages, the success of influencer marketing depends on SMIs converting the commercialised marketing messages into more personalised, useful, desirable, and reliable messages for consumers (Zhou et al., 2020). Thus, the inherent tension between commercial and non-commercial content should be balanced in SMIs' eWOM (Boerman et al., 2017).

Three factors are explored to understand whether SMIs' narrative strategies help smooth the tensions between commercial content and personal attributes in their eWOM (Table 4). The first factor relates to whether particular SMIs' narrative strategies can make the commercial element in their eWOM acceptable to consumers. The commercial

Table 3
Factors for measuring the value of SMIs' narrative strategies for breaking cultural barriers.

Dimensions of factors	Factors
Deliver cultural values to consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce and interpret the desired meanings of luxury brands with consumers. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social meanings • Individualised meanings • Deliver self-expressive value of luxury brands • Convey social value of luxury brands
Maintain luxury brands' images and positions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portray identities and positions of luxury brands in SMIs' eWOM • Maintain consistency in luxury brands' images

Table 4
Factors for measuring the value of SMIs’ narrative strategies for balancing commercial–personal tension.

Dimensions of factors	Factors
Balance commercial–personal tension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer acceptance of commercial elements in SMIs’ eWOM created by particular narrative strategies • Consumer recognition of commercial content and personal attributes in SMIs’ eWOM • Balance the tension between commercial content and personal content in consumers’ mind

elements embraced in SMIs’ eWOM are typically promotional contents, giveaways, discount codes, and advertising through sponsored links (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). The second factor concerns consumer recognition of commercial content and personal attributes in SMIs’ eWOM. According to Halvorsen et al. (2013), the line between commercial content and personal attributes in the bloggers’ posts can be considered vague in contrast to the traditional advertisement. Boerman et al. (2017) argue that it could be difficult for consumers to distinguish commercial content from non-commercial content in SMIs’ or celebrities’ eWOM, because these two types of content show a remarkable similarity in style and format. Hence, it is vital to understand whether certain SMIs’ narrative strategies make commercial content salient or integrated into personal attributes in their eWOM. The third factor is whether particular SMIs’ narrative strategies can balance the tension between commercial content and personal content in consumers’ minds. Personal attributes in SMIs’ eWOM are among the most influential factors for consumers’ brand perceptions and consumption (Audrezet et al., 2020). However, there is an underlying risk of a reduced effect caused by SMIs’ eWOM being over-commercialised (Pihl & Sandström, 2013). Thus, it is necessary to learn about the value of SMIs’ narrative strategies for balancing the commercial and personal tensions in their eWOM.

4.2.2.3. *Sponsorship disclosure.* The last issue is about sponsorship disclosure in SMIs’ eWOM, which has attracted the broader attention from marketers, policymakers, and researchers (Boerman et al., 2017; De Veirman et al., 2017). Many countries’ regulations and guidelines prescribe that endorsement must be disclosed in sponsored online messages to avoid misleading and deceptive practices and ethical concerns (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The findings of prior studies indicated that revealing the commercial cooperation with brands in SMIs’ eWOM reduces consumers’ brand recall and favourable attitudes toward brands (Campbell, Mohr, & Verlegh, 2013). Literature thus calls for understanding how sponsorship disclosure is interpreted by social media users and impacts marketing outcomes (Kim & Kim, 2021) and effective ways to reduce the negative influence of sponsorship disclosure (Audrezet et al., 2020).

This research addresses these calls and explores the value of SMIs’ narrative strategies for mitigating consumers’ negative responses towards sponsorship disclosure by examining two factors (Table 5). The first factor aims to explore consumer perceptions of sponsorship disclosure in SMIs’ eWOM. In the case of their negative perceptions being generated, the second factor helps understand whether SMIs’ narrative strategies minimise these negative perceptions.

Table 5
Factors for measuring the value of SMIs’ narrative strategies for mitigating negative responses toward sponsorship disclosure.

Dimensions of factors	Factors
Mitigate negative responses toward sponsorship disclosure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer perception of sponsorship disclosure in SMIs’ eWOM • Consumer acceptance of sponsorship disclosure in SMIs’ eWOM created by particular narrative strategies

5. Research framework

This study develops the research framework (Fig. 1) to underpin the approach to explore the value of SMIs’ narrative strategies for resolving problems with influencer marketing. This framework is built on the S-O-R framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) to illustrate the defined stimuli, organism and responses in the present study and guides data collection and analysis. The stimuli are the three SMIs’ narrative strategies, including brand attribute evaluation, brand love inspiration, and self-identity construction. This study explores the organism and response, which are about consumers’ perceptions and behavioural reactions of SMIs’ narrative strategies and the capabilities of these strategies to overcome three influencer marketing issues.

6. 5. Research methodology

6.1. Focus groups

Focus group interviews with consumers were employed to understand their perceptions toward the capabilities of SMIs’ narrative strategies to tackle the three influencer marketing issues. Rather than focusing on statistical generalisability, this qualitative method helps obtain more in-depth insights into consumers’ thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes about the three issues and the underlying reasons behind their particular perceptions, which are difficult or impossible to detect through quantitative research methods (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

6.1.1. Focus group discussion protocol

Before data collection, four types of open-ended questions (Table 6) were formulated and utilised in focus group discussions, including opening questions, introductory questions, key questions, and ending questions. They are derived from the literature review and closely connected with four research questions and defined variables in the research framework. These open-ended questions are primary questions designed to guide participants’ discussions. Secondary questions, which can be either open-ended or closed, are used to follow up primary questions or probe for greater detail on participants’ answers to primary questions, such as “why do you feel that way?” and “how strongly do you feel about this: strongly, very strongly?”.

6.1.2. Focus group techniques

Four techniques, photo elicitation, free listing, ranking, and choosing among alternatives, were used in focus group discussions. These techniques are ‘exercises’ or ‘activity-oriented questions’ that provide opportunities to elicit participants’ answers and promote discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

6.1.2.1. *Photo elicitation.* The photo elicitation technique (Tyson, 2009) enables the focus group moderator to explain what is meant by SMIs, eWOM and narrative strategies, introduce three SMIs’ narrative strategies (brand attribute evaluation, brand love inspiration, and self-identity construction), and induce participants’ discussion by triggering their thoughts and attitudes towards particular subjects. The messages used for photo elicitation were selected and printed before focus group interviews and then presented to the participants throughout each focus group discussion. Messages were selected from the posts published by the ten most influential Chinese fashion bloggers (Exane BNP Paribas, 2017) on Weibo and WeChat. These messages are about products of various Western luxury fashion brands and were copied directly without modifying the content. The recognisable information about bloggers was removed to avoid influence on participants’ perceptions. The other message selection criteria are representing the three narrative strategies accurately and easily be read and comprehended.

Three messages introducing different luxury brands were selected to present each narrative strategy, thereby eliminating possible influences

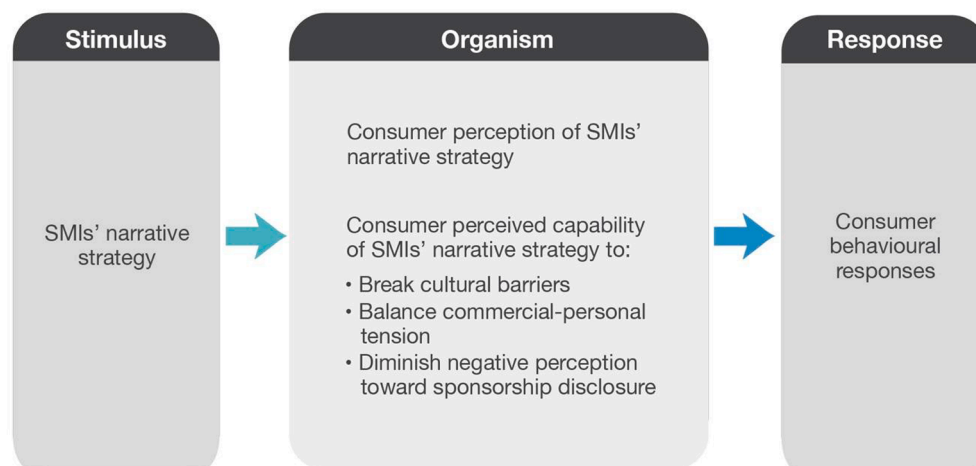


Fig. 1. Research framework.

from consumer biased perceptions and attitudes toward particular luxury brands. These three messages are related to men's and women's luxury products, and each message is generally composed of 200–600 words and several pictures. There are variations in the three messages to present each strategy to get rich results about participants' perceptions. For example, these messages embrace the two types of luxury brand meanings: social meanings and individualised meanings. The selected messages also involve the non-sponsored and sponsored messages, commercial elements, and other elements to effectively stimulate participants' perceptions and discussions on the moderator's questions.

6.1.2.2. Free listing. A free listing task (Krueger & Casey, 2015) was used to ask participants to list all their thoughts and feelings whilst reading the bloggers' messages portraying three SMIs' narrative strategies. Participants were provided with pieces of paper for writing their answers. When everyone completed the task, the moderator asked participants to discuss what they have written down about each strategy. The key items and adjectives participants used for expressing perceptions toward each narrative strategy were recorded by the moderator on paper and quickly categorised based on their meanings and polarities, thereby allowing the moderator to ask probing questions about why participants had such perceptions and feelings.

6.1.2.3. Ranking. After the free listing task, a ranking task was used to ask participants to rank the three SMIs' narrative strategies according to their liking, from the most preferred to the least preferred. When participants finished the task, the moderator asked them to report their responses about the most and least liked narrative strategies. The moderator wrote down participants' responses immediately, counted the results, and selected the most frequently mentioned strategies in their responses. Then participants were asked for their confirmation and opinions on these strategies as the results of the most liked and most disliked narrative strategies in the group's viewpoint.

6.1.2.4. Choosing among alternatives. A task of choosing among alternatives was applied to obtain participants' preference of two categories of luxury brand meanings: social meanings and individualised meanings. The moderator introduced these meanings by giving examples taken from bloggers' messages and then asked participants to select one of the two alternatives. After making their selection, participants were asked to report their answers, provide reasons for their selection, and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the two types of brand meanings.

6.1.3. Sampling

The target population was primarily defined by country, gender, age range, social media usage experience, and interests in luxury brands. The place of residence was also used to identify potential participants, as consumers living in different tier cities are supposed to have different luxury consumption behaviours (Fung Business Intelligence Centre, 2015; Liu et al., 2016). This research considered consumers living in two cities, Shanghai and Chengdu, which are Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities, respectively, and among the three largest luxury fashion markets in China (Fung Business Intelligence Centre, 2015; Zheng, 2018; Song, 2018). This research thus aimed at a target population of Chinese Weibo or WeChat users who are actual or potential luxury fashion consumers, both male and female, aged between 18 and 40 years old, and living in Shanghai and Chengdu.

A snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants for focus group discussions (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). Information sheets and consent forms were sent to each potential participant to inform them about the details of focus group discussions, ask them to answer screening questions to decide the most appropriate sample, and obtain their consent for participation. There are 8 to 10 participants in a focus group discussion (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). This research conducted three focus groups in Shanghai and Chengdu, respectively, for a total of six groups ($n = 53$). The appendix displays the demographic details of all participants.

6.1.4. Focus group discussion

Each focus group discussion lasted for around two hours. At first, two pilot focus groups were undertaken with university students to test the focus group protocol's effectiveness to identify issues. After necessary modifications to the protocol, six focus groups were conducted in Chengdu and Shanghai. These group discussions took place in comfortable environments, such as the meeting room of a hotel located in the city centre and café on a university campus, making participants feel relaxed and active in their discussions. All these discussions were conducted in Mandarin, the native language of participants and the focus group moderator, enabling the participants to express perceptions and opinions precisely and preventing miscommunication between participants with the moderator. The moderator used the words 'luxury brands' and 'bloggers' instead of pointing out specific luxury brand name or blogger during questioning, thereby preventing bias in participants' responses that can compromise the validity of focus group findings. All focus group discussions were audio-recorded for subsequent data analysis.

Table 6
Focus group questions.

Types of questions	Themes	Questions
Open questions	Common behaviours of reading SMIs' social media messages concerning luxury brands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How often do you read SMIs' social media messages related to luxury brands? • On which social media platform do you prefer to read these messages? • What are your purposes for reading these messages?
Introductory questions (Linked to RQ1)	General perceptions of three SMIs' narrative strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you feel about the three narrative strategies used by SMIs to create eWOM? • What factors make you generate these feelings toward these narrative strategies?
	The most liked and disliked SMIs' narrative strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which narrative strategies do you like best/least? • Reasons for like or dislike? • How to change the disliked narrative strategies to be likeable?
Key questions (Linked to RQ2, RQ3, RQ4)	Break cultural barriers (Liu et al., 2016; Zhan & He, 2012) <i>Deliver cultural values to consumers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you like the two types of meanings of luxury brands introduced and discussed in SMIs' messages? • Which type of luxury brands' meanings do you like best? • Which narrative strategies can make you imagine that you are wearing, using, or carrying the mentioned luxury product so as to link self-identity with the luxury product to build or enhance self-concept? • Which narrative strategies conveys the social value of the luxury product to you?
	<i>Maintain the luxury brand's image and position</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which narrative strategies best portray the identity and position of the luxury brand? • Based on your previous feelings of this luxury brand, is your impression of the brand image different after reading these bloggers' messages? • If changed, positive change or negative change?
	Balance commercial–personal tensions (Boerman et al., 2017; Kozinets et al., 2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think these bloggers' posts are commercialised or personalised? • Can you separate the commercial content and personal attributes in these bloggers' messages? • Do you think the commercial elements involved in these bloggers' messages are acceptable or not? • Which narrative strategies can help to balance the commercial and personal tension in bloggers' messages?

Table 6 (continued)

Types of questions	Themes	Questions
	Sponsorship disclosure (Boerman et al., 2017; Hwang & Jeong, 2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think of the sponsorship being revealed in SMIs' messages? • Which narrative strategies can make sponsorship disclosure more acceptable?
Ending questions	Suggestions for improvement of SMIs' narrative strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How could these three narrative strategies be improved? • If you had a chance to advise SMIs to use these narrative strategies, what advice would you give?

6.2. Data analysis

The qualitative data collected in focus groups includes the audio recordings of focus group discussions and participants' handwritten responses. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts and participants' handwritten responses, which were in Chinese, were directly coded and analysed without translation into English to avoid any translation errors or loss of meaning. A hybrid approach of deductive and inductive thematic analysis was adopted for analysing and recording themes within the rich, complex, and lengthy accounts of data. This hybrid approach could ensure rigour within qualitative research using thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). A step-by-step process of data coding and analysing was adopted, as shown in Fig. 2.

There are seven steps in the data analysis process, beginning with developing a priori codes and themes according to literature review and the research framework:

- A. Three narrative strategies
 - a. Brand attribute evaluation
 - b. Brand love inspiration
 - c. Self-identity construction
- B. Breaking cultural barriers
 - a. Delivering cultural values
 - b. Maintaining luxury brands' images and positions
- C. Balancing commercial–personal tensions
- D. Sponsorship disclosure

These predetermined themes and codes also correspond to the questions guiding focus group discussion, supporting their applicability to the raw data. The second step involved initial reading the transcripts and participants' handwritten responses and summarising the key points to create initial codes. In the third step, both deductive and inductive coding was performed using NVivo data management software. The transcripts were imported into NVivo and matched with a priori codes and themes and the initial codes developed manually in the second step. Then the data were segmented, sorted, and reorganised. The analysis was guided, yet not limited, by a priori codes and themes. Inductive codes were also assigned to the data segments that present a new theme (Boyatzis, 1998). These data-driven codes were either different from the predetermined codes and themes or extended the initial codes. A wide range of new themes emerged from data and enriched findings to fulfil the purposes of this study.

In the fourth step, data was re-read to continually create additional inductive codes, ensuring all the codes were refined to accurately represent the meanings of data. In the fifth step, codes were connected to identify themes. Then each theme was assigned a concise phrase to describe its meaning. The sixth step involved grouping the identified themes under overarching themes defined with headings corresponding to the research questions. In the seventh step, the identified themes were reported with quotations from data.

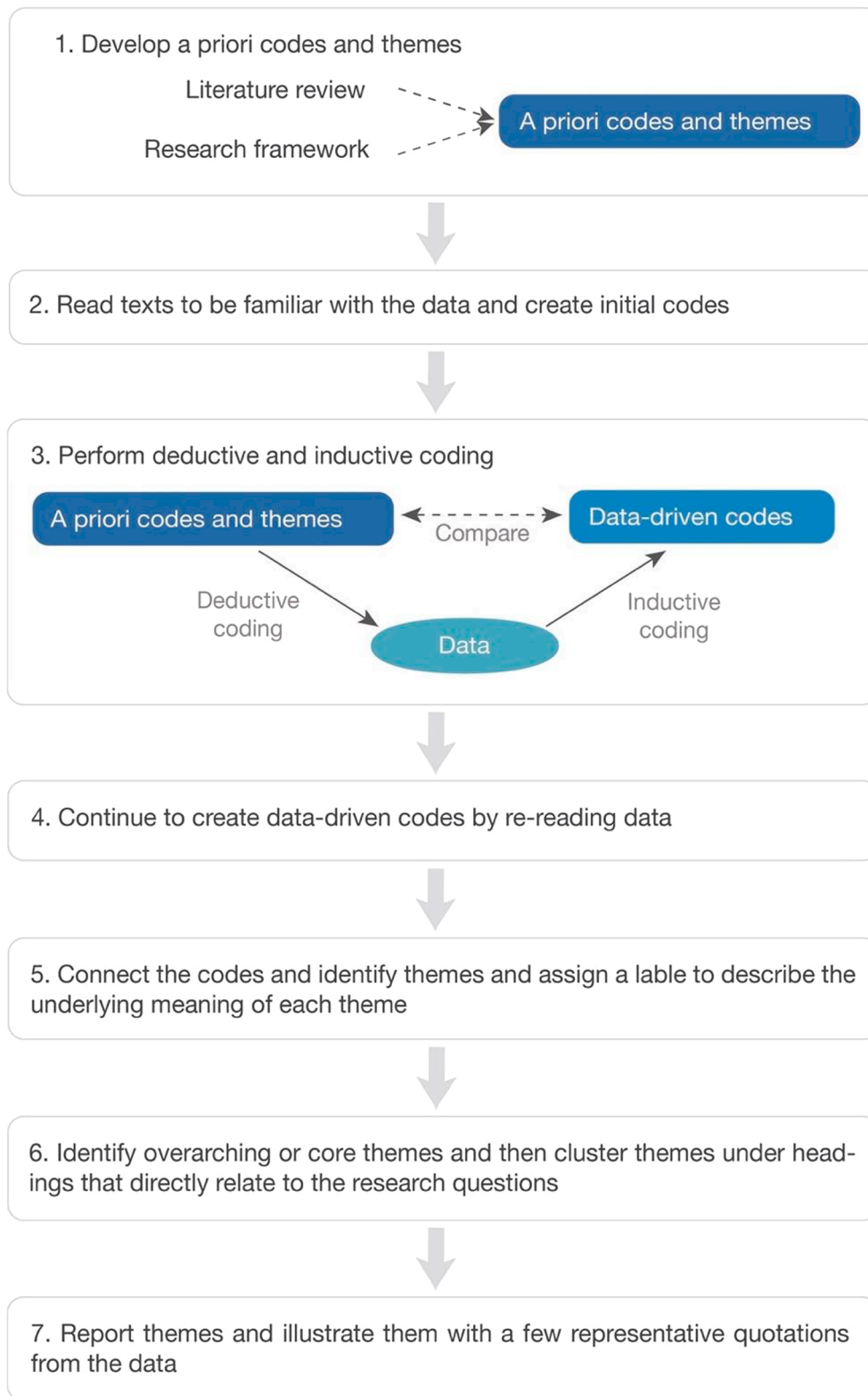


Fig. 2. Steps in the process of data analysis.

6.3. Reliability and validity

A main coder did the tasks of data coding and analysis, and three supervisors monitored the overall data analysis process to guarantee the validity and reliability of research results. Two concepts of dependability and auditability are used for testing reliability (Sekaran &

Bougie, 2013). Dependability, which signifies consistency and stability in measurements, was ensured by using research instruments throughout the six focus groups, including predefined questions for focus group discussion and four technologies of photo elicitation, free listing, ranking, and choosing among alternatives. Consistency and stability of research instruments were maintained, making the focus

group discussions replicable in the future. In addition, deductive coding (a priori codes and themes derived from the research framework) and inductive coding (codes and themes emerging from data) were used to ensure the reliability of the codes and themes identified in the data analysis process (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Auditability was ensured by recording focus group discussions and displaying a figure (Fig. 2) about data coding and analysis to provide sufficient information to support revealing and understanding the data collection and analysis processes (Appleton, 1995).

Validity was tested through three notions: descriptive validity, interpretive validity, and theoretical validity (Brewer, 2000). Descriptive validity was gained by transcribing recordings of six focus group discussions verbatim to offer a thorough description of the data collection process. Interpretive validity was ensured by repeating what participants had said to confirm their responses during focus group discussions and asking them to clarify or elaborate when a response was unclear or under further investigation. Furthermore, phrases used by participants in discussions were directly used for initial coding in the second step of data analysis process, helping stay as close to the actual accounts as possible and maximise interpretative validity (Maxwell, 1996). Theoretical validity was gained by adopting a research framework to guide designing questions for focus discussion, analysing data, and interpreting results. This research framework is built upon the S-O-R framework and literature review concerning potential problems with influencer marketing.

Other measures of validity were also adopted. Using open-ended questions in focus group discussions gives participants the opportunities to respond to questions in their own words to maximise validity (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). Two pilot studies were carried out to examine the predefined questions and tasks for discussion to ensure sufficient and high-quality data. Besides, quotations of participants' responses are used to report research findings. In doing so, the arguments made in connection with the data set can be rendered believable and credible (Thorne, 2000).

7. Results

7.1. Perceptions of SMIs' narrative strategies (RQ1)

Participants' perceptions of three SMIs' narrative strategies were understood via using a free listing task and a ranking task and the sequent discussions on each strategy. The results show that perceptions of narrative strategies ranged over several subjects, including the narrative strategy itself, SMIs' eWOM created using this narrative strategy, and brands or products recommended in the SMIs' eWOM. The most liked narrative strategy is self-identity construction, whilst the most disliked narrative strategy is brand love inspiration. Fig. 3 presents a summary of participants' perceptions of the three narrative strategies.

Self-identity construction is used by SMIs to link identities of brands and products with personal identities or personality traits in eWOM, thereby demonstrating the performance of brands and products for self-expression and identity constructions (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). SMIs usually associate the identities of themselves or celebrities with products or brands to build archetypes in their eWOM. More than half of the participants perceived this narrative strategy as helping them better understand the identities and positions of brands. However, several participants criticised this narrative strategy and showed a concern that the brand images and consumer groups could be defined and limited by the identity of archetypes in SMIs' eWOM. As one participant claimed: "Consumers' impressions of brands can be influenced and limited by identities of bloggers" (SH3-fp). Their purchase intention can be negatively influenced by the disliked endorsers. Therefore, this narrative strategy can encourage both positive and negative spillover effects of endorsers on consumers' attitudes towards the endorsed brands (Carrillat, d'Astous, & Christianis, 2014).

Moreover, several participants stated that they want to imitate the

outfits, styles, and brand selections of admired bloggers after reading their messages created by using this strategy. This consumer desire to imitate is suggested by Ki and Kim (2019) as the underlying mechanism for SMIs serving as taste leaders and opinion leaders influencing consumers to purchase their endorsed products, services, or brands. Also, these messages encouraged three participants to create a self-referencing association, which is about the behaviour of mentally relating their own identity to the product. Self-referencing narratives can create a self-product connection (Ardelet, Slavich, & De Kerviler, 2015) and leads to a persuasion process of narrative transportation that evokes consumer immersion into the content (Escalas, 2007). Besides, the other perceptions of this narrative strategy are about being effective in driving traffic to messages, enhancing brand awareness and brand liking, and making messages persuasive, attractive, and educational. Participants were motivated to read SMIs' eWOM messages and had a deep impression of these messages, and their purchase intention could be enhanced.

Brand love inspiration, which is the most disliked SMIs' narrative strategy, is used to demonstrate an intense fanship or worship of brands by SMIs or other reference groups (Kretz & De Valck, 2010). Participants' perceptions of this strategy present a striking contrast, ranging from extremely positive to extremely negative. Several participants argued that this narrative strategy highlights people's enthusiasm toward brands, arousing their interest in reading messages and curiosity about the brands and why people are passionate about them. This narrative strategy was also perceived as provocative to arouse readers' empathy. However, more than half of the participants argued that SMIs' messages show a lack of objectivity and an absence of logical reasons or arguments. A few participants also claimed that these messages are exaggerated, brainwashing, and stereotyping people.

Several participants claimed that this strategy could make them comply with others' opinions (Shaikh, Malik, Akram, & Chakrabarti, 2017). They stated that when making a product selection, if they are unsure about which is best, they might feel that following what the majority of people have brought is a safe option. One participant described her view vividly: "I think this strategy could easily lead consumers to jump on the bandwagon. For example, this message described the product as a must-have item for fashionable men. Then, some men who want to be fashionable would say 'wow, I want to buy it, I want to be stylish'..." (SH1-fp). Also, a few participants mentioned that this strategy could evoke their interests in the promoted brands, promote their acceptance of these brands, and encourage them to purchase.

Moreover, participants suggested that this strategy may be effective to target the dependent consumers who conform to others' brand attitudes and consumption behaviours. These consumers may intend to obtain a sense of relational connection or gain the reward of group acceptance (Mourali, Laroche, & Pons, 2005). It may not be useful for influencing independent consumers who refuse compliance behaviour or prefer logical arguments to emotional stimulation. Furthermore, they also suggested that this method could be making SMIs' eWOM to be attractive for the consumers whose emotions are easily affected by other people's moods and emotions, or by the situation at that moment. Therefore, consumers' cultural value and personalities can be moderators to the effectiveness of the brand love inspiration strategy.

Brand attribute evaluation is used by SMIs to show their judgment on the performance of products from certain perspectives. It was positively perceived by participants as making SMIs' eWOM contain efficient and detailed descriptions of products and logical arguments. With this strategy, SMIs' eWOM are practical for them to evaluate products and select alternatives, encouraging their message involvement and purchase intentions. As one participant said: "This strategy could be helpful for consumers who have particular purchase needs or potential purchase intentions to understand the attributes of a product. Bloggers can give useful suggestions to consumers through their comprehensive but focused evaluation of the characteristics and performances of this product. These messages are similar to product reviews given by bloggers" (SH3-fp). Conversely, a few

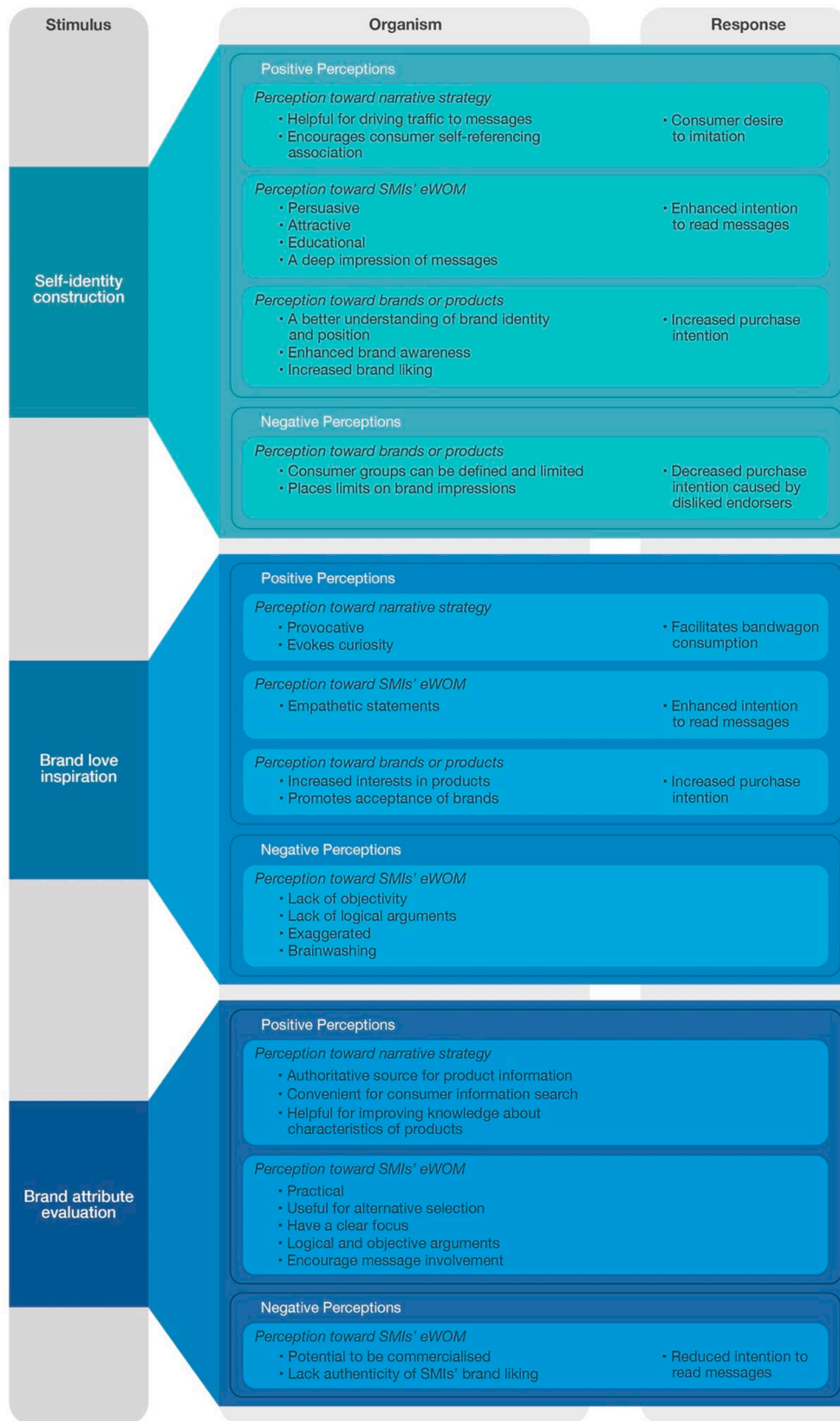


Fig. 3. Participants' perceptions of three SMIs' narrative strategies.

participants perceived the SMIs' eWOM created by using this narrative strategy as commercialised. As one participant claimed: "I feel that bloggers' brand liking is not authentic. These messages are just commercial promotions. Thus, I have a low interest in reading them" (SH3-fp). Several participants also expressed that the explicit promotional intent of these messages was unpleasant. This strategy can lead to SMIs' eWOM raising consumers' suspicion of the authenticity of SMIs' brand liking and the possibility of SMIs being involved in a commercial relationship with the recommended brands.

Furthermore, the purpose of SMIs' eWOM is to persuade consumers to accept the opinions and claims displayed in eWOM to stimulate information adoption (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). An exploration of consumer perceived persuasive attempts and persuasive strength of SMIs' narrative strategies could help understand the capability of narrative strategies for cultural adaptation and persuading Chinese luxury consumers. Participants were asked about which narrative strategies have explicit persuasive intent. The most voted narrative strategies were brand love inspiration and brand attribute evaluation. Surprisingly, when participants were asked to select the most persuasive narrative strategies in their mind, the most chosen narrative strategy was self-identity construction. The findings show that overtly persuasive SMIs' eWOM messages, such as the messages created by using brand love inspiration and brand attribute evaluation, could evoke consumers' resistance to persuasion. Thus, SMIs should use these two strategies in a way of diluting persuasive intents.

7.2. Perceptions toward capabilities of SMIs' narrative strategies to deal with the three issues

7.2.1. Break culture barriers (RQ2)

At first, a task of choosing among alternatives was used to stimulate participants' perceptions concerning the attractive meanings of Western luxury brands. Their responses and following discussion revealed that, for most participants, the preferred luxury brand meanings are individualised meanings rather than social meanings. This finding is interesting, as it draws a difference from previous studies' findings, which indicated that Chinese luxury consumers have an intense desire for symbolic meanings for socialising and showing off (Zhan & He, 2012). However, more participants in Chengdu reported a preference for social meanings than their counterparts in Shanghai. Hence, the extent of cultural diversity in the city of residence influences Chinese consumer adoption of cultural values and leads to differences in Chinese luxury consumption behaviours. Table 7 displays a summary of the perceptions of the two types of luxury brand meanings.

Social meaning refers to the conventionally shared symbolic meaning of luxury brands by social groups, such as Weibo or WeChat users or brand communities, or cultural groups such as hip-hop fashion followers. Social meaning is perceived as helping to reduce the uncertainty consumers may feel towards purchasing a product. One respondent highlighted the capability of such meanings for product differentiation: "It is more helpful for differentiating this bag from others" (CD3-fp). She also mentioned that these meanings were helpful for her to reference public evaluations on products or brands when making a purchase decision: "Taking this dress as an example, what are the public evaluations on its performance? Is it the one I want to own? Or whether my evaluation of it is consistent with mass opinions?" (CD3-fp). Another participant indicated his belief in the reliability of public preferences for products: "After all, mass opinions are more important and reliable than individual feelings. I feel like I won't go wrong if I buy this product" (SH3-mp). There are several potential reasons for participants taking the meanings derived from social groups into consideration when evaluating products. From a cultural perspective, China's collectivistic cultures promote consumers to structure their judgments in the light of group norms (Zhan & He, 2012). From a consumer behaviour perspective, consumers are likely to accept symbolic meanings given by reference groups to satisfy their need for psychological association with these groups (Escalas & Bettman,

Table 7

Participants' perceptions of social and individualised meanings attached to luxury brands.

Social meanings of luxury brands		
Categories of perceptions	Perceptions	
Positive perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helpful for product differentiation • Referencing public preferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinguishing a product from others • Taking public evaluation into consideration • It's always right to follow public opinions • Particular meanings are acceptable
Negative perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conditional • Dedicated • Repugnant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a specific and clear focus • Leading to antagonistic sentiments • Strong feelings of boring and disgust
Individualised meanings of luxury brands		
Categories of perceptions	Perceptions	
Positive perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meanings from consumers arouse interest • Desired • Important for making purchase decision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like to read the experiences from other consumers • Desire to read and learn about • Need to read these meanings to make a purchase decision
Negative perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indifferent • Inapplicable to self 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalised meanings don't matter to me • Individualised feeling and opinions may be not applicable to me

2005). Also, this participants' perception can be linked with the collective luxury consumption behaviour that signifies consumers purchasing certain luxury products since these are very popular among the masses, regardless of their beliefs (Shaikh et al., 2017).

By contrast, one participant had an intense feeling of disgust and antagonistic sentiments toward social meanings of luxury brands. She stated that: "I don't like to give labels to products or people. You described this product as being 'the hottest selling item in China', and thus, I don't want to buy it any more" (CD1-fp). This participant may have an independent orientation and is unlikely to conform to group norms (Shaikh et al., 2017). Similarly, one respondent expressed her feeling of dislike towards the meanings that encourage conformity behaviours: "I actually think that this type of meanings is not bad, for example, 'niche and chic', and 'the item that can be matched with anything'. I feel that these terms are acceptable. But I don't like other terms like 'the hottest style online'. Haha, my perception is based on the words and phrases they used to interpret the meanings" (CD2-fp). Therefore, SMIs should carefully interpret the social meanings as mass accepted meanings to signify the features, benefits, and distinctiveness of brands rather than persuading consumer conformity.

Unlike social meanings derived from social groups, individualised meanings are about subjective meanings that a luxury brand holds for a particular individual. All the three SMIs' narrative strategies could help to interpret the individualised luxury brand meanings to consumers. One participant indicated her interest was aroused by the meanings derived from other consumers. Also, one participant expressed her desire for individualised meanings about products, regarding these meanings as those "I most want to read and learn about" (CD1-fp). Another respondent claimed that: "I really need to read the personalised meanings given by others to decide whether or not to buy this product" (CD1-fp). Besides, several participants thought that individualised meanings might be less referential for themselves rather than having strong feelings of dislike toward these meanings. One participant elucidated that she was indifferent to these meanings: "It is merely about his own opinions and personalised information" (SH2-fp). Another participant also showed her concern about this by saying: "These words are about the fashion blogger's

own feelings and evaluations, which may apply to himself but not to me” (SH3-fp).

The subsequent participants’ discussion is about perceptions toward narrative strategies’ capabilities to convey self-expressive value and social value of luxury brands to them. To target Chinese consumers who give significance to self-related values of luxury goods, SMIs should tailor their eWOM to encourage personal connection with the recommended brand. Accordingly, participants were asked to select the narrative strategies that stimulate the connection between their self-concept and brand images. The most chosen narrative strategies were self-identity construction. This narrative strategy highlights brands or products’ contributions to identity construction and self-defining behaviour, facilitating participants mentally picturing themselves relative to the recommended product in SMIs’ messages. Then participants were asked to choose the SMIs’ narrative strategies that help signal achievement and social status and affirm community membership. The most preferred narrative strategies are brand love inspiration and self-identity construction.

To succeed in influencer marketing campaigns in China’s luxury market, it is necessary to convey the globally standardised brand identity and positions to consumers and maintain consistency of brand image in SMIs’ eWOM. Thus, the second part of participants’ discussion presents two main themes regarding participants’ perceptions toward the capabilities of narrative strategies to maintain consistent international luxury brand images. Participants were asked about which narrative strategies could be perceived as capable of representing the image and position of luxury brands in bloggers’ messages. The most mentioned narrative strategy was self-identity construction. Then the moderator asked participants about which narrative strategies could change their impressions of Western luxury brands’ images instead of directly asking them about perceptions of narrative strategies that could maintain consistency in luxury brands’ images. Some participants claimed that brand love inspiration and brand attribute evaluation could exert negative changes in their impressions of luxury brands’ images, whereas self-identity construction positively changed their impressions and improved their understanding about luxury brands’ images. Thus, according to participants’ responses, self-identity construction can help maintain consistency in luxury brands’ images.

To summarise, the findings suggest that self-identity construction is the most compelling narrative strategy for breaking cultural barriers in SMIs’ eWOM. Participants’ perceptions show that this narrative strategy has the repertoire to deal with the issues used as measures for the capability to break cultural barriers, including interpreting the preferred luxury brand meanings, conveying social values of luxury brands, stimulating linking self-concept with brand images, portraying luxury brands’ identities and positions, and maintaining consistency in luxury brands’ images. Therefore, self-identity construction can connect Western luxury brand identities to the cultural values and ideology of Chinese consumers. This capability supports the role of SMIs as cultural intermediaries to transform the meanings of luxury brands into socially and culturally adjusted meanings for the consumers in a particular market (Delisle & Parmentier, 2016).

Table 8
Participants’ perceptions of commercial elements in SMIs’ eWOM.

	Main categories of perceptions	Categories of perceptions	Perceptions
Positive perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions toward commercial elements • Perceptions toward SMIs’ eWOM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful • Convenient • Acceptable • Authentic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful for making a purchase • Good to know • Saving time for information search • Getting used to being surrounded by advertising in daily life • A channel for acquiring information • Making the message to be authentic
Negative perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions toward brands or products • Perceptions toward SMIs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased expectation on products • Negative impression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectation on the product is declined • Generating a bad impression of the blogger • Declined good impression of the blogger

7.2.2. Resolve commercial–personal tension in SMIs’ eWOM (RQ3)

Photo elicitation was adopted to evoke participants’ thoughts and perceptions about the value of three SMIs’ narrative strategies to smooth the tension in commercial and personal content in SMIs’ eWOM. The first step explored participants’ perceptions of the commercial elements in bloggers’ messages, including prices, giveaways, discount codes, competitions, and purchase links. Their discussions ranged over several subjects, such as the issues being questioned, SMIs, eWOM, brands, and products. A summary of participants’ perceptions about this issue is shown in Table 8.

Participants’ perceptions reveal that commercial elements would not lead to consumers’ negative attitude toward eWOM or negatively affect consumers’ willingness to purchase the recommended products. Interestingly, most of them stated that commercial elements are acceptable because they want to know the information concerning the purchase of luxury brands, such as price, discounts, purchase links, or store locations. These pieces of information can help them make price comparisons and sequential purchasing behaviour. SMIs embedding commercial elements in eWOM could save their time to search for similar information. One respondent indicated that getting used to being surrounded by advertising in daily life is a reason for being comfortable with commercial content. As he stated: “Because we normally receive too many advertisements on the phone. Thus I feel that this sort of content is acceptable” (SH3-mp).

Another participant conveyed her positive attitude toward commercial information in bloggers’ messages, even though she might not pay attention to it. She said: “This (messages containing commercial elements) is acceptable because I read bloggers’ posts merely for obtaining information about products. I probably would not click the hyperlink provided by him. But, I would not have negative feelings about the product recommended in his post even if I find this post has been commercialised” (CD2-fp). These positive perceptions contrast to Western studies, which suggest that commercial content in SMIs’ eWOM could reduce the persuasive effect of messages on consumer brand attitudes and purchase behaviour (Halvorsen et al., 2013; Pihl & Sandström, 2013; Boerman et al., 2017). However, these perceptions are in line with McKinsey & Company’s (2017) descriptions of Chinese luxury consumption behaviour, which include price sensitivity and awareness of price gaps in different markets, and needing reassurance about luxury products quality, authenticity and price. Also, several participants claimed that the commercial elements in SMIs’ eWOM may make them feel that these messages are created genuinely and honestly and therefore worthy of belief. Thus, commercial elements may somewhat enhance the credibility of SMIs’ eWOM.

There are still somewhat negative participant perceptions about SMIs and products, including decreased expectations on products and a negative impression of SMIs. One participant mentioned that his expectation of the recommended product was downgraded after being aware of the commercial content: “When I read a blogger’s message, if I think the introduced product is okay and then I realise that it is an advertisement, my expectation of it decreases” (SH3-mp). These negative perceptions show that Chinese consumers’ high and positive expectations

on products could be lowered after realising the commercial content in SMIs' eWOM. They may doubt that SMIs' positive eWOM about the products is created due to brands' sponsorship.

Next, participants discussed how to recognise commercial content. Many participants stated that sometimes they could not realise whether the price and purchase links shown in bloggers' messages are commercialised contents, or derived from bloggers' personal experiences and the desire to share useful information with readers. This finding is similar to the argument in Western studies that it could be difficult for consumers to distinguish commercial content from personal content in bloggers' messages (Boerman et al., 2017). The ways used by participants to separate the commercial content from personal content are looking for personal experiences depicted in bloggers' messages and recognising the writing style used by bloggers. The descriptions about personal experiences with products and the sentences written in a colloquial style would be considered as personal content.

In the third step, participants were encouraged to discuss their perceptions about the narrative strategies that could smooth commercial–personal tensions in bloggers' eWOM. They mentioned that brand attribute evaluation has such potential. This finding is interesting, as this narrative strategy was negatively perceived as potentially commercialised. According to their discussions on other relevant topics such as sponsorship disclosure, this narrative strategy may make commercial elements in bloggers' messages reasonable. Thus, they may have a tolerant attitude towards commercial content and read it to fulfil a purpose of information seeking, thereby having positive perceptions of commercial information, as elucidated in the preceding section.

7.2.3. Mitigate negative perceptions about sponsorship disclosure (RQ4)

Participants were informed about China's regulation on revealing a paid partnership between bloggers and the sponsoring brand, and questioned their perceptions of such disclosure in SMIs' eWOM. Contrary to the findings from prior studies, most participants considered sponsorship disclosure acceptable, except for four participants who had negative feelings about it. Their perceptions are displayed in Table 9.

Some participants stated that it was acceptable and understandable for them that bloggers receive materials in exchange for promoting products on their blogs, especially those bloggers who make a living from blogging. As one participant elucidated: "I think it is acceptable. The income of a blogger comes from building a large fan base, catching great attention, and collaborating with brands" (SH3-fp). Several participants mentioned that sponsorship disclosure could evoke their rational thinking. One participant said: "If he indicates the paid partnership with other parties in his message, I will use rational thinking when reading these messages" (SH3-fp). Another participant supported this claim by saying: "Because this message provides the information I need, disclosing sponsorship makes me read this message rationally, rather than blindly following his recommendation". For other participants, sponsorship disclosure made SMIs' messages more truthful as they honestly reveal the sponsorship, so they are not trying to mislead or cheat them.

However, four participants had negative perceptions relating to sponsorship disclosure, eWOM, and SMIs. For one participant,

sponsorship disclosure was non-acceptable, and it could have a potentially negative effect on product purchase. As he stated: "I am indifferent to this message because it is just an advertisement...I mean, you may think that disclosing sponsorship is good and transparent. However, it may have a negative effect when you read the message to help you to make a purchase decision" (SH1-mp). For the rest of them, revealing a paid partnership would make them have negative impressions of these bloggers, and they would be less willing to read the sponsored message after recognising it as advertising. When researchers asked them about the reasons for their negative perceptions, one participant responded: "As followers normally expect that bloggers can provide some useful information derived from their own viewpoint, rather than commercialised information" (SH3-fp).

Participants' perceptions reveal that sponsorship disclosure in SMIs' eWOM seems to be acceptable to Chinese consumers. This finding is different from consumers' negative perceptions of sponsorship disclosure found in Korea (Hwang & Jeong, 2016) and the Netherlands (Boerman et al., 2017). Participants argued that sponsorship disclosure could make SMIs' eWOM more authentic and provoke rational thoughts about the message content. Also, even if some consumers' negative perceptions about sponsorship disclosure are evident, yet no negative perceptions toward sponsors, brands, or products introduced in SMIs' sponsored eWOM were found.

Participants were then asked to choose the narrative strategies capable of making sponsorship disclosure in bloggers' eWOM more acceptable. The most selected narrative strategies were brand attribute evaluation and self-identity construction. This finding challenges the suggestion by Audrezet et al. (2020) that the optimal solution for SMIs to manage authenticity of content is to express their passion for the endorsed brand when their commercial partnership with this brand is transparent in their eWOM. The findings of present research indicate that brand love inspiration, which is used by SMIs to express worship and passion for the recommended brands, may not be useful for making sponsorship transparency acceptable to consumers.

8. Discussion

Brands and SMIs should be well prepared to embrace the challenges and opportunities brought about by influencer marketing. SMIs can influence consumers by distributing eWOM and develop and maintain close relationships with consumers (Enke & Borchers, 2019). However, there are potential risks of losing their eWOM effects, such as over-commercialised content and sponsorship disclosure in their eWOM (Halvorsen et al., 2013; Boerman et al., 2017). To provide insights into this area, this research explored the value of three SMIs' narrative strategies, brand attribute evaluation, brand love inspiration, and self-identity construction, to overcome potential issues with influencer marketing.

A matrix checklist (Fig. 4) is given to illustrate consumer perceptions of the three narrative strategies and their capabilities for dealing with the issues of breaking cultural barriers, releasing commercial–personal tension, and reducing the negative influence of sponsorship disclosure. The results reveal that self-identity construction could break cultural

Table 9
Participants' perceptions of sponsorship disclosure in SMIs' eWOM.

	Main categories of perceptions	Categories of Perceptions	Perceptions
Positive perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions toward sponsorship disclosure • Perceptions toward SMIs' eWOM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptable and understandable • Encourage rational thinking • Truthful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sponsorship is a source of SMIs' income • Read the commercialised information more rationally and objectively. • Makes the messages more truthful
Negative perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions toward sponsorship disclosure • Perceptions toward SMIs' eWOM • Perceptions toward SMIs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-acceptable • Decreased reading motivation • Negative impression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential negative effect on product purchase • Reduced intention to read sponsored messages • A bad impression of sponsored blogger

Themes	Brand love inspiration	Brand attribute evaluation	Self-identity construction
The most liked SMIs' narrative strategies			●
The most disliked SMIs' narrative strategies	●		
The SMIs' narrative strategies with explicit persuasive intent	●	●	
The most persuasive SMIs' narrative strategy			●
Capability to interpret attractive meanings attached to luxury brands	●	●	●
Capability to convey social value of luxury brands	●		●
Capability to deliver self-expressive value of luxury brands			●
Capability to portray luxury brands' identities and positions			●
Capability to maintain consistency in luxury brands' images			●
Capability to balance commercial–personal tension		●	
Capability to mitigate negative responses toward sponsorship disclosure		●	●

Fig. 4. A matrix checklist of participants' perceptions of the value of SMIs' narrative strategies.

barriers to interpret consumer preferred luxury brand meanings, convey consumer desired values of luxury brands, portray luxury brands' identities and positions, and maintain consistency in luxury brands' images. Moreover, brand attribute evaluation may help balance commercial–personal tensions. It can make commercial elements in SMIs' eWOM reasonable to consumers and evoke consumers' tolerant attitude towards commercial content, thereby making consumers read SMIs' eWOM to seek information about purchasing luxury brands. Finally, negative perceptions about sponsorship disclosure could be diluted by

using brand attribute evaluation and self-identity construction.

Fig. 5 shows a conceptual model to illustrate the potential factors that moderate SMIs' narrative strategies' contributions to resolving influencer marketing issues. Cultural values can be a significant factor affecting the effectiveness of SMIs' narrative strategy. This study looks into China's luxury market context where the consumers hold deep-rooted collectivist cultural values and diversified modern Western cultural values (Zhan & He, 2012). As displayed by the striking contrasted consumers' perceptions toward the narrative strategy of brand love

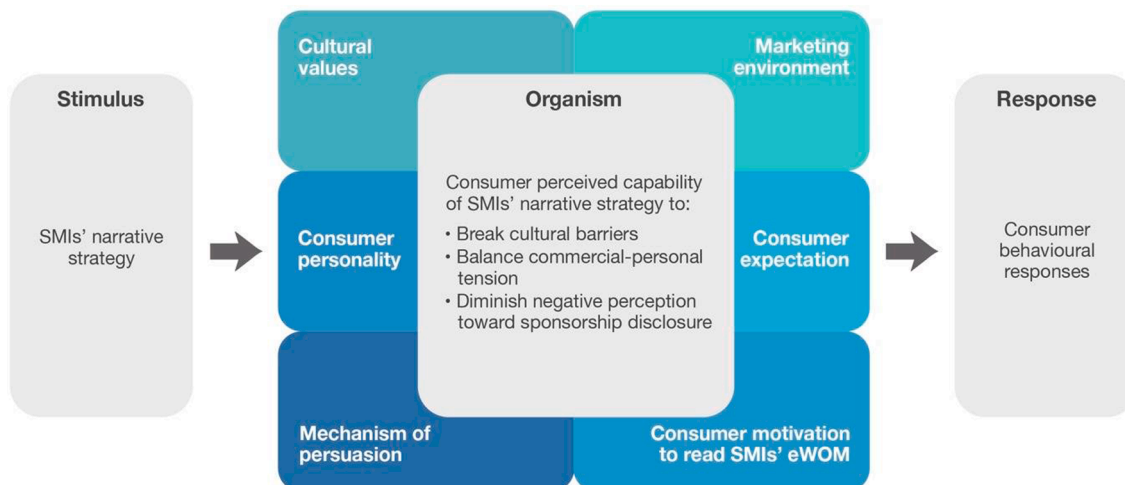


Fig. 5. Potential factors influence the value of SMIs' narrative strategies to overcome issues with influencer marketing.

inspiration, consumers with different cultural values can have extremely positive or extremely negative perceptions toward this strategy. Consumer perception of this strategy also highlights the role of consumer personality in influencing the strategy’s effectiveness, as displayed in Fig. 5. In the group discussions, consumers analysed the personalities making people be attracted to SMIs’ eWOM created using brand love

inspiration.

Another influential factor is consumer expectation. According to consumer perceptions, when they hold high and positive expectations of the recommended product and SMIs, their expectations can be downgraded by the commercial element and sponsorship disclosure in SMIs’ eWOM. These decreased expectations may result in consumer scepticism

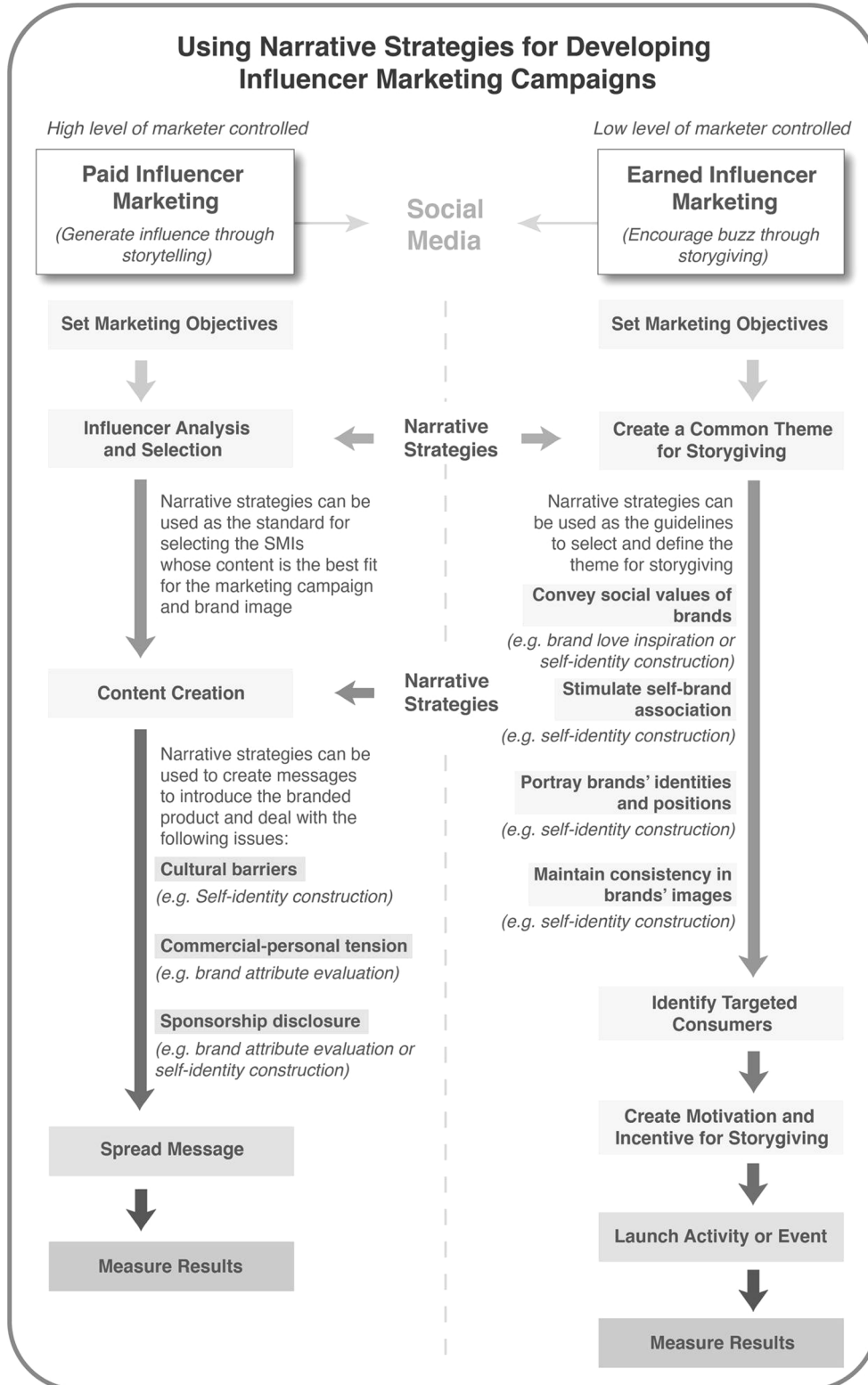


Fig. 6. Conceptual model of using narrative strategies to cultivate influencer marketing.

of the authenticity of SMIs' positive eWOM and a reduced intention to read SMIs' eWOM. Besides, consumers' motivation to read SMIs' eWOM and marketing environment can also affect their perceptions of commercial elements and sponsorship disclosure. The commercial elements in SMIs' eWOM, such as price, discounts, and purchase links, can be positively perceived by consumers when they read SMIs' eWOM for brand information acquisition. A marketing environment of the prevalence of commercial advertising in consumers' daily lives can make consumers tolerant and comfortable with commercial content.

The underlying mechanism of persuasion needs to be considered when harnessing the value of SMIs' narrative strategies for breaking cultural barriers. This study found that the most liked self-identity construction strategy can persuade purchase intention by evoking a mechanism of consumer desire to imitate (Ki & Kim, 2019). In contrast, the most disliked brand love inspiration strategy was criticised by consumers as projecting an intense persuasive intent to stimulate consumer conformity. Consumers demonstrated a desire for SMIs' logical argument on their brand love. Similarly, for SMIs interpreting social meanings to them, consumers showed their preference to the meanings presenting the features, benefits, and distinctiveness of brands rather than the meanings encouraging conformity. Also, in terms of perception toward sponsorship disclosure, consumers mentioned that their rational thinking could be stimulated by sponsorship disclosure. Accordingly, SMIs should adopt logical reasoning in arguments to create their eWOM when their commercial partnership with brands is revealed.

Based on the findings of this research, a conceptual model (Fig. 6) is created to demonstrate how to use SMIs' narrative strategies for cultivating two types of influencer marketing: paid influencer marketing and earned influencer marketing. SMIs' narrative strategies could be used for the most significant steps in the preparation stage of these two marketing campaigns.

Paid influencer marketing, which is a high-level of marketer-controlled campaigns, aims to collaborate with SMIs to create and spread content about a brand or new product to shape consumers' attitudes and influence their behaviours (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). After setting marketing objectives, selecting SMIs and producing creative content could be essential for the initial stage of a paid influencer marketing campaign (Kozinets et al., 2010; Audrezet et al., 2020). This study suggests that narrative strategies may help in these two steps. First, marketers may use narrative strategies as standards for content and structure in their analysis and selection of SMIs, thereby choosing the one whose content is the best fit for the marketing campaign and brand image. For instance, marketers may consider that the messages created by using self-identity construction are appropriate for a campaign. Thus, they can select the SMIs who are proficient at using this narrative strategy. Marketers may also use narrative strategies as structures to measure SMIs' content to choose the one who can create the content that is ideal for their campaign.

Second, marketers can collaborate with the selected SMIs to use narrative strategies as guidelines for creating eWOM. In this way, narrative strategies can also help deal with the potential issues surrounding the marketing campaign, such as cultural barriers, commercial–personal tension in eWOM, and sponsorship disclosure. For example, the findings from this study indicate that self-identity construction may be useful for breaking cultural barriers. Brand attribute evaluation may help balance commercial–personal tension. Negative perceptions of sponsorship disclosure can be mitigated by brand attribute evaluation and self-identity construction.

Narrative strategies can also be used to create a common theme for developing earned influencer marketing in the process of story-giving, thereby targeting and attracting the SMIs who do not receive compensation to promote brands. Story-giving changes the narrative from the brand's perspective to that of consumers, offering brands the opportunity to co-create brand images with consumers by soliciting them to share their narratives and personal brand stories on social media (Hughes et al., 2016). A buzz could be generated because of the high

credibility of consumer-generated content, making story-giving more engaging and compelling (Hewett, Rand, Rust, & van Heerde, 2016). Although it is impossible to control the interaction and conversations among consumers, story-giving ensures that marketers do not have to relinquish control of consumers' information creation completely. Marketers can create a common theme for consumers' stories (Hughes et al., 2016). This is the step in which narrative strategies could be useful.

Narrative strategies can be referenced and adopted as guidelines for selecting and defining the theme for consumer-generated stories. For instance, marketers can adopt brand love inspiration to create the topic, such as sharing personal experiences of purchasing a particular brand to express fandom in a meaningful way. With a well-defined theme to encourage buzz on social media, consumers and SMIs may be attracted by the story-giving activity and proactively start conversations about it. Moreover, the purposes of conducting story-giving activities may be raising consumer attention to a brand and co-creation of brand meanings without diluting the established brand image in the process (Hughes et al., 2016). Accordingly, this research suggests that the common theme defined for a story-giving activity should signify the social values of a brand, stimulate self-brand association, represent the brand's identity and position, and maintain consistency in the brand image. Narrative strategies could help achieve these goals, as evidenced in the research results.

To summarise, this model shows the capacity and approaches of narrative strategies to benefit influencer marketing on social media. Narrative strategies could be useful for selecting SMIs and creating content in the development of paid influencer marketing campaigns, and creating a common theme for earned influencer marketing in the process of story-giving. Specific types of narrative strategies displayed in the model were recommended based on the findings of this study, which indicates Chinese consumers' positive perceptions toward SMIs' narrative strategies for creating eWOM about luxury brands. They can be changed when this model is used for informing influencer marketing conducted to promote other product categories or in different cultural contexts.

9. Implications, limitations, and future research

9.1. Theoretical implications

This study contributes to influencer marketing literature (Taylor, 2020) by shedding light on resolving potential influencer marketing problems. First, this study theorises the value of SMIs' narrative strategies to overcome content creation issues in influencer marketing. Prior literature has acknowledged that lack of control over content creation, commercialised content, and sponsorship disclosure in SMIs eWOM can lead to negative consumer responses (Enke & Borchers, 2019; De Cicco et al., 2020; Audrezet et al., 2020). However, the approach to cope with these challenges to diminish potential negative consumer responses is underexplored. This research fills this gap and finds that SMIs' narrative strategies can help break cultural barriers, balance commercial–personal tension, and mitigate negative consumer perceptions of sponsorship disclosure in SMIs' eWOM. By discussing research findings, a conceptual model (Fig. 6) is developed to illustrate the ways to use SMIs' narrative strategies in developing two types of influencer marketing: paid influencer marketing and earned influencer marketing.

Second, this research is one of the first attempts to take an international perspective to explore overcoming influencer marketing issues to target foreign markets. This research answers the call for further research on the methods to develop influencer marketing to overcome challenges brought by cultural differences (Dwivedi et al., 2020). Based on the literature review, this research suggests four factors to examine the capability of SMIs' narrative strategies to cope with cultural differences: a). interpret local consumers' preferred brand meanings, b). deliver local consumers' desired values of brands, c). portray an

international brand identity and position, and d). maintain consistency in brand images. Also, research findings demonstrate six potential factors (Fig. 5) that could influence the effectiveness of SMIs’ narrative strategies in a marketplace, including cultural values, marketing environment, consumer personality, consumer expectation, mechanism of persuasion, and consumer motivation to read SMIs’ eWOM.

The third contribution of this research is to respond to the call for further research adopting the S-O-R framework to explore the influencing factors and consumer reactions to SMIs endorsed promotional activities (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Previously, the understanding of consumer responses to influencer marketing mainly was obtained from quantitative approaches. By adopting the S-O-R framework in a qualitative approach, this research obtains a more in-depth understanding of consumer responses to the surrounding factors interacting with influencer marketing and further insights into the underlying reasons for their responses.

9.2. Practical implications

This research provides implications for SMIs using narrative strategies to create eWOM, and for marketers using narrative strategies to develop influencer marketing on social media. When SMIs cooperate with brands in marketing activities, brand attribute evaluation can mitigate SMIs’ concern about their eWOM being over-commercialised. Besides, the self-identity construction and brand attribute evaluation strategies can reduce consumers’ negative perception of sponsorship disclosure in their eWOM. In the new era of networked co-production of brand meanings, influencer marketing campaigns need careful cultivation of the right language and points framed with the most appropriate narrative strategies. This research has specific implications for brands harnessing the value of narrative strategies in developing two types of influencer marketing activities, thereby maintaining or enhancing control over SMIs-created content and resolving potential problems with influencer marketing.

9.3. Limitations and future research

The limitations of this research relate to the cultural context, the methodology used, and the product category adopted for the research design. This research used a qualitative focus groups method to explore consumers’ perceptions. Thus, further research could use a quantitative approach to investigate how consumers respond to and internalise SMIs’ eWOM framed with the three narrative strategies. Moreover, this research identified six factors that could moderate the contributions of SMIs’ narrative strategies to overcome the three potential issues with influencer marketing. Further research can quantitatively test these moderator effects to develop theoretical understandings on this area.

Appendix A. Demographic information of focus group participants

Focus group SH1 (Total participants: 8)			
Participants	Gender	Age	Occupation
SH1-fp	Female	34	Office clerk
SH1-mp	Male	24	Student
SH1-mp	Male	24	Sales agent
SH1-mp	Male	28	Sales agent
SH1-fp	Female	23	Student
SH1-fp	Female	23	Urban planning designer
SH1-fp	Female	25	Sales agent
SH1-fp	Female	23	Student
Focus group SH2 (Total participants: 8)			
Participants	Gender	Age	Occupation
SH2-fp	Female	30	Purchasing agent
SH2-fp	Female	35	Office clerk

(continued on next page)

An interesting finding from this research revealed that, for Chinese luxury consumers, the most liked luxury brands’ meanings discussed in SMIs’ eWOM are individualised meanings, which is different from the statements in prior studies that Chinese luxury consumers highly value social and symbolic meanings. Further research can examine this finding quantitatively to understand whether it is generalisable to the broader population. Besides, this research found that commercial elements may somewhat enhance the credibility of SMIs’ eWOM, and sponsorship disclosure may make SMIs’ eWOM more authentic and provoke cognitive thoughts about the eWOM content. Further research can quantitatively examine the relationships between commercial contents or sponsorship disclosure in SMIs’ eWOM and Chinese consumers’ perceived credibility and authenticity of SMIs’ eWOM.

Moreover, this research develops a conceptual model (Fig. 6) to show the approaches to utilise SMIs’ narrative strategies to cultivate influencer marketing campaigns. Further research can use it to explore the implication of SMIs’ narrative strategies for developing influencer marketing concerning different product categories or in other cultural contexts. Further research can firstly identify the narrative strategies used by SMIs as inquiry and then examine how these narrative strategies are perceived by consumers in the local market by using the items listed in this model. In so doing, the narrative strategies that could be effective for their influencer marketing campaigns could be understood.

10. Conclusion

This research explored the capabilities of SMIs’ narrative strategies to deal with issues surrounding influencer marketing, such as breaking cultural barriers, balancing commercial–personal tension in SMIs’ eWOM, and mitigating negative perceptions of sponsorship disclosure. A conceptual model was created to illustrate approaches to using narrative strategies to develop two influencer marketing campaigns: high-level marketer controlled paid influencer marketing and low-level marketer controlled earned influencer marketing. This model can contribute to both the theory and practice about the value and use of SMIs’ narrative strategies for influencer marketing.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

(continued)

Focus group SH1 (Total participants: 8)			
Participants	Gender	Age	Occupation
SH2-fp	Female	27	International trade sales
SH2-mp	Male	37	Sales executive
SH2-fp	Female	29	Purchasing agent
SH2-fp	Female	23	Game planner
SH2-mp	Male	27	Freelance
SH2-fp	Female	25	Purchasing agent
Focus group SH3 (Total participants: 10)			
Participants	Gender	Age	Occupation
SH3-fp	Female	22	Student
SH3-mp	Male	24	Student
SH3-fp	Female	24	Student
SH3-fp	Female	28	Recruitment consultant
SH3-mp	Male	27	Sales agent
SH3-fp	Female	22	Public relations
SH3-fp	Female	24	Student
SH3-mp	Male	23	Student
SH3-fp	Female	23	Student
SH3-fp	Female	36	Teacher
Focus group CD1 (Total participants: 8)			
Participants	Gender	Age	Occupation
CD1-mp	Male	28	Sales executive
CD1-fp	Female	33	Hotel manager
CD1-fp	Female	20	Student
CD1-mp	Male	24	Office clerk
CD1-fp	Female	26	Office clerk
CD1-fp	Female	21	Student
CD1-mp	Male	25	Waiter
CD1-fp	Female	28	Office clerk
Focus group CD2 (Total participants: 10)			
Participants	Gender	Age	Occupation
CD2-fp	Female	26	Auditor
CD2-mp	Male	25	Investment company manager
CD2-fp	Female	23	Financer
CD2-fp	Female	24	Teacher
CD2-mp	Male	27	Game designer
CD2-mp	Male	26	Civil servant
CD2-fp	Female	26	Teacher
CD2-fp	Female	25	Teacher
CD2-fp	Female	27	Teacher
CD2-fp	Female	30	Teacher
Focus group CD3 (Total participants: 9)			
Participants	Gender	Age	Occupation
CD3-fp	Female	23	International trade sales
CD3-mp	Male	23	Teacher
CD3-fp	Female	28	Budget analyst
CD3-mp	Male	31	Freelance
CD3-fp	Female	25	Consultant
CD3-fp	Female	27	Consultant
CD3-fp	Female	26	Real estate company planner
CD3-fp	Female	28	Consultant
CD3-fp	Female	26	Office clerk

Appendix B. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.05.011>.

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