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Promoting Foreign Luxury Brands in China: An Analysis of Social Media Marketing Approaches and their Social and Political Implications in the Country

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PROMOTING FOREIGN LUXURY BRANDS IN CHINA

**An Analysis of Social Media Marketing Approaches and their Social and
Political Implications in the Country**

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INTRODUCTION

In a world that is increasingly relying on online connection, social media have become essential platforms for brands to advertise their products. In the Chinese context in particular, social media have grown to the point where even the most normal daily tasks like paying at a store, doing online shopping, ordering at a restaurant, and even paying your bills, can for example be done with a click on WeChat. People nowadays, especially the younger generations, which are often the main target audiences for brands, live off their phones and their social network connections. It becomes therefore essential for a brand to deeply understand the social media environment in order to make the most out of it in terms of advertisement and marketing. The following research will in fact focus on analysing social media strategies used by luxury fashion brands when promoting their products in the Chinese market specifically. Luxury fashion brands were chosen as they can be considered an emblematic example of foreign brands trying to enter the Chinese market. The luxury market in China has been booming in the past fifteen years, and more and more Chinese people are interested into and are able to afford foreign luxury products offered by these brands. The research will focus mainly on the two principal strategies that a brand can choose from: standardisation or adaptation. These two strategies will be put in the perspective of cultural, social and political characteristics that are identified within the Chinese society. These characteristics will form the theoretical framework of this research: the two marketing strategies, which are related to the internationalization of a brand, will be analysed and considered through these factors, which are defining of Chinese consumers. The research will therefore evolve around the following question: “To what extent the chosen marketing strategy (standardisation or adaptation) of a luxury fashion brand influences the latter’s popularity in the Chinese market? And what role do social, political and cultural factors play in this context?”

This research will analyse a number of posts from the ten most popular luxury fashion brands online of 2021 (Beauloye, 2021) taken from two equivalent social media platforms, Twitter and Weibo. The research will analyse whether a certain set of cultural values and political ideologies have been taken into consideration by a specific brand when approaching the Chinese market within a said social media platform. Understanding to what degree a brand has actually considered (and represented) these factors will allow us to define whether they picked a marketing strategy that leans more towards standardisation or adaptation. A final calculation of social media engagement rates per post, and eventually the calculation of the average of those rates per social media, will significantly contribute to assessing which strategy seems to work best for Chinese consumers and the Chinese market. The final results of this research will show that adaptation seems to not only be the preferred strategy, but also the most successful one out of the two on social media, and that keeping into consideration social, political and cultural factors is in fact essential to guide and determine such successfulness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. THE LUXURY MARKET: INTRODUCTION TO THE CONCEPT OF LUXURY AND THE EXPANSION OF THE LUXURY MARKET IN CHINA

In order to understand the delicate dynamics related to advertising a foreign luxury brand into an intrinsically different market like the Chinese one, it is important to start by giving some context on what is meant with the term “luxury” and on how foreign luxury in particular came about in the country.

According to Hung et al. (2020), the Oxford Latin Dictionary defines luxury as “something that is not essential but provides pleasure and comfort”, therefore underlining the non-necessity nature of luxury products and services. However, the concept of luxury does not simply come down to “something that is unnecessary”. Luxury products (and services) are in fact characterised by a mixture of elements that underline their essential exclusiveness: the premium monetary price, the (perceived) high-quality, the prestigious name of the luxury brand that produces them, the scarcity, and the immaterial values that owning or purchasing a luxury product brings along. As described by Li et al. (2012), luxuries confer pleasure and contribute to providing an indulgence to the consumer beyond the bare minimum; luxuries also provide high levels of symbolic and emotional value to consumers who purchase, display and make use of them, by conferring them esteem and satisfying their functional and psychological needs. As a consequence, the marketing of luxury is based on advertisement strategies that underline the authority and prestige that such luxury products confer to its consumers, and not only their social, political and economic use (Badarò, 2020). Luxury consumption is in fact very commonly associated with the social status it represents and can confer to the people who consume luxury products. Thorstein Veblen, in his work “The Theory of the Leisure Class” (1899), studies the connection between conspicuous consumption and social class: his theory evolves around the concept that to own property means to have status and honour, and therefore to behold a high position in the social hierarchy (Trigg, 2001). As a consequence, Veblen believes that people are drawn to a constant accumulation of new consumption goods in order to distinguish themselves from others. In his own words, “Unproductive consumption of goods is honourable, primarily as a mark of prowess and a perquisite of human dignity; secondarily it becomes substantially honourable in itself, especially the consumption of the most desirable things” (Veblen, 1899, p. 50). In fact, as explained also by Hung et al. (2020), consumption carries a symbolic meaning, to the point where the items owned by consumers are recognised as part of their extended selves. Researchers have agreed that the term “luxury” defines a conceptual and symbolic dimension, and not merely a category of products or services: such symbolic dimension brings about values that are firmly related to cultural and socioeconomic contexts, and it therefore makes luxury products desirable for reasons other than function (Li et al., 2012).

The vast majority of luxury fashion brands that have a global reputation and name come from European countries or the US. For what comes to luxury brands, the process of internationalization tends to happen rather early: in fact, such brands reach market saturation quite easily and are, therefore, drawn to different directions of growth outside of their home market (Bonetti, 2014). In the past 20 years, new emerging markets became

the target of the biggest luxury brands: these markets possess all the characteristics these brands are looking for, first and main being their high purchasing power. The BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) economies in particular have played a leading role in this regard (Bonetti, 2014). It was especially important for luxury brands to rely on the Chinese market after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, as in such a delicate period of time most of the world economies were falling, while the Chinese one (and the BRIC countries' economies in general) was still growing steadily (Zhang & Kim, 2013). Foreign marketing, branding and consulting agencies started to open up new branches in China's main cities in order to study the Chinese consumers' patterns and provide valuable information to foreign companies who wanted to promote their products within the country (Badarò, 2020). China's shift from a production to a consumption economy, thanks to the reform policies initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, has led to the creation of a generation of "nouveau riche" that seems quite keen on purchasing foreign luxury goods (Bonetti, 2014). It has been argued by Bonetti (2014) that, for this reason, the younger generations in particular seek to emulate western consumers by introducing western luxury fashion brands in their daily lives. In this regard, the term "Country of Origin Effect" (COE) was introduced to describe the consumers' attachment of their perceptions to other countries and products when it comes to quality evaluation (Bonetti, 2014). According to Bonetti (2014), in fact, this term represents the cause for the growing importance and popularity of products marked for example as "Made in France" or "Made in Italy", as they are considered prestigious because of a level of craftsmanship recognised worldwide and which the Chinese believe they still don't have. This kind of admiration Chinese consumers have towards foreign luxury has contributed to reshape the way they behave in the interdependent Chinese society: they now buy luxury items to please others and to please themselves, a process that comes about through the appreciation of the innate value of (luxury) goods that are produced abroad. As a consequence, consumption in China has become part of a new neoliberal logic that has caused for the so-called nouveau riche to start embracing foreign luxury goods as an essential component of their social identities and their personal networks (Badarò, 2020). We must take notice that the Covid-19 pandemic, together with President Xi Jinping's "Common Prosperity"¹ push have made it increasingly difficult for foreign luxury brands to grow in the Chinese market: in fact, a trend called "Guochao", which sees growing popularity and preference for Chinese-made goods, has found favour within those belonging to the so-called "Generation Z" in particular (Wong & He, 2022). This trend might affect the foreign luxury market in the future, and it is therefore advised that foreign luxury brands take into consideration the interests of this younger generation and their specific type of demand from the market, as it is a growingly relevant consumer group and the one that more than any others relies on social media when making purchasing choices.

Moreover, it is also worth mentioning that the internationalization of a luxury brand is not as easily done as it might seem. In fact, luxury brands place great importance on the brand's DNA and strongly care about maintaining it even when promoting certain products in a new context. The process of building the prestige and reputation of a brand is one that requires controlling the way value is transformed and the hierarchies

¹ The "Common Prosperity" push initiated by Xi Jinping aims at reducing China's wealth gap and helping to boost China's middle class population to an estimated 500 million by 2025 (Wong & He, 2022).

between actors involved in the process (Badarò, 2020). Many brands are worried that the consumption of luxury goods in China might produce negative value for a specific brand, therefore undermining its reputation: in fact, foreign brands tend to believe that Chinese consumers are mostly unaware of the value and meaning of luxury, and only see it as a means to brag and show off their social status and wealth, which are causes for a worsening of these brands' global reputation according to them. As a consequence, most brands aim at turning simple consumption of luxury goods into experiences for Chinese consumers to learn about western and global modernity, mainly in terms of the value, history and meaning behind a specific brand and its products. Badarò (2020) rightly points out that this kind of view excludes the possibility that value could originate in China, and therefore it beholds rather western/orientalist assumptions that might condition marketers approaches to the Chinese market in not so positive ways.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN CHINA: THE GREAT FIREWALL, MARKETING APPROACHES AND THE D&G SCANDAL

Social media can be defined as a platform that allows for user-generated content to be exchanged in an interactive manner. The intrinsic difference between traditional media outlets and social media is that the latter allows its users to interact with said media by publishing their own opinion and their own content (Yang & Wang, 2015). When it comes to marketing a brand, social media marketing becomes the only form of marketing that allows to reach consumers at each stage, by offering the possibility to establish a brand image, to do targeted advertising, and to do detailed market research (Saravanakumar & Suganthalakshmi, 2012). China, in particular, has the world's largest internet user base and the world's most active social media environment (Chiu et al., 2012), therefore understanding the complexity of the Chinese social media landscape is of utmost importance when doing marketing in the country. Social media started spreading in China in 1994 in the form of online forums, while instant messaging began in 1999 and blogging took off in 2004 (Chiu et al., 2012). In China, the most popular social media platforms are local ones, which makes the users of these platforms extremely homogeneous in terms of cultural background. This can be considered the main distinctive factor between social media in China and social media in the rest of the world, as international platforms like Twitter, Facebook or Instagram have way more culturally diverse users (Wang et al., 2020). Among the Chinese social networks, Sina Weibo, a micro-blogging platform which launched in 2009, is one of the main players (Chiu et al., 2012). The reasons for the diversified, yet exclusively Chinese social media landscape within the country can be directly related to the issue of censorship. In fact, "Great Firewall" of China is the name that has been given to the country's internet filtering system, the most sophisticated and extensive in the world, which blocks out or filters websites and information coming from abroad (Liu, 2010). Under this system, as Liu (2010) explains, "bundles" of electronic information pass through certain Chinese government-controlled international routers which are able to detect politically sensitive and controversial keywords. When Google announced in 2010 that it would close its internet search service in China under the domain ".cn", China started pioneering what has been called by researchers "networked authoritarianism", which allows a

non-democratic government to stay in power and limit freedom of speech while simultaneously promoting internet use (Liu, 2010). It is around this period of time that a series of knock-off websites that emulated the functions of internationally popular ones started appearing in China, as the original websites were slowly becoming permanently blocked even before the Google dispute in 2010 (Liu, 2010).

Such intrinsic differences between Chinese social media and international ones make it a bit harder for brands to enter the Chinese landscape in terms of marketing strategies. In fact, Chinese users are way more active than those in other countries and they tend to value the advice of opinion leaders in social networks much more highly. As a consequence, companies must engage in new strategies in order to effectively communicate brand identity and values through Chinese social media (Chiu et al., 2012). Many were the studies that have been done in this regard (Checchinato et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2016; Saravanakumar & Suganthalakshmi, 2012; Wang et al., 2013; Yu & Hu, 2020). For example, Wang et al. (2013) have examined the different approaches that should be taken depending on whether the culture a brand is being promoted into is a “high context” or a “low context” one, and an “indulgent” or a “restrained” one. In the case of China, which is generally considered a high context culture (namely, one characterised by signs, symbols and indirect communication), information should be transmitted through visuals, symbols and associations, in a more implicit manner. The authors also consider the Chinese society as a restrained one (namely, a society in which the gratification of needs is controlled by strict social norms), but they suggest that luxury brands may still feature indulgence in their ads, as it might make their products even more appealing to the Chinese consumer base. Liu et al. (2016), on the other hand, focus more on the specific approaches that foreign brands may adopt when doing advertising in China, by analysing the difference between “standardization” and “adaptation”. In this study, the authors make a comparison between the two techniques by underlying the pros and cons of both: they found, for example, that standardisation, which entails adopting a global strategy regardless of cultural differences among the consumer base, allows brands to keep control of their image, but may not be as effective in all cultures and countries. Adaptation, on the other hand, works greatly when a brand is trying to focus on incorporating local cultural values and on entering a certain national market in a steady way, but may have a negative effect as it could compromise the brand’s image and cause consumer confusion with regards to brand identity and even country of origin. Yu & Hu (2020) also take into consideration the standardization and adaptation dilemma, but by applying these approaches on the use of celebrity endorsement in ads and campaigns. They also found that the use of local celebrities for product endorsement may have both pros and cons in terms of brand image and consumer reactions, as well as the use of international celebrities might cause for lower social media interaction but may enhance the perceived brand quality and prestige. Another study on standardization vs. adaptation is Checchinato et al.’s (2014), where the authors put to comparison several editions of Vogue China to equivalent others of Vogue Italy and found that standardization seemed to be the prevalent choice for most brands, although the claims of the ads, especially those of luxury cosmetic products, were intrinsically different in the Chinese Vogue. Lastly, Saravanakumar & Suganthalakshmi (2012) focused on how a brand should connect with users and customers on social media, and found that crowdsourcing through crowd engagements,

and allowing for easy e-commerce access can significantly improve the brand perception and the brand awareness of the consumer base.

As it is noticeable by the number of studies that have been done in this regard, some of which were mentioned earlier, standardization and adaptation remains the main dilemma for foreign brands trying to do marketing in China. Regardless of the chosen approach, a brand's remaining obstacle is that of attracting a certain consumer base without coming across as insensitive towards the traditions and the culture of that specific audience. The most emblematic recent example of this sort of mistake is the one made by the Italian luxury fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana (D&G) in 2018. Many scholars and China-experts have analysed such incident (Liu, 2019; Rellini, 2019; Tyler, 2020; Zheng, 2020) and have tried to unfold all the mistakes that were made in the process. In 2018, D&G launched a massive campaign in China to advertise its upcoming fashion show (called "The Great Show") that was planned to happen at the Shanghai World Expo Centre at the end of 2018. In order to promote this event, the brand had released three short advertising videos that showed a Chinese female model dressed in traditional clothes and makeup and set in a traditionally Chinese-looking environment; in each of these videos the model was trying to eat typically Italian food with chopsticks while a male voiceover was commenting and making fun of her as she was struggling. As soon as these videos were released, the reaction coming from the Chinese was of immediate outrage and disdain, and it caused the cancellation of the show as well as several hundreds of millions of dollars in damages to the company as it was being boycotted by the Chinese market. As explained by Zheng (2020), these videos were problematic for several reasons: first of all, the narrator talks about "us" when referring to the Italian people and culture, and "you" when referring to the model (and the Chinese people in general) therefore putting in clear contrast the Western viewpoint versus the representation of the Chinese culture; secondly, chopsticks (which represent Chinese culture in this case) are defined as "sticks" in the video, which seems to imply that using them instead of western cutlery like forks and knives is inferior and ridiculous. Thirdly, the commercials seem to depict D&G's country of origin, Italy, as superior to China and therefore more desirable: a comment of the narrator in particular highlights this intent, when he states "This will make you feel like you're in Italy, but you are in China". Overall, the arrogant tone of voice of the narrator and the Chinese model's bizarre use of chopsticks have caused major controversy on Chinese social media and on international ones too, and the hashtag "boycott D&G" was mentioned more than 18000 times on Weibo (Tyler, 2020). As a consequence to the scandal, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, the co-owners of the brand, published an apology video that also sparked major backlash. Although the video had the clear intention of making up for the scandal and asking Chinese people for forgiveness, it eventually only worsened the situation as the two co-owners came across as expressionless and non-caring, because the audience couldn't really intercept any real secondary emotions. Moreover, the video was posted only on Weibo and not on other international social media outlets, which made Chinese people question the purpose and the sincerity of this apology (Liu, 2019). As these events clearly demonstrate, the power that social media reactions and engagement have is one that has the potential to destroy the reputation of a brand and its market value in the matter of a few minutes. Negative comments and trending hashtags, among others, can cause great damage

to a company, a damage that D&G is still trying to overcome, and it is therefore essential for brands to make use of this powerful tool that is social media in the smartest and most careful way.

3. CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT: SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL INFLUENCES

Understanding consumer behaviour constitutes an essential part of marketing a brand or a product, especially when this happens in a country and context different from that of the brand's home one.

Zhang & Kim (2013) underline that luxury products possess both conspicuous and social value, and that consuming luxury automatically becomes an indicator of status and wealth. When it comes to China, many studies define Chinese consumers of luxury products as “aspirational”, to the point where the term “aspirational consumerism” is considered characteristic of Chinese people (Badarò, 2020). Aspirational consumerism refers to that seemingly typical attribute of Chinese consumers that sees them uninterested in the material and aesthetic qualities of a product, while focusing exclusively on the brand's reputation and the power a brand's product has in conferring social status (Badarò, 2020). This image of Chinese luxury consumers is a rather recurrent one, and it has also been related to all Asian cultures in general: Zhang & Kim (2013) underline how the consumption of luxury goods with the aim of securing social recognition and status is a consequence of the role “status” itself plays in such societies, a much higher one than in the West. Chinese consumers in particular seem to purchase luxuries in a conspicuous manner in order to display wealth and accommodate societal expectations.

Apart from simply being “aspirational consumers”, Chinese people's behaviour towards luxury is heavily influenced by many characteristics related specifically to the country and its culture, characteristics that are intertwined with each other. Such characteristics can be identified among the literature as four determining factors of consumer behaviour: brand awareness and value consciousness; ideologies and political influences; traditional cultural values; and susceptibility to normative influence. Badarò (2020) has analysed the importance of creating brand awareness in the Chinese market and has described how brands often employ “consumer education” strategies to do so. Zhang & Kim (2013) have underlined how Asian consumers tend to indulge in consumption of certain luxury brands because of the prestigious name or logo of such brands, which is what they consider to be bringing value, and therefore they have defined value-conscious consumers in China as ones who mainly care about the name of a brand as a way of displaying wealth. Bartikowski et al. (2021), Gao (2009), and Sun et al. (2014) have studied the political influences that affect Chinese consumers. Bartikowski et al. (2021) focused on nationalistic discourses and how those affect the perception Chinese consumers have of foreign brands; Gao (2009) argued that the collectivist aspect of the Chinese society influences purchasing-motivations in Chinese consumers, while Sun et al. (2014) have considered materialism and its growing importance in post-socialist societies, and have analysed the differences in purchasing behaviour between generations of consumers raised during the Mao era and those raised during the era of Deng

Xiaoping's reforms (after 1978). Many studies (Hung et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2014; Zhan & He, 2012; Zhang & Kim, 2013) have also considered the important role that traditional cultural values derived from Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Legalism still play in the Chinese societies. These studies have identified three relevant cultural values in particular, namely "miànzì", "guānxi" and "harmony", and they have analysed how these values influence consumer purchasing behaviour and motivation, some positively and some in a more negative way. Lastly, Zhan & He (2012) have considered the concept of "susceptibility to normative influence" and have studied its degree of importance on the Chinese society and its consumer patterns, by keeping into consideration the growing role that western influences play in China. These four distinctive factors of impact on a country's consumers' purchasing behaviour have been chosen as theoretical framework for the purpose of this research. In the section "theoretical framework" they will be explained in more detail and contextualised within the marketing strategies of adaptation and standardization.

Chinese consumers have been divided by luxury marketing experts into four categories: domestic Chinese consumers, frequent outbound Chinese travellers, nomadic overseas Chinese, and overseas Chinese. "Domestic Chinese" refers to that category of consumers that live and travel most often within China; "frequent outbound Chinese travellers" are those who have the economic power and motivation to leave for experiences that they cannot have within China; "nomadic overseas Chinese" refers to those younger generations of consumers who choose to live in different parts of the world for short periods of time for various reasons like studying; lastly, "overseas Chinese" are those people who migrated beyond China: this category of people refers particularly to those immigrants who left China after the year 2000 and have more economic power than previous generations of immigrants (Xue & Gu, 2022). According to experts Xue & Gu (2022), the most important types of Chinese consumers luxury brands should focus on are the frequent outbound travellers and the nomadic overseas Chinese, as they are "Chinese by heart and international by mindset". In fact, these groups of people are particularly important because they have purchasing power and willingness to be open to a different world: because of their global mindset they have a higher maturity in their perception of luxury (Xue & Gu, 2022)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As seen in the literature review, the four defining factors that influence Chinese consumer behaviour are of relevant importance to the purpose of this research. More specifically, these factors define what is meant with "adapting" to the Chinese culture in the context of marketing foreign luxury brands, and therefore it is relevant to consider how much these brands take into consideration these factors in their marketing strategies.

Brand awareness and value consciousness

It has been argued by marketers that Chinese consumers lack knowledge about luxury brands, and that they consequently find it difficult to identify such brands because of their comparatively limited experience within

the market. For this reason, Chinese consumers tend to be automatically drawn to choose extremely well-known brands when purchasing luxury (Zhan & He, 2012), and creating brand awareness and value consciousness becomes therefore essential for luxury brands when advertising their products in China. As mentioned earlier, it is for this reason that foreign luxury brands often employ marketing strategies that aim at “consumer education”, and in which Chinese consumers are taught to understand the value of luxury products through exhibits on a brand’s history, workshops, parties, and fashion shows. These initiatives are aimed at creating brand awareness by fulfilling the lack of knowledge and aesthetic criteria in the Chinese nouveau riche class (Badarò, 2020), an essential step in order to promote brands into the market and to form “conscious” consumers. When talking about consciousness of a brand, we necessarily address the value consciousness of the products of that brand as well. According to marketers, value consciousness, quality, scarcity and uniqueness of the materials are exactly what Chinese consumers ignore, as they are believed to value a product exclusively based on its market price (Badarò, 2020). Value consciousness in particular is strictly related to brand awareness, as it refers to a tendency to seek for the best features of a product or service for a given price. This means that high-value conscious consumers are necessarily more sensitive to the benefit/cost ratio and are keener to seek products that offer the best value considering a given price (Zhan & He, 2012). For Asian consumers, such value is recognised in the prestigious name or logo of a brand, which is highly popular: such brand becomes therefore an essential symbol of group identity, and consequently makes consumers more willing to pay a certain premium price for a product of that brand (Zhang & Kim, 2013). Owning or showing a particular brand can directly conform the consumer to the group he/she is trying to identify with, which is a typical characteristic of collectivist societies like the Chinese one. As a consequence, brand awareness and value consciousness are intertwined factors that foreign luxury brands have to take into consideration when advertising in the Chinese market and that can be highlighted on social media marketing through photos, images or texts that hint, for example, to the history of the brand and its concept.

Political and ideologic influences

The political and ideologic influences in the Chinese society form the second structural factor that a foreign brand should take into consideration when adapting. Geert Hofstede, a Dutch social psychologist, studied the differences between collectivist and individualist societies in his “Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind” (1991) and he distinguished them as follows: “Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth inwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 51) Very often the Chinese society is considered a collectivist one, as Chinese people are identified as tending to view the self as an interdependent entity that is based on the connectedness of individuals (Gao, 2009). In the context of luxury, collectivism implies that luxury goods may be purchased with the aim of gaining external social status, as collectivists tend to express personal affluence

through consumption more than individualists do (Gao, 2009): as a consequence, focusing on the social status-conferring benefits of a product or brand can turn out to be very fruitful advertising-wise.

Closely related to collectivism, materialism has been also taken into consideration: it is defined by Sun et al. (2014) as the importance that a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. This tendency has been attributed particularly to post-socialist or communist societies: in the case of the Chinese one, materialism influences the choice of luxury products which is driven by the desire for a higher standard of living. This concept underlines the importance that Chinese consumers give to conforming to societal norms, as opposed to expressing individualistic autonomy, which is more characteristic of western consumers (Sun et al., 2014).

Another type of political influence is that of nationalism. Nationalism is defined by Bartikowski et al. (2021) as the extent to which people identify with a certain culture or nation. Considering nationalism is highly relevant in this context as strong nationalistic appeals (which are common among Chinese politics) may provoke two divergent reactions in Chinese consumers: on the one hand it may increase the belief that buying foreign brands is ethically wrong towards the home nation; on the other hand, it may promote social responsibility associations that consumers hold for foreign luxury brands, and actually increase the perceived reputation of these brands (Bartikowski et al., 2021). In relation to the latter, it has been argued by Bartikowski et al. (2021) that a foreign luxury brand's closeness to the local consumers' culture may induce feelings of certainty in the consumers and, as a consequence, foreign luxury brands operating in a market heavily characterised by nationalism may not lose brand equity, but actually find a rather accepting environment.

Lastly, the somewhat significant difference between Chinese generations raised during the Mao era, and those raised during the later era of Deng Xiaoping's reforms, is also of great importance: in fact, political ideologies seem to condition Chinese consumers' perceptions of foreign luxury brands, as a study by Sun et al. (2014) has shown that the generations born under the Deng Xiaoping's reform period seem keener to accepting and welcoming foreign luxury brands and their views. As a consequence, such brands should point towards these younger generations rather than towards the older ones, as the former were raised in a socialist market economy that was focused on developing the country's productivity and on raising people's standard of living (Sun et al., 2014). In the context of social media, being careful about Chinese political ideologies and influences is translated into advertisement that underlies the potential of conformity to a group that a product can give, and it being a symbol of higher standard of living, while also showing interest into and addressing the younger generations of the Chinese consumer base.

Traditional cultural values

The three traditional cultural values mentioned in the literature review, namely "miànzi" (in Chinese 面子), "guānxi" (in Chinese 关系) and "harmony", combine together to form the third relevant factor that shall be taken into consideration when adapting to the Chinese market. Miànzi is generally translated to "face", and it refers to one's social self-esteem and their desire to be respected during interpersonal interactions (Sun et al.,

2014). As the core of traditional Chinese values, “having miànzi” implies that people successfully impress others with their own reputation (Hung et al., 2020). Miànzi positively relates to brand consciousness, so people with high levels of miànzi-consciousness make use of easily identifiable and prestigious luxury brands to display their wealth (Zhang & Kim, 2013).

“Guānxi” is a concept of “gift-giving”, and it refers to an informal personal connection between two people which is built on continuous exchanges of favours (Sun et al., 2014). Closely related to miànzi, having guānxi-consciousness implies caring about one’s position in the social structure and therefore seeking to improve it by distinguishing themselves from the lower classes through the display of wealth and the obtainment of material benefit and deference from others (Sun et al., 2014).

Lastly, the concept of harmony, which refers to a person’s inner peace of mind as well as their interpersonal harmony, may be compromising to a luxury brand as people with high harmony-consciousness perceive materialism in a negative way: they in fact believe it implies values that work against interpersonal relationships, like greater self-interest, being less likely to share, and causing the envy of others (Sun et al., 2014). As a consequence, people with high harmony-consciousness try to find a state of equilibrium between opposing forces that are connected by values like the exchange of favours, group orientation, solidarity towards others, non-competitiveness and humbleness.

These three cultural values are still very deeply embedded in the Chinese society and taking them into consideration on a social media marketing level may include advertisement and descriptions that highlight how wearing or using a certain luxury product can make the consumer appear powerful and important within a group of people or within society itself. Harmony on the other hand, works against luxury brands, and therefore the latter may try to reach high harmony-conscious consumers by underlining the aspect of exchanging favours and having solidarity towards others through campaigns and ads that show how the production of luxury products is respectful of workers and masters of certain crafting techniques, and how these products themselves, when gifted to others, represent respect, care and generosity towards those same others.

Susceptibility to normative influence

The fourth and last factor is that of susceptibility to normative influence, which also closely relates to traditional cultural values, but specifically highlights the need Chinese consumers have to choose products that conform to specific group norms (Zhan & He, 2012). Georg Simmel explained the psychological human tendency towards imitation in his article “Fashion” (1957), where he describes imitation (which he calls with the term “fashion”) as something that frees us from choosing and that allows us to appear merely as creatures of the group, as we are transferring the responsibility for an action from ourselves to another. In today’s society this concept is reflected by the tendency that a consumer has towards conforming to the expectations of others when it comes to purchasing decisions (Zhan & He, 2012). Zhan & He (2012) have defined this tendency as “susceptibility to normative influence”, which refers directly to the degree to which one tends to conform to

social norms. Social norms are highly influential in China mainly because of its generally collectivist culture, and therefore Chinese consumers tend to pick products that follow certain group norms. What differentiates susceptibility to normative influence from the other factors is that it isn't exclusively driven by traditional cultural values anymore, but also by western influences, which are growing more powerful in the country. These western influences are specifically relevant to wealthier consumers, as they seem to trust foreign brands to a greater degree than their less-wealthy counterparts (Zhan & He, 2012). As a consequence, conforming to the group means associating oneself with a specific social group and, at the same time, taking part in western trends and fashions, and the cultural values that such fashions represent. In the context of social media marketing, susceptibility to normative influence can be taken into consideration by studying the consumer preferences and consumer demand, and by underlining how a specific product is used by certain people. More specifically, the use of celebrity endorsement is one seemingly effective way to highlight how a certain person (and therefore the group that person belongs to or represents) makes use of the advertised product, and consequently how owning that product conforms the consumer to the group of that particular person.

These four factors summarize the main aspects that a foreign luxury brand should take into consideration when choosing to adapt to the Chinese culture. In fact, adaptation implies considering these specific cultural, political and societal characteristics as highly relevant when trying to target the Chinese consumer base. Therefore, it is through the conceptual framework of these aspects that the following research will analyse social media advertisement techniques of foreign luxury brands in China and will define whether such techniques reflect an approach of adaptation (and therefore take into consideration these aspects to a certain degree) or whether they reflect one of standardization. The four factors have been identified through an extensive analysis of the literature on the topic and are linked to each other as they influence all aspects of Chinese consumers' lives.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

In order to discover which marketing strategy seems more successful in the Chinese market for foreign luxury brands, this research will take into consideration two comparable social media platforms, Sina Weibo and Twitter. These two platforms are very similar in terms of structure, as they are both microblogging networks in which a said account can post small texts of a maximum of 280 characters for Twitter, and 140 for Weibo, and they can include pictures and short videos as well. Twitter and Weibo are the most popular platforms of this kind in their own context, Weibo's being within China, and Twitter within western countries and the countries of origin of the brands.

In order to get a comprehensive image of luxury fashion brands' approaches to the Chinese market versus the western one, ten specific brands have been selected. These brands were chosen based on a ranking made by Luxe Digital on the fifteen most popular luxury brands online in 2021 (Beauloye, 2021), among which only the ones categorised as "fashion brands" were picked. Luxe Digital has calculated this ranking based on brand value, search share of interest and social media engagement/conversations. The search share of interest was

calculated based on worldwide Google trends data, while the social media engagement rate was quantified through the number of engagement actions across all tracked social channels and divided by the total audience among these platforms for a specific brand. According to this ranking, the brands that will be taken into consideration will be the following: Gucci, Chanel, Hermès, Christian Dior, Louis Vuitton, Prada, Versace, Armani, Valentino and Balenciaga. For each one of these brands, twenty posts per platform will be taken into consideration, so twenty posts for the Twitter account and twenty posts for the Weibo one of a same brand, across the same chronological period of time. Because recently posted content might not have reached the best of its impact within the social media, only slightly older posts will be analysed, from a period of time that goes specifically from the 21st of May 2022 backwards. Each post that will be taken into consideration will be analysed through a methodology approach that considers a series of concrete aspects related to the post and its content, with the aim of reaching a conclusion on whether standardization or adaptation was the preferred strategy chosen by the brand and to what degree it has been used.

The four factors previously identified in the theoretical framework are to be considered the key determinants of the extent to which a brand adapts to the Chinese culture. It is through these four factors that the following elements of a post will be taken into consideration:

- *Language and wording of the ad*: analysing the language used in the ad and comparing the specific choice of words gives already a good insight on the strategy picked by a brand. We should keep in mind that being Weibo an almost exclusively Chinese platform, most (if not all) posts on this platform will be in Mandarin Chinese, whereas on Twitter (being an international platform) they will mostly or entirely be in English. However, this point of analysis won't simply keep into consideration which language is used in the ads, but it will mostly pay attention to the specific word choice: in fact, the word choice heavily conditions the degree of adaptation of a brand as the text that describes a certain product is practically essential in explaining the products characteristics and its functions/benefits. Moreover, if the brand picks words that are intrinsically connected to the Chinese culture, for example by referring to a certain festivity, place or cultural value, we can most certainly speak of adaptation. The wording of the post is relevant specifically if we keep into consideration the four aspects of the theoretical framework: when specific words refer to specific cultural values, political influences, the brand's history or to group norms, we can also most certainly speak of adaptation.
- *Visual content of the ad (photos or videos)*: as previously explained, microblogging platforms allow users to post short texts and attach short videos and/or a couple of photos to them. Analysing the visual content of the ads, which is expected to always be present in the posts as visual content is an essential aspect of advertisement, is also important to understand the degree of adaptation. By focusing on the four determinants of the theoretical framework, a series of characteristics will be taken into consideration. For what comes to brand awareness and value consciousness, any historical or brand concept-defining aspects will be analysed and considered. For what comes to materialism, collectivism and/or other political influences, it will be noted whether an ad places special emphasis on the social status-conferring benefits of a product, if it underlines its potential of conformity to a group, and if it

refers explicitly to younger generations. With regards to traditional values, any ad that highlights how a product makes its consumer powerful, its importance within a specific group of people, or its value in favour-exchanging relationships will be considered as showing an adapting approach. Lastly, susceptibility to normative influence will be noted on ads that underline how a specific product is used by a certain group of people. More specifically, celebrity endorsement will be an intrinsic element of this aspect. Not only it will be analysed whether there is any sort of celebrity endorsement in an ad, but the nationality/origin of that celebrity will also be taken into consideration: is the celebrity China-popular and/or Chinese? Or is he/she worldwide famous and not ethnically Chinese? Very often professional fashion models happen to be celebrities themselves, so for the purpose of this research, we will only consider “celebrities” those who do not model as their main and first profession. The aspect of celebrity endorsement is also related to brand awareness: in fact, Yu & Hu (2020) found in their study that the use of Chinese celebrities on Chinese social media’s ad campaigns contributes to engaging Chinese social media users and to building a closer relationship with them.

The following table summarizes the main points of analysis that will be used for the research. The extent to which each of the four factors is taken into consideration by a brand will be measured based on the guiding questions included in the table: each guiding question will be considered separately in order to give an assessment on whether a particular aspect of a factor is explicitly or implicitly present in the post that is being analysed. The following table will be used for each post analysed and to each point of analysis an assessment will be given on the column “data”. After analysing all the posts and giving an assessment on the degree of standardisation or adaptation of each post (based on the response seen for each single guiding question), an average will be calculated to assess whether the brand in question seems to opt more for one strategy or the other.

		DATA
LANGUAGE	English or Chinese?	
WORDING	Does it mention/refer to Chinese culture or not?	
BRAND AWARENESS & VALUE CONSCIOUSNESS	Does it mention/refer to the history or concept of the brand?	
POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES	Does it place emphasis on social status-conferring benefits? On the potential of conformity to a group? Or on younger generations?	
TRADITIONAL CULTURAL VALUES	Does it highlight the powerfulness of the product/brand? Or the importance within a specific group of people? Or does it value favour-exchanging relationships?	
SUSCEPTIBILITY TO NORMATIVE INFLUENCE	Is there any celebrity endorsement? If so, what kind of celebrity is used?	

Source: Author's summary of main points of analysis for the research; table used for the analysis.

The aim of the research will be of defining which of the two strategies seems to be more successful and to what degree it is employed. The successfulness of a strategy will be defined through the calculation of the social media engagement rate of a post. The social media engagement rate will be calculated according to the Forbes Agency Council “classic” method of calculation of social media engagement, which consists in a formula that sees the number of public interactions (likes, comments and shares, in the case of Weibo and Twitter) divided by the number of followers of the account, and the total of that multiplied for 100. The importance of calculating social media engagement lies in the fact that a higher level of engagement means a higher efficiency in marketing strategy, hence the more comments and likes a specific post gets, the more efficient the marketing strategy is resulting to be. It could be criticized that analysing social media engagement also comes with some deficiencies, as we must remember that a comment under a post, for example, isn’t necessarily a positive one. However, this gap is filled by the number of likes: if a post has a high number of likes, it comes necessarily that the ad has been overall well-appreciated by its audience. It is also important to remember that for accounts like those we are analysing, which have a very high number of followers, the engagement rate is usually quite low compared to that of a personal account of a

user, that usually has a much smaller number of followers. That is because, among the millions of people following the account of a brand, many are less-active users and therefore don't engage much (or never) on the brand's posts. According to a study published by SocialInsider in 2022 (Cucu, 2022), the average engagement rate for fashion brands' accounts on Twitter is 0,04%, whereas it was not possible to find official data on the average engagement rate for the same type of market on Weibo.

This research will therefore be based on empirical data extracted by 400 different posts, 200 per social media platform. These posts will then be put to comparison to define whether an approach of standardization or adaptation has been picked. It is extremely important to keep in mind that a Weibo post that seemingly shows a preference for adaptation, cannot be considered as "adapting" until it has been put to comparison with its Twitter equivalent and it has been shown that they are in fact different, although promoting the same product. The methodology approach of comparing ads on different medias with the aim of analysing a brand's preferred marketing strategy has been used in previous research as well (Checchinato et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2015; Yu & Hu, 2020). After having put to comparison the ads and having determined which strategy is the preferred one by a specific brand, the social media engagement rate will be calculated, in order to define its successfulness.

Despite the fact that much academic research has been already done on the topic of luxury and its diffusion within the Chinese market, no research has been concluded yet in the context of standardization and adaptation as social media strategies used to promote luxury brands and products in China and on Chinese social networks. More specifically, this research will be considering these internationalization marketing strategies from the point of view of cultural, social and political factors as those constructing the theoretical framework. Very often researchers tend to consider marketing in a different country solely based on selling trends in that specific country without diving deep into the causes of those trends and into what takes to promote a foreign brand into a different market while still showing respect and appreciation for specific cultural values and traditions. Among the literature analysed, none was taking into consideration all of the four factors that construct our theoretical framework: in fact, they were all focusing on only one, or maybe two different aspects of those that characterize Chinese consumers, whether they'd be social, political or purely economic. Analysing only one specific characteristic of this consumer base in the context of marketing strategies might give very detailed insight within its own category, but it will always lack the more comprehensive image that a research which takes into consideration all of the different types of influences can give. Moreover, researching how all of these aspects together influence the Chinese consumers' response to these brands and products on social media, gives a more up-to-date insight on newer consumer generations and their consumption trends. As a consequence, this research, while still keeping into consideration Chinese people's consumption characteristics, also aims at analysing to what degree certain cultural and political aspects are taken into consideration by fashion luxury brands when marketing on Chinese social media platforms, and the positive or negative results of such considerations, as well as how a certain approach might result in greater appreciation of the brand and its products.

RESULTS

As previously shown, the analysis of the brands' accounts and posts has been conducted through the employment of the table. Since the analysis was driven by a theoretical framework based on four values that define and imply adaptation, it is only logic to follow the same pattern for the analysis of the results and divide it in those same four points plus the additional one of language and wording.

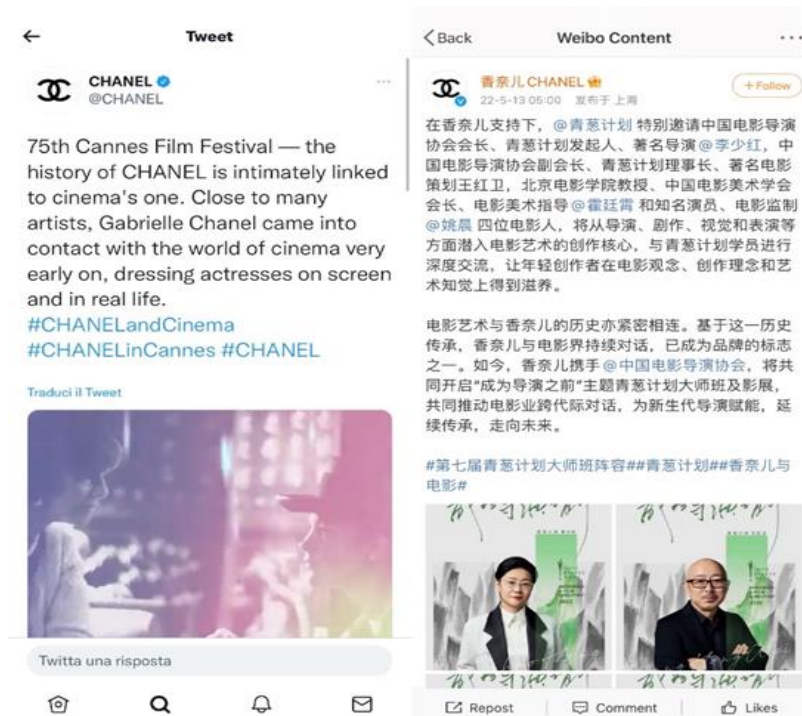
1. *Language and wording*

First of all, the language on the Twitter posts was English for every brand, while it was Chinese for every brand on Weibo. For what comes to wording, most posts were very similar both on Twitter and Weibo in terms of textual content, but in 5 brands out of 10 we have found references regarding the 520 Chinese festivity. Posts about this festivity were mainly found on Weibo, but in some cases also on Twitter. Apart from references to this Chinese festivity, another slight difference in the choice of words on the Weibo posts compared to the Twitter one was that of being more detailed and explanatory about the characteristics of a certain product or the techniques and inspirations used for a certain collection: this aspect could be connected to consumer education. As we will see in the next point of analysis, the textual content of the posts was quite often showing a level of adaptation in terms of instructing Chinese consumers about the history, concept or people behind the brand.

2. *Brand awareness and value consciousness*

Not all brands showed adaptation in terms of educating consumers about the brand and the value of its products, but those who did focused on explaining a product's characteristics in more specific detail, like in the case of Gucci, or on promoting events like exhibitions or masterclasses taking place in China and specifically designed for the Chinese consumer base, like it is the case of Chanel and Louis Vuitton. As we can see in the following posts, Chanel is focusing on cinema both on Twitter and on Weibo, but by adapting the latter to the Chinese cinema industry through the funding and promotion of a masterclass aimed at young generations that want to become film directors. At the end of the description of the post, the Chanel Weibo account highlights: “如今，香奈儿携手@中国电影导演协会，将共同开启“成为导演之前”主题青葱计划大师班及影展，共同推动电影业跨代际对话，为新生代导演赋能，延续传承，走向未来” [Now Chanel, together with @China Film Directors Association, will jointly launch a masterclass and a film festival themed “Before becoming director” to promote intergenerational dialogue in the film industry, to empower a new generation of directors, and to preserve their heritage and to move towards the future] (Chanel's 8th analysed post on Weibo, Weibo account of Chanel, <https://weibo.com/u/1892475055>, 13/05/2022, accessed on 01/06/2022). Although this masterclass might not teach directly about Chanel, it is still an important marketing technique for the brand because it shows interest in the Chinese market and Chinese consumers seem to appreciate this kind of



approach: in fact, the engagement rate for this post is 0,03%, which is higher than the overall average found on Weibo for the Chanel account (amounting to 0,007%).



Chanel's 7th analysed post on Twitter. (Source: Twitter account of Chanel, <https://twitter.com/CHANEL>, 18/05/2022, accessed 01/06/2022).

Chanel's 8th analysed post on Weibo. (Source: Weibo account of Chanel, <https://weibo.com/u/1892475055>, 13/05/2022, accessed on 01/06/2022).

Louis Vuitton, on the other hand, is also promoting consumer education, but in this case through the institution of a temporary exhibition about the brand in different Chinese cities, which is clearly aimed at creating brand awareness among the Chinese consumer base. In fact, in the post description it is underlined “路易威登联袂各界艺术家，展陈百年来绚丽缤纷的艺术合作。邀您漫步展览空间，跨时空邂逅经典佳作，畅享灵感妙境” [Louis Vuitton has partnered with artists from all circles to showcase the magnificent and diverse artistic cooperation over the past century. You are invited to stroll around the exhibition space, encounter classic masterpieces, and enjoy the wonderful world of inspiration] (Louis Vuitton's 4th analysed post on Weibo, Weibo account of Louis Vuitton, <https://weibo.com/louisvuitton>, 19/05/2022, accessed on 03/06/2022). This example shows explicitly that adaptation characteristic regarding the factor of creating brand awareness that is the institution of exhibitions and events that educate consumers and receivers about the concept, history and/or artistic inspiration of the brand.


 路易威登 
+ Follow

22-5-19 04:16 from 新版微博 weibo.com
 发布于 上海

创想篇章，继往开来。自首次亮相深圳后，#LVAND
 展览#将于青岛启航新旅。路易威登联袂各界艺术家，
 展陈百年来绚丽缤纷的艺术合作。邀您漫步展览空
 间，跨时空邂逅经典佳作，畅享灵感妙境。
 展览时间：2022年5月20日至2022年7月1日
 展览地点：青岛市市南区奥林匹克帆船中心5号门



*Louis Vuitton's 4th analysed post on Weibo.
 (Source: Weibo account of Louis Vuitton,
<https://weibo.com/louisvuitton>, 19/05/2022,
 accessed on 03/06/2022).*

3. *Political ideologies*

Regarding political ideologies, the brands analysed almost never referred to this factor, whether explicitly or implicitly. As we said in the theoretical framework, we can consider references towards group-conformity, social status-conferring benefits, or younger generations as an implicit adaptation to political ideologies. Although most brands presented some degree of celebrity endorsement, we could say that only Louis Vuitton seemed to refer to group-conformity more than others: in fact, when promoting the “Dauphine” bag, Louis Vuitton chooses three brand ambassadors, two being globally famous actresses and one being Zhou Dongyu, a famous Chinese actress, mostly known within China. The campaign represented by these actresses was present on both Twitter and Weibo, but with a difference: on Twitter, the posts dedicated to the campaign always show the three actresses together, except for one which is dedicated to Deepika Padukone (one of the two globally famous actresses), whereas on Weibo only one post is dedicated to the two international actresses (Louis Vuitton’s 11th analysed post on Weibo, Weibo account of Louis Vuitton, <https://weibo.com/louisvuitton>, 17/05/2022, accessed on 03/06/2022), while another one is about Zhou Dongyu only (Louis Vuitton’s 12th analysed post on Weibo, Weibo account of Louis Vuitton, <https://weibo.com/louisvuitton>, 17/05/2022, accessed on 03/06/2022). The difference in number of reactions that we can see in the posts shows the significant greater appreciation that the Chinese have for seeing national celebrities being represented. In a way, we could consider the adaptation that Louis Vuitton has brought about with this campaign as one that

enhances group-conformity and social status-conferring benefits, as this actress(es) represents the group of people she belongs to (one with high social status position) and endorses the use of Louis Vuitton products as being associated with this same group.



Louis Vuitton's 11th analysed post on Weibo. (Source: Weibo account of Louis Vuitton, <https://weibo.com/louisvuitton>, 17/05/2022, accessed on 03/06/2022).



Louis Vuitton's 12th analysed post on Weibo. (Source: Weibo account of Louis Vuitton, <https://weibo.com/louisvuitton>, 17/05/2022, accessed on 03/06/2022).

Apart from this subtle referral, we can say that the political ideology factor was left aside from brands and almost never included in their Weibo posts when trying an adaptation approach.

4. Traditional Cultural Values

For what comes to traditional cultural values, we also haven't noticed a great degree of adaptation: the posts analysed for each brand did not seem to refer specifically to the powerfulness of a brand and to the benefits this brings to the consumer in terms of "miànzi". The main thing worth noting in this regard is the extreme difference on amount of likes and interactions that there is between a post on Weibo with international celebrities, and one with Chinese ones. In fact, the users and followers seem to greatly appreciate a post with a national celebrity: as we can see in the example below (Dior's 16th analysed post on Weibo, Weibo account of Dior, <https://weibo.com/u/2130860695>, 19/05/2022, accessed on 04/06/2022), these posts from Christian Dior's Weibo account show a significantly higher amount of likes compared to those of other posts in the same account, which have a much lower engagement rate. This factor doesn't directly refer to traditional cultural

values per se, but it shows that Chinese consumers are really happy to see Chinese celebrities appear in their social media, and they show a lot of appreciation for it. In a way, such celebrities represent the concept of “miànzi” in the sense that they are part of a social group that is identified as one with high levels of miànzi: as a consequence, buying or wearing products of the same brand that these celebrities are endorsing implies gaining the same degree of miànzi.



Dior's 16th analysed post on Weibo. (Source: Weibo account of Dior, <https://weibo.com/u/2130860695>, 19/05/2022, accessed on 04/06/2022).

Another result worth noting in this regard is the one found in the analysis of three different posts from Armani. These posts seem to refer somewhat explicitly to interpersonal relationships and their importance, which is a characteristic related to the cultural value of “guānxi”. All the three posts are directed towards the Chinese festivity of 520, but in slightly different ways: the first one refers to companionship and underlines that “爱的表达方式各不相同，而陪伴，一定是最长情的告白” [Love is expressed in different ways and companionship must be the longest confession of love] (Armani's 14th analysed post on Weibo, Weibo account of Armani, <https://weibo.com/armani>, 18/05/2022, accessed on 04/06/2022); the second one, mentions that “爱有着多重的释义，对自己的亲人，有时却疏于了表达，520 将近，不如趁着节日，将你的爱意告知那个最重要的人吧” [Love has multiple meanings and sometimes we neglect expressing it to our relatives; 520 is approaching, so why don't you take advantage of the festival to tell your love to that most important person] (Armani's 17th analysed post on Weibo, Weibo account of Armani, <https://weibo.com/armani>,

17/05/2022, accessed on 04/06/2022); the third one, instead, refers to friendship and compares this kind of relationship to that of brotherhood or sisterhood by stating “她是那个伴随一起长大的人，她如同镜子一般照着自己。是一辈子的姐妹，也是一辈子的好友。520 将近，别忘了对身边一同成长的兄弟姐妹表达心中的爱” [She was the one who grew up with her, and she looked at herself just like in a mirror. A lifelong sister and friend. 520 is approaching, don't forget to express your love to brothers and sisters that you grew up with] (Armani's 19th analysed post, Weibo account of Armani, <https://weibo.com/armani>, 16/05/2022, accessed on 04/06/2022). These three posts seem to refer to relationship in three different ways but always by underlining the importance such relationships should have in one's life. Although more than half of the brands analysed referred to 520 in some way, Armani was the only one who explicitly referred to relationships in a way that we could connect to the traditional cultural value of “guānxi”.



Armani's 14th analysed post on Weibo. (Source: Weibo account of Armani, <https://weibo.com/armani>, 18/05/2022, accessed on 04/06/2022).



Armani's 17th analysed post on Weibo. (Source: Weibo account of Armani, <https://weibo.com/armani>, 17/05/2022, accessed on 04/06/2022).



Armani's 19th analysed post on Weibo. (Source: Weibo account of Armani, <https://weibo.com/armani>, 16/05/2022, accessed on 04/06/2022).

Still with regards to traditional cultural values, there is one example that is worth bringing: once again on the Armani Weibo account, we can notice one post that might be referring indirectly to the value of harmony. This post is also about the 520 festivity, but this time it brings the voice of a Chinese celebrity who is talking about love, and in the description of the post we can find a quote from this same person which states “坦然与自我和解，勇敢与世界碰面，都将升华成一个人爱与被爱的能力” [Being calm, reconciling with oneself and meeting the world bravely will be sublimated into one’s ability to love and be loved] (Armani’s 5th post on Weibo, Weibo account of Armani, <https://weibo.com/armani>, 20/05/2022, accessed on 04/06/2022). We could consider this as implicitly referring to the value of harmony because people with high-harmony consciousness give great importance to the idea of finding inner peace and living in harmony with the rest of the world, through the reconciliation and perfect equilibrium between various different and opposing forces. As we can see from the image below, this post was greatly appreciated within the Weibo followers of the Armani account.



Armani's 5th analysed post on Weibo. (Source: Weibo account of Armani, <https://weibo.com/armani>, 20/05/2022, accessed on 04/06/2022).

5. Susceptibility to normative influence

Susceptibility to normative influence was brought about exclusively in the form of celebrity endorsement. This might be the most interesting aspect of the analysis, as almost every brand adapted their celebrity endorsements with the use of Chinese celebrities when promoting the brand on Weibo. The degree of adaptation in this regard really depends on the brand, as one brand, for example, did not show any type of adaptation or celebrity endorsement in general, whereas others showed a completely different range of celebrities on their Weibo account compared to those on their Twitter account for the same products or events. The first one is the case of Hermes: this brand has barely any sign of adaptation and no sign of celebrity endorsement on its Weibo account. The posts of the Weibo account are in a sense different from those of the Twitter account as they promote completely different products, but never by referring to Chinese culture or Chinese consumers, not explicitly nor implicitly. Moreover, the Weibo account of the brand resulted to be way more active than its Twitter counterpart. On the other hand, there were also brands whose posts on Weibo were endorsing the same kind of products or events but with completely different celebrities, and only Chinese ones. That is the case, for example, of Versace and Christian Dior. Versace, while promoting its new collaboration with Fendi on both accounts, it utilizes completely different celebrities to do so, western ones on Twitter and exclusively Chinese ones on Weibo. This shows also in the significant difference in social media engagement rate between the two accounts (0,019% for Twitter and 0,99% for Weibo), which underlines once again that Chinese celebrity endorsement on Weibo is highly appreciated by its users. For what comes to Christian Dior, while promoting its most recent fashion show which took place in Venice Beach (California), it makes use of western

celebrities who attended the show dressed in Dior to promote the event on Twitter, while it shows pictures of Chinese celebrities endorsing the same event and its online streaming on Weibo. As mentioned earlier, the significantly higher amount of likes that Weibo posts with Chinese celebrity endorsement have compared to those with Western celebrities seems to highlight once again how such degree of adaptation is greatly appreciated by Chinese consumers and has a positive effect in promoting a specific brand and its products into China.

6. Social media engagement rates

When it comes to numbers of interactions, the results of the research are very interesting. The table below shows the average social media engagement rate that was calculated for each brand, on Twitter and on Weibo.

	Gucci	Chanel	Hermes	Dior	Vuitton	Prada	Versace	Armani	Valentino	Balenciaga
Twitter	0,008%	0,01%	0,12%	0,005%	0,01%	0,01%	0,019%	0,006%	0,05%	0,053%
Weibo	0,002%	0,007%	0,003%	0,09%	0,88%	0,001%	0,99%	2,31%	0,88%	0,14%

Source: Author's calculation of average social media engagement rate per account and per social media based on the social media engagement rate of each post analysed.

As the table shows, the highest engagement rate for Twitter is the one of Hermes. We must notice that Hermes' Twitter account had the lowest number of followers (119.600 in total) than any other brand's Twitter account. This partially influences the engagement rate as the lower number of followers, the higher the engagement rate of a given account tends to be. The brand that had the highest engagement rate for Weibo, on the other hand, is Armani, whose rate is far beyond any other brand. This data could represent the most obvious answer to the main research question, as we will see in the discussion. For what comes to brands who performed worst, we have Prada with the lowest engagement rate on Weibo, and Dior with the lowest engagement rate on Twitter.

Overall, Weibo seems to win over Twitter as for highest social media engagement rates: in fact, six brands out of 10 have higher engagement rates on Weibo than they do on Twitter. In this regard, we must keep in mind that Chinese users, as mentioned earlier in the literature review, tend to be way more active on social media than their counterparts on Twitter, and this might also influence the engagement rates.

We should also mention that the Balenciaga Twitter account only had 12 posts in total: as a consequence, for the Balenciaga accounts only 12 posts were considered for both social networks. This also influenced the timeline that was used to analyse the other brands, as the 12 Twitter posts included also some that were posted after the 21st of May 2022.

DISCUSSION

This research brought about a number of interesting discoveries that significantly help us with assessing what Chinese consumers want to see from foreign luxury brands. By dividing the analysis in several different points, it is possible to understand in great detail which of these factors influence the popularity of a brand the most.

As for language, the use of Mandarin Chinese in the description of 100% of all posts analysed on Weibo shows how the use of the local language is an obvious choice that doesn't necessarily imply adaptation, but rather a mere communication necessity when considered that in China most people have a very limited knowledge of the English language. Being the Chinese language used in all posts of all brands on Weibo, we cannot fully consider it as a sign of adaptation. However, the analysis of specific wording among the textual content of the posts shows that some brands do in fact differentiate their communication strategy depending on the platform: in fact, on Weibo it appears to be more common that posts advertising a certain product have more descriptive and explicative texts than they do on Twitter. This might reinforce the assumption that foreign brands seem to have towards Chinese consumers and their knowledge about luxury, which is that of being aspirational yet not enough knowledgeable consumers. The wording of textual content is essential on these two platforms to "give voice" to an ad: for example, many brands decided to mention the 520 Chinese festivity in their posts, which would have otherwise not been obvious or explicit at all. In fact, without the explicit mention or hashtag about 520, most of these posts would have seemed as mere advertisement of products, and their connection with 520 would have not been captured by the readers. Posts regarding 520 that had an explicit reference to the festivity in their textual content were overall very well appreciated by the public, with engagement rates higher than average.

The explanatory descriptions mentioned earlier that seemed to be more common on Weibo, can relate also to the topic of brand awareness and value consciousness. In this regard, consumer education plays a significant role and particularly explanatory descriptions seem to be driven by this purpose of educating and raising awareness among consumers about a product's characteristics. Consumer education is even more obvious when brands decide to invest in exhibitions about the brand's history or in specific projects that aim at teaching younger generations a specific set of skills. These were the cases of Chanel and Louis Vuitton, as we have seen in the previous section. The reactions to this type of initiatives also seemed to be very positive in terms of engagement rates: in fact, Chanel's posts about its initiative towards Chinese aspiring movie directors received the highest engagement rate out of all its other posts on Weibo. This leads us to the conclusion that Chinese people like to be directly engaged by these brands: seeing a foreign brand making initiatives and investing money into China shows that this brand cares deeply about its Chinese consumers and about the perception such consumers have of the brand itself. In the analysis of the posts, only these two brands promoted actual initiatives of this kind; something smaller but similar was brought about by Balenciaga and Armani, as they both introduced interactive initiatives to promote their brand that were available on WeChat and therefore specifically designed for Chinese consumers. Balenciaga, in particular, launched a small videogame on WeChat that is meant to be themed as the 520 festivity and to promote the brand and its products at the same

time. This might represent a more subtle form of consumer education, one that also shows interest in engaging Chinese consumers. In the case of Balenciaga, this strategy hasn't been as greatly appreciated as in other cases, but it still shows a rather high engagement rate if we consider the relatively low number of followers that the Balenciaga Weibo account has (227.600). The high number of interactions that posts regarding the 520 festivity have shown, demonstrates that using Chinese festivities to promote certain products is a good strategy: brands were in fact promoting products in terms of how the latter could "enrich" the consumer's 520 experience, and one brand even created a limited edition line specifically designed for 520. Overall, all posts regarding this festivity resulted in having a higher number of interactions compared to the average of a given brand, suggesting that Chinese consumers did appreciate the interest and engagement of these brands in Chinese festivities.

For what comes to political ideologies, the overall results show that brands tend to avoid mentioning or even implicitly referring to Chinese political ideologies and influences. Why this happens is not clear, but the main hypothesis is that brands prefer to avoid such "risky" fields in order to limit the possibilities of counterreactions or misunderstandings from the public. References to collectivism and China's collectivist culture, whether explicit or not, are not found in any post. The only thing we could consider as referring in some way to collectivism is the sense of belonging to a group that is brought about by celebrity endorsement. In fact, being China a collectivist culture, most consumers seek to buy luxury products so that they can be recognised as belonging to a certain group that they want to identify/be identified with. Celebrity endorsement contributes to this as people see their favourite celebrities wearing a certain brand's product and therefore are subconsciously convinced that in order to belong to the same social group of that person, they need to purchase and wear that product. Materialism also doesn't appear in explicit or implicit ways in the posts analysed. One could say that being the posts about certain material products, they are implicitly promoting materialism itself, but if we only consider materialism in this way, then it would not result as being a characteristic of Chinese consumers. In fact, as mentioned in the theoretical framework, materialism is more typical of post-socialist countries in the sense that these countries give a different value to material goods, one that is higher than it ever was before in that society. Objectively speaking, Western culture is heavily materialist as well, and it has already been this way for a long time. But the Chinese society has only recently discovered the world of capitalist consumerism in the way westerners have known it for decades, if not centuries, and therefore the materialist aspect of their consumption behaviours is more relevant and more obvious than it is for westerners. Lastly, nationalism also results in being entirely absent from the analysed posts. The presence of Chinese models and Chinese festivities in the posts cannot be directly linked to the political influence of nationalism because the models or the festivities being endorsed are promoted by a brand that is in itself a foreign one and therefore nationalist discourses would not make sense if coming from them. As we mentioned previously, nationalism might actually work against the perception of Chinese consumers towards foreign luxury brands, and it is therefore in the interest of the brand itself to avoid bringing about heavy nationalistic discourses. Consequently, it is interesting to note that brands have mostly avoided taking into consideration political

ideologies and influences within China, and therefore it is hard to assess whether taking them into account would have a positive or negative impact on a given brand.

The brands analysed in this research have also shown relatively limited adaptation in terms of traditional cultural values. One reason behind this might be that brands do not want to risk adapting to certain cultural values in such a way that might be easily misunderstood and that could cause a scandal similar to that of D&G that was mentioned earlier. This is likely the reason why in the analysis we do not find any post that refers explicitly to Chinese culture and tradition. The concept of “miànzi”, for example, is never referred to directly, nor we can find direct referrals about the powerfulness that a brand’s products can confer. The only way in which we could say that miànzi is shown, is once again through celebrity endorsement: in fact, Chinese celebrities wearing a certain product look like strong personalities who are entering the western world of fashion through their great careers. This could be seen as an implicit way of underlining the powerfulness of a product and the goal that these people have reached (and that consumers can reach) through the purchase of that same product. For what comes to “guānxi”, posts referring to this concept were also quite scarce: the only exception is the series of posts by Armani that highlight the 520 festival and refer to interpersonal relationships of all kinds in an explicit way. Although the 520 festivity has been promoted by most of the brands analysed, only Armani actually took advantage of it being a festivity about love and amorous relationships to talk about all sorts of relationships and their importance, and therefore engaging Chinese consumers with high guanxi-consciousness. Despite being posts about 520 relatively popular and well-appreciated, these ones in particular did not show very high interaction levels. Lastly, harmony was taken into consideration only by one post, also from Armani, as seen earlier. This post, on the contrary of the previously mentioned ones, received great appreciation from the users, which might be because of its different and more interactive format (short podcast) and/or because of the celebrity endorsement used for this podcast and post.

Susceptibility to normative influence seemed to be the most used and effective adaptation tool employed by the analysed brands. Most brands, in fact, made use of Chinese celebrity endorsement to promote their products: whenever there is an occasion to have a celebrity advertise a product, that occasion is taken. And the results are staggering: posts with Chinese celebrities have numbers of likes that are hundreds of times higher than any other post of the same brand. For example, the post with the highest engagement rate out of all the posts analysed among all brands was one by Armani on Weibo, which had an engagement rate of 35,2% and which showed a Chinese celebrity wearing and promoting a collection of sustainable t-shirts made with recycled materials. The rest of the posts on the Armani Weibo account had a much lower average engagement rate of around 0,003%, with a couple of exceptions. It is hard to assess whether the significantly higher number of interactions that this post turned out to have is due to the celebrity per se, or if the fact that he is promoting sustainable t-shirts has an impact too. Considering that all posts showing Chinese celebrities on Weibo have resulted in much higher amounts of interactions than the rest of the posts, the most obvious conclusion is that the reason behind this one is the same. The fact that all posts who presented a very high number of interactions within all brands are those with Chinese celebrity endorsement leads us to the conclusion that having Chinese celebrities wear and shoot campaigns in a given brand’s products is the best strategy experimented so far when

promoting this given brand in the Chinese market. This factor is the one that more than any other has influenced the social media engagement rate averages and probably one of the main causes for the Weibo averages being higher in most cases than the Twitter ones. This confirms once again the results of the study conducted by Yu & Hu (2020), where they stated that celebrity endorsement with international celebrities may result in lower social media interactions when employed in China.

Social media engagement rates are the conclusive and defining factor that allows to draw a conclusion on the matter of this research. Based on the points that were previously defined and analysed, and through the combination of this analysis with the results of the engagement rates, we can conclude that adaptation is overall the preferred technique used by these brands, and also the most effective one. Although no brand showed incredibly high levels of adaptation, some clearly showed more interest in their Chinese consumers' cultural, social and political aspects than others. The brands that had the highest number of posts presenting adaptation to some degree were Dior, Louis Vuitton, Versace, Armani, and Valentino, with Versace and Armani being the top two (respectively 19 out of 20 posts, and 16 out of 20 posts showing some degree of adaptation). These brands also result to be those with the highest average engagement rates on Weibo, which are in all cases also higher than their Twitter counterparts. This clearly proves how some degree of adaptation, and especially the use of Chinese celebrity endorsement, results in significantly higher interactions from Chinese consumers which, in turn, demonstrate appreciation towards a certain brand.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has analysed to what extent the marketing strategies of standardization and adaptation influence luxury fashion brands' internationalization into the Chinese market. More specifically, the research has analysed to what extent political, social and cultural factors influence such internationalization, and has concluded that adaptation is overall the most employed strategy as well as the most appreciated one by Chinese consumers. The different factors constructing the theoretical framework were the defining elements that helped concluding to what degree a brand was employing the adaptation strategy. These results were overall compliant with results of previous research done on the topic, except for one case: Checchinato et al.'s (2014) research had found standardization to be the preferred strategy when comparing ads between Vogue Italy and Vogue China. The different results found may be justified by the intrinsic difference between paper magazine advertising and social media advertising. However, diving more deeply into these two categories and understanding why there is such a concrete difference between these two types of luxury brands advertisement within China could be an interesting topic for future research. This study, although aiming at giving a general understanding of the importance of all cultural, social and political factors when advertising in the Chinese market, comes with some limitations itself. First of all, analysing complicated and historical cultural aspects in the context of social media might reduce them to more simplistic interpretations of their intrinsic nature and their influence in the Chinese society: in fact, it is quite complicated to interpret these cultural aspects and translate them into luxury fashion products' advertisements. Moreover, analysing social media engagement

rates does not necessarily include in the calculation the actual influence that taking into consideration certain cultural aspects might have: for example, there are always users who like a post just for the aesthetic features of the content of the post, because they are mere fans of the brand, or even just without reading the description. These elements constitute limitations to this study that are hard to keep into consideration when doing this sort of analysis. Social media is a rather new and complicated landscape, and because of the enormous freedom of interaction it gives to its users, it is more complicated to truly capture the real demands of consumers on these platforms. However, this research has surely demonstrated that Chinese consumers greatly appreciate when a brand shows interest in their market by taking into consideration the unique Chinese political, cultural and social characteristics and translates them into its marketing strategies. Social media, in particular, has given more power and voice to consumers, and it is therefore essential for foreign brands internationalizing into the Chinese market to give particular attention to the intrinsic characteristics of such consumers in order to avoid cultural misunderstandings and to best promote their values and products around the world.

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