

THE GREAT SHOW'S GREAT FALL

A Crisis Analysis on Dolce & Gabbana's PR crisis in November 2018

Italian luxury fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana was going to host a runway extravaganza, *The Great Show*, in Shanghai on Nov. 21st, 2018. In order to generate media attention around the show, D&G posted a series of videos on traditional Chinese and Italian food culture on Weibo (a major Chinese social media platform) and Instagram on Nov. 17th. However, the videos were widely received as explicit racist toward the Chinese people, producing significant consequences to the brand's public image.

1. Prodromal Stage: The videos are triggers

The series featured a Chinese model in a lavish D&G dress and jewelry attempted to eat spaghetti, pizza and cannoli with chopsticks, and the model used the chopsticks in a weird and dramatic way. The video had a voice over in Mandarin Chinese, but it was perceived as condescending and inappropriate. For example, "Welcome to the first episode of Eating with Chopsticks by Dolce & Gabbana", the voiceover man pronounced the brand name incorrectly on purpose to mock the Chinese-English accent (Friedman & Wee, 2018). In another video, the voiceover read: "We're going to show you how to properly eat the great Italian Margarita pizza using the small-stick like things (referring to chopsticks).", suggesting that Italian food is superior than Chinese food. The series of videos went viral and causing significant backlash.

To the public's surprise, D&G did not respond to the backlash by issuing a statement explaining what happened, rather the brand quickly deleted the videos, which fueled the anger and contempt to a new level on social media among the Asian community, especially among Chinese people. It was cringeworthy to watch the videos and the Chinese people felt seriously offended. Nonetheless, it was another incident caused by Stefano Gabbana, the co-founder and

designer of D&G, that escalated the crisis and put the brand in a passive position, which eventually damaged the brand substantially.

2. Acute Stage: Crisis Escalation

On Nov. 21st, the same day that *The Great Show* was scheduled, Gabbana, using his personal account, argued with a fashion blogger @michaelatranova about the controversial videos, and @michaelatranova shared the screenshots of their chat on Instagram. In their argument, Gabbana made racist comments such as “[China is a] country of [five poop emojis]” and “China Ignorant Dirty Smelling Mafia, “Chinese eat dogs (Friedman & Wee, 2018).” In addition, Gabbana claimed that he was not afraid of @michaelatranova exposing him online. The screenshots were then posted on Weibo and was the No. 1 hot topic of that day, as well as the hashtag #boycottdolce.

3. Chronic Stage: Crisis Management Came in Late and Wrong

Chinese customers were furious at the time that they revolted against D&G. They refused to shop at D&G or buy any of its products. Some went further. They destroyed their own D&G products to show their anger (Friedman & Wee, 2018). Hundreds of Chinese celebrities and models who were expected at the show denounced D&G and Gabbana’s behaviors on their social media and announced that they would no longer be present at *The Great Show*.

In the afternoon, D&G issued its first statement that the comments were not made by Stefano Gabbana because his account as well as the brand’s official account were hacked. It is recommended that when a company is communicating the crisis to the public that whatever they say should be honest, provable and supportable. While there was no way to verify if it was true that the two accounts were hacked. Be truthful is one of the best practices to crisis management, but D&G was not ready to face the truth.

In the statement, D&G posted a screenshot of Gabbana's racist comments and put "NOT ME" in red and giant font on it. D&G also apologized to China and the Chinese people on the unauthorized comments, nothing regard to the racist videos was mentioned. The apology was done wrong since the it seemed off to the public because if Gabbana did not make those offensive comments, why would he apologize for the comments, not the videos which are the triggers of the entire incident.

The crisis and D&G's unprofessional response led to substantial consequences. The show was forced to cancel. Meanwhile two Chinese D&G ambassadors Reba Dili and Junkai Wang announced on Weibo that they had cancelled all existing and future deals with the brand (Colon, 2018). Major Chinese e-commerce websites Taobao, jd.com. and secoo.com. have removed all D&G products from their websites. Luxury e-retailer Net-a-Porter also removed all D&G products from its Chinese website (Friedman & Wee, 2018). Department store Lane Crawford announced that it would remove all D&G products in all store locations and online shopping site (Friedman & Wee, 2018). Moreover, questions about D&G's controversial videos and response were asked in the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Regular Press Conference, indicating that the whole world was paying attention to the D&G crisis.

D&G then issued a second statement on social media on Nov. 23rd, expressing its deep sadness that the show was cancelled and appreciation to all who have worked hard to prepare for the show. Still, no apology was made regarding the videos.

4. Resolution Stage: D&G, you could do better than that

A few hours after its second statement, D&G announced its first apology in a third one with a video in which Stephano Gabbana and Domenico Dolce (the other co-founder) ask for forgiveness from the Chinese people. At the end, two co-founders apologized in Chinese, trying to

show their respect. Nonetheless, it was not well-received by the public for the two were being disingenuous in the video. First, they were both reading off a script. Second, the content in the apology was insincere. For example, “we want to ask for your forgiveness if we have made mistakes in interpreting [your culture].” At this point, D&G remained unaware of what the real problem was nor the mistakes they indeed made. Insincere apology hurts a brand more than doing nothing at all.

The three statements concluded D&G’s responses to the crisis which was still not contained at that time and whose effect on the Chinese market is carried in till today. On Nov. 5, 2019, Shanghai held the International Import Expo and D&G was seen had a booth at the venue. Immediately, people posted on Weibo to express their discomfort seeing the brand at an international event and reminded others to not forget what happened last year. D&G has left a deep racist and arrogant impression on Chinese people, and it is difficult for them to turn the image around at this time.

Looking Back

The extravagant show’s great fall was not the first time that D&G has gotten backlash in China. Back in 2017, D&G launched its Dolce & Gabbana Loves China campaign with pictures shot in Beijing, which featured glam models next to underprivileged local people (Koetse, 2018). Many people perceived the pictures as showing Beijing as an underdeveloped city on purpose and they reacted angrily toward the campaign.

Like the brand had an issue with respecting China and its culture, Stefano Gabbana has a history of making offensive comments. Gabbana made body-shaming comments on Lady Gaga in response to her Super Bowl halftime show in 2017. Gabbana then apologized but his apology received mixed reactions (Eidell, 2017). In Jan. 2018, Gabbana commented in Italian on a photo

collage of Selena Gomez wearing five different red dresses, which translates into English means “she’s really ugly!” Gabbana also responded to a user’s comment, agreeing that Gomez “looks like a Pomeranian dog” (Goldstein, 2018).

Moving Forward

When a brand has already been involved in multiple PR crises, itself and its PR team should remain vigilant because once there’s another crisis, it will come stronger and causes more damage than the previous one due to the brand’s shattered public image. It is better to avoid the crisis from the first place than trying to contain it at the end.

D&G’s great fall in China also offers insights to all brands that want to open up or maintain its market in another country. It is crucial to respect the other culture, to make its people feel being respected. When a crisis is first identified, being truthful is a company’s best practice to keep itself in the proactive position. D&G missed the best time—right after the videos received criticism—to fix what it did wrong. It then made a couple more unsmart moves which eventually caused its fiasco in China. Take every opportunity to solve the crisis as your last attempt.

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