

# Come mangiare un cannolo con le bacchette: The Contested Field of Luxury Fashion in China, a Case Study of the 2018 Dolce & Gabbana Advertising Incident

Qian Huang      Alice Janssens

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## Abstract

A story that begins with a pair of chopsticks, pizza, spaghetti and a cannolo and comes towards its close with models waiting at a partially abandoned dress rehearsal, the saga of the Dolce & Gabbana ‘The Great Show’ is one of digitisation and conflictual interactions between an international luxury fashion brand, Chinese and international media, and consumers. This paper aims to explore these conflicts. Adopting Bourdieu’s field theory, it interprets the interactions between actors involved in the development of the incident. By analysing the timeline of events and actors’ framing, it explains how consumers, social media influencers, established media, and the brand negotiated variant forms of capital in the field of global luxury fashion and its Chinese market. It proposes that the capital held by certain actors engaged in the global luxury fashion industry was converted during November 2018 and provides a framework for understanding these developments that may be translated to analyse similar events.

**Keywords:** Dolce & Gabbana; China; luxury fashion; social media; field theory.

**Qian Huang:** Erasmus University Rotterdam (Netherlands)

✉ [huang@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:huang@eshcc.eur.nl)

She is a PhD candidate and lecturer at the Erasmus University Rotterdam Department of Media & Communication. She studies digital vigilantism in China. Qian’s PhD research is a part of the research project funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) entitled *Digital Vigilantism: Mapping the terrain and assessing societal impacts*. Qian received a Bachelor’s degree in English and International Studies from China Foreign Affairs University, followed by a Master’s degree in Global Communication from Chinese University of Hong Kong.

**Alice Janssens:** Erasmus University Rotterdam (Netherlands)

✉ [janssens@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:janssens@eshcc.eur.nl)

She is PhD candidate and lecturer at Erasmus University Rotterdam Department of History. Her dissertation, *The Rise and Fall of Berlin as an Interwar Fashion Centre* focuses on the business history of fashion cities, employing the German capital as a case. Alice holds a Master’s degree in Cultural Economics from Erasmus University Rotterdam and has published on the relationship between intellectual property and fashion. She has professional experience in the fashion, cultural heritage and contemporary art industries.

## Introduction

“Greater China is expected to overtake the US as the largest fashion market in the world in 2019” proclaims the latest State of Fashion report.<sup>1</sup> Emphasizing a focus on luxury and emerging consumer markets, the report highlights the key role of the growing Asian sector.<sup>2</sup> However, along with this affirmation the publication bears a warning for brands intending to capitalise on the rapid growth of the Chinese market. It cautions that while the returns for successful brands may be manifold, “so are the penalties for those who fail.”<sup>3</sup> Cases of successful Asian expansion by Western fashion brands are many, yet one example from 2018 provides a view of the risks brands may face when engaging with the Chinese market.

In November 2018, Italian luxury fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana (D&G) released a series of advertisements for its Shanghai fashion show, ‘The Great Show,’ on social media. These videos promoted an event marked to be the brand’s biggest, an homage to the Chinese consumer who accounted for approximately 30 percent of D&G’s 2018 revenues.<sup>4</sup> In these videos, a stereotypically Chinese-looking model wearing a Dolce & Gabbana dress and jewellery awkwardly eats exaggeratedly large Italian foods—a pizza, spaghetti, and a cannolo—with chopsticks. Overlaid above a soundtrack of Chinese folk music, a Mandarin-speaking male voiceover introduces the film, incorrectly pronouncing the company’s name. The narrator makes sexual innuendos about the size of the dishes and describes chopsticks as ‘stick-shaped cutlery’ while referring to the food as ‘the great Italian cuisine.’ This contrasting, normative presentation of the two cultures along with the narrator’s intentionally strong accent and the model’s exaggerated facial expressions resulted in extensive backlash against the adverts from fashion followers as well as Chinese and international press. Criticism increased following the publication of screenshots of an Instagram conversation between a netizen and the purportedly hacked account attributed to Stefano Gabbana. In these images the netizen criticises the campaign and in response @stefanogabbana derides China as “...Ignorant Dirty Smelling Mafia” and “the country of [poop emojis].”<sup>5</sup> Hashtags including #boycottdolce began trending across Chinese and global social media networks following the public sharing of the adverts and screenshots by fashion followers and industry watchdog @diet\_prada. Between November 21st and 24th, more than 50 hashtags related to the D&G incident were trending on Sina Weibo with 31 of them reaching over 1 million searches. The most searched #DGTheGreatShow-Cancelled had been read over 870 million times by December 1.<sup>6</sup>

The events and public discussion resulted not only in a brand boycott, but also influencers and models quitting ‘The Great Show,’ celebrities ending collaborations, and the event’s cancellation allegedly at the request of the Chinese Culture and Tourism Department. The incident also precipitated the removal of D&G products from retail locations including luxury department store Lane Crawford, and all Chinese and some European online shopping sites. Despite an apology video by D&G founders, Vogue China

1. Business of Fashion and McKinsey & Company, “The State of Fashion 2019,” (2019), <https://www.mckinsey.com/-/media/McKinsey/Industries/Retail/Our%20Insights/The%20State%20of%20Fashion%202019%20A%20year%20of%20awakening/The-State-of-Fashion-2019-final.ashx>.
2. Jean-Noël Kapferer, “The future of luxury: Challenges and opportunities,” *Journal of Brand Management*, vol. 21, no. 9 (2014).
3. Business of Fashion and McKinsey, “The State of Fashion,” 11.
4. Vogue, “Dolce & Gabbana Cancels Its Shanghai Great Show Amid Controversy,” (November 21, 2018), <https://www.vogue.com/article/dolce-gabbana-cancels-shanghai-great-show?verso=true>.
5. Vanessa Friedman and Sui-Lee Wee, “The Crash and Burn of Dolce & Gabbana,” *The New York Times*, (November 23, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/23/fashion/dolce-gabbana-china-disaster-backlash.html>; Mario D’Arco, Vittoria Marino and Riccardo Resciniti, “How to (Not) Survive a Social Media Firestorm: The Dolce & Gabbana’s Ad Debacle in China,” in *Advances in National Brand and Private Label Marketing*, eds. Francisco J. Martínez-López, Juan Carlos Gásquez-Abad and Anne Roggeveen (New York: Springer, 2019), 181–9.
6. SNSdatamining, “D&G ruhua shijian yuqing fupan baogao,” *Zhihu.com*, (December 5, 2018), <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/51596965>; NPR Goats and Soda, “Dolce & Gabbana Ad (With Chopsticks) Provokes Public Outrage in China,” *NPR*, (December 1, 2018), <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/12/01/671891818/dolce-gabbana-ad-with-chopsticks-provokes-public-outrage-in-china?t=1571753940756>.

also cancelled all D&G content and advertisements in its spring issues.<sup>7</sup> The events harmed not only D&G's image, but also its global business, with its Asia-Pacific market shrinking from 25% to 22% of total turnover in March 2019.<sup>8</sup>

Given the frequency of comparable events, we believe the D&G case is demonstrative of a trend of conflicting interactions between actors in the global luxury fashion industry and its Chinese market.<sup>9</sup> Thus we address the incident as an indication of broader societal and structural change rather than analysing it as a micro-level study of marketing and consumer behaviour.<sup>10</sup> By doing so, this research provides a framework to understand comparable cases. The following research addresses the question: How does the 2018 Dolce & Gabbana incident represent the conflicting structural interactions between actors in the digitised global luxury fashion industry and its Chinese market?

## Global Luxury Fashion, its Agents and Capital

Analyses of luxury fashion conducted by scholars of fashion, sociology, and cultural studies often provide macro-perspectives, theorising about the nature of the industry and its products. These works regard the importance of branding and marketing as an outcome of luxury products' representative and symbolic nature, goods described by Coco Chanel as necessities beyond necessity.<sup>11</sup> These symbolic 'unnecessaries' are deemed to function within Veblen's realm of conspicuous consumption, as products with psychological and status value—expensive items purchased not for utility, but to display social class, association, and wealth.<sup>12</sup> While Veblen's definition and its relation to social class have been debated, the symbolic, geographic, and heritage nature of luxury items are deemed of key importance.<sup>13</sup> As such, branding and marketing of these characteristics is paramount. Brands must sell their products, and in order to do so must associate items with the exquisite nature of luxury and a strong brand identity while functioning within the ever-increasing speed of fashion cycles.<sup>14</sup>

Recent meso- and micro-level studies from the business history of fashion and cultural economics disciplines have emphasised the importance of intermediaries and legal systems as key structures for an industry threatened by increasing digitisation and globalisation.<sup>15</sup> Work has further addressed digitisa-

7. SNSdatamining, "D&G ruhua shijian"; Tiffany Ap, "Lane Crawford Drops Dolce & Gabbana After Shanghai Firestorm," *WWD*, (November 23, 2018), <https://wwd.com/business-news/business-features/lane-crawford-drops-dolce-gabbana-after-shanghai-firestorm-1202912013/>; Robert Williams, "Dolce & Gabbana Is Still Paying for Insulting Chinese Women," *Bloomberg*, (March 7, 2019), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-07/dolce-gabbana-is-still-paying-for-insulting-chinese-women>.
8. Claudia Cristoferi, "Dolce & Gabbana sees sales slowdown in China after ad backlash," *Reuters*, (August 27, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-dolce-gabbana-results/dolce-gabbana-sees-sales-slowdown-in-china-after-ad-backlash-idUSKCNrVHrEV>.
9. Elizabeth Paton, "Versace, Givenchy and Coach Apologize to China After T-Shirt Row," *The New York Times*, (August 12, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/12/fashion/china-donatella-versace-t-shirt.html>.
10. D'Arco et al., "How to (Not) Survive."
11. Woody Hochswender, "Review/Television; The Chanel Who Created the Fashions," *The New York Times* (July 25, 1989), <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/07/25/movies/review-television-the-chanel-who-created-the-fashions.html>; Antoinette Fionda and Christopher Moore, "The anatomy of the luxury fashion brand," *Brand Management*, vol. 16, nn. 5–6 (2009).
12. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (London: Macmillan, 1899); Fionda and Moore, "The anatomy of the luxury fashion brand"; Jonathan Vickers and Franck Renand, "The Marketing of Luxury Goods: An exploratory study – three conceptual dimensions," *The Marketing Review*, vol. 3, no. 4 (2003); Radha Chadha and Paul Husband, *The Cult of The Luxury Brand: Inside Asia's Love Affair with Luxury* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2006); Uche Okonkwo, *Luxury Fashion Branding: Trends, Tactics, Techniques* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
13. Agnès Rocamora, "Fields of fashion: Critical insights into Bourdieu's sociology of culture," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 2, no. 3 (2002); Jean-Noël Kapferer and Vincent Bastien, "The Specificity of Luxury Management: Turning Marketing Upside Down," in *Advances in Luxury Brand Management*, eds. Jean-Noël Kapferer, Joachim Kernstock, Tim Brexendorf and Shaun Powell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 311–22.
14. Kapferer and Bastien, "The Specificity of Luxury Management"; Fionda and Moore, "The anatomy of the luxury fashion brand," 348.
15. Regina Lee Blaszczyk and Ben Wubs, eds., *The Fashion Forecasters: A Hidden History of Color and Trend Prediction*

tion, mediatization, and the impact of new media forms on the industry.<sup>16</sup> While these diverse works engage with the fashion context and pose questions about communication, they often do not directly analyse the structural changes caused by new media.

Luxury fashion branding scandals similar to the D&G incident have often been addressed via micro-level analysis. These works generally focus on individual producers' strategies and consumer attitudes and purchasing choices.<sup>17</sup> For example, crisis communication and public relations scholars have provided insights into how brands should react in order to minimise harm to their image and business.<sup>18</sup> Business management scholars have regarded such cases as demonstrative of the cultural challenges foreign brands may encounter when conducting business in China.<sup>19</sup> These analyses form part of a larger body addressing the interaction of international brands with Chinese producers and markets which emphasises the importance of the growing Chinese market for global goods.<sup>20</sup> Works within present problems resulting from differences in understanding, branding, and production, but also highlight the key role of Chinese consumers and their interest in international and well-established products and brands.<sup>21</sup>

The range of discussion surrounding the luxury fashion industry, its actors, digitisation, and branding strategies holds significant value. However, both grand theories and micro-level cases provide limited insights for the clear understanding of the structural interactions between different actors in the D&G incident. Therefore, this work will blend understanding from the above studies with analysis employing a meso-level approach.

## Field Theory and Fashion

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu bridges the above-mentioned approaches by applying Field Theory to the fashion industry.<sup>22</sup> Straddling the gulf between macro and micro, Bourdieu argues that global so-

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(London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Regina Lee Blaszczyk and Veronique Pouillard, eds., *European Fashion: The Creation of a Global Industry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); Alice Janssens and Mariangela Lavanga, "An Expensive, Confusing, and Ineffective Suit of Armor: Investigating Risks of Design Piracy and Perceptions of the Design Rights Available to Emerging Fashion Designers in the Digital Age," *Fashion Theory*, (2018).

16. Taylor Brydges, Brian Hrac and Mariangela Lavanga, "Evolution versus entrenchment: debating the impact of digitization, democratization and diffusion in the global fashion industry," *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, vol. 5, no.2 (2018); Agnès Rocamora, "How New are New Media," in *Fashion Media: Past and Present*, eds. Djurdja Bartlett, Shaun Cole and Agnès Rocamora (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Agnès Rocamora, "Mediatization and digital media in the field of fashion," in *The End of Fashion: Clothing and Dress in the Age of Globalization*, eds. Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 155–64.
17. Elitico Marketing, "D&G ruhua shijian, fenxi pinpai gai ruhe yingdui xinmeiti weiji gongguan," (November 23, 2018), <https://eliticomarketing.com.au/dg%E8%BE%Br%E5%8D%8E%E4%BA%8B%E4%BB%B6%EF%BC%8C%E5%88%86%E6%9E%90%E5%93%81%E7%89%8C%E8%AF%A5%E5%A6%82%E4%BD%95%E5%BA%94%E5%AF%B9%E6%96%B0%E5%AA%92%E4%BD%93%E5%8D%B1%E6%9C%BA/>; Hannes Gurzki and David Woisetschlager, "Mapping the luxury research landscape: A bibliometric citation analysis," *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 77 (2017).
18. Teresa Sádaba, Patricia SanMiguel and Paula Gargoles, "Communication Crisis in Fashion: From the Rana Plaza Tragedy to the Bravo Tekstil Factory Crisis," in *Fashion Communication in the Digital Age*, eds. Nadzeya Kalbaska, Teresa Sádaba, Francesca Cominelli and Lorenzo Cantoni (New York: Springer, 2019), 259–75; D'Arco et al., "How to (Not) Survive."
19. Fabian Jintae Froese, Dylan Sutherland, Jeoung Lee, Yipeng Liu and Yuan Pan, "Challenges for foreign companies in China: implications for research and practice," *Asian Business and Management*, vol. 18, no. 4 (September 2019).
20. Simona Segre Reinach, "Fashion and National Identity: Interactions between Italian and Chinese in the Global Fashion Industry," *Business and Economic History On-line*, vol.7 (2009); Wessie Ling and Simona Segre Reinach, eds., *Fashion in Multiple Chinas: Chinese Styles in the Transglobal Landscape* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018); Kelly Tian and Lily Dong, *Consumer-citizens Of China: The Role Of Foreign Brands In The Imagined Future China* (London: Routledge, 2010); Francesca Bonetti, "Italian luxury fashion brands in China: a retail perspective," *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2014); Simona Segre Reinach, "One Fashion, Two Nations: Italian-Chinese Collaborations" in *Fabricating Transnational Capitalism: A Collaborative Ethnography of Italian-Chinese Global Fashion*, eds. Lisa Rofel and Sylvia Yanagisako (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 190–216.
21. Bopeng Zhang and Jung-Hwan Kim, "Luxury fashion consumption in China: Factors affecting attitude and purchase intent," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2013).
22. Agnès Rocamora, "Pierre Bourdieu: The Field of Fashion," in *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, eds. Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (London: I.B.Tauris, 2016), 233–50.

ciety is structured into a number of distinct meso-level sub-spaces dedicated to specific types of activity - fields.<sup>23</sup> These fields, according to Swartz's interpretation, "denote arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate and monopolize... different kinds of capital."<sup>24</sup> Bourdieu and Delsaut regard fashion as a competitive field ruled by conflict for the exclusive power to impose legitimate symbols of distinction upon clothing, a cultural field split between restricted and large-scale production.<sup>25</sup> Restricted production is represented as purely artistic, while the latter focuses on the *bourgeois* mass market and is dominated by the quest for profitability.<sup>26</sup> While this division has been updated in discussions of the fashion system, it presents key logics defined by the contrasting ideas of fashion as cultural product and profitable mass consumer item.<sup>27</sup> Given the importance of social structures, actors, their logics and contexts to the understanding of the D&G incident, this article will employ these theories for the following analysis.

## Agents and Capital in Luxury Fashion

This article adopts two key concepts of Bourdieu's Field Theory as theoretical tools: agents and capital. Bourdieu theorises that each field contains independent agents who interact with other agents and the field. Discussing agents in fashion and more broadly, Bourdieu identifies four categories: agents of production, consumption, legitimation, and diffusion.<sup>28</sup> Agents of production are individuals or institutions in charge of the material and symbolic production of works; agents of consumption are individuals or institutions who consume the above-mentioned works; agents of legitimation are entities, institutionalised or not, who practice symbolic sanctions and forms of recognition to consecrate certain types of work or persons; agents of diffusion communicate the symbolic value of cultural products to consumers and the general public.<sup>29</sup> Agents within the global luxury fashion field can be identified as follows; designers and brands are agents of production; customers and potential customers are agents of consumption; traditional media, celebrities, influencers (and occasionally netizens) can be both agents of legitimation and diffusion. This results from a blurring and development of roles linked to the democratisation and digitisation of fashion media.<sup>30</sup>

Bourdieu identified four major types of capital held by agents; economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Economic capital is the amount of money and wealth an agent has. Cultural capital can be present in three forms; the embodied long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, the objectified form of cultural goods, and the institutionalised form such as educational qualifications.<sup>31</sup> Social capital is the aggregate of resources of a durable network of mutual acquaintance and recognition.<sup>32</sup> Symbolic capital is "the degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration, or honour and is founded on a dialectic of

23. Elaine M. Power, "An introduction to Pierre Bourdieu's key theoretical concepts," *Journal for the Study of Food and Society*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1999): 48–52.

24. David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), 117.

25. Rocamora, "Fields of fashion."

26. Simona Segre Reinach, "The meaning of Made in Italy' in fashion," *Craft + Design Enquiry*, no. 7 (2015): 135; Rocamora, "Pierre Bourdieu."

27. Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashion-ology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies* (Oxford: Berg, 2005); Kal Raustiala and Christopher Sprigman, "The Piracy Paradox: Innovation and Intellectual Property in Fashion Design," *Virginia Law Review*, vol. 92 (2006); Bo Lönnqvist, "The Dynamics of Fashion in West Europe," in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion Volume 8: West Europe*, eds. Joanne B. Eicher and Lise Skov (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 24–32; Rocamora, "Pierre Bourdieu."

28. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on art and literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

29. Bourdieu, 37.

30. Kayla Boyd, "Democratizing Fashion: The Effects of the Evolution of Fashion Journalism from Print to Online Media," *McNair Scholars Research Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2015).

31. Power, "An introduction."

32. Power.

knowledge and recognition.”<sup>33</sup> A key feature of capital is that different types are interconvertible, with economic capital the most easily converted.

Within the global luxury fashion industry, there is an established and dominant distribution of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital predominantly focused around established Western brands.<sup>34</sup> This links to the luxury fashion industry’s historical engagement with Western court culture and highly skilled production clusters in Paris, London, and later New York and Milan.<sup>35</sup> Even with the globalisation of production and consumption resulting from market development, outsourcing, and digital technologies, the luxury fashion industry retains its relationship with Western centres recognised for producing both material and symbolic fashion.<sup>36</sup>

Consumers, agents of consumption, hold economic capital. Such economic capital has a crucial impact on the global luxury fashion field, as it may influence aspects as key as retail locations, marketing, and even product design.<sup>37</sup> Currently the market with key expected levels of growth and therefore economic capital is Greater China.<sup>38</sup> As such it is of growing importance that luxury brands consider the power of the Chinese consumer in their brand development and advertising, by either targeting the market or ensuring that they do not estrange its consumers with stereotypical or orientalist imagery often prevalent within fashion.<sup>39</sup>

Since the 19th century, the established agents of diffusion and legitimation have been publications and their journalists, who communicate fashion—selecting, editing, and circulating information to the public via magazines, newspapers and television stations, their embodied form of cultural capital.<sup>40</sup> They practice their symbolic capital by framing fashion information and discussions, setting the parameters for sectoral and public conversation by means of “persistent selection, emphasis and exclusion” which enable audiences to “locate, perceive, identify and label” information.<sup>41</sup> In the early 2000s, opportunities brought by the Internet fostered the development of independent fashion websites and retailers’ own digital magazines which joined the above agents. Yet during this period, despite digitisation, symbolic and cultural capital generally remained in the hands of the established fashion agents and press.<sup>42</sup>

With the development of digital media, especially social media, the fashion industry has undergone changes in retailing, brand and market development, and most importantly communication—the control of how information flows and is framed, which have led to changes in the distribution of symbolic capital. In the past decade bloggers and influencers, who enjoy great social capital, have developed a growing impact on consumer purchasing behaviour.<sup>43</sup> Fashion bloggers, influencers, industry watchdogs, and occasionally netizens can pose a threat to the controlled access to and coverage of fashion products,

33. Power.

34. Simona Segre Reinach, “The identity of fashion in contemporary China and the new relationships with the West,” *Fashion Practice*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2012).

35. Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); David Gilbert, “A new world order? Fashion and its capitals in the twenty-first century,” in *Fashion Cultures Revisited: Theories, Exploration and Analysis*, eds. Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (London: Routledge, 2013), 11–30; Okonkwo, *Luxury Fashion Branding*.

36. Rocamora, “Fields of fashion.”

37. Rocamora, “Pierre Bourdieu,” 237.

38. Business of Fashion and McKinsey, “The State of Fashion,” 11.

39. Segre Reinach, “The identity of fashion.”

40. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*.

41. Todd Gitlin, *The whole world is watching: Mass media in the making and unmaking of the new left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 7.

42. Julie Bradford, “Fashion journalism,” in *Specialist Journalism*, eds. Barry Turner and Richard Orange (New York: Routledge, 2013), 91–107.

43. Kate Nelson Best, *The history of fashion journalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Agnès Rocamora, “Mediatization and Digital Retail,” in *The End of Fashion: Clothing and Dress in the Age of Globalization*, eds. Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

events, and people—becoming a secondary set of agents of diffusion and legitimation.<sup>44</sup> Though in recent years more influencers have accepted sponsorships and collaborated with fashion institutions, some influencers and watchdogs provide counter-narratives and critical point-of-views on the industry, including @diet\_prada, @Cashincopy, and The Cutting Room Floor podcast.<sup>45</sup> While the validity of some statements made by these watchdogs have been queried, their position as questioners of traditional narratives have led them to amass significant followings and rendered them positions of some authority.<sup>46</sup> These changes are demonstrative of the democratisation of fashion in the contemporary digitised global economy—the translation of social capital into symbolic.<sup>47</sup>

It is clear that the global luxury fashion field has a long-held dominant distribution of capital among its established agents. However, digitisation, democratisation, and market developments are leading to changes in power dynamics resulting in the clear transitions of position and capital apparent in the following case.

## Methods

In order to understand how the established structure and capital distribution of the global luxury fashion field was challenged during the 2018 D&G incident, this article sets out to identify the key agents engaged in the incident and examine the capital they held, chose, and/or challenged. To do so, the authors conducted a detailed analysis of the incident timeline and the framing employed by agents.

The authors collected and cross-checked factual information about key actors (including their time of involvement in the incident, nationality, platform of post, and key messages) and decisive moments in the escalation of the incident provided by both Western and Chinese news outlets. News articles were sourced by searching the keywords ‘Dolce & Gabbana,’ ‘D&G’ and ‘dujiabanna [Dolce & Gabbana]’ in LexisNexis and Wisers Chinese News Database with the date limitation of November 17 to 23, 2018. The public opinion report published by SNSDatamining served as a supplementary source to identify key social media influencers, celebrities, watchdogs, and netizens and their posts.<sup>48</sup>

As agents of diffusion and legitimation have traditionally had significant impact on the global luxury fashion field by framing information and discussions, framing can be regarded as a crucial way for agents to practice their cultural and symbolic capital. To address this framing and its role within the D&G incident, the authors examine how different agents used framing to influence the incident and negotiate their capital.<sup>49</sup> This involved the collection and analysis of information published and posted by these agents between the 17th and 23rd of November—the dates identified as key to the development of the incident.<sup>50</sup>

## The 2018 D&G Incident

The timeline of the incident is as follows:

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44. Boyd, “Democratizing Fashion.”
  45. Rachel Strugatz and Lauren Sherman, “Diet Prada, Estée Laundry and the Rise of Watchdog Culture: Harmful or Helpful?” *Business of Fashion*, (January 24, 2019), <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/professional/diet-prada-estee-laundry-and-the-rise-of-watchdog-culture-harmful-or-helpful>.
  46. Strugatz and Sherman.
  47. Boyd, “Democratizing Fashion.”
  48. SNSdatamining, “Dujiabanna ruhua shijian.”
  49. Holli Semetko and Patti Valkenburg, “Framing European politics: A content analysis of press and television news,” *Journal of Communication*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2000).
  50. See appendix 1 for the classification, lists of social media influencers, watchdogs, netizens and celebrities engaged in the development of the incident.

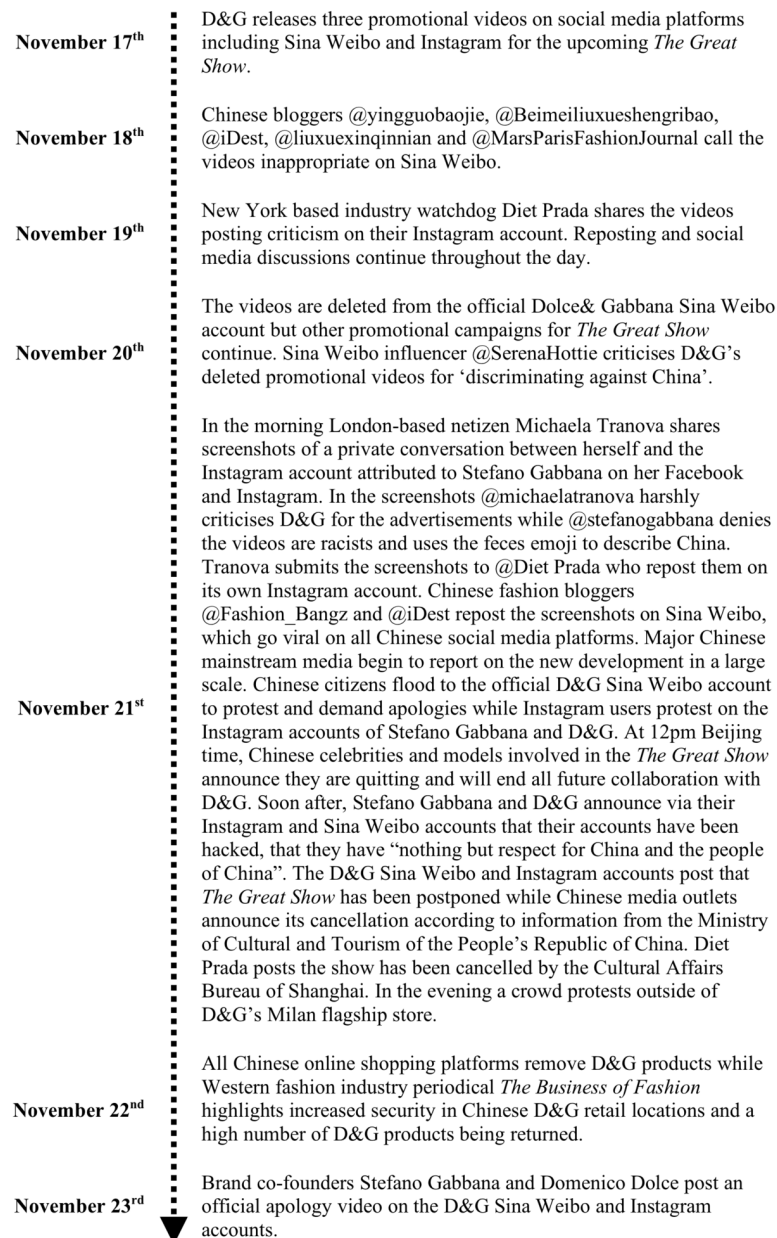


Figure 1: Timeline of Events developed from Sina News, "Dolce Gabbana ruhua shijian zhuzongbaodao (Reports on the development of Dolce Gabbana Insulting China Incident)," [http://fashion.sina.com.cn/zt\\_d/dgruhua/](http://fashion.sina.com.cn/zt_d/dgruhua/)



Agents and the corresponding capital they demonstrated during the incident can be identified as follows. The brand D&G is the agent of production holding symbolic capital, expressing and legitimising its understanding of fashion and referencing Chinese culture in its advertisements. General Chinese social media users are potential agents of consumption with economic capital. Chinese Sina Weibo accounts @yingguobaojie, @Beimeiliuxueshengribao, @iDest, @liuxuexinqinnian, @MarsParisFashionJournal, @SerenaHottie, @Fashion\_Bangz, and Instagram accounts @diet\_prada and @michaelatranova may be seen as agents of diffusion and partial agents of legitimation practicing their social and symbolic capital by disseminating information and their framing of the incident via social media posts. Chinese and western mainstream media can be identified as agents of diffusion with cultural capital embodied in newspaper articles communicating information provided by social media. Finally, celebrities and models involved in ‘The Great Show’ may be seen as agents of diffusion and legitimation, whose announcements terminating all collaborations with D&G serve as a symbolic de-legitimation of the brand. It is interesting to note that during the development of the incident, traditional agents of diffusion and legitimation, established consumer focused fashion media, did not play a significant role.

### Stages of Escalation

Three major stages of escalation can be identified. The first stage features the growth of public discussion following Chinese social media influencers’ criticism of the promotional videos between the 18th and the 20th of November. This discussion negatively addressed the advertisements, claiming that they stereotyped Chinese culture and could be seen as “insulting to China.”<sup>51</sup> The main framing adopted by Chinese Sina Weibo influencers emphasises D&G’s reliance on the Chinese market and criticises the brand for trying to earn Chinese money without respecting the people and culture.<sup>52</sup> This framing shows that among Chinese social media users, there is an awareness of Chinese consumers’ economic capital and their intention to convert such capital into symbolic capital. The fact that incident concluded with an official apology from D&G founders is indicative of the possibility of such a conversion. It is noteworthy that in contemporary China, capital conversion intentions are often demonstrative of nationalistic sentiment towards China’s recent economic prosperity, which conforms with the official ‘Chinese dream’ framing of Chinese Communist Party propaganda.<sup>53</sup>

The second stage began when Chinese social media influencers reposted screenshots of the conversation between @michaelatranova and @stefanogabbana, and Chinese mainstream media engaged. At this point the framing changes and the incident escalates. Following the publication of the conversation, the framing of the incident shifts from a focus on “inappropriate or discriminatory promotional adverts” to emphasising Stefano Gabbana’s purported racism.<sup>54</sup> The change of focus and resulting accusations demonstrate how social media influencers and fashion watchdogs successfully mobilised their followers to criticise the brand and designer. This shows the conversion of social capital into symbolic capital, which provides the authority to challenge the designer’s symbolic legitimacy. Such conversion exhibits similarities with the digital vigilantism phenomenon in China, whereby citizens weaponise digital media to harm individuals perceived as offensive.<sup>55</sup> In the past decade, due to the rise of social media, this practice of using social capital to establish, protect, or gain symbolic capital has been routinely used by Chinese citizens. Radicalised by the above-mentioned nationalistic consumerism, agents involved in the D&G incident weaponised this proven tactic to achieve their goals.

51. Yingguobaojie (@yingguobaojie), “zhege dapai you ruhua? ni rangwo ‘qikuaichifan,’ wo rangni ‘qikaigundan,’” Sina Weibo (November 18, 2018), <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1617545659311821985&wfr=spider&for=pc>. The original post has been set as private and is not searchable or viewable. Therefore, we provide the link to the archived post on Baidu Baijiahao database.

52. SerenaHottie (@SerenaHottie), “... zai shipinzhong huashi qishi zhongguoren, haiyao yong zhejige shipin lai quan zhongguoren de qian ?,” Sina Weibo (November 20, 2018), <https://www.weibo.com/2244243302/H3Art2dwb?type=comment>.

53. Fan Yang, “Rethinking commercial nationalism: The ‘Chinese Dream’ in Neoliberal Globalization,” in *Commercial Nationalism*, eds. Zala Volcic and Mark Andrejevic (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 65–85.

54. Sina News, “Dolce Gabbana ruhua shijian zhuzhongbaodao,” *Sina News Fashion*, (2018), [http://fashion.sina.com.cn/zt\\_d/dgruhua/](http://fashion.sina.com.cn/zt_d/dgruhua/).

55. Daniel Trotter, “Digital vigilantism as weaponisation of visibility,” *Philosophy & Technology*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2017).

In contrast to the new agents of diffusion and legitimation, established fashion consumer periodicals refrained from directly accusing the brand and designer of racism. Rather, they frame the incident as an unfortunate event stemming from misperception. They emphasise the D&G apology and its rejection by Chinese media and netizens. Similarly, the majority of well-known Chinese fashion influencers refrained from commenting or taking a strong stance on the issue. This approach is understandable given that both consumer periodicals and established fashion influencers gain economic capital by accepting endorsement from and collaborations with brands.<sup>56</sup> This increases their dependence on brands and render them less likely to critique. Contrastingly, less-established influencers who are still accumulating social capital and resulting access to economic capital are more prone to take a strong stance in social controversies to gain popularity.<sup>57</sup>

The third stage of escalation began on the 21st between 12:00 and 13:50 CST when Chinese celebrities and models involved in and invited to the show announced that they would boycott the event and discontinue all future collaborations with D&G. The framing in celebrity announcements echoes responses to similar incidents which pit national dignity against opportunity, careers and economic gain.<sup>58</sup> Boy band member Wang Junkai's comment elucidates this conflict: "My country is above everything. We have always been proud of and confident about Chinese cultural heritage and aesthetics. With no doubt, you are the best!"<sup>59</sup> Such framing indicates a struggle and choice between the benefits of and the source of celebrities' symbolic capital in their related field. Celebrities are chosen by brands because their visibility and popularity driven by their field's symbolic capital can be converted into a consumption driver.<sup>60</sup> Once offered the opportunity to collaborate with brands, celebrities gain economic capital through endorsement fees and symbolic capital as recognised fashion icons. However, such symbolic capital is determined by factors including public opinion which explains the tendency for Chinese celebrities to align with social norms and the rising nationalism encouraged by the Chinese government.<sup>61</sup>

Our data also indicates the limited determinative impact established fashion and mainstream media, Chinese or Western, had on the incident. The majority of these outlets did not report on the events before the exposure of the conversation between @michaelatranova and @stefanogabbana. When commenting on the conflict, they do not present a new frame. The frame they commonly adopt highlights economic consequences, addressing the celebrity and model boycott, the show's cancellation and D&G's expected drop in profits, emphasising the significance of Chinese consumers.

Some media even shifted their framing in a way that suggests the influence of public opinion. Three Western media outlets, *Dazed*, *The Financial Times*, and *The Guardian* amended their framing on the 23rd of November. They change from identifying the brand and Stefano Gabbana as players in an incident triggered by misperception to a frame including accusations of racism. While it is too bold to claim these media are losing their cultural and symbolic capital, it is obvious that their traditional positions and capital in the field are increasingly challenged within the digitised global fashion economy.

The 2018 D&G incident clearly represents conflicting interactions between actors in the global luxury fashion field and the Chinese market.

56. Bradford, "Fashion journalism."

57. José Van Dijck and Thomas Poell, "Understanding social media logic," *Media and Communication*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2013).

58. Zhiqi Zhang, "Mingxing zhadui biaotai aiguo: women dui zhengzhi gongtongti de zhongcheng jiuqing yuanyu shenme?," *Jiemeian News*, (November 28, 2018), <https://www.weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309351000894310621088051725&u=5182171545&m=431062103105503&cu=1820246805>.

59. Junkai Wang (@KarryWangStudio), "zuguo gaoyu yiqie, duiyu zhongguode wenhuadiyun he jingshenshenmei, women yizhi shengandao jiaobao he zixin. Wuyongzhiyi, nishi zuihaode!," Sina Weibo, (November 21, 2018), <https://www.weibo.com/6349794947/H3GmNbSQR?type=comment>.

60. Olivier Driessens, "Celebrity Capital: Redefining Celebrity Using Field Theory," *Theory and Society*, vol. 42, no. 5 (2013).

61. Shuang Liang, "Florian Schneider: China's Digital Nationalism," *International Journal of Communication*, no. 13 (2019): 3.

## Conclusion

The above article adopts Bourdieu's field theory to analyse the 2018 D&G incident, identifying agents who contested the established distribution of capital in the global luxury fashion field. It indicates the increasing capability of consumers and less-established influencers to challenge the symbolic capital of brands and established fashion media, presenting the conversions of capital possible. It poses questions about the role of traditional fashion media and its framing of digitally focused incidents.

Given the above findings, this analysis provides a framework for research on similar cases such as the recent critique of Versace and Coach for categorising Hong Kong as a country.<sup>62</sup> It emphasises the risks of social media marketing and the importance of careful brand positioning, especially in such crucial and highly mediated markets as China. It highlights the engagement level of the Chinese market and emphasises the changing roles of not only producers and information disseminators, but also those previously deemed passive consumers.

Future research on this case could benefit from a greater analysis of the intercultural dynamics of the fashion industry, addressing political controversy, racial representation and orientalism, and from an examination of the interaction between the global fashion field and other fields. Moreover, a greater consideration of the controversial background of D&G would embed the case better.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, the above study provides a vital perspective into the interactions between entrenched actors and those brought into the debate by recent digital developments.

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62. Tom Hancock, "Coach and Versace attacked in China for Hong Kong reference," *The Financial Times*, (August 11, 2019), <https://www.ft.com/content/aba97316-bcb5-11e9-b350-dbood509634e>.

63. Don-Alvin Adegeest, "Dolce & Gabbana, a history of PR disasters," *Fashion United*, (November 22, 2018), <https://fashionunited.uk/news/fashion/dolce-gabbana-a-history-of-pr-disasters/2018112240119>.

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## Appendix 1: Social Media Influencers, Watchdog, Netizen, and Celebrities

### *Key Non-fashion-related Chinese social media influencers:*

1. @yingguobaojie 英国报姐 [Ms. British News] (Sina Weibo & Zhihu account)
2. @beimeiliuxuesehegribao 北美留学生日报 [College Daily] (Sina Weibo & WeChat public account)
3. @liuxuexinqingnian 留学新青年 [New Youth Abroad] (Sina Weibo)

### *Key Fashion-related Chinese social media influencers:*

1. @SerenaHottie (Sina Weibo)
2. @Fashion\_Bangz (Sina Weibo)
3. @iDest (Sina Weibo)
4. @Mars的巴黎时尚笔记 [Mars Paris Fashion Journal] (Sina Weibo)

### *International fashion watchdog:*

@diet\_prada (Instagram)

### *Key netizen:*

@michaelatranova (Instagram)

### *Key celebrities:*

1. Junkai Wang
2. Dilireba
3. Ziyi Zhang
4. Bingbing Li
5. Kun Chen
6. Xiaoming Huang
7. Rocket Girls 101

## Appendix 2: Chinese and Western Media Outlets in Sample

### *Chinese mainstream media (including newspapers, news websites):*

1. Xinhuashe 新华社 [Xinhua News Agency]
2. Renmin Ribao 人民日报 [People's Daily]
3. Huanqiu Shibao 环球时报 [Global Times]
4. Guanchazhewang 观察者网 [Guanchazhe Online News, <http://www.guancha.cn>]
5. Guangming Ribao 光明日报 [Guangming Daily]
6. Fenghuang Xinwen 凤凰新闻 [Phoenix News]
7. Pengpai Xinwen 澎湃新闻 [The Paper News]
8. Xinjingbao 新京报 [Jing Daily]
9. Sanlian Zhoukan 三联周刊 [Sanlian Weekly]



10. Jiemian Xinwen 界面新闻 [Jiemian News]
11. Jinri Toutiao 今日头条 [Toutiao News, <https://www.toutiao.com/>]

*Western mainstream media (English language publications from the U.S. and the U.K.):*

1. New York Times
2. The Wall Street Journal
3. The Financial Times
4. CNN
5. The Washington Post
6. USA Today
7. The Independent
8. BBC News
9. The Telegraph
10. The Guardian
11. Reuters

*Western established fashion media:*

1. Vogue
2. Harper's Bazaar
3. WWD
4. Glamour
5. Drapers
6. Dazed
7. The Business of Fashion

## Appendix 3: Chinese Source Translation

SNSdatamining. “Dujiabanna ruhua shijian: 24 xiaoshinei qinshou dazao niandu ‘gongguan chehuo xianchang’” 杜嘉班纳辱华事件: 24 小时内亲手打造年度“公关车祸现场” [Dolce & Gabbana insulting China incident: public relation disaster created by itself within 24 hours]. *The Paper* 澎湃新闻, (November 21, 2018), [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_2657460](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2657460).

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Yingguobaojie (@yingguobaojie). “zhege dapai you ruhua? ni rangwo ‘qikuaichifan,’ wo rangni ‘qikai-gundan’ 这个大牌又辱华? 你让我”起筷吃饭”, 我让你”起开滚蛋” [This brand insulted China again? You tell me to ‘use chopsticks to eat food,’ I tell you to ‘get out of country’].” *Sina Weibo post*, (November 18, 2018), <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1617545659311821985&wfr=spider&for=pc>. The original post

has been set as private and is not searchable or viewable. Therefore, we provide the link to the archived post on Baidu Baijiahao database.

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