

The mechanism of symbolic evolution in Italian fashion brands

*Kexin Li, Honglei Guo**

Jiangnan University, Wuxi, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: 2502424300@qq.com

Abstract. The orderly evolution of symbols constitutes a crucial component in the development of Italian fashion brands and represents one of the key reasons for their strong competitiveness in the contemporary international market. From an interdisciplinary perspective integrating fashion history and design studies, this paper examines brand development trajectories and specific design cases to analyze the continuity and reconstruction of classic symbols, the selection and application of emerging symbols, and the modes through which the two are integrated. The findings suggest that the symbolic evolution of Italian fashion brands follows a mechanism characterized as "constancy within change", whereby the essential core of classic symbols is preserved while being infused with contemporary cultural trends, thus generating multiple concrete evolutionary pathways.

Keywords: Italian fashion, fashion brands, visual symbols, symbolic evolution

1. Introduction

In the increasingly competitive global fashion market, the sustained competitiveness of fashion brands depends more than ever on their capacity to dynamically update their symbolic systems. Since the twentieth century, the Italian fashion industry has enjoyed an international reputation, and its developmental trajectory exhibits a high degree of representativeness and reference value.

Existing studies have largely focused on the static analysis of brand symbols, paying relatively little attention to their dynamic mechanisms of evolution. However, as a domain characterized by rapidly shifting trends, the fashion field is inherently dynamic.

Against this backdrop, this paper takes Italian fashion brands as its research object and explores the dynamic evolutionary pathways and underlying logic of brand symbols by examining three interrelated dimensions: the reconstruction mechanisms of classic symbols, the introduction mechanisms of emerging symbols, and the synergistic mechanisms between the two.

2. The evolutionary trajectory of symbols in Italian fashion brands

By tracing the symbolic evolution of Italian fashion brands from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century, it becomes evident that brand symbols have undergone a dynamic process shaped by

multiple factors, including prevailing ideological trends, technological innovation, and cultural identity. This historical trajectory provides a foundational framework for subsequent analysis.

In the late nineteenth century, the Italian fashion industry began to take shape. During this period, the Italian fashion scene sought to free itself from the dominance of British and French fashion and to assert its own independence. To this end, designers increasingly turned their attention to indigenous Italian cultural symbols and incorporated them into fashion design [1]. Through this integration of "tradition" and "modernity", Italian brands gradually established an autonomous voice within the global fashion landscape.

Following the end of World War II, the Marshall Plan provided Italy with capital and technology, greatly accelerating the modernization of its textile and garment industries. The success of the Florence Fashion Show 1951 propelled Italian fashion rapidly into an international phase [2]. Major brands began to construct distinctive identities through symbolic systems. For instance, the iconic red gowns of Valentino came to signify luxury and romance. These symbols functioned not merely as visual elements but also as carriers of layered meanings related to social class, gender identity, and cultural values.

During the 1970s and 1980s, global culture entered a postmodern context, and the fashion industry was no exception. Emerging brands such as Armani and Versace demonstrated increasing diversity in their selection and use of symbols. Armani, through androgynous tailoring and subdued color palettes, constructed an image of the calm and rational professional woman. In contrast, Versace employed vivid colors, intricate patterns, and an emphasis on the human body to celebrate desire and vitality, creating a visual narrative fundamentally different from that of Armani. At this stage, Italian fashion exhibited a multi-centered structure: brands stood in contrast to one another while simultaneously forming an integrated Italian system within a shared cultural context, thereby demonstrating a high degree of inclusivity within the global fashion system.

From the late 1980s onward, many Italian family-owned brands were gradually acquired and consolidated by multinational fashion groups. Coupled with the expansion of global media, brands were increasingly required to balance local traditions with the demands of international markets, leading to a symbolic language that became progressively globalized and conceptualized [3]. The transformation of Gucci during this period is particularly illustrative. Under the creative direction of Tom Ford, Gucci introduced a series of new symbols associated with sensuality and avant-garde aesthetics, enabling the brand to quickly reassert its position at the forefront of international fashion. This transformation was not merely a visual update but also a reconfiguration of brand values—from an emphasis on aristocratic heritage to an orientation toward the visual consumption culture of the mass media age.

In retrospect, the symbolic evolution of Italian fashion brands can be broadly divided into four stages: initial formation and exploration, international expansion, diversified development, and contemporary expression. Throughout this process, the interplay between constancy and change has remained central to symbolic evolution.

3. Mechanisms of the evolution of classic symbols

Classic symbols constitute a brand's distinctive assets. Their value lies in their strong recognizability and accumulated cultural significance; however, if they remain unchanged, they risk rendering the brand rigid and outdated. Therefore, the evolution of classic symbols serves as a bridge connecting a brand's past achievements with its present development. Based on this study, the evolution of classic symbols can be categorized into two primary pathways: content reconstruction and semantic reconfiguration.

3.1. Content reconstruction

Content reconstruction represents a common strategy for sustaining the vitality of classic symbols. A representative example is the floral motif of Gucci. First introduced in 1966, this motif is known for its intricate and delicate visual style. Upon its release, it was widely acclaimed and quickly became one of the brand's signature symbols [4]. Subsequently, in response to shifting aesthetic trends across different periods, Gucci continuously reinterpreted and reconstructed the floral motif, expanding both its applications and visual expressions (see Table 1). In the "90 × 90 project" launched in 2025, Gucci collaborated with multiple artists to redesign this classic symbol. While the fundamental structure of the motif was preserved, more contemporary color schemes and compositional strategies were adopted. This reflects a design approach of "seeking constancy through change": retaining the underlying logic and core aesthetic of the symbol while incorporating new stylistic elements and modes of expression. In doing so, the expressive capacity of the symbol is enriched without abandoning the brand's classic identity [5]. This principle encapsulates the essence of content reconstruction.

Table 1. Evolution of Gucci's floral motif

Period	Major Influencing Factors	Evolutionary Characteristics
1970s	Continuation of aristocratic elegance	Retention of the motif's early classical and refined visual style
1980s	Brand transformation and the rise of minimalism	Emergence of monochromatic floral motifs
1990s	Global expansion strengthening unified identity	Integration of the floral motif with brand logos
2000s	Expansion into smaller-scale applications	Appearance of line-drawn floral motifs
2010s	Rise of cultural diversity and rapid growth of the Chinese market	Fusion with traditional Chinese flower-and-bird painting, creating an Eastern aesthetic
2020s	Revival of retro trends and redesign of classic resources	Reinterpretation of classic floral motifs through a more contemporary design language

3.2. Semantic reconfiguration

Semantic reconfiguration refers to preserving the original form of a classic symbol while endowing it with new cultural meanings, thereby aligning it with contemporary ideological and cultural currents. A salient example is the Medusa emblem of Versace. Derived from Greek mythology, this image was initially imbued with the symbolic meaning of "fatal attraction" during the early stage of the brand's development. It emphasized feminine sensuality and constructed a form of dangerous beauty predicated on the gaze of others.

However, in the context of increasingly prominent gender consciousness, such meanings have become less compatible with contemporary values. As a result, Versace has re-encoded the visual representation of the Medusa symbol, transforming it from an object of passive observation into an active subject of power. In formal terms, the brand has emphasized metallic textures, structured silhouettes, and highly saturated colors, while juxtaposing the Medusa image with elements of street culture and hip-hop visual language. This strategy diminishes its previously singular narrative of sensuality and instead foregrounds themes of female empowerment and self-assertion. Through this process of formal deconstruction and contextual reapplication, the Medusa symbol retains its classic visual form while shedding its earlier connotations of mythological

seduction. It is thereby reconstituted as a symbol of strength within the contemporary cultural context, achieving a semantic transformation of a classic visual sign.

4. Mechanisms of the evolution of emerging symbols

The value of emerging symbols lies in their capacity to capture contemporary trends and expand market reach, thereby injecting new vitality into brands. To effectively incorporate such symbols, a systematic approach must be followed, encompassing both selection and application.

4.1. Symbol selection: cultural sensitivity and brand compatibility

Cultural sensitivity and brand compatibility constitute two core dimensions that must be carefully balanced in the selection of emerging symbols. Cultural sensitivity refers to a brand's ability to perceive shifts in the social context—namely, to identify emerging social issues, transformations in value systems, and evolving trends—and to translate these changes into perceptible visual symbols and narrative strategies. Brand compatibility, by contrast, emphasizes that the introduction of new symbols must be grounded in the brand's existing meaning structure, maintaining an intrinsic resonance with its historical traditions, aesthetic stance, and core values.

Taking Prada as an example, the brand has in recent years paid particular attention to the theme of female subjectivity. At the cultural level, it has responded sensitively to contemporary discussions surrounding gender power structures and the reconfiguration of female identity, translating feminist discourse into runway narratives and visual expressions—such as functional tailoring, de-ornamentation, and power-oriented silhouettes [6]. However, these emerging symbols are not merely externally appended elements; rather, they resonate deeply with Prada's long-standing emphasis on rational aesthetics and an intellectual sensibility. By embedding contemporary social issues within its consistent framework of "discursive elegance", the brand not only responds to the spirit of the times but also preserves its core values, thereby achieving a synthesis of symbolic innovation and semantic continuity.

4.2. Symbol application: formal reconfiguration and semantic transformation

Following the selection of new symbols, they must be further transformed and adapted to ensure that they serve the brand's strategic objectives while maintaining internal narrative coherence. A pertinent example is the "Jade" collection presented in the Spring/Summer 2026 runway show of Armani. This collection draws inspiration from jade in Eastern culture while incorporating cultural elements such as round fans and tassels. In Eastern cultural contexts, jade symbolizes moral integrity and auspicious meanings; however, such connotations do not directly correspond to Armani's established aesthetic system. Rather than directly transplanting these traditional symbols, the brand achieves semantic transformation through the re-creation of color, texture, and tailoring [7]. For instance, jade green and soft pink-white tones are employed as the dominant color palette, while the luster of premium materials such as silk and satin is used to evoke the texture of jade. The formal characteristics of traditional round fans are reinterpreted through embroidery, fabric splicing, and innovative silhouettes, thereby translating these cultural symbols into visual expressions compatible with haute couture contexts.

Overall, the Eastern elements in this collection are integrated into Armani's established narrative framework, characterized by fluid silhouettes and refined elegance. As a result, they no longer function merely as cultural signifiers but become organic components of the collection's overall aesthetic system. This integration achieves a unity between cultural expansion and brand language. In this way, emerging symbols not only respond to the growing demand for cultural diversity but also resonate with the brand's core values at

a formal level, avoiding superficial appropriation. Consequently, brands are able to maintain continuity of identity and aesthetic depth while expanding into global markets [8].

5. The synergistic mechanism between classic and emerging symbols

While the evolution of classic and emerging symbols follows distinct logics, in practice, the two are often advanced through a synergistic mechanism. This synergy is first manifested in the hierarchical integration of symbolic structures: classic symbols constitute the core layer with high recognizability, serve the function of maintaining brand continuity, whereas emerging symbols are typically positioned within a decorative layer, expanding expressive dimensions without undermining the core identity. In this way, a balance between stability and innovation is achieved. For example, Gucci frequently employs its iconic "GG Monogram" as a foundational pattern, upon which contemporary trend elements are superimposed. Within this structural framework, the brand further establishes a coherent stylistic order through the coordinated use of materials, color schemes, proportions, and compositional logic. Such strategies effectively integrate old and new symbols, preventing visual disjunction and enabling diverse symbolic elements to achieve harmony within a unified perceptual framework.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the symbolic evolution of Italian fashion brands unfolds within a persistent tension between constancy and change. On the one hand, classic symbols sustain identity continuity and cultural depth; on the other, engagement with contemporary aesthetics and social issues facilitates ongoing renewal of meaning. By incorporating emerging trends while adhering to core brand values, Italian fashion brands have developed multi-layered evolutionary pathways that allow them to remain dynamically relevant within a global context without losing their foundational identity. This dynamic equilibrium provides an important point of reference for contemporary fashion brands seeking to reconcile historical inheritance with innovative transformation.

References

- [1] Li, J., & Cao, P. (2021). Italian fashion and the fashion of Italy: A review of A brief history of Italian fashion. *Art & Design Research*, (2), 115–120.
- [2] Bian, X., & Zhang, M. (2008). The evolution of the Italian clothing industry in the 20th century. *Journal of Donghua University (Natural Science)*, (4), 416–421, 433.
- [3] Cai, D. (2017). Inheritance and innovation: The construction of image totems in century-old Italian fashion brands—A case study of Gucci. *Zhuangshi*, (9), 25–31. <https://doi.org/10.16272/j.cnki.cn11-1392/j.2017.09.010>
- [4] Giannini, F. (2011). *Gucci: The making of*. Rizzoli International Publications.
- [5] Wang, Q. (2019). *A study on Gucci's fashion pattern design* (Master's thesis, Nanjing Normal University).
- [6] Wei, Y. (2023). *Postmodern feminist fashion design based on perceptual analysis* (Master's thesis, Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology).
- [7] Feng, X., & Xiang, Y. (2025). Three levels of application of Chinese elements in Western cross-cultural fashion design. *Silk*, 62(4), 20–27.
- [8] Li, K., & Xu, Z. (2025). Beyond "Made in China": Visual rhetoric and cultural functionality in translating the traditional Chinese totem Loong. *Semiotica*, 263(11), 159–184. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2024-0032>