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Narratives of Italian craftsmanship and the luxury fashion industry: representations of Italianicity in discourses of production

ABSTRACT

In the last few years many luxury fashion labels like Gucci have emphasized, in their communication, the various types of craftsmanship involved in the creation of their pieces as a mean of providing history and additional value to their products. This article investigates this phenomenon with a specific focus on issues of national identity and 'Italianicity' (Barthes 1977). Firstly, the different strategies concerning representations of craftsmanship in discourses of production that are employed by Italian luxury fashion labels are examined. This phenomenon is investigated through a series of case studies with the aim of identifying situations of dialogue and contradiction between the strategies employed. Moreover, the article examines how both the celebration of Italian handmade craftsmanship in fashion and issues of technological developments are addressed in the discourses of production of luxury fashion goods. Also, the history of the Italian fashion system and its distinctive traits will be considered in this respect. However, narratives of Italian craftsmanship are not only present in the communication of Italian luxury fashion labels examined here. References to craftsmanship 'made in Italy' also features in the discourses of production employed by non-Italian luxury fashion brands like Marc Jacobs. In this respect, this article considers how Italian craftsmanship is strictly intertwined with connotations of quality, arguing that it can be productively employed by luxury fashion labels both to provide additional value to products and, more broadly, to enhance the reputation of their brands. Moreover, it is argued that luxury fashion labels do not merely capitalize on ideas of Italianicity that are already present but instead contribute, in an ongoing process, to re-create them through narratives that emphasize certain values associated with them. In this sense, the Italian luxury fashion labels examined here also contribute to reinforce the positive image of their brands.

Keywords: luxury fashion, craftsmanship, branding, Italianicity, narratives of production, national identity.

In recent years luxury fashion labels have extended their brands and associated their names with goods that are not always characterized by a high price tag, extending towards the lower-end of the market and making luxury products available to more and more people. Many have argued that this phenomenon implies a democratisation of luxury (Mortelmans 2005: 517, Okonkwo 2007, Tungate 2009, Chadha and Husband 2006, Thomas 2007, Taylor et al. 2008, Kapferer 2012). Masstige strategies can be extremely profitable for luxury fashion brands but they can also be problematic in terms of maintaining the exclusivity and prestige associated with luxury companies (Stegemann 2006: 63, Roux 1995: 1977, Dubois and Paternault 1995: 73, Phau and Prendergast 2000) as they can reduce 'the prestige of the core brand, perhaps because the core brand becomes mentally associated with a lesser quality brand extension' (Kim and Lavack 1996: 28). In order to avoid brand dilution (Aaker 1990, Milberg et al. 1997, Loken and Roedder John 1993, Lye et al. 2001) and protect the aura of prestige and status associated with their brands, many luxury

companies emphasize certain traits that are commonly associated with luxury such as rarity, scarcity and restriction (Berthon 2009: 46, Dubois et al. 2001: 11, Mortelmans 2005: 505, Stegemann 2006: 59, Aiello and Donvito 2006 : 2, Appadurai 1986: 38). Luxury fashion brands sustain the scarcity of their most prestigious and expensive products through a variety of strategies like limited production and availability (Phau and Prendergast 2000, Dubois and Paternault 1995, Mortelmans 2005: 505, Aiello and Donvito 2006 : 2). They employ strategies of limited distribution in order to create a 'well-controlled scarcity' (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008: 14) and maintain their prestige and reputation (Okonkwo 2007: 105, Moore and Birtwistle 2005: 268, Mortelmans 2005: 505). However, for other goods associated with luxury fashion brands such as Armani, like diffusion lines and products of downscale vertical brand extension like fragrances, it is not possible to speak of real scarcity, as they are produced in large numbers. In those cases companies like Armani then try to convey at least an 'impression of scarcity' (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008: 49).

Other traits associated with luxury goods that are emphasized by luxury fashion brands in their communication and branding strategies are high quality, which revolves around issues of good design and aesthetic value (Mortelmans 2005: 506, Dubois et al. 2001: 12, Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008: xi, Aiello and Donvito 2006: 2), high quality materials (Jackson 2004: 157, Mortelmans 2005: 506) and excellent craftsmanship. In particular, in the last few years many luxury fashion labels have emphasized, in discourses of production, the craftsmanship involved in the creation of their pieces as a mean of providing history and additional value to their products. This article investigates this phenomenon with a specific focus on issues of national identity and 'Italianness' and examines in particular production videos created by Italian and non-Italian luxury fashion labels.

The term 'Italianness' was coined by Barthes (1977) to connote an abstract entity that remains open to new additions that, case by case, are linked to Italy and its lifestyle, not crystallizing into a definitive list of elements that are Italian tout court. 'Italianness is not Italy, it is the condensed essence of everything that could be Italian, from spaghetti to painting' (Barthes 1977: 48).

Production videos are becoming increasingly present in the discourses of luxury fashion brands, both in Italy and abroad, and complement established strategies of showcasing craftsmanship in store for a selected public. With regard to the Italian luxury fashion industry only, this strategy has been used by Gucci, with its Gucci Artisan Corners (that saw Gucci artisans showcasing their skills in a series of selected stores around the world, through purpose-built Gucci workshops). A similar strategy was employed by Fendi for its 'Fatto a Mano' campaign, which saw Fendi artisans collaborate with several artists to create unique pieces in Fendi stores around the world. It has to be noted however, that the production videos examined here are rather different, as they are not only directed at the clientele of the luxury fashion brands in question, but more broadly to potential consumers and those who have an interest in such labels. In this sense, the demonstrations of the labels' craftsmanship have gone global, as not only are they featured in official websites, but they are, in many cases also published on Youtube and readily available to anyone with access to the internet.

Craftsmanship is a distinctive trait that characterizes luxury fashion brands (Berthon et al. 2009: 45, Dubois and Paternault 1995: 75, Fionda and Moore 2009: 349) and, as observed by Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2008: xii), luxury goods are usually associated with 'specialists working by hand on individual pieces' for a significant amount of time, which makes these products more expensive, but also more unique, than if they were mass-manufactured (Dubois et al. 2001: 11). Italian luxury fashion labels, like their French counterparts, have often emphasized their heritage in terms of craftsmanship in their communication, as in the case of Hermès or Chanel. Many have recently produced a number of videos, in addition to print and TV advertising campaigns, that demonstrate how their products are handmade employing traditional methods, showcasing the workmanship of skilled artisans.

Gucci created a series of videos showing the handmade production of its Jackie and New Bamboo bags. This emphasized how all of the different phases - from dyeing, cutting and stitching the leather

to the finishing of the bags - are performed by expert artisans (Prada 2011a and 2011b). Similarly, Ferragamo produced videos that showcase the craftsmanship involved in the production of leather goods. With regard to handbag production, Ferragamo also emphasized how the brand can rely on the 'workmanship made up of slow, careful, encoded gestures that are the fruit of a typically Tuscan artisanal expertise' (Ferragamo 2010a). The same level of craftsmanship and expertise is also showcased in the production of its Tramezza men's shoes (Ferragamo, 2010b).

Fendi, on the other hand, published a series of videos illustrating the skills involved in the handmade creation of a greater variety of products, from sofas to watches and fur goods. In one of the videos that focus on its 'Selleria' range, Fendi highlights how the company 'recovered the artisan mastery of the Roman saddlers, composing unique items produced in limited editions and numbered, entirely cut and assembled by hand' (Fendi 2011a). Regarding the creation of its sofas, Fendi's production videos also show how the different phases of production are performed by skilled artisans using traditional methods in regard to stitching for example (Fendi 2011b).

Fendi also emphasized the handmade craftsmanship involved in the creation of its Peekaboo bespoke bags (Fendi 2012a), of the 15th anniversary edition of its iconic baguette bags (Fendi 2012b) or its watches (Fendi 2011c). Similarly, Dolce and Gabbana also focus on the different phases of handmade production of their Sicily bag (Dolce and Gabbana 2012) and jewellery line (Dolce and Gabbana 2011), that also showcase different elements of Italian traditional craftsmanship.

In the videos produced by the above mentioned Italian luxury fashion labels the technology involved in the many phases of goods production is not featured. Instead, they prefer to emphasize the craftsmanship of the artisans that create the products by hand. This resembles the many accounts 'of Made in Italy that romanticizes small, craft-based firms competing against all the odds on the unforgiving field of hardscrabble capitalism' (Ross 2004: 212).

By endorsing ideas of craftsmanship and handmade production of fashion, those luxury fashion brands capitalize on well established narratives associated with Italy (Steele 2003: 161), but refer to a myth of Italian craftsmanship that hides the reality of how many fashion goods are manufactured using automated production methods produced.

'Craft' is a key term in the promotional rhetoric of virtually every Italian manufacturer, and it is supposed to evoke an unbroken tradition of making things by hand in artisanal workshops as old as the Renaissance.

(Ross 2004: 210)

Despite the fact that it was fairly recently, in the twentieth century, that Italian fashion gained popularity among consumers and respect in the fashion industry, becoming one of the ideal homelands of fashion (Vaccari 2005: 48), the prestige and reputation of Italian craftsmanship has a long history and was established way before the rise of Italian fashion in the post-war period.

Italian textiles have been appreciated since the Middle Age and are renowned for their quality and colours (White 2000). Embroidery also has a long established tradition (Steele 2003: 122, Rocca 2006, Giordani-Aragno 1983) and so has tailoring and accessory production, especially concerning shoes and, more generally, leather goods (Jackson 2004: 161). Many Italian luxury fashion labels were actually born as leather goods workshops, such as Gucci, Prada and Fendi, or shoemakers, like Salvatore Ferragamo.

Images of craftsmanship and artisanal traditions are closely intertwined with ideas of Italy and contribute to create and reinforce the corporate mythology of the Italian fashion companies mentioned above, but do not represent a complete account of how the goods produced by those brands are actually made. Nowadays, many Italian luxury brands produce a significant part of their products abroad (Segre Reinach 2005: 49) mostly in Asia and Northern Africa, but nonetheless 'European luxury brands frequently dwell on their "heritage" for marketing purposes, using a tradition of craftsmanship as a way of seducing consumers and justifying elevated prices' (Tungate 2005: 18).

Narratives of Italian craftsmanship are so powerful that they are not only present in the communication of Italian luxury fashion labels, but also feature in discourses of production employed by non-Italian luxury fashion brands like Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Marc Jacobs. Italian craftsmanship is so strictly intertwined with connotations of quality and prestige that it can provide additional value to products and also, more broadly, enhance the reputation of any luxury fashion brands.

Bruno Pavlovsky (Chanel's president of global fashion) revealed that the label produces part of its knitwear, shoes and bags in Italy as Italian craftsmanship in those areas are excellent. Italian artisans are, he explains, better than their French counterparts when it comes to making bags that are not structured or require particular leather work (Pambianco News 2012). The quality of Italian craftsmanship in regard to leather and its worldwide reputation is also recognized by fashion label Marc Jacobs as it designs bags in Milan and produces them in Florence, as shown in a video posted on their website and official Youtube channel (Marc Jacobs 2011). Similarly, Louis Vuitton's shoes are made in Italy, in Fiesso d'Artico, because, as Pietro Beccari (vice-president of marketing and communication for the label) confirms, Italy is the place with the best know-how in shoemaking, whereas the company manufactures its leather in Asnières (France) and watches in Switzerland, in Le Chaux-de-Fonds (Crivelli 2009). It has to be noted that the French fashion system has a long history of being closely intertwined with Italian craftsmanship, as 'Italian artisans were, in fact, often employed by French couture house to do fine handwork' (Steele 2003: 7) so that this situation showcases a certain historical continuity.

In this respect, the strategy employed by Prada for their production movies is different. Whereas other labels focus only on the craftsmanship involved in the creation of their product and only marginally, and very briefly, feature manufacturing phases that are not the result of handmade workmanship, Prada shows phases of production that utilize automated processes, such as plotting.ⁱ This represents a different facet of the Italian luxury fashion industry and a more honest account of how different goods associated with the production of luxury fashion labels are produced. Not all the products created by luxury fashion brands are the result of handmade production or are characterized by the high level of craftsmanship that is showcased in the production videos examined earlier. The videos that emphasize the workmanship of skilled artisans created by Fendi, Ferragamo and Dolce and Gabbana fail to mention a problematic aspect of the contemporary luxury fashion industry in regard to the manufacture and prestige of their products.

Most of the products associated with modern luxury fashion labels are nowadays mass-manufactured, and not only when a brand extension is involved. In this respect, Kapferer (2004: 70) distinguishes three levels within the production of luxury brands. The level of the *griffe*, where the products are the result of the unique work of the designer, the level of the workshop and streamline mass production. However 'even if the *products*ⁱⁱ are mass-manufactured, as in the case of a perfume' people often 'want to believe that the *object*ⁱⁱⁱ comes directly from the designer's workshop' (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008: xii) and consider them as emanations of that very craftsmanship that labels greatly emphasize through their corporate communications.

Nowadays, the democratisation and massification of luxury brands imply that there are different levels of luxury within the luxury industry, which are often a function of different methods of production. Alleres (1990) distinguishes three types of luxury goods: inaccessible luxury, characterized by very high prices, intermediate luxury, characterized by products that are more accessible than the goods in the previous category, and accessible luxury, characterized by even cheaper prices than the ones associated with the other two typologies of goods. It is the latter that nowadays is the most important financially, as Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2008: xi) argue. Similarly to Alleres, Silverstein and Fiske (2003 and 2005) also recognize that contemporary luxury goods are not always associated with premium prices. Consequently, they identified three typologies of new luxury, all of which 'are not so expensive as to be out of reach' (Silverstein and Fiske 2005: 3), i.e. accessible super-premium products, old luxury brand extensions and masstige goods, which are products that refer to established luxury brands but are sold at much cheaper prices and therefore

are accessible to the majority of the population. The more accessible facets of luxury fashion brands are not characterized by the same level of craftsmanship showcased by the production videos by Fendi and Dolce, Ferragamo and Gabbana examined earlier.

In its discourses of production, Prada refers to a different type of know-how that nonetheless is closely intertwined with the Italian fashion system. This includes knowledge that is deeply rooted in the technological progress and the industrial development that the country has experienced since the post-war period. The success of many Italian luxury fashion companies like Prada, but also Missoni, Ferragamo and Gucci, is strictly intertwined with the specific industrial structure of Italy, which revolves around a series of industrial districts. Industrial districts are 'dense concentrations of interdependent small- and medium- sized enterprises (SMEs) in a single sector and in auxiliary industries and services' (Dunford 2006: 27). They are clusters of enterprises that operate in the same sector and they constitute the core of the Italian industrial system. The districts also involve a community of people, companies, institutions and associations that operate in a limited area, so that there are at stake also certain widespread values and knowledges, alongside a series of cultural and social elements (Merlo 2003: 102).

There are more than one hundred and fifty industrial districts in Italy, mostly located in the North and Centre of Italy (Ricciardi 2010: 137), especially in the fashion industry (Brunetti et al. 2002: 52, Dunford 2006: 34, Cersosimo et al. 2007: 53, Bacci 2004, Merlo 2003) such as Como for silk, Biella for wool and Florence for leather.

Consider also the Italian leather fashion cluster, which contains well-known shoe companies such as Ferragamo and Gucci as well as a host of specialized suppliers of footwear components, machinery, molds, design services, and tanned leather. [...] It also consists of several chains of related industries, including those producing different types of leather goods (linked by common inputs and technologies) and different types of footwear (linked by overlapping channels and technologies). [...] The extraordinary strength of the Italian leather fashion cluster can be attributed, at least in part, to the multiple linkages and synergies that participating Italian businesses enjoy.

(Porter 1998: 79)

This industrial structure is particularly beneficial for the fashion industry because, as Dunford (2006: 28) observes, 'in industries such as textiles, clothing, knitwear, and shoes, fashion/seasonal factors are a stimulus to rapid changes in products: development cycles are short, prototyping is rapid, batches of products are small, the variety of products is great, and costs are spread across a wide range of goods'. As emphasized by Steele (2003: 2), 'the Italian fashion system is characterized by the vertical integrations of production from fiber to finished item'.

In this respect, Prada's production movies refer to a type of know-how that does not revolve around issues of craftsmanship, transcending the established association between Italy and handmade production. Italy has a long history of being considered as being placed outside of modernity (Parkins 2004: 258) both in the discourses of literature and tourism (Vestito 2006: 139). Yet, those narratives co-exist alongside the ones celebrating its modern design (Snaiderbaur 2009: 64), showcasing the two faces of the 'made in Italy' phenomenon.

The discourses of production that focus on issues of handmade craftsmanship and the ones that on the other hand feature automated process conjure up ideas of 'Italianness' through different and contradictory traits, but both versions are nonetheless presented as being authentic to the public. This supports conceptualisations of authenticity as an effect of sense, a narrative construction that transcends any anchoring to reality. It is problematic to conceptualize authenticity in relation to its correspondence to an objective reality. Far from being a self-evident concept, authenticity is a culturally determined entity (McIntosh and Prentice 1999: 593).

Authenticity cannot be determined simply by retailing the objective material attributes of the artefact. It has to do not only with genuineness and the reliability of face value, but with the interpretation of genuineness and our desire for it.

(Spooner 1986: 200)

Authenticity is not an intrinsic quality of objects, but the result of people's projections and expectations (Bruner 1991, Silver 1993) and of narrative strategies. There is an inherent paradox in authenticity, as it is 'seen as the unstageable, the untouched and the real (thing)' (Knudsen and Waade 2010: 22). Yet nonetheless it can be staged (MacCannel 1973). As observed by Wang (1999: 351) 'things appear authentic not because they are inherently authentic but because they are constructed as such in terms of points of view, beliefs, perspectives, or powers'. In semiotic terms, authenticity is a textual strategy in the same way truth is (Greimas 1984), being conjured up through narratives that support such a modality of discourse.

The myths of authentic 'Italianicity' that the discourses of production employed by the luxury fashion brand examined in this article convey are presented as obvious. However, they are actually the result of a selection of traits associated with coherent communicative strategies that work as a 'lustral bath of innocence' (Barthes 1977: 51) naturalizing connotations of Italianicity. Those myths of authentic 'Italianicity' are in fact constructed entities that hide their nature as social and ideological constructs through an aura of reality (Barthes 1974), translating concepts that are culturally constructed 'into self-evident laws of nature thereby reinforcing social stereotypes and making them appear inevitable' (Bronwen and Ringham 2006: 213).

Narratives of handmade craftsmanship and high-tech manufacturing are both strongly associated with the Italian fashion industry and imply a contradiction that seems to be problematic for luxury fashion brands that emphasize their heritage in terms of craftsmanship in their communication and focus on issues of handmade production. This is exemplified in the case of a Ferragamo video focusing on the production of its women's shoes, which clarifies that although it is true that 'most of the manufacturing stages are done by machine, but the machine is always guided by man's experienced hand' (Ferragamo 2010c). This fosters conceptualizations of the Italian fashion industry as being a 'marriage of traditional craftsmanship, innovative design, and modern industrial technology' (Steele 2003: 117). This phenomenon is often described as the artisanal production of industrial goods (Calabrese 2009: 39). Prada also goes in this direction. Despite showing phases of automated manufacturing, at the same time it aims to reinforce its prestige and heritage through other production videos that focus on the craftsmanship and handmade production involved in their more expensive lines, such as Haute Couture. This is epitomized by a video that showcases the handmade finishing of a special edition of the Prada eau de toilette, Amber pour homme, that presents the metal casing of the bottle being covered in leather by the hand of a skilled craftsman (Prada 2011c). Despite the fact that this special edition is very different from the average fragrances that are completely produced in automated factories, the video actually suggests that all the Prada products are made by hand by skilled specialists, thus perpetuating the myth of the label and its intrinsic craftsmanship. In fact, the Prada brand was in fact born in 1913 as a workshop specializing in leather products.

The different, and even contradictory, traits associated with Italian fashion are a function of the richness of Italian identity and the variety of traits of 'Italianicity' it comprises. This reinforces the idea that national identity is not a fixed entity but a conglomeration of different traits, a mutable and fuzzy entity that allows enough diversification for brands to pick and choose the most appropriate characteristic for their ends. For this reason, in this article, Italian national identity is examined in terms of 'Italianicity' instead of 'Italianness'.

As argued by Edensor (2002: 17) national identity can be created and reproduced through different mundane elements like landscapes, films or advertising and is grounded 'in the everyday'. In

accordance with Billig (1995: 6), he also argues that national identity is reproduced through the apparent innocence of everyday discourses. Edensor argues that national identity can be 'found in a bewilderingly dense profusion of signifiers, objects, practices and spaces' and is 'constituted by innumerable pathways, connections and sources' (Edensor 2002: 33). National identity is not only constructed through discourses of nationalism but also the ones of 'nationness' (Borneman 1992: 352) that feature in a variety of media, narratives and practices. These are more discreet mechanisms that can actively create nations' identity. In this perspective, national identity is a 'fluid' (Cartocci 2009: 184) or a 'liquid' entity (Bauman 2000) that, far from being fixed and established once and for all, remains 'perpetually open to context, to elaboration and to imaginative reconstruction' (Cubitt 1998: 3). In this sense, national identity is constantly evolving and open to be modified by a variety of players, including the brands that are considered here and the discourses of production that they employ.

So, national identity is not static, but is 'never complete, always in process' (Hall 1990: 222). Brands also contribute to this process, constructing myths of national identity that then circulate worldwide, creating and re-shaping, in an on-going process, powerful images whose influence goes beyond the realm of commodities and into culture. In this sense, the products, discourses and narratives associated with luxury fashion labels examined here are pivotal, as they can greatly influence 'popular notions of Italianess, Frenchness and Britishness' (Davey 1999: 121). In this respect, it is not relevant whether those notions of national identity are the result of narratives developed within the boundaries of the countries in question or outside of them, as with the case of discourses of production employed by non-Italian luxury fashion brands that focus in the value of Italian know-how examined earlier. As Edensor argues (2002: 144) 'the production of national identity' can also occur 'outside of the nation'.

From this perspective, national identity is a 'discursive concept, built by different kinds of texts, tourist texts (brochures, leaflets, guides, pictures) and other kinds (movies, newspapers, literature)' (Bruculeri 2007: 1), created by different sources and media, in a comparative perspective based on difference as a salient identity-making tool (Ricoeur 1996). In semiotic terms, nations are texts (Ferraresi 2000: 245), entities created through narratives (Bhabha 1990) where at times reality and mystification merge (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The ideas of national identity that those different elements convey are not natural nor obvious, but constructions whose strength does not lie in their accuracy.

Discourses of nationhood in branding are intrinsically selective. They do not aim to convey an accurate portrait of nations, but only emphasize certain traits associated with them that are functional in reinforcing the positive image of national brands. This means that they contribute to re-shape conceptualisations of national identity by focusing only on the positive characteristics and rejecting less desirable associations, creating 'idyllic' images that in turn contribute to reinforce the positive image of the brands. In this sense, the notions created by brands as a function of this logic can be described as 'benign form of national consciousness because elements that are not benign are not permissible within a nation-branding framework' (Aronczyk 2008: 55).

Far from being parasitic entities that simply capitalize on Italian identity, brands are active players in its constant re-definition. For example Prada, Ferragamo and Gucci were, alongside other luxury fashion labels, the creators of the association between Italy and fashion. In this sense, the discourses and narratives employed by luxury fashion brands are pivotal sites for shaping and mobilizing notions of Italian national identity.

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- i See <http://www.prada.com/en/production-movies>
- ii Emphasis in the original.
- iii Emphasis in the original.