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The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Dolce & Gabbana and narratives of heritage and national identity

by

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Abstract

National identity is a powerful tool often used in the marketing and communication strategies of brands, especially in the luxury fashion industry. This chapter will focus on the case of Dolce & Gabbana and examine the strategies it employs in this sense with regard to its digital storytelling practices. It will be discussed how the label emphasizes elements linked to the most virtuous facets of Italian national identity, and in particular craftsmanship, to support the prestige and aura of the brand, linking it to a long-established workshop tradition that is not strictly linked to the actual origin of the label. Moreover, the chapter will also examine the risks in using traits of national identity and discuss how that was the case for the controversy that emerged in 2018 with regard to the depiction of China in a series of promotional videos posted by Dolce & Gabbana. It will also be observed how, in order to recover from the scandal, Dolce & Gabbana has strengthened and focused even more, in its digital narratives, on traits of Italian national identity with regard to craftsmanship and tradition.

Dolce & Gabbana & Italianicity

Dolce & Gabbana is an Italian luxury fashion label founded in 1985 by Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana. The label is renowned with regards to womenswear for its sensual and bold looks. Dolce & Gabbana, in terms of brand identity, heavily relies on references to its country of origin, Italy, and in particular on the culture of Sicily and its Mediterranean heritage. References to those elements are consistently featured by the label in every aspect of their marketing and communication strategy and constitute, in semiotic terms, an isotopy. An isotopy is something that could be described as a recurring 'theme' or 'motif', a *fil rouge* providing continuity and coherence to storytelling and that can involve all levels of meaning, from the textual surface to the deeper structures of the Generative Trajectory (Greimas and Courtés 1986, Nöth 1995, Bronwen and Ringham 2006).

The narratives employed by Dolce & Gabbana, and that feature characterizing traits of Italian national identity, are considered here not in terms of Italianness but in terms of Italicity (Barthes 1977), as we want to draw attention to the fact that the elements that are linked to Italy, and considered as salient traits of national identity, are not fixed once and for all, but change in time and space, to include new and different elements where sometimes reality and imagination merge and are closely intertwined.

The focus on Italicity of Dolce & Gabbana is easy to see in the label's communication strategies, its products, advertising campaigns, but also store environments. For example, Dolce & Gabbana features, in its flagship stores and selling points in upmarket retailers, an abundance of frescos, brocade textiles, marble but also bright Sicilian carts and majolica pottery. Lately, the link between Dolce & Gabbana and Italian identity has been emphasized further with culinary collaborations that have seen the label firstly offering a 'Limited Edition Dolce & Gabbana pasta' collection with Valvona Crolla in 2017 and then, in 2019, expanding on this with a collection of *panettoni* (a type of Italian Christmas cake) with Fiasconi, all featuring packaging in the bright colours and patterns so closely associated to Sicily, and more broadly, the south of Italy and the Mediterranean area.

Moreover, Dolce & Gabbana's advertising campaigns feature countless signs of Italianicity, from 'pizza, pasta and mandolino' to bread, big multigenerational families and parties in the streets. However, despite the differences in the elements featured, a common theme emerges, and that is an image of Italy as a place outside of modernity (Parkins 2004), frozen in an idealized past centered around conviviality and tradition. This is particularly evident in the brand's digital storytelling strategies, which will be examined in the next section through the analysis of a series of videos focusing on the craftsmanship of Dolce & Gabbana, that once again capitalizes on certain traits linked to Italy to provide prestige and a competitive advantage to its products. However, if relying on traits of national identity that are familiar with consumers has significant advantages, there are also risks involved. National identity can be an incredibly valuable reserve for brand culture, as seen in the next section with regards to the use of narratives of craftsmanship, but sometimes situations of cultural opportunism (Dallabona 2015) that see brands appropriating, and taking advantage, of cultural elements can go wrong if those are perceived as offensive by certain communities. That was the case for the furious backlash received by Dolce & Gabbana with regards to a campaign focusing on China in 2018, that is discussed later on in the chapter.

Digital storytelling and Italian craftsmanship

Dolce & Gabbana, unlike older labels like Gucci, does not originate in workshops nor is rooted in the craftsmanship traditionally associated with Italian fashion and which contributed to creating the reputation of the country as a homeland of fashion in the first place. Nonetheless, Dolce & Gabbana refers to this pivotal aspect of Italian heritage whilst at the same time also portraying other elements of Italian national identity in their marketing strategies. Here, we focus in particular on the over 40 videos, published by the brand on its official YouTube channel, that focus on how the goods associated to the label are produced, with the aim to examine references to traditional Italian craftsmanship. It will be argued that the label has emphasized, in its online communication, the handmade craftsmanship involved in the creation of their products. However, it will be observed how that element is presented only in association to certain types of goods and not to the totality of products that are associated to the name of the fashion brand. It is important to notice how the vast majority of the videos published by Dolce & Gabbana primarily show their most expensive products, from haute couture pieces to shoes and handbags, but also jewellery and watches. There are only a couple of videos focusing on cheaper items, like eyewear. Even cheaper products, like cosmetics or fragrances, are actually not represented at all. Nonetheless, the videos share many common elements. Those are represented by a focus on handmade production, references to practices that are hundreds of years old, and very limited references to modern methods of production.

In all of the videos focusing on the production of Dolce & Gabbana's haute couture, for example, we only see workers performing tasks completely by hand. At first, we are shown people drawing the design on paper, then we see the different materials getting cut and sawn, before decorations and embroideries are applied. Even though we actually see some faces at times, it's interesting to notice how the focus of the videos is actually represented by the hands of many expert artisans slowly and carefully performing a series of actions. For example, in a video focusing on the brand's jewellery line (Dolce & Gabbana 2011), we only see the hands of the artisans making the product and working on the different pieces, melting metal, mounting stones, creating delicate filigree and finishing the products. The same can be observed when it's shoes or handbags been made, as we see different people, and many hands, in a workshop setting performing a series of actions, from cutting to sewing, from embroidering to applying decorative elements and painting, alongside gluing materials, hammering leather with nails and assembling the final products. Interestingly, many of the hands featured in the videos proudly showcase signs of ageing (wrinkles and age spots), alluding to the link between years of experience and the ability to master all the delicate phases of the production of Dolce & Gabbana products. Moreover, the focus on the hands of craftspeople is also functional to present them as an anonymous and 'eternal' force that is intrinsically linked to

'Made in Italy' and that can provide history and additional value to the Dolce&Gabbana products. This dimension is further emphasized in a small series of videos that focus not on the in-house production practices of Dolce & Gabbana, but on the different artisans and companies that supply the brand when it comes to some specific products or materials. That is for example the case for certain types of silk (Dolce & Gabbana 2019a), brocade (Dolce & Gabbana 2019b) or velvet (Dolce & Gabbana 2019c). With regards to the latter, the video is described as an insider's look into the handmade production of *soprarizzo* velvet, "an ancient handcraft renowned for its use of two different irons: an intricate and delicate process that enhances the homespun manufacturing of this unique textile" and that has been produced in Venice's Canal Grande by Bevilacqua Weaving since the 15th century. It has to be noted that, while the production videos posted by Dolce & Gabbana feature a piece of classical music as soundtrack, the videos focusing on the traditional craftsmanship of its suppliers are actually narrated in Italian by the people involved in the production of goods. The videos present English subtitles to make them accessible to a wider public, and it is argued here that the choice to not use a voice-over in English but to privilege the first-person account of the Italian people actually involved in the production of traditional textiles, or employing jewellery techniques that are centuries old, is functional to convey ideas of authentic Italianicity. Those notions of authenticity are in this sense the result of narrative strategies that support such modality of discourse (Greimas 1984) and not the product of some intrinsic characteristics (Spooner 1986, Wang 1999, Bruner 1991, Silver 1993).

It has to be observed that such dimensions of handmade craftsmanship and workshops are often used for promotional purposes by Italian companies (Ross 2004), and that is especially the case for the small- and medium- sized enterprises (SMEs) that constitute the backbone of the Italian fashion industry (Dunford 2006). The prestige and good reputation attributed to Italian craftsmanship has been long-established thanks to centuries of experience in the field of textile production (White 2000), embroidery (Steele 2003, Rocca 2006, Giordani-Aragno 1983), tailoring and accessory production, in particular leather goods (Jackson 2004), and it precedes the rise of Italian fashion in the post-war period. It is precisely on this tradition that Dolce & Gabbana is capitalizing on by presenting, in its digital storytelling, narratives of traditional Italian craftsmanship.

As examined by Dallabona (2014), craftsmanship is an element often employed by Italian luxury fashion brands in their communication and marketing practices as that is considered a powerful tool in terms of associating the products, and the label, to positive values and connotations, supporting their appeal and presenting them as part of an invaluable long-established heritage. More generally, craftsmanship is also considered as a distinctive trait that characterizes luxury fashion brands (Berthon et al. 2009, Dubois and Paternault 1995, Tungate 2005, Fionda and Moore 2009) and the assumption is that the luxury products are unique (Dubois et al. 2001) as a result of the fact that specialized artisans make those products by hand (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008). However, that is only one facet of how the goods associated to luxury fashion labels are actually made, even though people prefer not to believe that (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008). In fact, not all the products associated to luxury fashion brands are made by hand, and a number of goods bearing the name of luxury fashion labels are mass-manufactured. That is especially the case for diffusion lines and the less expensive facets of the brands, such as accessories and cosmetics for example (Dallabona 2014). This is in line with conceptualizations that state how there are nowadays different levels of luxury in the industry. In this sense, Kapferer (2004) identifies for example the level of the *griffe*, where the products are the result of the unique work of the designer, the level of the workshops, which is the one that the videos by Dolce & Gabbana discussed above refers to, and lastly the level of mass-manufacture, which is very different from the other two and it's the type of production used for example in eyewear.

On its official YouTube channel, Dolce & Gabbana features a number of videos depicting the production of their glasses, and those are the only videos where technology and mass-manufacture is actually seen. For example, in two videos focusing on the making of the Domenico and Lace frames (Dolce & Gabbana 2019e and 2019f) we see the design for the eyewear pieces being drawn

by hand, but then the frame and temples of glasses are machine-made. This might seem problematic in terms of the narratives of traditional Italian craftsmanship that the label is employing in the other videos, but at the same time this is counterbalanced by two elements. In fact, alongside notions of traditional handmade craftsmanship, the reputation of Italian luxury fashion labels, and more broadly Italian fashion, is also strictly associated to ideas of technological advancements (Steele 2003). And moreover, Dolce & Gabbana still focus on conveying ideas of tradition and craftsmanship even when it comes to products that are usually mass-manufactured through videos depicting special editions where handmade production has a more prominent role. With regards to eyewear, that is for example the case of the DG Crystal Sunglasses (Dolce & Gabbana 2019g), that feature stones individually applied to the frame by hand, or in the case of the Mosaico (Dolce & Gabbana 2014) and Sicilian cart glasses (Dolce & Gabbana 2016).

The video for the limited edition Mosaico eyewear shows how the tassels of the mosaic are firstly produced, and then applied, by hand to create a colourful and detailed floral pattern. It is this process, it is claimed in the caption, that makes “this sunglass a real masterpiece, unique and highly exclusive” and an “expression of the most high Italian craftsmanship ability” (Dolce & Gabbana 2014). Another limited edition eyewear collection was launched in 2016, called Sicilian Carretto, i.e. Sicilian cart (Dolce & Gabbana 2016). The video shows a dark-haired Mediterranean looking woman painting a wooden glass frame using rich and vibrant colours to replicate the same intricate patterns which feature on the traditional Sicilian carts, but on a smaller scale. The craftswoman works slowly and meticulously, using a magnifying glass to transfer the traditional pattern and paint relief miniatures. The caption states that, “like the antique carts, every pair of glasses is a special piece: the decorator’s hand renders each model completely unique”, in this sense supporting the idea that the label Dolce & Gabbana is using traditional methods of production and handmade craftsmanship that originate in Italian culture, benefiting from the positive values and connotations deriving from this association. But those two videos focus on special editions eyewear, more expensive pieces produced in limited number, and that are not mass-produced as their 'regular' counterpart.

However, the choice by Dolce & Gabbana to focus on notions of craftsmanship and handmade production, even in this case, is functional in terms of capitalizing on the long-established reputation of Italian fashion for its heritage and quality (Steele 2003). This contributes to reinforce narratives that see Italy as the custodian of traditions and skills that pass down from generation to generation, kept alive and constantly revitalised by production practices employed in the fashion industry, and in particular by luxury fashion brands, which are in turn presented as an essential part in conceptualisations of Italianicity. It is interesting to note that Dolce & Gabbana has actually emphasized this dimension of Italian traditional handmade craftsmanship even more after the notorious 2018 scandal concerning promotional videos presenting a controversial image of China. The label is in this sense recognizing the powerful value of such narratives in reinforcing positive elements of national identity that can, in turn, positively affect the prestige, aura and reputation of the brand, which was, as discussed in the next section, tarnished by the controversy.

The big controversy: Dolce & Gabbana loves China

As we have seen, to rely on traits of national identity that are familiar with consumers can be very beneficial, capitalizing on long-established positive associations that increase the prestige and desirability of brands and their products. But using traits of national identity can be a double-edged sword and cause offence, potentially alienating consumers and the public opinion. Dolce & Gabbana has been long criticized by the Italian community for reinforcing questionable stereotypes, like the one surrounding the alleged innate boisterous and loud nature of Italians. Storytelling can use stereotypical elements to convey meaning in a concise manner and to play with elements that are familiar to the public, but there is a danger of oversimplification and, if those are not employed with cultural sensitivity, the risk of causing offence rises even more. This was the case with regards

to a series of videos created by Dolce & Gabbana in November 2018 to promote their fashion show in the city of Shanghai (China), and which caused a furious backlash amid accusation of racism.

The Chinese market is very important for luxury fashion labels, and Dolce & Gabbana planned to lure such consumers further by organizing a fashion show, in late 2018, that was supposed to promote the label and celebrate China at the same time (Wiener-Bronner 2018). Chinese celebrities, buyers and movie stars were to attend, and the event was heavily promoted online through the hashtags #DGTheGreatShow and #DGLovesChina. However, as Dolce & Gabbana posted three promotional videos to Weibo (the most popular social network in China), controversy ensued.

The videos featured a young Chinese model, wearing Dolce & Gabbana clothes and accessories, facing typical Italian food, i.e. pizza, spaghetti and cannoli. The set of the videos was constituted by what has been described by many as a dark and old fashioned Chinese interior that does not represent the true reality of the country nowadays, and the ads feature a soundtrack of stereotypical Chinese folk music that has been similarly defined as outdated (CGTN 2018). Things were not made better by the voice over, a male speaking in Mandarin giving instructions and who appeared to be 'mansplaining' to the your girl how to use chopsticks to eat pizza, spaghetti and cannoli as she struggled, nor by the double entendres of sexual nature (Xu 2018). The videos even featured the speaker mispronouncing the name of the label Dolce & Gabbana, in what was perceived to be a mockery of Chinese people. What was perhaps meant to be a tongue-in-cheek campaign certainly seemed to have missed the mark, as the ads were perceived as racists and disrespectful, so much so that within an hour hashtags about boycotting Dolce and Gabbana emerged and became viral in China (France24 English 2018). In response to that, Dolce & Gabbana posted a message on their official Instagram page, but that fell just short on an apology, as it stated that they intended to bring to Shanghai a tribute event dedicated to China which they created with love and passion, and defined the whole thing as unfortunate for all those who worked to create the event, before closing with a heartfelt thank you to the friends and guest who were planning to attend (E! Asia 2018). The brand also immediately removed the three videos from Weibo, but not from its official Instagram account, and soon the controversy gathered pace even more.

The Chinese brand ambassador resigned from the role (DW News 2018) and very quickly celebrities and VIPs, but also model agencies, started to distance themselves from the event, declaring that they would not attend the fashion show due to Dolce & Gabbana's disrespectful attitude towards China, that they thought was being depicted as a backward and old-fashioned country ignorant of the Western way of life, so much so that it's citizens were portrayed as allegedly unable to perform even simple tasks like eating pizza. The ads were branded "offensive" and accused of "spreading false stereotypes" and lacking consideration for the Chinese cultural sensibilities (Barr 2018). On the day of the fashion show everything was ready for the grand scale event, that saw thousands of people involved in the production and that should have seen over 360 people walking the catwalk, but at the last minute everything was cancelled as Chinese guests and models started leaving due to another controversy (Dazed 2018). In fact, screenshots of a conversations between a journalist of Diet Prada (a popular Instagram account acting as a sort of watchdog with regards to the fashion industry) and Stefano Gabbana were circulating over the internet, with the latter allegedly making some rather offensive remarks towards China in response to the scandal. Some refused to believe the screenshots were true as to send such messages would have not been a wise PR move at all but the story, again, went viral.

The alleged messages by Stefano Gabbana were quite strong, using a 'poop emoji' to define China and adding that the country was "Ignorant, Dirty Smelling Mafia" (Diet Prada 2018). Later on Dolce & Gabbana claimed that the brand's account, and the one Stefano Gabbana, had been hacked. Afterwards, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana also released a video, still available on their official YouTube Channel (Dolce and Gabbana 2018), where they made a grovelling apology and asked to be forgiven for the lack of respect shown towards China, claiming that this was never their intention at all and that they would learn from this mistake, making sure to always respect Chinese culture from now on. However, the damage was indeed already done, and products by Dolce & Gabbana were removed from Chinese retailers online in a move that was estimated to have costed

the brand over €36 millions in just one day (Dazed 2018). It is clear to see that the brand image of Dolce & Gabbana in China was seriously tarnished by the controversy, as retailers refused to feature the label's products in their shop and Chinese consumers returned Dolce & Gabbana items (Van Elven 2018). In China, the Weibo hashtag #DGTheGreatShowCancelled was mentioned in 74,000 discussions and seen over 540 million times (Hall and Suen 2018). But what were the repercussions in Western countries and how did the digital narratives surrounding the Dolce & Gabbana changed as a result of the scandal?

We monitored the social media Twitter for one year, from November 2018 to the end of October 2019, to assess the short-term and long-term implications of the scandal. We collected live data from Twitter using the Twitter streaming APIs and we used specific keywords related to Dolce & Gabbana to filter out unwanted or unrelated tweets. Overall, we collected more than 280K tweets between general tweets and retweets. We then performed sentiment analysis over the corpus, calculating the sentiment polarity of the tweets using VADER (Hutto and Gilbert 2015). VADER is a widely used rule-based model for general sentiment analysis. For each tweet, VADER produces four polarity scores: negative, neutral, positive and compound. The first three indicate the grade of the polarity of the tweet in each class, whereas the fourth metric score indicates the overall polarity of the tweet. In our analysis, we used the compound score as the sentiment polarity of the tweets. The polarity values range from -1 to +1 with -1 indicating a strong negative sentiment and +1 a strong positive sentiment.

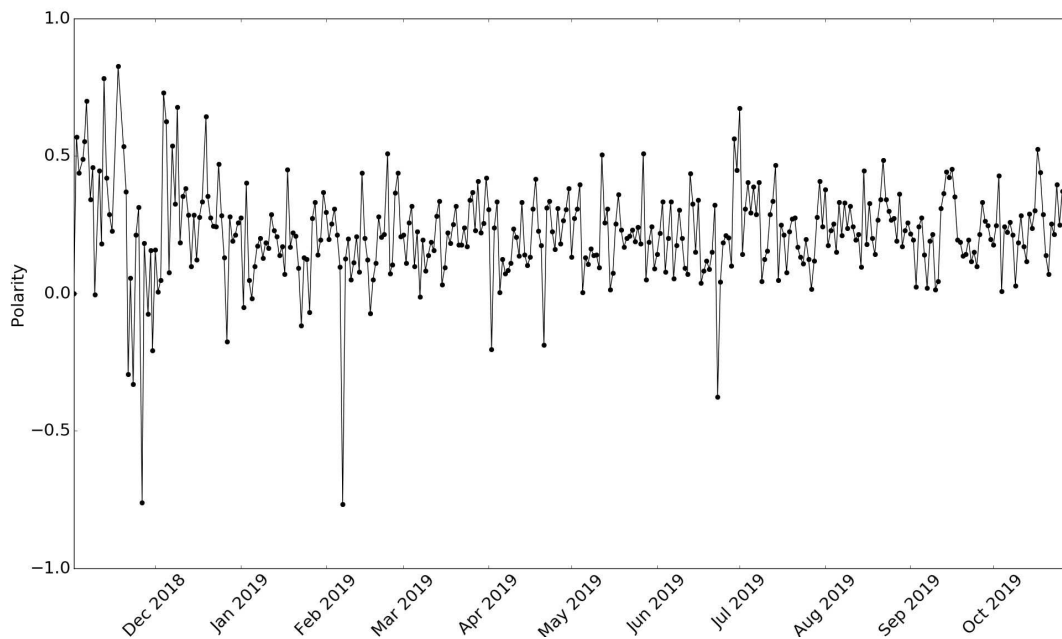


Figure 1: Day polarity of Dolce & Gabbana on Twitter

To produce the figure 1, we computed the aggregated polarity of all the tweets generated on each day between November 2018 and October 2019. The sentiment polarity for p_d for a day d is computed using weighted average of the sentiment polarity for all general tweets $t_{i,d}$ for the day d with $i=1, \dots, N_d$, where N_d is the number of general tweets for the day d . The weighted average is computed taking into account the number of retweets $r_{i,d}$ for each general tweet:

$$p_d := \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N_d} (r_{i,d} + 1) t_{i,d}}{\sum_{i=1}^{N_d} (r_{i,d} + 1)} .$$

The use of the number of retweets in the averaging is in line with our aim to measure the overall sentiment toward D&G for each day. We assumed that a retweet is an indication of a person expressing a sentiment aligned with the sentiment of the general tweet that is retweeted.

Looking at figure 1, we can see that within the year we monitored, a major dip in the sentiment polarity for Dolce & Gabbana is seen in November 2018 as the result of the China scandal discussed above. The dip was the biggest one for the whole year, and it is in this sense significant of how much the controversy, and the related backlash, affected the narratives surrounding the brand Dolce & Gabbana. However, despite a clear immediate negative reaction by Twitter users, our results also show that the effects of the scandal were not felt for very long, because in just a matter of days the narratives surrounding Dolce & Gabbana went back to being positive and in line with their standard performance. This in a certain sense contradicts earlier reports in the press, which predicted that Dolce & Gabbana would suffer, in terms of brand image, for quite some time. However, we argue, the consequences of the scandals were far from over, and still active under the surface, being just suspended and ready to re-emerge under the right circumstances.

Even though there were other dips, the polarity concerning Dolce & Gabbana has remained mostly positive in the aftermath of the scandal and the year after that, with only one significant exception, a major dip seen in February 2019. This was again related to the China scandal discussed above, as it seems that Dolce & Gabbana was left vulnerable to negative narratives and prone to see the scandal re-emerge. Interestingly, in this case the dip was the results of events that originally completely transcended the brand's activities. In fact, the major dip in the polarity that occurred at the beginning of February 2019, the second biggest in the year we monitored (see figure 1), occurred because the Dolce & Gabbana scandal in China of November 2018 became topical once again in the aftermath of another scandal in the luxury fashion industry, this time concerning Gucci.

Gucci was accused of racism due to the peculiar design of a 'balaclava jumper,' a black sweater with a turtle neck that went over the lower face of the wearer, leaving an opening for the mouth that was surrounded by a red motif resembling lips, which was likened to blackface causing huge controversy. The Gucci scandal attracted significant attention in the press worldwide and the garment in question was swiftly withdrawn (Willan 2019). However, as the scandal became viral and attracted more and more attention in the press, many articles again dragged out the Dolce & Gabbana China controversy of November 2018 as a clear example of bad practice in the luxury fashion industry, which was accused of widespread cultural insensitivity (BBC 2019). The repercussions were seen also online, as we have observed that at the time Dolce & Gabbana online discourses again became characterized by a striking negative polarity. However, just as it happened at the time of the original scandal, the polarity soon went back to positive and no similar major dips were observed again in the whole year we monitored. Nonetheless, despite the quick recovery in both cases, this means that negative impressions and narratives concerning the brand Dolce & Gabbana have not gone away for good and that they are likely to re-emerge again if other similar scandals will appear in the future, not necessarily as a result of direct actions by the brand itself but also as a result of the behavior of its competitors as well.

National identity: a valuable resource to be used carefully

The core of the Dolce & Gabbana scandal of November 2018 was the disputable use of national identity traits, in a series of videos aimed at promoting a fashion show in China, that presented a controversial image of the country and that was ultimately considered offensive by the public it was design to entice. In this sense this highlights the power such narratives hold, and the issues faced

when communication is not quite right in terms of cultural sensibility. It is quite interesting then to observe how, in the aftermath of the scandal, Dolce & Gabbana turned again to narratives of national identity to solve the issues caused by the use of national traits. In fact, if the dimension of Italianicity and a certain presence of narratives of traditional handmade craftsmanship were already present in Dolce & Gabbana's communication, they were emphasized even more after the notorious 2018 scandal. As the reputation of Dolce & Gabbana was tarnished by the Chinese controversy, the label went back to 'safer' and less contentious narratives focusing on its country of origin, in this sense recognizing and capitalizing on the effectiveness of such narratives of national identity in terms of positively affecting the prestige, aura and reputation of the brand.

As we have seen in the beginning of this chapter, which focused on notions of traditional Italian craftsmanship employed by Dolce & Gabbana, traits of national identity can be a very valuable resource for brands, anchoring the brand image to positive narratives that are strictly associated to a certain area and rooted in people's mind, capitalizing on such associations to augment the prestige and desirability of products. In contrast to what one might think, globalisation does not actually necessarily sees a complete homogenization of offering, as consumers crave diversity and see difference as an element worth pursuing (Naisbitt 1994, Pieterse 1995, Bell and Valentine 1997), especially when that is linked to entities that possess positive connotations. That is the case for images of Italy, that has historically acquired a good reputation in a variety of areas and in particular with regards to fashion, design, food, and lifestyle, being associated to narratives of quality and excellence in that respect (Snaiderbauer 2009). Positive narratives concerning countries like Italy and their heritage are widespread in the media and create a virtuous circle that enhances the reputation of luxury brands (Jackson 2004) and that concur in creating and reinforcing such images by adopting them in their communication strategies (Moilanen and Rainisto 2009). Traits of Italianicity are in this sense powerful marketing tools that support brands in their international expansion (Moor 2007) by providing differentiation (Callon et al. 2002) and creating trust and respect (Clifton and Simmons 2003), which explains why many luxury fashion brands consistently focus, and capitalize, on their country of origin (Godey et al. 2012).

In this sense the videos published by Dolce & Gabbana examined earlier with regards to craftsmanship present a myth of authentic Italianicity that is presented as obvious, but that actually is created by purposely selecting a specific element that is functional to serve the needs of the label in question. The selection of such a trait, in association with a coherent communicative strategy, ends up naturalizing such element of Italianicity and portraying it as distinctive and 'obvious' (Barthes 1977). But one needs to remember that such myths of authentic Italianicity are far from obvious and inevitable (Martin and Ringham 2006), as they are culturally created entities that hide their nature as social and ideological constructs through an aura of reality (Barthes 1974). National identity can be sometimes be perceived as an immutable entity, but it's actually culturally created and reproduced through many mundane different elements beyond the discourses of nationalism (Edensor 2002), such as marketing practices (Billig 1995, Borneman 1992). National identity is not fixed but constantly changing, a liquid entity (Bauman 2000) that is always in process (Hall 1990) and open to reconstruction (Cubitt 1998). In this sense, brands like Dolce & Gabbana are active players in this constant re-definition of Italian national identity, creating narratives that circulate worldwide and reshape what this concept entails.

However, relying on traits of national identity in marketing is also associated to risks, as seen in the China controversy of late 2018. The narratives employed by Dolce & Gabbana with regards to Chinese identity support the notion that discourses of nationhood in marketing are selective, as they focus on traits that are functional to convey the message the brand wants to achieve, and that this selection needs to be considered carefully to avoid pitfalls. If certain traits, like traditional Italian craftsmanship, are incontrovertibly positive and functional in reinforcing the positive image of the brands who anchor themselves to those narratives, when it comes to other traits that are potentially controversial then the process of selection needs to be undertaken more carefully, and the cultural sensitivity of recipients needs to be considered more attentively. If this doesn't happen, brands risk to end up being involved in controversies that can hurt their reputation and alienate consumers,

therefore losing sales and suffering financially. National identity can offer valuable elements to nourish and support brand culture, as seen in the case of traditional Italian craftsmanship, but to rely on other national identity traits can quickly go wrong if they are perceived as offensive by certain communities, especially if they represent the specific public brands were trying to target, as seen with regards to the controversy surrounding Dolce & Gabbana's attitudes towards China and its heritage. Brands should focus only on positive traits and reject those that could be problematic if they want to achieve their goals and avoid controversy and backlash, as everything can go viral very quickly in a world that is more and more connected. Labels' goal in this sense should be to create idealised images that contribute to reinforce the positive image of the brands, but also contribute to re-shape conceptualisations of national identity in a positive manner as that can in turn positively affect them.

The authors

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