

## **59 Be Italian! Aesthetic employees and the embodiment of national traits in luxury fashion flagship hotels**

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the aesthetic employees associated with the new spaces of luxury fashion brands in the hospitality industry, i.e. luxury fashion flagship hotels. These are defined as hotels that are opened as a function of brand extension by luxury fashion labels, and are primarily associated with Italian luxury brands. Luxury fashion flagship hotels hold a very close relationship with their respective parent brands and they can also employ strategies that see the deployment of characteristic traits associated with Italy and its culture as a way to augment their offerings, maximising the brand extension potential. Traits of Italianicity can also be employed in luxury fashion flagship hotels to provide a coherent setting that is in line with the philosophy of the brands, and that involves not only interior design and services but also the appearance and performance of staff in a situation where fashion and cultural values are strictly intertwined. Through different case studies, it will be argued that the use of Italian national identity traits and strategies of cultural opportunism involves a double form of commodification of embodied dispositions of staff, who are expected to personify both the brand's values and some Italian national characteristics. In this sense luxury fashion flagship hotels are posited as sites where cultural processes and business practices coexist, and where composite, complex, and at times, contrasting identities are showcased and negotiated.

### **Introduction**

The present work aims to examine the case of the aesthetic employees associated with luxury fashion flagship hotels, and to investigate the use of national identity traits and strategies of cultural opportunism in terms of the appearance and performance of staff.

The term 'luxury fashion flagship hotel' (Dallabona 2015a) was coined to differentiate between true hotel brands opened as a function of brand extension by luxury fashion labels, and other forms of association between those brands and ventures in the hospitality industry. In fact there are cases where owners, or creative directors, of luxury labels appear to have simply invested in the hospitality industry in the name of diversification, as in the case of the Ferragamo family (who currently own five Lungarno Hotels in Florence and one in Rome) or of designer Alberta Ferretti, (who has launched two hotels, Castello Montegridolfo and Carducci76 in Italy). A number

of international luxury fashion designers and brands have also ventured into the hospitality business in terms of occasional collaboration, and lent their talent primarily to curating design elements. For example, Azzedine Alaïa designed the '3 Rooms' hotels in Paris and Milan, while at Hotel Halekulani in Honolulu (USA) bridal designer Vera Wang curated a suite. Diane Von Furstenberg designed a suite in 2010 for Claridge's in London, whilst Karl Lagerfeld has also been rather active in this field. In 1994 he curated the refurbishment of Schlosshotel Vier Jahreszeiten in Berlin, in 2012 he made over the Hotel Metropole in Monaco, and moreover he has more recently worked on the Sofitel So Singapore. Suites curated by Bottega Veneta are now available at St Regis Hotel in Florence and Rome and also at Park Hyatt Chicago, but there are many more examples of this. In Paris Sonia Rykiel has curated the refurbishment of Hotel de Crillon and of the restaurant of Hotel Lutetia, whilst Christian Lacroix collaborated with the Hotel le Bellechasse and Hotel le Petit Moulin. Also in Paris, Martin Margiela designed the Maison Champs-Élysées. However, all of those examples belong to the category of occasional collaboration, and are not part of a consistent strategy of brand extension resulting in the creation of true branded hotels associated with the name of luxury fashion labels, which is a phenomenon that only involves Italian luxury brands (Dallabona 2015b).

The luxury fashion flagship hotel phenomenon currently includes four brands (Dallabona 2017): Versace, with Palazzo Versace hotels in Main Beach (Australia) and in Dubai (United Arab Emirates); Bulgari with the Bulgari Hotels and Resorts developments in Milan, Bali, London, Dubai, Beijing and Shanghai (China); Armani with the Armani Hotels and Resorts in Dubai and Milan; Fendi, who launched the Fendi Private Suites in Rome in 2016. However, two more luxury fashion flagship hotel brands existed in the past, Missoni Hotels and Resorts (in Edinburgh and Kuwait city) and Maison Moschino in Milan, which are the focus of this article.

## **Methodology**

The researcher adopted a semiotic approach to examine the cases of Missoni Hotel Edinburgh and Maison Moschino in Milan. Such an approach was chosen due to the very versatile nature of semiotic theories (Mick et al. 2004: 53), which allow for the analysis of the different elements involved in the luxury fashion flagship hotel phenomenon and the discourses concerning them.

There are intrinsic difficulties in researching the luxury sector, as companies are very wary of outsiders and extremely cautious in allowing access to their staff or spaces (Tungate 2005). The decision to focus on the cases of Missoni Hotel Edinburgh and Maison Moschino was in this sense the outcome of a self-selection process.

This study examines different types of data, the discourses and narratives present in the media concerning the hotels in question, interviews conducted by the researchers and her observation of Missoni Hotel Edinburgh and Maison Moschino. Both hotels were visited on three occasions, and the observation was carried out in line with the one employed by Thornton (1995) and Gray (2003). Semi-structured in-depth interviews with a purposive sampling (Bryman 2008) were conducted with key figures involved in the management of the two hotels in question.

## **Hotel Missoni Edinburgh and Maison Moschino**

The first Missoni Hotel opened in Edinburgh (UK) in 2009 and was followed two years later by a resort in Kuwait, but both closed in 2014 when the licensing agreements between the fashion label and Rezidor (an international hospitality management company based in Brussels) were terminated. Missoni Hotel Edinburgh is still managed by the same group, now named Radisson Hotel Group, and has been re-branded as Radisson Collection Hotel Royal Mile Edinburgh.

Maison Moschino was opened as a one-off hotel in Milan in 2010 as a function of a licence agreement between the parent brand Moschino and Hotelphilosophy S.p.A., an Italian hospitality management company that specialised in luxury and design hotels. The hotel closed down in August 2014 as the group the licensee belonged to ran into some difficulties. Maison Moschino has now opened its doors again as NH Milano Palazzo Moscova.

As discussed by Dallabona (2017), the reason for the closure of these hotels is to be found in the choice of strategy employed to create and manage them, i.e. licensing. The latter is in fact characterised by some intrinsic vulnerabilities that were exposed in the aftermath of the economic slowdown from 2008 onwards, which resulted in a shift in the market for luxury fashion and lifestyle brands. All of the other luxury fashion flagship hotels created as a function of different strategies are still open today, whilst more have been added.

Luxury fashion flagship hotels hold a very close relationship with their respective parent brands and can employ strategies that see the deployment of characteristic traits associated with Italy and its culture as a way to augment their offerings, maximising the brand extension potential. This was theorised by Dallabona (2015a and 2016) in terms of cultural opportunism aimed at exploiting the positive characteristic linked to Italy to serve and nourish the brands.

However, traits of Italianicity can also be employed in luxury fashion flagship hotels to provide a coherent setting that is in line with the philosophy of the brands and that involves not only interior design and services, but also the appearance and performance of staff in a situation where fashion and cultural values are strictly intertwined. Here, it will be argued that the use of Italian national identity traits and of strategies of cultural opportunism by those luxury fashion flagship hotels involve a double form of commodification of embodied dispositions of staff, who are expected to personify both the brands' values and some Italian national characteristics.

In the present work such Italian characteristics are examined in terms of Italianicity, a term coined by Barthes (1977: 48) to identify any element that could be considered, in different times and contexts, as Italian. This term is used here, instead of 'Italianness', because it emphasises the flexibility of national traits and supports the notion that those are not defined once and for all, but respond to different contexts and can change in time, even resulting in the co-existence of contrasting narratives

such as modernity and tradition as examined in the case of digital representations of Italian craftsmanship (Dallabona 2014).

Hotel Missoni Edinburgh employed characteristic traits associated with Italy and its culture in a variety of areas, aiming at augmenting and providing coherent offerings based on the Missoni's public persona to their clientele (Dallabona 2015a and 2016). The Missoni family plays a prominent role in the running, but especially in the communication and marketing strategy, of the Missoni brand and the narratives focus in particular on notions of family, informality and friendliness, which provide the dimension of brand culture (Kapferer 2004). These traits are strictly intertwined with Italy and refer to a relaxed lifestyle which appeals to time-poor city dwellers (Vita 2005: 30).

However, these traits refer to a mythical dimension (Barthes 1972) that does not necessarily provide an accurate account of how Italians live their lives nowadays, but that nonetheless creates powerful narratives which are presented and reinforced by films and TV shows, and also by a variety of entities including brands like Missoni. In this sense luxury fashion flagship hotels are posited as sites where cultural processes and business practices coexist, and where composite, complex and, at times, contrasting identities are showcased and negotiated. In fact the traits of Italianicity employed by Missoni Hotel Edinburgh are different from the ones showcased in Maison Moschino.

Service culture at Hotel Missoni Edinburgh focuses on certain elements of Italianicity which are in line with the brand identity of the label and the public persona of the Missonis, in this sense emphasising the dimension of unpretentiousness, friendliness and informality in a variety of ways. As examined in Dallabona (2015a), this was for example the case for staff at the hotel's restaurant, whose friendliness was aimed at avoiding forms of 'intimidation' by the waiters (Bell and Valentine 1997: 127). This focus on making sure that guests feel welcomed is one that very much echoes the narratives surrounding the Missonis because, as Rosita Missoni observed, they are well-known in the fashion world for being good hosts (Nayer 2011), and this is an element mentioned by countless interviews and journal articles (Dallabona 2016).

This is the ethos behind the choice, within Hotel Missoni Edinburgh, not to have formal uniforms in contrast with other hotels in that category. At Hotel Missoni Edinburgh staff wore Missoni kilts (presenting a twist to the the traditional Scottish garments by adopting Missoni patterns instead of tartan ones) or Missoni clothes, with an emphasis on the colourful knitwear pieces that constitute the signature style of the label, in this sense alluding to the dimension of informality that characterises Missoni but that also represents a trait associated to Italianicity. In this perspective staff at Hotel Missoni Edinburgh embody corporate identity (Solomon 1998), and as their bodies contributed to communicate the brand values (Pettinger 2004) they can be considered as aesthetic employees (Warhurst et al. 2000, Warhurst and Nickson 2001 and 2007, Witz et al. 2003) that are 'made up' by their employers (Du Gay 1997).

However, because staff at Missoni Hotel Edinburgh have to embody certain specific traits that are in line with the brand identity of the Missoni label but also associated with Italianicity, such as friendliness and informality, this means that they actually embody both brand values and national traits (Dallabona 2015a). This is a double form of commodification involving aesthetic employees, one that sees employers looking for people who possess traits which can make them act spontaneously in a way that is consistent with the brand identity, meaning that employers seek to hire people who possess what Bourdieu calls 'habitus' (Witz et al. 2003: 47). The habitus is a complex entity that is the product of lifelong experiences accumulated since childhood and that reflects the specific social conditions of individuals, resulting in certain dispositions that are embodied and guide people's behaviour (Bourdieu 1984 and 1991). These embodied dispositions are not staged but genuine as they have become second nature for people (Goffman 1969), and it's precisely for their sincerity that they are attractive for employers, as this means that staff will therefore be naturally able to convey the brand values in a convincing way.

Nowadays, it is becoming more and more common for employers to select staff based on their personalities (Bell and Valentine 1997: 126), but it has to be noted that the focus on friendliness at Hotel Missoni Edinburgh was actually also supported by promoting real forms of friendliness and sociality among staff, which reinforced the dimension of familiarity so closely intertwined with the Missoni brand identity. For example, staff took part in calendar photo shoots and charity runs, and drinks were even created to celebrate certain members, as in the case of the drink 'Bella Carina' which was named after the hotel's manager. This was part of the service culture of Missoni Hotel Edinburgh, called VITA (the Italian word for life), that focused on notions of family, friendliness and values such as care and solidarity, and that was inspired by Italy, considered as a mythical entity characterised only by positive values.

However, the case of Maison Moschino is different in the sense that the traits of Italianicity portrayed there, despite being similarly positive, are actually not the same ones that are emphasised by Hotel Missoni Edinburgh. This is a function of the fact that Maison Moschino is in line with the Moschino aesthetic and brand values, which focus on notions of creativity that capitalise on Italy's reputation in this field, and in particular with regards to fashion. As argued by Spinelli (2004), many companies have been exploiting Italy's reputation as a creative country, which in turn creates a circle that sees such a trait circulating worldwide in a variety of domains reinforcing the myth of Italian creativity. This was especially the case for Italian fashion, which has successfully established itself as power player after WWII as a function of particular circumstances (White 2000), but also of the specific contribution of fashion houses. Maison Moschino capitalised on this reputation, and in particular on the specific traits that characterise Milan and its style. Milan is the Italian fashion capital and is at the centre of a 'magic circle' (Dunford 2006: 29) of industrial districts, i.e. clusters of enterprises (mostly small or medium sized) that operate in the same field, and that constitute the backbone of the Italian industrial system (Becattini 2003, Pyke et al. 1990).

As the Italian fashion industry bloomed and became more and more renowned and profitable, Milan's image became one of a sophisticated, exclusive and elegant capital of shopping (Foot 2003: 147) that is characterised by a specific look of 'understated elegance' (Ferrero-Regis 2008: 13). The 'Milanese look' is one facet of the Moschino label, as that is characterised by a mix of minimalist and understated pieces and of flamboyant and over-the-top ones. These contrasting aesthetics are present in the products, and also in the spaces associated with the label, including Maison Moschino (Dallabona 2015a and 2017). There, a neutral backdrop of clean lines and white surfaces offered an opportunity for the most extravagant aspects of the Moschino label to stand out, and in this sense the service culture at Maison Moschino focused on both traits. Staff at Maison Moschino wore black suits but presented with a twist, in the form of boat necks for female staff and a more casual cut for male staff.

At Maison Moschino, staff embodied traits associated with Italian fashion and supported guests on their own personal fashion journey, as they were at hand providing information and tips on the city's shopping areas. The hotel is located at the core of that 'microfashion' phenomenon which contributes to strengthening the role of Milan as a the fashion capital and a place permeated with Italian creativity (Muscau 2008: 151). The most renowned independent luxury boutique of the city, Corso Como 10, is located less than 500 meters away from Maison Moschino. Corso Como 10 is the shop opened in 1990 by Carla Sozzani (sister of Franca, the long-serving director of Italian Vogue), and represents a landmark for international fashionistas (Klein 2005). Moreover, Maison Moschino also offered a package that was specifically tailored for those who love the brand, called 'Shopping Therapy', offering a discount in all the Moschino boutiques (and also in the Alberta Ferretti ones, as the two companies belong to the same group).

## **Conclusion**

Maison Moschino and Hotel Missoni Edinburgh both refer to elements of Italianicity in their spaces, services and branding strategies, but they rely on different elements. But what is it that makes it possible for Maison Moschino and Hotel Missoni Edinburgh to use such contrasting traits to support their brand and nonetheless articulate them as being authentically Italian?

This is a function of the variety of features associated with Italy, and which spring from a rich heritage originated in different geographical, historical and cultural contexts, as the country itself faced a troubled path to unification (which was only achieved in 1861), but also of the very nature of national identity. National identity is not a monolith, perennially static and immune from change, but is actually a concept that evolves and is re-shaped by different elements and narratives (Edenson 2002, Billig 1995, Borneman 1992). In this sense national identity is something that can always be re-elaborated (Cubitt 1998: 3), a fluid (Cartocci 2009) or liquid entity (Bauman 2000) that is never complete but always in process (Hall 1990: 222). We can theorise nations from a semiotic perspective, as texts (Ferraresi 2000), entities created through narratives (Bhabha 1990) where reality and fiction are strictly intertwined and, at times, difficult to differentiate (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). In

this sense, traits of national identities like those examined here belong to the realm of myth, social and ideological constructs that hide their nature through an aura of reality (Barthes 1972) and innocence (Barthes 1977: 51) which make them appear as if they were self-evident laws of nature (Bronwen and Ringham 2006: 213). But those traits of Italianicity are not natural or obvious; they are constructed entities that serve, in this case, to nourish branding strategies. In doing so, it's only the positive elements that get selected, portrayed and reinforced, both creating and supporting idealised versions of Italianicity that in turn contribute to reinforce the positive image of the brands who employ them.

National traits can be a valuable resource for brands, and can be used to permeate every aspect, from products and services to spaces and employees, in a situation where socio-cultural elements and business practices are closely intertwined and influence each other. In fact if it's true that businesses regularly appropriate cultural elements, the former are also necessarily taking part in cultural processes (Jackson 2002: 5), in a situation that sees any part of branding and marketing strategies, including the bodies and attitudes of staff discussed here, becoming sites for shaping and mobilising notions of national identity.

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