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**Autor:** Jia, Jemince Ruxin

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Jemince Ruxin Jia\*

# Marketing controversies—Dolce & Gabbana's China campaign *Eating with Chopsticks*

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**Abstract:** In early November 2018, the Italian fashion house Dolce & Gabbana (D&G), founded by Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, posted a campaign video *Eating with Chopsticks* (*qi kuai chifan* 起筷吃饭) on Instagram, Twitter, and Chinese Weibo (微博) for its forthcoming Great Shanghai Show. This video spurred anger in China. Netizens boycotted the brand nationwide. The Show in Shanghai was forced to cancel, the brands' stores in China were surrounded by protesters, and the brands' products were pulled down from the virtual shelves of major Chinese e-commerce platforms. This paper analyzes the meaning and influence of the video *Eating with Chopsticks* and a series of campaigns and fashion shows that the brand promoted from 2015 to 2019 on Twitter, Instagram, and Weibo. It experiments an interdisciplinary approach to the issues of gender, cultural, and racial discriminations, using literature from gender studies, cultural studies, media studies, consumer studies, and marketing studies.

**Keywords:** brand marketing; cultural hierarchy; gender; sexism; social media

## 1 Introduction

The campaign video *Eating with Chopsticks* is voiced and subtitled in Chinese. It consists of three parts, each part lasts around 40 s, featuring a young Chinese woman eating a large pizza, a cannoli, and pasta with chopsticks; in every video an off-camera male narrator, speaking in Chinese, first names the dish, then ridicules the model's clumsy attempts to eat it, before instructing her on how to “properly” use chopsticks when eating classic Italian dishes. By the end of each part of the video, a countdown prepares the audiences for the *Show*, which was scheduled on

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\*Corresponding author: Jemince Ruxin Jia, Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies, Voßstraße 2, 69115 Heidelberg, Germany; and Department of Asian and North African Studies, University Ca' Foscari, Dorsoduro 3246, 30123 Venice, Italy, E-mail: jemincejemince@gmail.com

21 November at the Shanghai World Expo Exhibition and Convention Center (*Shanghai shibo zhanlan guan*, 上海世博展览馆).<sup>1</sup>

However, Chinese “netizens” or “citizens of the net” (users of internet and social media)<sup>2</sup> thought the video was racist and sexist and discriminative against China and Chinese women. To strike back, Stefano Gabbana attacked them on Twitter as “ignorant mafia shit” and “dog eaters” on the day of the *Show*,<sup>3</sup> which exacerbated the Chinese’s antagonism towards the brand. Consequently, many models and renowned Chinese celebrities including Zhang Ziyi 章子怡 refused to participate in the *Show* as they planned.<sup>4</sup> A Chinese-French model Estelle Chen withdrew from the *Show* and tagged D&G on her Instagram, saying “you don’t love China, you love money.”<sup>5</sup> Doing so almost means that the celebrities will never work with the brand again in the future. Stood on the side of the models and stars, a lot of Chinese netizens accused D&G’s founders of carrying insulting intention and chose to boycott the brand.

After the video sparked a public backlash in China, the *Show* in Shanghai was forced to cancel and the brand was boycotted nationwide. Some netizens created D&G’s epitaph: “born in 1985 in Italy, died in 2018 Shanghai” (生于 1985, 卒于 2018 上海).<sup>6</sup> In the next days, the Chinese model, Zuo Ye 左也, who performed the woman in the video stated on her Weibo, “I am Chinese, I am always proud of my home country.” (我是一个中国人, 始终以我的祖国为傲)<sup>7</sup> She blamed the brand, “I really did not expect that the cooperation almost ruined my career” (万万没想到这次合作几乎葬送了自己的模特事业).<sup>8</sup> The statement shows Zuo’s need to distance herself from D&G, because many Chinese netizens held her accountable for being part of the insulting campaign and accused her of pandering to foreign powers.

To remedy D&G’s brand image, Dolce and Gabbana first claimed on Twitter that their accounts were hacked. Then, they argued that the campaign was a “misinterpretation of Chinese culture” and a “mistaken expression of love.”<sup>9</sup> However, the Chinese netizens thought it was a “deliberate insult.”<sup>10</sup> The campaign incident sparked people’s curiosity that whether the renowned fashion house deliberately employed offensive controversies in the video to promote the *Show*. In the paper

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1 Baker (2018).

2 Seese (2009: 130).

3 Guixiaodao 轨小道 (2018).

4 Wang (2018).

5 Wiener-Bronner (2018).

6 Guixiaodao 轨小道 (2018).

7 Xiangyangdenihong (2019).

8 Xiangyangdenihong.

9 Dolce & Gabbana (2018b).

10 Dolce & Gabbana (2018b).

“The fashion scandal: Social media, identity and the globalization of fashion in the twenty-first century,” the authors Annamari Vänskä and Olga Gurova define the incident as an “unintentional fashion scandal,” explaining that the brand only meant to adopt a “playful take on cultural difference,”<sup>11</sup> rather than to humiliate the Chinese. However, I see it differently. I argue, the brand employed racial, sexual, and cultural controversies in the campaign to shock the Chinese audiences in order to increase its exposure in social media and to spark netizens’ discussions about it; it is a consistent marketing strategy, which the brand has been using in different campaigns since 2015.

## 2 Section 1: D&G in the Shanghai Incident

### The first layer of meaning in *Eating with Chopsticks*: exoticizing and eroticizing Chinese woman’s appearance and demeanor

Before the 2018 campaign incident, Dolce & Gabbana or D&G was one of the most renowned and popular fashion brands in China with its flagship stores covering most Chinese metropolis and its virtual shelves occupying big e-commerce including Tmall (*Tianmao*, 天貓) of the Alibaba Group. The brand distinguished itself from other designer marks with its emphasis on the Catholic tradition and men and women’s sexual attractiveness. It addressed the characteristics as part of its ‘DNA’ on its website and in its earlier branding video in 2016. The website’s cover story under the title “Pieces of History—Dolce & Gabbana DNA” begins, “Timeless silhouettes, masterly crafted fabrics and Sicily, whether widows or sharply tailored Sunday bests, are the pillars of the brand’s DNA.”<sup>12</sup> An advertising video with the same title on D&G’s YouTube channel visualizes a lustful flirtation between a woman and a man. A text below the footage introduces that the scene is set in a Neapolitan street in Sicily, “Every day, the most beautiful woman of the area passes by there.”<sup>13</sup> The woman in the video dresses up in a black lace dress and high black stilettos. While she quaintly walking passes a church, the camera moves from her feet to face, showing a group of young men staring at her legs and chest. One of the infatuated young men waits for her every day at the same spot until one day, he sees her going out the church, perhaps after a Mass or pray. His eyes cannot move away from her, and his steps follow her. In the meantime, the woman’s eyes explore the man from her black lace veil. In the next moment, the

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<sup>11</sup> Vänskä/Gurova (2021).

<sup>12</sup> Dolce & Gabbana (2016a).

<sup>13</sup> Dolce & Gabbana (2016b).



man touches the woman's hair and thigh. And their cheeks rubbing against each other. The storyline and scene imitate Monica Bellucci's classic film *Malena* (2000), in which a famous scene shows that the Sicilian beauty Malena, starred by Bellucci, was followed by a group of young male admirers in the streets. In the film and campaign story, the two women's attractiveness are highlighted via their erotic interactions with men.

In the 2018 campaign video *Eating with Chopsticks*, D&G employed the same strategy of storytelling, featuring a Chinese woman eating pizza, cannoli, and pasta under the instruction of an man who speaks fluent Chinese, but appears to be Italian by referring to "our magnificent Margeritha pizza.". The background of the video, the music, the woman's demeanor, and the man's language have rendered an erotic and ambiguous atmosphere, which is established on sexual, racial, and cultural stereotypes of East Asian women. It begins with a Chinese folk instrumental composed of drums, cymbals, and bamboo *Xiao* (箫). In the music, a giggling young Chinese woman sits down in a Chinese-style restaurant, which is crammed with red lanterns, Chinese calligraphy couplets, stickers, curtains, and sandalwood furniture. The props are used to essentialize an exotic and nostalgic spectacle of feudal China, which is often seen in the films directed by Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, including *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *Red Sorghum* (1988). Media scholar Rey Chow argues that Zhang alienates the Chinese ethnography from its reality and mystifies it to cater to foreign consumption.<sup>14</sup> To be precise, Zhang's usage of the exquisite screen colors—usually dim, warm, and in high contrast and the old but refined architectures, furniture, utensils, and costumes exaggerates and caricatures some "ethnic detail[s]"<sup>15</sup> of feudal Chinese society and signifies a kind of "backwardness."<sup>16</sup> The campaign video imitates Zhang's visual style to caricature a 'traditional' Chinese imagery that is exotic and alien to what is contemporary and Italian and turns the audiences "into a kind of migrant."<sup>17</sup>

In the 'traditional' Chinese restaurant, the young woman is the main spectacle. She has the exoticized East Asian particularities—thin eyes, small nose, high cheek bones, and freckles, which are mainly appreciated in the fashion industry in Europe and North America, but disliked or even despised in China. In 2019, a 25-year-old Chinese model—Li Jingwen 李静雯 sparked controversies on Chinese social media. Li posed for the Spanish fashion house Zara and appeared in its catalogue with freckles. Some Chinese netizens jeered her ugly, accused Zara of

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<sup>14</sup> Chow (1995: 142–172).

<sup>15</sup> Chow (1995: 143).

<sup>16</sup> Chow (1995: 145).

<sup>17</sup> Chow (1995: 145).

stigmatizing Chinese beauty, and asked the brand to modify Li's photos.<sup>18</sup> In China's mainstream popular culture, only women with oval-shape face, fair, clear, and smooth skin, and big almond eyes are adored as beauty. The most acknowledged prototype is actress Fan Bingbing 范冰冰 who modelled for Louis Vuitton (LV) in 2014. Choosing an actress who differs from the Chinese mainstream beauty to cast *Eating with Chopsticks* highlights D&G's intention to alienate itself from the convention and to encourage its audiences to embrace the aesthetics.

Apart from that, the video adopts linguistic tactics to render the exotic scene of China, which in the meantime conveys sexual implications. In the first part of the video, the male narrator introduces: "Welcome to watch Dos & Gabna," (*huan ying shou kan Dos and Gabna*, 欢迎收看 Dos and Gabna) (0:05-0:08).<sup>19</sup> The brand name 'Dolce' and 'Gabbana' are deliberately mispronounced to 'Dos' and 'Gabna' to mimic a Chinese accent, suggesting that the Chinese are unable to speak the Italian name correctly. The narrator continues:

"We are going to present to you [the audience] how to use this 'small stick-shaped' utensil to eat **our** great traditional Margherita Pizza."

(“今天我们首先要向大家展示，如何用这种小筷子形状的餐具来吃我们伟大的传统玛格丽特披萨饼。”) (0:10-0:20)<sup>20</sup>

Later, he asks the woman and the audience: "Is this [cannoli] still too big for **you** [plural]?" (“对你们来说还是太大了吗? ”) (1:11-1:13)<sup>21</sup> In the sentences, he others the woman and the audiences as *you* (plural) and understates them by mocking the Chinese accent and addressing chopsticks as small sticks.

As the narrator talks, the woman tries to handle the three kinds of food with chopsticks. However, because of the foods have gigantic size, the woman fails and she looks embarrassed. Nevertheless, she keeps smiling and remains silent. Her "doll-like, quiet, and submissive" demeanor represents that of, according to Liang Tien, the outdated stereotypical "China doll" and "Geisha girl,"<sup>22</sup> rendered in the late 1990s Hollywood cinema.<sup>23</sup> Rachel Leng argues that the female prototype provided an "'antidote' to visions of liberated [white] women" who challenged the traditional feminine role in their society at that time.<sup>24</sup> The American filmic representations of East Asian female body, according to Traise Yamamoto, have been

<sup>18</sup> Allen (2019).

<sup>19</sup> LDOPE (2018).

<sup>20</sup> LDOPE (2018).

<sup>21</sup> LDOPE (2018).

<sup>22</sup> Tien (2000).

<sup>23</sup> Pak (1999).

<sup>24</sup> Leng (2013).

“a particularly potent source of [...] embodiments of racialized sexual difference [...] deployed to both recast the reality of white racism and reassert the centrality of white masculinity.”<sup>25</sup> While the woman is maneuvering the food, the Italian narrator jeers her for not being able to use chopsticks correctly. Yet, she is not angry and always agrees. When he compliments on her bracelet, she smiles and nods. The juxtaposition between her docility and the man’s arrogance renders a racial and sexual hierarchy between them. The netizens could not bear seeing her complying with Western aesthetics and submitting to white masculinity.

### Netizens’ discussions on the first layer of meaning

The woman’s appearance and demeanor were discussed most and mainly among Chinese netizens. A woman posted a commentary article on a Chinese-language forum, writing “On the female model’s face, her small eyes are deliberately painted with upward thin eyeliner; they often squint into slits when she smiles in an exaggerated manner. She is created as a stereotype of Asian woman in Euro-american culture.” (模特小姐的脸, 小眼睛, 故意画了上挑的细眼线, 时常因为动作夸张大笑眼睛眯成缝。这是欧美文化里, 对亚洲女性最刻板的形象构建。) <sup>26</sup> Some netizens accused the brand of promoting misogyny. Misogyny is a term that addresses the problem that the society scrutinizes women’s appearance and behavior according to patriarchal moral standards.<sup>27</sup> According to Leta Hong Fincher, in China, women and men enjoy unequal gender terms at work and in private; elite men control social and economic resources.<sup>28</sup> Thus, some women submit to their materialistic desire and have sex with men in exchange of money.<sup>29</sup> Women who “take the shortcut” or being perceived to have such a tendency are attacked as morally decadent.<sup>30</sup> In the eyes of some Chinese netizens, the woman in *Eating with Chopsticks* might have exhibited such a tendency, because she was showing off her gold-plated bracelet, which might be seen as a manifestation of her hedonistic desires. What is worse, she is suspected of being submissive to an Italian man, which diminishes the Chinese masculinity. A Chinese influencer on Zhihu (知乎)—a question-and-answer forum—gives a historical review of Stefano Gabbana’s hostile speeches against women. He stigmatized young women as “ugly,” “cheap,” and

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25 Yamamoto (2000).

26 Utsnhk (2018).

27 Osburg (2013: 326–328).

28 Fincher (2014: ch. 3).

29 Osburg (2013: 326–328).

30 Schmidt/Peng (2018: 387).

“fat” on social media before.<sup>31</sup> Digital news *Metro* cited D&G’s sexist advertising in Spain in 2007. The campaign contains photos showing a man holding a woman’s wrist and pinning her to the ground, while a group of other men surrounding and staring at her. The representation was banned in Spain because it was accused of supporting sexual violence and the idea that “the woman is immobilized and subject to a man’s will.”<sup>32</sup>

Compared to the angry Chinese, international netizens had divided opinions. Some netizens deemed the representation of stereotypes a friendly joke and regarded the anger of Chinese as an overreaction. However, most of them regarded the depiction of the Chinese woman discriminative. Nathan Rich, a self-claimed China-lover from the United States created a video on YouTube to counteract *Eating with Chopsticks*. He used a knife and a fork to eat baozi, date soup, and beef noodles and mimicked the D&G woman’s clumsy movements and submissive facial expressions. Rich also invited a Chinese-speaking woman to play the narrator. She mocked him all the time. Moreover, Rich complied *Eating with Chopsticks* with his mimicry footage in one video and synchronized the actions of the D&G woman and his own to maximize the juxtaposition and sarcastic effect.<sup>33</sup> The reversed discriminative representation spurred laughter and applause among international audiences, and rewarded his YouTube channel with tens of thousands of subscribers.

## The second layer of meaning: belittling the Chinese cultural symbolism—chopsticks

The campaign video also renders a cultural hierarchy between China and Italy. It employs chopsticks as the Chinese cultural symbolism, while using pizza, cannoli, and pasta to represent Italy and what is foreign to the woman. She uses chopsticks like knife and fork to cut pizza, then, to grip a gigantic cannolo, but fails. It seems that the Chinese utensils are incompatible with the Italian cuisine. Yet, the Italian man can always provide a solution to the problem. He instructs the woman to use chopsticks as pliers to seize the pizza and, then, to wield them as a spoon to scoop the cream filling from the cannolo. The woman and the man’s student-instructor relationship postulate a knowledge hierarchy, which implies that the Chinese are impotent in mastering their own culture and they should learn from the Italians how to handle cultural differences.

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<sup>31</sup> Yingguo baojie 英国报姐 (2018).

<sup>32</sup> Duncan (2015).

<sup>33</sup> Rich (2018).

Portraying the Chinese woman as clumsy and ‘stupid’ was part of D&G’s plan. After the campaign incident, the model Zuo Ye clarified on Weibo that the brand was looking for “an Asian girl, whose appearance had Oriental characteristics, to eat ‘Western food’ with ‘chopsticks’” (有东方长相的女孩子用“筷子”来吃“西餐”); they wanted to “accentuate the strong cultural conflicts so as to advertise the *Great Shanghai Show*” (以这种强烈的文化冲突感来宣传这次上海大秀). She also discovered that “Everyone at sight [of video shooting] was speaking Italian, only the director used standard English to communicate with me [her]” (在场的所有人说的都是意大利语, 除了导演本人与我沟通时说的是标准的英语). “She was required by the director to laugh out loud, smile with teeth, smile and cover her mouth, all the time” (一直被导演要求大笑、露齿笑、捂嘴笑); and she was “demanded to use an exaggerated way to perform” (要求演技夸张), including using chopsticks to penetrate the pizza and showing surprise when seeing the large food.<sup>34</sup> Clearly, the video makers taught Zuo to act in a ‘stupid’ way in order to juxtapose with the narrator’s intelligence and highlight the cultural conflict.

## Netizens’ discussions on the second layer of meaning

Although the original video was made only in Mandarin, international netizens voluntarily provided English translations and shared them on social media including YouTube. The English-subtitles helped accelerate the video’s global circulation. The topic about chopsticks stirred up the most heated discussions among netizens who had Chinese or East Asian cultural background. A few influential YouTube channels conducted interviews among young East Asians in- and outside China and found that the interviewees were most angry at the scenes when chopsticks are addressed as “small sticks” and the usage of chopsticks is misinterpreted. “They’re making fun of the Chinese people not knowing how to eat Western food.”<sup>35</sup> “Everyone knows that Chinese people use chopsticks to eat. But we don’t use chopsticks to eat pizza or spaghetti [...] It’s like common sense!”<sup>36</sup> “She uses chopsticks to eat pizza [...] I think they have discrimination in their minds, that’s why they did this ad.”<sup>37</sup> An interviewee mentioned to the YouTube channel *Asian Boss* that “so many [East] Asians, including the Japanese and Koreans, have also boycotted them [D&G].”<sup>38</sup> The netizens thought that chopsticks are cultural symbolism of China and East Asia as a whole. However, some

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<sup>34</sup> Sina Finance (2019).

<sup>35</sup> CantoMando (2018).

<sup>36</sup> Tang (2018).

<sup>37</sup> Victor Talking (2018).

<sup>38</sup> Asian Boss (2018).

international netizens expressed their discontent with the fact that “there is always something offensive to [Chinese] people” and urged the Chinese to fix their own problems, such as the lack of human rights.<sup>39</sup> The idea coincides with the video makers’ intention to mock the Chinese as the incompetent *other*.

### The third layer of meaning: eroticizing food and the woman’s sexual appetite

The video makers might have gone a step further to stigmatize the woman as a lustful girl for having an abnormalized sexual appetite.<sup>40</sup> Natalia Andrievskikh thinks that food in gigantic size can convey meanings of aggression and power of masculinity.<sup>41</sup> Michael Jones asserts, “Demonstrating healthy appetite in women is interpreted as ‘acting up’ and giving in to passions;”<sup>42</sup> Miriam Hospodar argues, appetite for food can be associated with sexual desire.<sup>43</sup> The Chinese woman in the video has an abnormally large appetite. The pizza and pasta prepared for her are at least three times of the normal portion. The white-cream-filled pastry cannolo is in the size of her forearm. According to Italian semiologist Dario Mangano, cannoli are “a true and proper symbol of Sicilian culture.”<sup>44</sup> The word ‘cannoli,’ or ‘cannolo’ in its singular form, means “the pipe from which water comes out in troughs and fountains” in Sicilian dialect. The pastry’s “evocative” and “phallic shape” consolidates its genital symbolism and associates it with “prurient stories.”<sup>45</sup> It used to be consumed in Carnivals and perhaps made by nuns during the time of the Arab rule of the island. Consuming cannoli, thus, implies an indulgence of pleasure and sexual desires even in contemporary time.<sup>46</sup>

Considering the fact that one of D&G’s co-founders Domenico Dolce was born and raised in Sicily, he must have been very aware of the cultural symbolism of cannolo and used it in the video to render the Italian masculinity and to tease the Chinese woman. In fact, the Western popular media, led by Hollywood, has a history of exaggerating the sexual capacity of East Asian women. Yamamoto argues, from the nineteenth-century to the beginning of twenty-first-century, many

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<sup>39</sup> Penderson (2019).

<sup>40</sup> Moy (1993).

<sup>41</sup> Andrievskikh (2014: 142).

<sup>42</sup> Jones (2007: 135).

<sup>43</sup> Hospodar (2004: 82).

<sup>44</sup> Dario Mangano (2022: 2).

<sup>45</sup> Mangano. 7.

<sup>46</sup> Mangano. 6–7.



American films portray them as “sleazy Asian girl (SAG)” or “super Jap.”<sup>47</sup> She quotes James S. Moy and explains that the outdated female prototype was “perceived as possessing special mastery of sexual practices” and in the center of white male gaze.<sup>48</sup> The sexual implication is euphemistically expressed in the video. The camera moves from the woman’s hand to her mouth, featuring the process how she uses chopsticks to scoop the fluid cream filling from a cannolo and savors its taste. While she chews, her red lips are writhing and smiling, her brows are lifting, and her eyes are rolling. Her exaggerated facial expression and slow mouth movement construct an erotic scene, which induces the spectators to imagine her joy and to project their own fantasies into the scene.

## Netizens’ discussions on the third layer of meaning

A Chinese user on the news website EasyNet (*Wangyi*, 网易) quotes an English-speaking YouTuber “You don’t get the hidden joke. They are trying to show Chinese girl having hard time with big Italian penis. Their nickname for penis is Cannoli!” The user collects materials from various online sources to elaborate on the point. They write that Cannoli comes from Italy’s Sicilian region and was used as a symbol of fertility in history. In many online stores, one can find T-shirts for men, printed with English language slogans, which metaphorically address penis as cannoli, such as “Wanna see my cannoli?” “Leave the gun, take the cannoli.”<sup>49</sup> A female netizen quotes the male narrator “Is it still too big for you?” and comments “[...] As a woman, I feel disgusted. Are you too big for whom? The video is full of white supremacist colonial sexism against Asian women.”<sup>50</sup> Not only East Asian women, but also men were jeered. Compared with the hypermasculine white men in popular Western media, “(east) Asian men are routinely portrayed asexual.”<sup>51</sup> An analytical article posted by a Chinese netizen in the Chinese video sharing forum “Bilibili” (哔哩哔哩) argues that the cannoli size joke insinuates that Chinese male genital is too small.<sup>52</sup>

This layer of meaning was not discussed enthusiastically, by Chinese or international netizens, as the other two topics. There are three possible reasons that inhibited the conveyance of the meaning. First of all, cannoli are popular mainly in Italy, most non-Italians might be unfamiliar with its genital signification. Secondly,

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47 Yamamoto (2000: 51).

48 Moy (1993: 280).

49 Chengdu Canyon (2018).

50 Utsnhk (2018).

51 Yamamoto (2000: 46).

52 DwighttttSing (2018).



the genital implication only appears in the second part of the video, the other two types of food provide camouflage to make the implication ambiguous. Thirdly, big appetite has no associations with sex in China. Judith Farquhar analyzes food and appetite in post-socialist China. He points out that eating well is part of Chinese philosophy, which constitutes an innate belief in the balance between human body and nature. In the 1990s, having a good appetite gained an extra meaning. Amid China's soaring economy, one's indulgence of appetite has become "a highly visible, even flamboyant, aspect of a growing consumer regime"<sup>53</sup> and represents wealth and showiness. Since the video makers did not contextualize appetite and cannoli in China and other regions outside Italy, the netizens did not fully comprehend this layer of meaning.

Although the third layer of meaning was not fully conceived by the Chinese and international audiences, the video sparked intensive online discussions worldwide and brought D&G to the center of attention on social media, which fulfilled part of the brand's marketing agenda. Darren Dahl defines the strategy as "shock advertising," with which the marketers "deliberately, rather than inadvertently, startles and offends its audience."<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, the publicity went astray, as many Chinese regarded boycotting D&G almost as a manifestation of their nationalistic pride; turning away from D&G was nearly the same as saying 'no' to the West, its dominant aesthetics and cultural superiority. The brand did not expect that its sexual, racial, and cultural jokes would be escalated to the level of national humiliation, and therefore, not prepared to embrace the impact.

### 3 Section 2: D&G before the Shanghai Incident

Annamari Vänskä and Olga Gurova in their recently published paper define the D&G campaign in Shanghai as a "fashion scandal," which means that the brand's "actions, statements or events ... have caused strong impassioned responses in the audience."<sup>55</sup> Although the two authors have identified that the scandal effectively increased the exposure of the fashion brand on social media, they consider it "unintentional."<sup>56</sup> However, I see it differently. The campaign was a carefully prepared marketing project, which adopted a provocative approach to the Chinese audiences, using a mature strategy that has been practiced for years by the brand

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<sup>53</sup> Appadurai/Comaroff/Farquhar (2002: 3).

<sup>54</sup> Dahl/Frankenberger/Manchanda (2003: 268).

<sup>55</sup> Vänskä/Gurova (2021: 3).

<sup>56</sup> Vänskä/Gurova (2021: 1).

on global social media. It used controversial topics, including discriminative sexual, racial, and cultural jokes in marketing materials and circulated them across social media platforms to spark online discussions.

Social media, with a great “networking capacity,”<sup>57</sup> has a great importance to fashion and brand marketing. Computer and internet technologies mediate people’s social life and encourage their participation and creation in cultural activities online in an “imagined community.”<sup>58</sup> The community is highly interactive and interoperable.<sup>59</sup> Each social media platform provides a space where everyone can talk to each other nearly about everything.<sup>60</sup> It also allows its data to be transported to other platforms.<sup>61</sup> Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Chinese Weibo are popular models of such. From small local tailors in China to top global luxury fashion houses, commercial brands see the advantage of social media and exploit it to communicate with netizens for information circulation and media exposure. When a brand shares a topic on a platform, it invites netizens to discuss and disseminate it to other platforms.<sup>62</sup> While the netizens are doing so, they become the co-creators and marketers of the brand.<sup>63</sup>

## 4 D&G’s social media campaigns from 2015 to 2018

Laikwan Pang argues that a brand is an “authorial signature,” which provides a semantic link from the commodity to a concept.<sup>64</sup> Since the year 2015, D&G began to associate its brand identity with rebelliousness and political incorrectness, while retaining its ‘DNA’ in terms of outfit design and styling. It used social media to promote the brand image and to communicate with global consumers. The publicity almost always yielded in the brand’s increased media exposure and market profit. In 2015, in an interview with Italy’s *Panorama Magazine*, Domenico Dolce professed his faith in the Catholic tradition of family synthesis, mainly the father, the mother, and the “naturally produced babies.” He argued that the

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<sup>57</sup> Voorveld (2019: 4).

<sup>58</sup> Marwick (2013).

<sup>59</sup> Marwick (2013).

<sup>60</sup> Voorveld et al. (2018).

<sup>61</sup> Marwick (2013).

<sup>62</sup> Marwick (2013).

<sup>63</sup> Voorveld (2019).

<sup>64</sup> Pang (2008: 193).

tradition was “in our blood” and “in the DNA,”<sup>65</sup> therefore, the IVF (*In vitro* fertilisation) babies were “children of chemistry, synthetic children.”<sup>66</sup> Stefano Gabbana supported the idea, stating that “both our mothers wore medallions of the Virgin in their bras for protection.”<sup>67</sup> Led by renowned celebrities and social media influencers in Italy, Britain and other Western countries, netizens boycotted the brand for its alleged discrimination against children, homosexual groups, and women. As a result, the brand misused the allegedly Catholic and Italian tradition to provoke public opinions and to increase its media exposure and sales.

According to Richard Elliott and Kritsadarat Wattanasuwan, people are “searching for identity through consumption.”<sup>68</sup> The IVF incident associated the brand D&G with an identity as a guardian of tradition and a counter-trendsetter. By consuming the products from D&G, people could imagine themselves embodying the identities and distinguish their values from that of the others who embraced homosexuality. Clearly, the consumers are not just a few. The brand’s annual turnover grew by 13% in the fiscal year 2015 and 8% in 2016,<sup>69</sup> although Dolce claimed that he “never used faith for advertising.”<sup>70</sup> Before the incident, the brand lost 14.6% of its turnover from 2012 to 2014.<sup>71</sup>

In 2017, when America’s first lady Melania Trump appeared in a 51,500 USD D&G jacket during her Sicily visit, Gabbana showered her with the ‘heart’ emoji on Twitter and claimed that his love was nothing political, but a natural customer-designer bond.<sup>72</sup> In online media’s outcry of ‘Boycott Dolce Gabbana,’ Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana initiated a self-staged boycott campaign to flout the objections. They made a video of themselves mimicing the protesters by wearing a T-shirt with the print “#BoycottD&G,” which was labelled 245USD in D&G’s shops; and they uploaded the video on Twitter and Facebook to celebrate the netizens’ fury.<sup>73</sup> The duo also surfed on the wave of the “MeToo” Movement. In an interview with British *Vogue*, Gabbana claimed that some feminists’ accusations of sexual harassment were only exaggerations, “It’s not new ... Ah! He touched my ass! It’s not violence.”<sup>74</sup> In the meantime, they again boycotted themselves on Tshirt, which fed media and netizens another captivating topic.

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<sup>65</sup> Mower (2015a).

<sup>66</sup> Macswan (2015).

<sup>67</sup> Mower (2015b).

<sup>68</sup> Elliott/Qattanasuwan (2015: 131).

<sup>69</sup> Fashionbi (2021).

<sup>70</sup> Mower (2015b).

<sup>71</sup> Fashionbi (2021).

<sup>72</sup> Givhan (2018).

<sup>73</sup> Wang (2017).

<sup>74</sup> Madson (2017).

In Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity theory, people make sense of themselves and their lives by the stories that they tell.<sup>75</sup> When Dolce and Gabbana self-staged the boycott show on Twitter, they created a story and invited the audiences (or consumers) to participate in its development and circulation. Since "the practices of [fashion's] production, consumption, distribution, and diffusion are articulated through the media," as fashion scholar Agnès Rocamora asserts,<sup>76</sup> D&G's show hit two birds with one stone. It involved the audiences to be the creators and marketers of the brand.

In the 2017 campaign "DGLovesChina," the brand exploited the same strategy. It attempted to use social media users to create and advertise a socially controversial brand identity in China. The campaign launched a series of photos themed as "hang out with the locals" on Weibo, Twitter, and Instagram.<sup>77</sup> Two Italian photographers—the Morelli Brothers set the background in Beijing's most touristic and historical sites including the Great Wall, the Nanluoguxiang (南锣鼓巷), and the Tiananmen Square, and featured two groups of people—the D&G models and the passer-bys. The images highlight a socioeconomic hierarchy between the two groups of people via their disparate appearance and outfits. The following paragraphs examine two photos from the series and explore how D&G incorporated discriminative elements to spur discussions on social media.

In a picture, four models and two passer-bys are standing on the Great Wall, the latter are decentered and kept in distance from the former.<sup>78</sup> The models act in leisure and look confident, and their hair and clothing have a refined and tasteful style. In juxtaposition, the locals are shy and nervous, their hair looks messy and their clothes are in a seemingly low quality and kitschy design, which suggests a lack of taste and capacity for fashion consumption. Through the visual contrast of the two groups of people, the photographers have tactically rendered the superiority of D&G's style and quality and its wearers' good taste. According to Malcolm Barnard, fashion can create differences and inequalities in our social roles.<sup>79</sup> The disparate fashion status between the models and the passer-bys caricatures a difference between their financial and social status.

The second picture implements the same strategy to place a weather-beaten rural woman next to a well-dressed young female model in front of the Tiananmen Square.<sup>80</sup> The contrast of their appearance and outfits consolidates the idea that the socioeconomic hierarchy between people can be constructed by fashion.

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<sup>75</sup> Ricoeur (1992: 5).

<sup>76</sup> Rocamora (2017: 5).

<sup>77</sup> Dolce & Gabbana (2017a).

<sup>78</sup> Dolce & Gabbana (2017c).

<sup>79</sup> Barnard (1996: 153).

<sup>80</sup> Boonviset (2017a).

Angela Carroll points out that brand names “generate more socio-psychological associations in the minds of consumers,”<sup>81</sup> and people consume brands for the purposes of “self-reference, self-identity and self-articulation.”<sup>82</sup> The photo positions the wearers of D&G in a superior socioeconomic position, compared to the locals. It invites the audiences to mimic the models in order to acquire social recognition. Other photos in the series inherit a similar logic to render a disparity of finance and taste between the models and the locals. The background is set in the intricate lanes or *hutong* (胡同) in the historical city center of Beijing.

The Chinese did not conceive the representation of the socioeconomic hierarchy. Instead, their national pride was harmed.<sup>83</sup> The netizens were dissatisfied with the brand’s focus on the “oldest,” “poorest,” “ugliest” parts of Beijing including the *Hutong*; they blamed the brand for exposing “a side of China that doesn’t feature its positive traits as seen in big international events,” represented by the “Center of International Trade” (*guoji maoyi zhongxin*, 国际贸易中心) and the famous cosmopolitan bar street “*Sanlitun*” (三里屯).<sup>84</sup> D&G’s turnover in the fiscal year of 2017 dropped more than 10%.<sup>85</sup> To save the situation, the brand came out with a new plan. It reallocated the major customers from the traditional elite middle-aged clients, like Melania Trump, to the millennials who they thought might welcome their ‘jokes’ more genuinely.

In an interview with *Vogue*, Gabbana and Dolce confessed their love with the youngsters and believed that an angry and rebellious spirit would bridge the luxury brand to the young customers. “They share different values [...] with us [...] [who] pent-down,” and they “talk about everything,” because they lead “another life” and “have different values than us,” and “they’re so angry that we’ve given them the worst world.” “If you want to speak to your audiences” who were the new dominant consumer force, “you need to talk about your point of view, your life,” not just “outfits with a stylist going,” Gabbana put it,<sup>86</sup> “I love to be free, free, free, free, free, free. I love to say what I think [...] I post what I like.”<sup>87</sup> Later, the duo banned journalists from visiting D&G’s shows. They refused to participate in the world’s mainstream fashion carnival—Milan Fashion Week and rejected the “Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiano,” which is the governing organisation and

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<sup>81</sup> Carroll (2008: 147).

<sup>82</sup> Carroll (2008: 148).

<sup>83</sup> Liu (2017).

<sup>84</sup> Both areas in the “Center of International Trade” and “Sanlitun” are regarded by Chinese as the hubs of Beijing’s most fashionable and wealthy young people.

<sup>85</sup> Fashionbi (2021).

<sup>86</sup> Madson (2017).

<sup>87</sup> Givhan (2018).

lobbying group of Italian brands.<sup>88</sup> Gabbana called the young female celebrity Selena Gomez “very ugly.”<sup>89</sup> Angela Carroll asserts, consumers purchase certain brands to “achieve self-consistency” with their self-identity.<sup>90</sup> In the perspectives of Stefano Gabbana and Domenico Dolce, ‘rebelliousness,’ ‘social media frenzy,’ ‘angry,’ ‘freewill,’ ‘non-mainstream’ are the representative qualities of the millennials. They, therefore, incorporated the qualities in their own speech and behavior to demonstrate that the brand shared very similar characteristics with the young consumers and to plead them for recognition of the similarity.

The millennial customers in China were especially attractive to D&G, as the Chinese market accounted for more than a third of the world’s luxury spending.<sup>91</sup> In February 2018, it employed one of China’s most popular teenage idol Wang Junkai (王俊凯) to be its ambassador.<sup>92</sup> However, the second half of 2018 witnessed the Sino-US trade war and a slow-down in Chinese economy,<sup>93</sup> which forced D&G to consolidate its Euromerican market, while partially withdrawing from China in order to secure its revenue. The programs of the *Great Shanghai Show*, which was scheduled in November 2018, can explicitly elaborate D&G’s shifting market orientation. I will elaborate on this in the next part in *D&G’s Fashion shows and primary market*. The *Show*’s campaign—*Eating with Chopsticks* inherits the mocking style of the 2017 “DGLovesChina” campaign.<sup>94</sup> Yet, it incorporates more provocative topics including sexual, racial, and cultural controversies to manifest the rebellious young millennial spirit, because the brand was prepared to de-center China and was bolder to experiment. However, the adversity to the experiment was unexpectedly strong and led to the cancellation of the *Show* and boycott of D&G in China.

## 5 D&G’s fashion shows and primary markets from 2015 to 2019

Usually, a brand’s spring-summer show theme is significant for the fashion commentators to interpret its market positioning for the coming year. By deciphering the D&G fashion shows from 2015 to 2019, I hope to elaborate the brand’s change of

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<sup>88</sup> New York Times (2018).

<sup>89</sup> Heller (2018).

<sup>90</sup> Carroll (2008: 148).

<sup>91</sup> Cristoferi (2019).

<sup>92</sup> News.cn (2018).

<sup>93</sup> Nicolaci da Costa (2019).

<sup>94</sup> Baker (2018).



target customers and marketing strategies and to prove that the campaign video *Eating with Chopsticks* is part of the brand's plan to perform the 'rebellious' millennial identity.

D&G's *Spring/Summer 2015 Women Fashion Show* salutes to the brand's DNA—the Italian Catholic tradition by highlighting religious symbolic patterns, designs, and colors.<sup>95</sup> Commented by fashion editor Tim Blanks, "reincarnations, black lace, hot blood [...] adding up to enough Catholic guilt to choke a pope."<sup>96</sup> The *2016 Spring/Summer Women Show* embraces youth and a different representation of "Italian traditional" aesthetic.<sup>97</sup> The models in raggy, material-stingy, and flower and letter print garments took selfies with cellphones on stage to mimic the care-free technophile millennial generation.<sup>98</sup> As Sarah Mower puts it, "it seems that Italian style and culture—the flamboyant, sensual, colorful sides of it—are being appreciated again," which was agreed by Gabbana, "We think it was the beginning of Italian fashion."<sup>99</sup> The *2017 Spring/Summer Show*<sup>100</sup> and the *2018 Spring/Summer Show*<sup>101</sup> continued the juvenating trend. In 2017, a group of youngsters breakdanced on the walkway, which was exoticized with tropical plants.<sup>102</sup> The next year, the youngsters strutted around on the catwalk in an electro-pop music, wearing poker cards and animal printed garments.<sup>103</sup>

The *2019 Spring/Summer Show*,<sup>104</sup> which took place in fall 2018, before the launch of *Eating with Chopstick*, marked a significant turn in D&G's client positioning. It reduced the elements of youth and China. Fewer Asian models were hired, and the jumping colors and playful patterns became less on clothes and accessories. The brand returned to its Italian "DNA"—Catholic, femininity, mid-age, and heterosexuality. Some of the brand's most cherished celebrity models—Monica Bellucci, Carla Bruni, and Eva Herzigova were invited to walk on the T-stage in black tight-waistline gowns and stilettos.<sup>105</sup>

To follow the tone of the *2019 Spring/Summer Show*, the *Great Shanghai Show* was planned in three programs: "DNA," "Future," and "Chinese New Year,"<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Dolce & Gabbana (2014).

<sup>96</sup> Blanks (2014).

<sup>97</sup> Dolce & Gabbana (2019).

<sup>98</sup> Vogue (2015).

<sup>99</sup> Mower (2015a).

<sup>100</sup> Fashion Channel (2016).

<sup>101</sup> Dolce & Gabbana (2017b).

<sup>102</sup> Fashion Channel (2016).

<sup>103</sup> Dolce & Gabbana (2017b).

<sup>104</sup> Dolce & Gabbana (2018a).

<sup>105</sup> Dolce & Gabbana (2018a).

<sup>106</sup> Xin jingbao (2018).



using garments, dance, music, and choreography to announce the brand's new market orientation in 2019, which is Euromerica, the millennials, and then China. The 'DNA' section was planned to take place at first and to present formal dressing with D&G's traditional fashion elements. 'Future' would embrace youth and the modern symbolism, such as clothing and accessories in transparent synthetic materials. The 'Chinese New Year' would be at last. Its venue was decorated in golden ornaments and was stuffed with auspicious decors of cloud, tiger, embroidery, and peony; a group of dragon dancers were ready to perform on the catwalk; models were assigned with red glittering gowns and clothes with panda patterns.<sup>107</sup> Prioritizing and highlighting the Italian 'DNA' in the show demonstrates the brand's determination to reorient its market from China to the Euro-american market.

D&G's sales in 2018 endorsed the decision. The cancellation of the *Great Shanghai Show* in China seems to have only affected the Asia-Pacific market. The brand's reputation and profit in the Euromerican market remained intact. A few months after the incident, top Western political figures, Hollywood stars, and social media influencers including Melania Trump, Emilia Clarke, and Kim Kardashian appeared on red carpets in custom D&G clothes,<sup>108</sup> which resurrected the brand's market position in the West. In the fiscal year 2018, D&G's global revenue increased by 4.9%. The United States contributed 16% of the growth, while Italy and other European countries accounted for 23 and 28% respectively.<sup>109</sup> A commentary article on *Business of Fashion* regards the growing sales as a sign that "Dolce & Gabbana's antagonism toward critics and disdain for political correctness remains a viable strategy."<sup>110</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

Indeed, fashion scandals are effective for marketing purposes.<sup>111</sup> From 2015 to 2018, D&G had extensively exploited socially controversial topics and persons in its campaigns to construct a youthful, proactive, and rebellious brand identity and used various social media platforms to promote the identity among the netizens. The campaigns with Melania Trump, 'IVF baby,' the 'Me Too' Movement, and the video *Eating with Chopsticks* are well-curated conversations between the fashion

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<sup>107</sup> Xin jingbao (2018).

<sup>108</sup> Friedman (2019).

<sup>109</sup> Cristoferi (2019).

<sup>110</sup> Nanda/O'Connor (2020).

<sup>111</sup> Dahl/Frankenberger/Manchanda (2003).

house and global netizens. The brand took advantage of the popular topics and celebrities, used them as carriers and curators of its identity, and exploited social media users as “producers of [its] brand content”<sup>112</sup> by encouraging them to participate in the online discussions and debate about the events and the people. As a result, the netizens, celebrities, and events all contributed to the creation and development of the brand identity and the promotion of the brand.

Among the many campaign materials, *Eating with Chopsticks* has the most complex synthesis of contentious elements. It exaggerates the sexual, racial, and cultural differences between the Chinese woman and the Italian man through visual, audial, and linguistic methods, and conveys the messages to audiences in three layers in straightforward and nuanced ways. The product permits a multiplicity of interpretations and is made to spark controversies among netizens. Nevertheless, it was not as successful as the campaigns in the past due to the Chinese’s nationalistic pride and sensitivity to related topics. Its failure was unexpected. It forced D&G to almost withdraw from the Chinese market, rather than to decentralize it.

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<sup>112</sup> Voorveld et al. (2018: 5).

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