Forever Now: Gucci’s Use of a Partially Borrowed Heritage to Establish a Global Luxury Brand

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Abstract
Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize the facets of luxury brand heritage and its utilization through various branding strategies. It also aims to examine Gucci’s uncommon creation and use of a partially borrowed heritage.

Design/methodology/approach - Our conceptual model of the facets and utilization of luxury brand heritage is derived from the academic literature. Our examination of Gucci’s creation and use of a partially borrowed heritage is based on primary data such as Gucci’s Facebook page and website as well as secondary reports from the business literature.

Research limitations/implications – This exploratory study provides marketing practitioners with insights about Gucci’s effective use of a partially borrowed luxury brand heritage. Further academic research in this area would help to determine whether the findings are generalizable.

Keywords - Luxury branding, brand heritage

Paper type - Research paper

Introduction
Over 90 years ago, a small shop, selling high quality leather goods, opened in the heart of Florence, Italy. The first customers were attracted to the “Englishness” of the products, but there was nothing English about Guccio Gucci, the founder of what has become one of the world’s greatest fashion emporia. The young Gucci had found his start as a liftboy in the Savoy Hotel in London at the turn of the 20th century. He had seen the rich and famous pass through those doors bearing elegant trunks and suitcases. This was to become his destiny.

Since its founding, the Gucci Group, more commonly known as Gucci, has grown to become a multi-billion dollar holding of French corporation PPR. In financial year 2011, Gucci revenue rose almost 18 percent to over three billion euros (four billion US dollars) (Demarco, 2012; PPR, 2011). This astronomical growth has been, in large part, a result of growing demand for luxury products in Asia, and more specifically, in China. The Chinese demand for luxury extends beyond the desire for the products themselves: Chinese consumers have shown a great deal of interest in products that exhibit European heritage, something of a surprise for a culture that can trace its own heritage back 7000 years or more (KPMG, 2011). In the context of heritage, Gucci shines. Is it real? Is it borrowed from a world which Gucci never really inhabited? Indeed, does it matter?

In our discussion below, we will look at the many ways in which heritage can be used by luxury brands. Each of these elements, and more, have been integral to the positioning used by Gucci to emphasize its heritage, to provide today’s luxury consumer with what is the perceived heritage on which the Gucci brand was built.

Facets of Luxury Brand Heritage
As the marketing literature indicates, it is not uncommon for luxury brands to leverage their heritage through their branding strategies (Alleres, 2003; Beverland, 2004; Bruce and Kratz, 2007; Fionda and Moore, 2009). After all, as Table I illustrates, a brand’s heritage is multifaceted and can be comprised of one or all of the following elements:
Each of these facets has been emphasized by Gucci in its branding efforts across the globe. Luxury product consumers from New York to London, from Paris to Beijing, have accepted the reality of this heritage.

**Authenticity**

Authenticity is often conceptualized in one of two ways. The first is the literal description of authentic as not counterfeit. The second description is more meaningful. Six attributes of authenticity have been identified by Beverland (2005b). These are heritage and pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality commitments, relationship to place, method of production, and downplaying commercial motives. With the exception of downplaying commercial motives, Gucci has emphasized all of these attributes to varying degrees. Each attribute is directly or indirectly addressed in the remaining traits described below.

**Country of origin**

The impact and role of country of origin has been studied at great length over the past decades. Topics of study relating to the meaning of country of origin have differentiated between what country of origin is and is not (Papadopoulos, 1993); have addressed the important dimensions, aspects and relations of the country of origin phenomenon (Helsop and Papadopoulos, 1993) and have described the strategic opportunity missed when managers deny the country of origin effects of their products (Johansson, 1993). The research on country of origin has been reviewed extensively by numerous authors (Bilkey and Nes, 1983). Papadopoulos (1993) provided a historical overview and Liefeld (1993) and Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999) provided meta-analyses of experimental works.

For instance, some scholars view a product’s country of origin as the country in which it was assembled (Chao, 1993), whilst others view it as the country in which it was designed (Chao, 1993). Gucci is vigilant about safeguarding its products’ authenticity by ensuring that their geographic origin is precise and controlled. Gucci extensively promotes both the country and city of its origin (Florence, Italy), doing so in ways ranging from the creation of the Gucci Museum in Florence, through to maintaining local workshops to ensure the continuity of Italian production.

To celebrate its 90th anniversary, in 2011 Gucci opened the Gucci Museum (Gucci Museo) on Piazza della Signora. Despite the museum’s very Italianate structure and its Florentine heritage, Gucci has chosen to distinguish itself from the city’s many leather shops, preferring to specialize in what would be regarded as “English-style” leather goods. Nonetheless, it remains distinctly Italian in its manufacturing and ideals.

The charm of what Steele (2003) calls a playful, sexy and effervescent life is the driving force behind the Made in Italy ideal: high quality and “hedonistic” beauty. Indeed, Made in Italy as a distinct phenomenon may be traced back to the 1950s and ‘60s, when la dolce vita was seen as an international symbol of glamour and sophistication. This sweet life was seen as embodying all things Italian: places, products, ideas and images. The need to maintain those cultural characteristics and to satisfy a contemporary consumer was recognized by designers Tom Ford and Frida Giannini, who looked through a historic Florentine lens to create fashion built on the archive of material available to them.

In the 21st century, the proliferation of counterfeit products has challenged many luxury marketers. Gucci has never wavered from its decision to manufacture in Italy, collaborating, just as it has for generations, with Italian workshops and artisans. Furthermore, the international standard, Social Accountability 8000, is one to which Gucci has adhered since 2004.
Craftsmanship

This strong heritage of craftsmanship took hold in the early 1900s, when Guccio Gucci returned from London to Florence. He and Aida Calvelli opened a leather goods shop on via Vigna Nuova. Behind the store was a small workshop where Guccio started making fine luggage and handbags, using the highest quality leather from Tuscan, German and English manufacturers.

In 2010, shortly before Gucci opened its museum in Florence, the company created an Artisan Corner. This has come to represent the House’s craftsmanship. Here, Gucci craftspersons perform live demonstrations of the time-consuming process of producing Gucci’s most famous pieces. From a marketing perspective, this is proof positive of the quality and exclusivity of the Gucci brand. In a more general sense, it draws attention to the precision and excellence of Gucci’s artisans. This workshop fulfills the expectation of Guccio Gucci, who returned from London in 1921, wanting to create products that respected Italian tradition and craftsmanship.

Gucci Chief Executive Officer, Patrizio di Marco commented in 2010, “There is no doubt that – following the (economic) crisis – consumers have been looking for reassurance and put more emphasis on the values that a brand stands for and the heritage that stands behind the brand” (in an interview at the 2010 International Herald Tribune Heritage Luxury Conference).

In short, it is accessories which have been representative of high quality and innovativeness in Italian fashion. This has been particularly true of artisanal leather goods, a skill which can be traced back to centuries-old traditions.

Charismatic founder

Guccio Gucci lived from 1881 to 1953. In his early adulthood, he founded the corporate behemoth that was to become Gucci Group. He and his wife, Aida Calvelli, bore several children. His son Aldo was the visionary who took Gucci into the global world of luxury fashion.

Ninety years ago, Guccio Gucci was developing high-quality leather products which were sold to tourists flocking to Florence. The products were well-made and reasonably priced, bearing an elegance that epitomized Guccio himself. “He was a man of great taste, which we all inherited,” recalled his son Aldo. “His imprint was on every item he sold” (Forden, 2001, p. 11).

Recognizing the need to supplement imported products (those coming from England and Germany), Guccio opened a workshop behind his store for which he sought out local craftsmen and building a reputation for both service and reliable goods. In due course, he acquired a larger workshop where, when necessary to meet demand, sixty craftsmen worked late into the night (Forden, 2001, p. 11). Despite some family struggles, the Gucci reputation was cemented on Guccio’s business sense.

Celebrity associations

Rome and Florence attracted not only common or garden tourists, but also Hollywood stars, royalty and political powerhouses. Gucci embraced them all. The customer list bore names of stars such as Elizabeth Taylor, Grace Kelly, Bette Davis, Sophia Loren and Katherine Hepburn, of royalty such as Princess Elizabeth, soon to be Queen of England, and pseudo-royalty such as Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy. They all purchased Gucci merchandise giving Gucci a cachet that could not help but attract new customers (Forden, 2001, p. 24). The association was not always with the celebrities’ knowledge or agreement. For example, when Jackie Kennedy Onassis was photographed carrying a Gucci hobo-style bag in New York in the 1970s it became universally known as the “Jackie Bag”and is still sold today under that name in many fabrics and colors. Similarly, the Flora design, a scarf for Princess Grace of Monaco, has been an iconic print for Gucci for over 40 years, today being used in everything from silk scarves to perfumes to window banners for the Gucci stores. (These products can be viewed on the company website, www.gucci.com.)

The relationship with Princess Grace continues today with her granddaughter, Charlotte Casiraghi, who is featured as a brand ambassador for Gucci. She appears in the Fall 2012 collection, casually dressed in Gucci loafers and reflecting an image of Grace Kelly in the 1950s. What is more, Charlotte Casiraghi’s being a world class horsewoman reinforces Gucci’s somewhat questionable heritage with the equestrian world (Gaudion, 2012).

History

In order for a brand’s history to serve as a facet of its heritage, the firm must judge the brand’s history to be important (Urde et al., 2007). Moreover, while history is retrospective and grounded in the past, brands that emphasize their heritage embrace all time frames, including the future (Wiedmann et al.,
Gucci extensively refers to its history by offering updated versions of its products from years ago, promoting its 75th anniversary, summarizing each decade of its existence on its website, providing the history of the Gucci brand on its Facebook Timeline, and even mentioning it in its current campaign, *Forever Now.*

**Utilization of Luxury Brand Heritage in Marketing Mix Elements**

As we have shown, Gucci’s marketers have recognized the crucial role that heritage can play in creating a strong European image across the globe. The means by which this heritage is marketed include the following:

- **iconic products** (Moore and Doherty, 2007; Oknokwo, 2010, p. 106; Tungate 2005, p. 155);
- **advertising and promotion** (Moore and Birtwistle, 2004; Okonkwo 2010, p. 202);
- **digital and social media** (Tungate, 2005, p. 202; Okonkwo, 2010, p. 202);
- **museum** (Zargani, 2011).

With each of these elements, we describe below how this leverage has occurred.

**Flagship stores**

In 1938, Guccio Gucci opened his first store in Rome, on Via dei Condotti. Gucci’s son, Aldo, continued this trend by opening many more flagship stores around the world in cities such as New York, London, Paris, Palm Beach and Los Angeles.

The current Gucci strategy with flagship stores is to create a balance between modernity and brand heritage. For example, creative director Frida Giannini explains the way in which the Milan flagship store makes specific reference to iconic Gucci materials, harkening back to earlier stores, whilst at the same time using new elements of design to maintain a modern backdrop for the collections. In describing this process in the corporate website, Giannini points out that recognized Gucci materials such as “…rosewood and marble are enhanced with the introduction of new elements such as ribbed glass, warm polished gold, smoked mirror and smoked bronze glass, recalling the elegance and richness of the Art Deco era.” [1]

The original flagship store built in Rome in 1938 and located at the foot of the famous Spanish Steps was a replacement for Gucci’s original Rome boutique. Here too, Frida Giannini has used elements of the company’s art deco origins to recapture the glory of the Dolce Vita era by reproducing glass and gold-plate lamp shades and an entrance foyer that recalls the celebrities who entered in earlier decades.

In the words of Frida Giannini, the Gucci heritage is “…destined for a selective clientele who demands exclusivity and the utmost in quality.” [2]

**Iconic products**

To a large extent, our discussion has looked at country of origin and craftsmanship, in describing the importance of Gucci products in asserting its heritage. It is no surprise, therefore, that Gucci continues to use its heritage through product marketing. A particularly good example of this is the iconic Stirrup Bag, originally launched in 1975 and newly reintroduced for the Winter 2012 collection. This bag, in the shape of a stirrup, evokes the House’s borrowed equestrian heritage. Reflective of Gucci’s core values and expertise, a trained artisan will take two days to craft a single bag. Using intricate craftsmanship and traditional manual techniques, precious hides from crocodile, python and ostrich, among other exotic skins, are transformed into plush, aged or glossy fabrics and then assembled with suede or rich cotton and linen linings and finished with a gold spur on the front panel. [3]

Throughout the years, there have been many Gucci-created iconic products, symbols and materials such as cuoiograssro rough leather, diamond-pattern handbags, the double G logo, a woven hemp material (known as *canapa* in Italian) (Forden, 2001, p. 17), a bamboo-handled bag (Forden, 2001, pp. 20, 22, 72), a brindle pigskin (Forden, 2001, p. 23), the Flora scarf developed for Grace Kelly (Forden, 2001, p. 37) and a woman’s loafer (Forden, 2001, p. 39), among others.
The creative process originated not only from the apparent brilliance of Guccio Gucci, but also from a recognition of the value of using local hides in the tanning process. For example, in creating cuoiograsso, the Gucci family began using hides from a tannery in Santa Croce where cattle were reared in the lush Chiana valley. As with calves used for veal, the animals used in cuoiograsso were contained in close-fitting stalls, thus avoiding abrasions or other damage to their hides prior to slaughter. A further treatment with fishbone grease ensured a soft, smooth and supple leather, from which scratches disappeared with a wipe of the hand (Forden, 2001, p. 17).

The 1960s brought in the Gucci loafer, priced at a mere $32, which became one of the most affordable and conspicuous status symbols in the Gucci line. This product was, according to Sheppard, a “...semi-secret, shared by women who really care about clothes and worn like a club insignia” (Sheppard, 1969, p. 12).

Other identifying symbols have appeared throughout Gucci’s history. [4] Among these are black brass tags reading “Valigeria G. Gucci Firenze” in gilded uppercase lettering affixed in luggage in the 1920s. During this same period, white cotton labels bearing blue embroidered cursive script and spelling out “G. Gucci Traveling Goods Florence” were sewn into the lining of the house’s canvas bags. This English signature indicated that the brand had been created for foreigners and tourists visiting Florence. During the 1930s, luggage made of leather, parchment, or diamond-patterned (rombi) fabric bore a label which emphasized the Gucci logo and the word “Firenze”. It was at this time that the Gucci symbol of a liftboy appeared. [5]

Amongst the most iconic of symbols that Gucci has incorporated into its products is the horse bit, appearing as a feature on purses, boots and accessories, or even more subtly as a detail identifying the object it adorns as quintessentially Gucci. It was first seen in 1953 on the loafer mentioned earlier. In that same era, it became part of Frida Giannini’s horse bit jewelry and chain purses, where a miniature horse bit (a double ring and bar) was used as an adornment for leather purse clasps. Although used sparingly at the outset, this symbol became an integral part of the Gucci collection, appearing on jewelry, watches and gift items, and incorporated into ties, scarves, and clothing. By the 1960s, the horse bit became a well-photographed status symbol on clothing and accessories worn by celebrities. [6]

Gucci’s then-creative director, Tom Ford, took the horse bit symbol to another level, both seductive and striking, and clearly associated with celebrity. Madonna, accepting an MTV award in 1994, wore a Gucci suit with a shining horse bit on her belt. In 1995, Tom Ford used the horse bit to re-release the women’s loafers, this time in high-heeled patent leather. The horse bit adorned other products throughout the late 1990s, and was seen gleaming on both products and models in famous and evocative advertisements.

Frida Giannini re-energized this classic equestrian symbol by pairing it with a leather accessory line known as “La Pelle Guccissima,” and as a detail on accessories such as eyeglasses, belts and jewelry. It was printed on dresses and incorporated into the famous Jackie handbag. Thus, the Horsebit Series was born and has continued to be integral to the Gucci line through to the present day. In an interesting twist of iconography, Gucci has used a band of red and green color (green-red-green) in a variety of ways, spanning limited edition sneakers created by Frida Giannini through to belts, straps and handles for purses, decorations on wide-brim and panama hats, and suspenders for women’s garments, making it one of the company’s most distinctive motifs. Displayed against a white background, the colors evoke the Italian flag, thus reinforcing the emphasis on country of origin. The equestrian heritage, from which Gucci draws, is evoked in the red, reflecting British fox-hunting jackets, and green suggesting rich countryside.

The green-red-green band gained global purchase in the 1960s when it was incorporated into the Jackie handbag and continues to be used in the Heritage totes of the 2010-11 collection.

**Advertising and Promotion**

Recognizing the marketing value of its heritage, Gucci’s recent advertisements have emphasized the equestrian collection from which Gucci Gucci first began to borrow his company’s heritage.

In 2012, Gucci sponsored the Gucci Paris Masters equestrian event [7], leveraging ties to personalities and celebrities such as Charlotte Casiraghi, Jessica Springsteen, Benjamin Castaldi, Julien Courbet, Nicolas Canteloup and Hannah Selleck.

Craftsmanship, a fundamental part of the Gucci heritage, is prominent in the House’s promotion and public relations. A 2010 campaign conceived by Frida Giannini and known as *Forever Now*, centers on the artisan. This campaign is replete with photographs from the 1950s depicting craftsmen...
at work. The theme of artisanship has been developed by other brands, but Gucci gives it an air of authenticity by using its vast photographic archive together with the experiences of its employees to promote the brand’s heritage.

**Digital and Social Media**

The relationship between heritage and modernity continues with the Gucci website in which a surfer can access an “Icons” tab to display both original and updated versions of signature products: bags such as the New Bamboo and the Jackie, the Horsebit loafer and Horsebit jewelry, the entire 1973 Gucci collection, the Flora design and hardware such as the stirrup. Under the “World of Gucci” tab, Gucci touts its history with a brief summary of the company’s accomplishments during each decade since the 1920s. To further cement the local flavor of the Gucci brand, the site carries videos displaying Italian artisans manufacturing Gucci’s products.

Although Gucci has an effective website, it has lured traffic to its social media outlets through some innovative promotional techniques, none of which are available on Gucci.com. Primarily, Gucci uses its Facebook page to display its history and heritage. By logging in and “liking” Gucci, a user will be able to find the company’s Heritage section with a tag line “Behind Every Icon There’s a Story. Discover and Share Them Here.” Another tag, “Inside the Archives” includes messages and photos of the Gucci Museo and auction estimates of Gucci products provided by Christie’s. By clicking on the tag “Behind the Craft” the follower meets Gucci artisans, past and present. A further section encourages a user to choose a vintage handbag and share it with friends.

Gucci’s Timeline on Facebook highlights key events of the brand’s history beginning with its inception in 1921. Some interesting historical events featured on the Timeline include Ingrid Bergman photographed carrying a bamboo handle bag while visiting Naples with her children in 1951. In 1973 Princess Caroline of Monaco wore a shirt in the print inspired by her mother, Princess Grace, confirming the Flora’s cross-generational appeal. In the 1976 Gucci entered the world of perfumes, launching a series of two bottles with monogram caps and glass horseshoe-shaped flasks.

In a skillful digital exercise, the company’s Facebook page features the innovative “Cut and Craft” campaign which offers fans the opportunity to download, construct and design their own bags based on the Stirrup, the Jackie and the New Bamboo. Demonstration videos are on YouTube and linked to Facebook and Twitter. Winners have their designs featured on the cover of Gucci’s Timeline on Facebook. This effort encourages user-generated interest and links it to the brand’s iconic products.

**Museum**

Gucci, and all it represents, is thus reinforced as a symbol of Florentine heritage and history with the Gucci Museo in the heart of Florence, across from Palazzo Vecchio, the home of the Medicis. Indeed, everything that Gucci does in the modern era is part and parcel of the concept of “Forever Now”. This slogan brings everything – real and artificial – in the Gucci history book into the here-and-now, making it all part of the heritage of the House of Gucci. In the words of the company, the past becomes “…an inspiration for future enterprise, (encapsulating) Gucci’s timeless appeal and commitment to invest in long-lasting values.” [9]

The Gucci Museo presents the rich archive of material preserved over the decades in a permanent exhibition, a focus of which is Travel. Jet-setting clients of the 1950s sought out Gucci’s trunks, suitcases and accessories, helping to cement the company’s success. Contemporary art works round out the collection, all of which is supported by the Pinault Foundation.

**Conclusion**

Somewhat less common than using products and promotion to emphasize corporate heritage is the creation and adoption of a fictional brand identity (Alexander 2009), which is then promoted over the years with increasing emphasis as its own identity and heritage. Ralph Lauren has done this with a pseudo-English style (Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008, p. 15; Tungate, 2008, p. 15), although it was Guccio Gucci who, several decades earlier, had already borrowed a heritage that spoke of equestrianism, with a connection to saddlery and horse bits. Aldo Gucci continued the ruse with “… a knack for embellishing the truth to suit the message he wanted to give and was probably … one of the most active architects of the stories about Gucci’s noble, saddlemaking past” (Forden, 2001, p. 34). He promoted this concept with style, creating an image of stables and horses, from the green and red webbing of girth straps, through to hardware shaped like linked stirrups and horse bits. So began the
myth that the Guccis have been noble saddlemakers to medieval courts. Even today, Gucci family members speak of the heritage of Gucci saddlers. Interestingly, Guccio Gucci’s daughter, Grimalda, wanted “… the truth to come out,” as she told a journalist in 1987. “We were never saddlemakers.”[10]

Perhaps in recognition of Gucci’s borrowed heritage, Francois-Henri Pinault, Chairman of PPR, the corporate owner of Gucci Group, acknowledges that “…a luxury brand is a combination of history and craftsmanship, design and materials. Gucci is part of Italian history.” [11] It is Frida Giannini’s masterful creation of highly modern, culturally relevant collection of products featuring a partially borrowed heritage that will keep Gucci at the forefront of luxury brands for years to come.

Table I

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Notes
[4] This research hand documentation has been carried out by the Gucci Historical Archive.
[5] This was a job held by Guccio Gucci at the Savoy Hotel in London, at the turn of the 20th century.
[6] Grace Kelly was immortalized with her children and Jacqueline Kennedy boarding an airplane, clearly carrying a purse with a horse bit closure.
[10] According to a history of Florentine families, the Guccis were active as early as 1224 as lawyers and notaries. The family crest featured a blue wheel and a rose on a gold banner floating above vertical red, blue and silver stripes. Guccio’s son Roberto spent a large sum of money in
heraldic research and worked the rose and the wheel – said to symbolize poetry and leadership – into the company logo. The original logo featured a bellboy carrying a suitcase in one hand and a soft traveling bag in the other. As Gucci gained success, a knight in armor replaced the humble porter (Forden, 2001, p. 24).


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