

## DOLCE & GABBANA: RACISM, STEREOTYPES, OR BEING FUNNY?<sup>1</sup>

*Jiya Hai wrote this case under the supervision of Professor Ann Peng solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.*

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On November 21, 2018, in Shanghai, China, millions of dollars and 500 viewers were at stake in a one-hour fashion show featuring the major fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana (D&G).<sup>2</sup> However, the brand instead cancelled the show only hours before it was scheduled to begin after controversial video advertisements and private Instagram messages, allegedly sent by Stefano Gabbana himself, went viral. The predominant accusation—that the videos were racist—was seen as justification for subsequent boycotts by Chinese celebrities and models.<sup>3</sup>

How could D&G repair the damage done to its reputation, especially in China?

### THE CONTROVERSIAL VIDEOS

The three 40-second videos were released on D&G's Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook profiles, as well as its Weibo account, to promote "The Great Show," which was intended to serve as a "tribute to China."<sup>4</sup> The videos were removed from D&G's official Instagram account but were later posted to YouTube.<sup>5</sup> D&G subsequently released an official apology video.<sup>6</sup>

The videos showed an Asian model using chopsticks and struggling to consume Italian food. In the first episode, the model is trying to eat an entire pizza, prodding it with her chopsticks as a narrator asks whether it is too huge for her and offers advice to use the chopsticks as pliers. These comments were largely perceived as patronizing. The second and third episodes saw the model attempting to eat a cannoli and spaghetti, respectively.

The videos sparked immediate and large-scale outcry on social media, with many interpreting them as a racist mockery of Chinese people. Reactions to the videos varied. Some described the series as "extremely racist" and suggested the videos had been intentionally created to spark public attention, no matter how negative, for profit. Proponents of this view suggested that the videos were not just racist but also "both pitiful and disrespectful."<sup>7</sup> Others said the videos were not as offensive as generally perceived. One parody video circulating on Weibo showed "a Caucasian man attempting to eat soup with a knife."<sup>8</sup>

Gabbana's response, on Instagram, to model Michele Tranovo's criticism of the brand's advertising only added fuel to the fire. Screen captures of the exchange depicted a series of messages in which Gabbana

appeared to complain about the backlash sparked by the videos and also to direct derogatory remarks toward Chinese people and China in general.<sup>9</sup>

The designer denied being the author of the messages in question: he and the brand posted messages alleging that their Instagram accounts had been hacked, with Gabbana writing “not me” over the screen captures. D&G used its official Instagram account to post a message apologizing for the distress caused by the “unauthorized” posts and to say the brand had “nothing but respect” for China and its people. An official statement to the press followed, saying that the brand’s dream had been to offer a tribute to China’s history and vision with love for China and the brand itself.<sup>10</sup>

However, many thought these statements were insufficient and insincere, and vast numbers of Chinese consumers strongly doubted the hacking excuse.<sup>11</sup> The public pointed out that the designers had previously apologized—for example, to Elton John, who subsequently accepted the apology<sup>12</sup>—and yet continued to offend individuals. For example, Gabbana body-shamed Lady Gaga over her Super Bowl half-time outfit—and later apologized.<sup>13</sup> As the incidents mounted, it could be argued that D&G simply had a habit of making bigoted remarks and then making empty apologies rather than allowing meaningful discussion.

## **DOLCE & GABBANA: COMPANY BACKGROUND**

D&G, founded in 1985, had become a famous international fashion house in the fashion and luxury goods sector. The brand produced and distributed high-end clothing, footwear, accessories, and beauty products for women, men, and children. D&G was owned by the D&G Group and managed in three operating divisions: production, distribution, and licences. This direct control permitted the group its distinctive style, which was based largely on its interpretation of the Mediterranean culture of Italy. D&G’s headquarters were in Milan, and it had branches in New York, Sao Paulo, Tokyo, and Hong Kong.<sup>14</sup>

The company founders, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, were the driving source behind the brand’s creative and stylistic products and activities. They also oversaw development of the company’s strategies, both on a global scale and at the company’s core. Dolce was born in Polizzi Generosa in 1958. Starting in childhood, he had worked for his family’s small clothing business. Gabbana was born in Milan in 1962, and he spent some time studying graphics before turning to fashion. After working as assistant designers, the two founded Dolce & Gabbana with an opening runway show in Milan in 1985—part of the new talents category and at the invitation of Italian fashion promoter Beppe Modenese. The two designers were among three chosen to present collections at the show. This event convinced Dolce and Gabbana that they could take their unique approach to fashion far.<sup>15</sup>

In 1986, D&G produced Real Women, their first collection. A year later, they launched a knitwear line, then followed up with beachwear and lingerie lines in 1989. A major success occurred in 1988, when an agreement with the Onward Kashiwayama Group allowed them to begin distributing their designs in Japan. Their first men’s collection appeared in 1990. Four years later, they launched the D&G label, inspired by a more youthful street style. The clothes in question were produced and distributed by the Italian company Ittierre SpA.<sup>16</sup>

The company went on to launch several fragrances, a line of eyewear, and music CDs. A decade after its launch of Real Women, D&G published Ten Years of Dolce & Gabbana to showcase important advertising texts and images. In 1999, the brand created a children’s collection and presented it at a children’s fashion show in Florence.<sup>17</sup>

D&G owed much of its massive size and success to the designers' use of elements from Italian culture. The founders, credited as the inventors of a Mediterranean style, derived inspiration from the Sicily of Luchino Visconti's film *The Leopard* as well as from "women of Italian realism," such as actress Anna Magnani. Nicoletta Gasperini, a journalist for Italian fashion weekly *Donna*, "helped define their image" as "a mediated image of culture" based on the Italian people's feelings as conveyed to the designers.<sup>18</sup>

The catalyst of the brand's international success was the designers' well-known friendship with Madonna. The pop singer ordered a corset from them for the launch of Alek Keshishian's film *Truth or Dare: In Bed with Madonna*. In 1992, Madonna participated in the D&G party and runway show, which effectively publicized her friendship with Dolce and Gabbana. Only a year later, the star requested that the pair design 1,500 costumes for her *Girly Show* tour.<sup>19</sup>

Since its inception, D&G had spread around the globe. Its most recent expansion was in the spring of 2018, when it opened its 18th US store, a freestanding flagship store in Miami. The two-level, 500-square-metre boutique, a tribute to the designers' passion for the performing arts, was designed by architect Gwenael Nicolas of Curiosity and took cues from an 18th-century opera house in Milan. The boutique had a museum-like feel to it and displayed women's and men's accessories and ready-to-wear collections. It was located within the city's design district.<sup>20</sup>

## DISPUTES WITH CELEBRITIES

The founders of D&G were not unfamiliar with controversy and criticism. In 2017, Gabbana publicly criticized Maria Grazia Chiuri, the artistic director of Dior, on Instagram, despite her accomplishments and success. On a photo of Dior's couture show, Gabbana commented, "She has gotten it all wrong, as usual."<sup>21</sup> In a less direct but still negative critique of another brand, Gabbana reposted photos comparing shoes designed by D&G and Chanel in 2017, calling the similarities "interesting."<sup>22</sup> Gabbana also said that Victoria Beckham was not truly a fashion designer. Beckham did not respond but indirectly addressed Gabbana after the in vitro fertilization (IVF) controversy.<sup>23</sup> In 2018, Gabbana said that he did not want a Japanese designer to work for the brand.<sup>24</sup> A comment had not yet been issued on this topic, but many perceived his words to be racist.<sup>25</sup>

In 2015, Gabbana and Dolce largely ostracized themselves from the gay community when they referred to in IVF as "synthetic."<sup>26</sup> Dolce, speaking to the magazine *Panorama*, called children born of the technique unconvincing "children of chemistry" and referred to surrogates as "wombs for hire, . . . choice[s] from a catalogue."<sup>27</sup> He went on to say that not even psychiatrists could help children who were not products of an act of love.<sup>28</sup> Gabbana said something similar, asserting that children needed a mother and a father.<sup>29</sup> Dolce said that, because he was gay, he could not have children. The designer accepted that this was the correct order of things, as a family's natural makeup could not be changed. In response, Elton John, who had two children with his husband David Furnish, took to Instagram to argue that IVF allowed "legions of loving people, both straight and gay, to fulfill their dream of having children" and said that D&G's thinking was archaic, like its fashions. He then began a boycott movement, saying he would never wear D&G again. Many celebrities joined the boycott, horrified by Dolce's comments.<sup>30</sup>

In a statement to ABC News, Gabbana wrote that freedom of expression was necessary to democracy, and Dolce added that he had simply discussed his personal views without judging other people's choices or decisions. As the boycott gained traction, Gabbana gave an interview in which he said that John was intelligent but ignorant because he preached understanding and tolerance only to attack others.<sup>31</sup>

## CONTROVERSIAL MARKETING STRATEGIES

The controversial video in which the Chinese model used chopsticks to consume Italian food was not the first time a major brand had needed to apologize for offending a large market of Chinese consumers—and it would likely not be the last. Usually, an enormously wealthy brand such as D&G would have little trouble moving past accusations of racism. Dolce and Gabbana were free to continue making politically incorrect statements and acting offensively because they did not need to appease investors. They retained direct control over the brand, which was not a conglomerate like many other labels. Some commentators suggested that D&G could act this way because the company did not consider its customers to be like others. The people who wore their clothing were often extremely wealthy and far removed from the everyday lives of public citizens.<sup>32</sup>

D&G also had a long history of using negative advertising and controversies to publicize its brand. In 2016, it received significant backlash for identifying a shoe in its spring/summer collection as a “slave sandal.”<sup>33</sup> In 2017, its Dolce & Gabbana Loves China campaign was criticized on Weibo for depicting a backward, underdeveloped view of Beijing.<sup>34</sup> The brand’s key commercial strategy was to place well-dressed models among “normal” people. In its 2017 marketing campaign in Beijing, the company’s portrayal of poor working class citizens as “normal” was seen as distasteful and misrepresentative of China’s economic progress.<sup>35</sup>

D&G, along with several other major luxury brands, had adjusted its expansion plans and marketing strategies to accommodate an increase in the importance of the Asian luxury goods market. “The Great Show,” cancelled on November 21, 2018, was intended to serve as an indicator that D&G was catering to China. However, criticism grew along with the increased instances of racism, disrespect, and cultural appropriation by the fashion industry. These controversies triggered a renewed discussion about racism and cultural sensitivity in the fashion industry.<sup>36</sup>

Some argued that the issue stemmed from a “cult of personality” within fashion’s centralized power system. Celebrity designers had become public figures with massive followings, often due in part to their outspoken personalities. Major luxury fashion brands also often relied on these personalities for relevance and recognition. Social media, essential to consolidating “cult” followings for designers, also made it easier for a global audience to follow a designer’s controversial words and deeds.<sup>37</sup>

## BOYCOTT FROM CHINESE CUSTOMERS

Chinese-French model Estelle Chen, who ultimately withdrew from D&G’s planned show in Shanghai, called D&G’s actions racist, and wrote that the designers loved money rather than China. Chen acknowledged China’s wealth, but asserted that the country was also rich in its values, culture, and people.<sup>38</sup>

The model was not alone in boycotting the event: agents of brand ambassadors also stated that their clients would not attend the show; event staff and models wrote “NOT ME” on images of their badges; and modelling agency China Bentley announced that dozens of its models were pulling out. Western models, including Lucky Blue Smith, also announced their support of the boycott and pulled out of the show.<sup>39</sup> In addition, previous customers and fans posted videos of their D&G products in flames. One writer and director, Xiang Kai, said he was willing to waste tens of thousands of dollars for his nation’s dignity and to “awaken” the Chinese people.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to the Chinese public viewing the videos as an insult to their national identity, the series had other severe consequences. Chinese e-platforms—including prominent e-commerce sites such as Alibaba Group Holding Limited’s Taobao Marketplace and JD.com Inc.—stopped carrying D&G products.

Following their lead, smaller platforms in China, such as Secoo Holding, Kaola, Vipshop Holdings Ltd., and Netease Inc., also stopped selling D&G products on their websites.<sup>41</sup> The e-commerce segment of Lane Crawford Ltd. in Hong Kong did the same.<sup>42</sup>

D&G's problems extended beyond China, with European and North American consumers taking to social media to denounce the brand and returning items to department stores. Less than a week after the release of the videos, the UK-based e-commerce company Yoox Net-A-Porter Group also stopped carrying D&G.<sup>43</sup>

Amid the criticism and vengeance directed toward D&G, the model in the ads also received significant personal backlash, with the campaign almost ending her career.<sup>44</sup> Many said that the brand had constructed her makeup to make her seem more Asian, with smaller eyes, and that the model herself was acting like a clown. One commentator mockingly asked, "Have you learned how to use chopsticks now?"<sup>45</sup>

## FINANCIAL COSTS

This particular controversy could have major consequences for D&G. Some D&G stores in Shanghai had since been vandalized, with posters regarding Gabbana's denial.<sup>46</sup> Angelica Cheung, editor of *Vogue China*, wrote that a population of 1.4 billion was a "huge consumption power" and that the hundreds of millions voicing their outrage could not be ignored.<sup>47</sup> In 2017, Chinese consumers were responsible for almost one-third of the world's total spending on luxury goods.<sup>48</sup>

Using calculations based on D&G's estimated profits of €1.3 billion<sup>49</sup> in 2018, with 30 per cent from China, *Women's Wear Daily* said this could cost the company €400 million—excluding the effects of cancelling the show and the consequences of Western consumers joining the boycott. Based on this logic, the potential loss for D&G could only worsen, as the Chinese luxury goods market was huge and rapidly continued to grow. A 2018 report by Bain & Company predicted that the Chinese market for luxury goods would grow up to 22 per cent by the end of the year.<sup>50</sup> Brand Finance estimated that 20 per cent of D&G's brand value could be wiped out.<sup>51</sup>

As millennial and generation Z consumers continued to make purchases online, Chinese consumers were estimated to take up 46 per cent of all luxury spending.<sup>52</sup> In contrast to the setback encountered by D&G, other major brands had begun to aggressively court this market. Some luxury brands had even played up their appreciation of the Chinese culture, in stark contrast to D&G's marketing approach. A notable example was Michael Kors, who worked directly with Chinese students to promote a fan meet-up event and "learned to speak Chinese." With this display of cultural respect, the brand's New York Fashion Week sales soared.<sup>53</sup>

A professor at New York University's Stern School of Business agreed that the controversy was a crisis and that D&G would have difficulty recovering. Andrew Gilman, founder of the crisis communications firm CommCore Consulting Group, said that global brands such as D&G needed to retain local sensitivities.<sup>54</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Since the cancellation of the Shanghai show, no tangible change had taken place in D&G's general behaviour or marketing. The most evident markers of a response included the video apology and subsequent messages on social media platforms about the supposed hacks that had resulted in the inflammatory messages and the videos themselves. However, given the reality that the Chinese luxury market was so large and continued to grow, it was likely that the aforementioned expert opinion about the brand's profits suffering from this mistake would become reality. What mitigation strategy or actions could D&G undertake to repair the damage done to its reputation?

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This case has been written on the basis of published sources only. Consequently, the interpretation and perspectives presented in this case are not necessarily those of Dolce & Gabbana or any of its employees.
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