APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Will Brioni's bet on China's luxury menswear market pay off?

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Brioni has refreshed its image. But despite localization in its decor, the products do not engage with China. Can it pull off its ambitions of expansion? Image credit: Brioni

By Arnold Ma

Having kept a low profile in China since its entry in 2012, Italian luxury menswear brand Brioni has come under the media spotlight by launching a series of new storefronts in several Chinese cities in less than six months, most recently, in Shenzhen and Wuhan in early January.

Behind this rapid expansion is Brioni's ambition to gain traction in the mainland's menswear industry. But the move also shows how, with the rise of a new generation of consumers, market dynamics have reshaped the industry.

Under the theme of "China Meets Italy," these openings demonstrate the label's efforts in localization, with outlets incorporating elements such as the historic installation of Yellow Crane Tower in the city of Wuhan; a hand-woven tapestry entitled *Ormeggi* or mooring in English which decorates the wall of the store in the harbor city of Shenzhen; and bamboo, a plant common to the city of Chengdu, adapted into the interior design of the storefront in the Southwestern city. Such respect for a place's culture always resonates well with its inhabitants.

The new stores also refresh the company's image as a sartorial ready-to-wear and leather goods maker, with offerings ranging from tracksuits and hoodies to sports shoes and baseball caps. The diversified range of products is the fruit of Brioni's Five Year Plans, with the aim of "making Brioni's elegance relevant to today's life."

The idea, introduced by Norbert Stumpfl, who took the position of Brioni's executive design director in 2018, was to develop its traditional tailor-made craftsmanship into a casual style infused with a modern edge. More youthful and, indeed, everyday: closer to life.

This transformation has also coincided with the growing preference for stylish and comfortable menswear via the ascendancy of Gen Z.

Today's young people are more sophisticated as a consumer group. They focus more on what brands can bring to the life and function of a product rather than superficial elements.

Such a shift has been evidenced by a greater interest in more comfortable options in China's high-end menswear industry, with consumption driven by "comfortability" believed to reach 350 billion RMB ($54.93 billion) by 2025.

The pandemic has also been a factor. As working from home becomes the new normal, traditional formal menswear is losing ground to athleisure, streetwear and loungewear. Such changes mean that adapting classic offerings to cater to emerging demand is the way forward for luxury menswear.

Brioni has obviously clocked this dropping a limited edition home wear collection in celebration of the Lunar New Year in 2021, which included everything from shorts and pajamas to scarves and cardigans. This approach continued, with a tracksuit featuring in its capsule edition for this year's Chinese New Year showcasing its new free and easy style.

By doing so, Brioni has been able to use its premium brand equity to create high-end athleisure products for young Chinese customers. However, like many other luxury peers attempting to update its core offerings, the label whose fame in China is built on its traditional niche should be aware of the potential downsides of expanding into the unknown. It risks harming its position.

Moreover, the Guochao trend continues to be embraced by other global luxury groups seeking to remake their products and so win over young men.

For example, the Dior Fall 2021 Menswear Collection, where traditional Chinese emblems such as seed embroidery and fan designs were woven into the brand's modernity. Random Identities, a luxury menswear business, teamed up with China's sportswear leader Li Ning, a pioneer of the Guochao trend, to reshape its signature Aurora sneakers.

Brioni does not seem too keen on this. Despite the attention to detail shown in the new storefronts, the label is yet to use local elements in its actual products. It seems to take greater pride in its Italian heritage. While there is nothing wrong with maintaining a strong brand identity, the practice also raises the question as to how effective its China strategy could be without borrowing authenticity from the domestic market.

The firm is expected to struggle to pick up traction among other homegrown market players and, more importantly, to stay relevant to its target audience, who have been driving the Guochao phenomenon.

Whether or not Brioni can pull it off remains to be seen. Yes, its recent efforts have catered well to the needs of the new cohort of consumers. But they might need to be more open to local collaborations: to make the brand not only more relevant to life today but, specifically, life today in China.

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