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Final Project

When I was filling out the application forms for Lorenzo de' Medici's Florence campus, I was debating between living in an apartment and living in a homestay. The apartment meant I would have more freedom since there would be no curfew and I could have anyone I wanted come visit, but living in a homestay meant I could experience what true Italian family life in Florence was like. I ended up choosing the homestay option because I knew I would regret not taking advantage of dinners cooked by an Italian every Monday through Friday. The stereotype of Italian culture being all food had been put into my head from an early age, and as someone who enjoys a good meal every once in a while, I was excited to get an inside look at what Florentine mealtime was like.

My host family is made up of five people: Francesca, the mom; Giancarlo, the dad; Sofia, the oldest child, who's 16; Lapo, the middle child, who's 13; and Yeabsira, who's 10. There are four students living in the apartment, as well: me, Alex, Izzy, and Lauren. Having nine people in the house means there's always plenty of food at dinner, and plenty of noise to go along with it. Between Francesca arguing with Sofia because she doesn't like the food, Lapo making noises that only he seems to be able to make, and Yeabsira complaining about something Lapo did, somehow, I can hear the television playing in the background. Sometimes it's set to Italian soccer news, other times to regular daily governmental news, and occasionally to non-news stations that play American movies dubbed over with Italian or Italian reality shows, like *Il Collegio*, which is popular with the kids.

Partially because it's often the only thing to look at, and partially because it's directly in my line of sight from where I sit at the table, I typically spend a good part of dinner staring at

the television, attempting to practice my Italian as I recognize a couple words in each sentence I hear. It has also become a way for one of my roommates and I to bond with our host mom because we are usually the last three at the table, eating, chatting, and watching whatever happens to be on the screen that night. While the television programming itself is quite interesting, whether it's the news or a movie, the commercials that occasionally come on are what have stuck out the most to me from the times I've watched television. While many aspects of them are similar to the television commercials that air in the United States, there are others, aside from the obvious language difference, that hint towards the ads being from a different culture.

As a marketing major, I've grown accustomed to paying attention to the strategies that surround me on a daily basis, from audio-only ads on Spotify that interrupt my music, to the emails that announce sales for whichever holiday is closest. I take the time to analyze those I come across, trying to decipher who their target is, and estimating how effective I think it'll be. Coming to Florence, I was already interested in what type of advertisements and marketing strategies I would see here, so when I first noticed the television was on at dinner, I was eager to see what commercials I would come across.

What I wasn't prepared for was how few commercial breaks there would be. Some nights at dinner, even if I'm there for 45 minutes, I'll only see three commercials. Coming from the United States, I've gotten used to watching an hour-long episode of television that's really only about 40 minutes of the actual show since the other 20 minutes is all advertising. I found out that wouldn't be the case in Italy, but even with the few commercials I've seen each night at dinner, there have been some that left me interested and somewhat surprised by their

content. Some are quirky and try to attract the consumer by using humor, like Mukki, the Tuscan milk company, while others explicitly use sex to sell their products, like Dolce and Gabbana; and while sex is a popular tactic in American advertising, too, Italians seem to take it to a whole new level in their ads.

One night when we were all sitting at the dinner table, I happened to glance over at the television and saw a gorgeous, blue water scene. Interested in what it was, I continued to watch, and suddenly I saw a couple passionately making out while they both wore skimpy white bathing suits. Having flipped through fashion magazines many times, I recognized the ad as being part of the campaign for Dolce and Gabbana's Light Blue fragrance, which tend to use sex to sell the scent, but I was still shocked to see just how passionate the scene on the screen was as I ate my pasta, surrounded by my roommates and host family. The surprised feeling continued since no one in my host family took a second glance at the screen or jumped up to change the channel; they simply kept chatting as they passed the dishes filled with food down the table. If the youngest was 16, then I wouldn't have been so shocked; it made me curious about the rating system of Italy, and how it relates to what can be shown on television.

I first encountered the Italian rating system for films on Netflix. With being connected to the Wi-Fi at my host home, Netflix switched from the American version to the Italian version. This meant older American shows like *How I Met Your Mother* and *Prison Break* were now viewing options, but it also meant the rating system has switched from American to Italian. I was seeing a lot of the letter "T," and had been reading it as "Teen" up until I looked up the actual term for it. As it turns out, "T" does not stand for "Teen" like it does for American video games; instead, it stands for "tutti," meaning it is suitable for all and akin to the American "G"

rating. As of 2017, there are three other ratings possible for Italian films that divide films based on what's considered to be unsuitable for ages 6, 14, and 18: VM6, VM14, and VM18. While these ratings sound familiar to PG-13 and R in the United States, Italy doesn't appear to be as strict on film ratings as the US is, which may be why no one was surprised to see the makeout scene in the ad at dinner. After looking through my Netflix, it took me clicking on the Horror category to find my first VM14 film. I was surprised to see *The Purge* is rated VM14, but *Split*, one of the recent psychological thrillers from M. Night Shyamalan, is rated T. In the US, *The Purge* is rated R and *Split* is rated PG-13. This appears to be a common theme when comparing Italian film ratings with their corresponding American ratings. Films with large amounts of violence, like *Never Back Down*, a film where the entire plot is based around fighting, will be rated T in Italy, but at least PG-13 in the US, and films with strong sensual content, like *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Her*, will be rated VM14 and T, respectively, in Italy, but R in the United States. I wondered if this was a reflection of Italian culture, but some articles have developed theories around this that speculate Italy isn't as strict with its film ratings because of the country's lack of children and low birth rate. In 2017, Italy had a birth rate of 8.6 births per 1000 people, while the US had a birth rate of 12.5 births per 1000 people. While these are both considered low, Italy's percentage of children in its population is also low, with less than 14% being under 15 years old. This may be why the country isn't in line with the United States in terms of how film content is rated, since there aren't as many children to be mindful of. However, this may be changing because some parents are beginning to advocate for more change, which can be seen with the new age category for ages 6 and under was added in 2017. Whether the less severe film ratings and more explicit commercials reflect Italian culture or the

country's lack of children, it's difficult to decipher; however, it's easy to see whenever I scroll through Netflix or watch television while eating dinner with my host family.

After seeing such an eye-catching ad, I was beginning to wonder if Italians just didn't watch ads. With being from the United States, where the average commercial break is almost four minutes long, I tend to use commercial breaks to grab a snack, use the bathroom, or scroll through Instagram. This isn't a unique behavior in the United States; television advertisements are known to be losing their effectiveness. Partially because of digital streaming services, and partially because Americans just aren't trusting advertising as much anymore, advertisers are trying to find solutions to this issue, which made me wonder if Italy is dealing with a similar issue. While the fragrance commercial barely got a reaction from the Italians at the table, the opposite reaction occurred when a Mukki commercial was on, a commercial I've gotten used to seeing at dinner. While the Light Blue ad represents a sexual side of Italian advertising, this ad seems to represent a humorous and somewhat quirky side of it. The ad features a man explaining how much the company cares, and what it is they care about. It moves quickly as the scene changes from a farm to a road to a hilltop, but the one aspect that remains is the humorous way he explains the sustainable aspects of the company. For example, to illustrate the 500,000 inspections the company does every year, the commercial shows a long list reminiscent of Santa's unraveling in front of the man. Overall, the commercial has an eccentric quality to it and it caught the eye of most of my host family since they looked over, watched most of it, and giggled when it got to the end. Since I've arrived in Italy, I have seen this commercial at least 20 times, which may be due to the success of the ad. This humorous side of advertising may be what advertisers in Italy are finding to be most effective, and with the

limited number of ads on television, the ads need to be effective since, like the United States, most of the revenue for television media comes from advertisers buying spots.

In Italy, advertising was 41% of media company budgets in 2015, more than the 38% for paid-for content, which illustrates its importance. Television itself is an important form of media for Italy, as well. In a survey looking at the media landscape of the country, 96% of responders said they had accessed some form of television during the week before the survey. An interesting aspect of Italian television habits is that the most common way to access the medium is through the traditional method with a digital decoder. The same survey found that 90% of Italians used this method to watch television, while only 57% mentioned watching on a personal device, like a laptop or smartphone. Italians using the traditional broadcasting method for television is interesting because compared to the United States, where traditional television is getting challenged by streaming services, the Italian statistics for watching traditional television are much higher. As for other European countries, while traditional television is still an important part of life for citizen of countries like France and Germany, these two countries appear to have higher streaming rates, while comparing Netflix subscription rates. In 2017, 5.8% of the French population was subscribed to Netflix, 4.7% of the German population was subscribed, while only 1.9% of the Italian population was subscribed to the service. With an internet penetration rate of 86.7%, Italy's low rates for the streaming service don't appear to be due to not having access to it; instead, it may be due to the lack of children, since most streaming tends to be done by younger demographics, or it may be due to a lack of desire or interest in streaming. While numbers are still low for streaming and for watching television on personal devices in Italy, it is important to note that they are increasing.

However, because of the overwhelming majority for watching television the traditional way, it puts a focus on the commercials that are shown during the programming since the large audience for television makes commercials a logical way to reach the Italian public with advertising. Most watchers would be exposed to the advertisements included in the programming as they watch their favorite shows, which means advertisers just need to capture the attention of the large number of watchers to ensure their spending is worth it, putting the focus on the ad content itself and the themes within it.

While there is not much research on effective ads in Italy, based on the attention it received from my host family, as well as the amount of times it's aired on television, the Mukki ad appears to be an example of a successful ad in Italy. The ad is originally from October 2017, as well, which means it must be working for the milk brand if it's still airing today. Partly because its shown so frequently and partly because of it's strange humorous content, this ad is the one that has stayed in my mind the most this semester. It reminds me of a commercial targeting children, similar to the Gushers and Capri Sun commercials I would see while watching Saturday morning cartoons, which is why it surprised me to see that it was for milk and not some sort of sweet treat. While this ad is memorable for its unique tone, it's not the only Italian commercial that has left me somewhat confused. I had a similar reaction to another ad that always seems to run after the Mukki spot. This commercial seems to have had much less production, and reminds me of an even earlier time in my childhood.

This commercial is for a discount furniture store located near Pisa, Orisni Franco, and only has animated photos and text that overlap each other as the ad cycles through the various groups of furniture the store is currently offering as soft, instrumental music plays in the

background. The text stands out because it has a colorful glow that surrounds its beveled edges, and reminds me of the prize clips from early 2000s episodes of *Wheel of Fortune*. What's even more unusual about this ad is the prices of the furniture featured in it since they're not the typical even figure or number ending with a nine most prices are; instead, they seem like they're randomly generated, with prices like €587 and €1,306 filling the screen. With pricing being one of the four P's of marketing, it makes me wonder how they came up with those prices and if the prices themselves are a strategy to get the attention of Italians because they certainly caught mine. This commercial is unlike any other I have seen while in Italy, but thinking back, no television commercial here seems to be like others I've seen. There do seem to be themes like humor and sex, but each ad seems to be testing consumers to gauge their reactions. There doesn't seem to be a clear equation or outline for an Italian television commercial. Most do include the typical call to action at the end of them, asking the viewer to call or visit or buy whatever it being shown, but as for the content itself, much of it seems to be somewhat all over the place with the tactics being used. While I first saw this with television commercials, this idea doesn't just apply to television advertising; other forms of advertising I've seen here, mostly in the form of digital advertising, also seem to be trying new, somewhat unusual ways to get their messages across.

Other than watching television at dinner, another place I've been able to observe Italian ads is on Spotify. Spotify allows for far greater targeting on its platform, even going as far as basing ads on what playlist someone is listening to, so my ads are generally not for milk or discount furniture. Since the service is mostly for listening, the ads on here come across as more of a disruption since they can sometimes be louder than the music I'm listening to, and

occasionally, more outlandish than the television spots. One ad currently circulating on both Spotify and YouTube is for Molinari, an Italian alcohol brand. While this brand follows many other Italian ads by focusing on attractive, well-dressed women and men, it pokes fun at Italian culture. Called, "Too Much," it lists the various aspects of Italian culture that can be seen as "too much," asking, "Italians, what's wrong with you?" at the start of the ad. While the voiceover itself is unexpected with its content, the other surprising aspect of this ad is that the voiceover is in English with a voice that doesn't have an Italian aspect. The ad includes Italian subtitles, and the description on the ad's YouTube page is in Italian, but the ad itself sounds like an American woman is suddenly the spokesperson for an Italian alcohol brand. Since Spotify's advertising platform for its clients allows for targeting based on many different and specific factors, it makes me wonder if this ad is shown to native Italians, as well. Since I had to switch my Spotify account to Italy after two weeks of being abroad, all of the ads that I hear are in Italian, apart from this one, which makes it stick out even more. Even though the ad ends with, "And that's why we love you," the critiquing nature of it still surprises me every time it comes on. With ads like Coca Cola's 2014 Super Bowl ad that featured *America the Beautiful* being sung in languages other than English creating large amounts of controversy and hate, I can't imagine an ad like Molinari's working in the United States. However, this may demonstrate a stark difference between the two cultures; perhaps Italians are comfortable with their "too much" factor, while Americans seem to get upset with any slight dig to the culture, no matter how true it is, and even if it's meant to be a celebration of it.

While analyzing the advertisements I have come across while living here in Italy, comparing statistics, and asking questions that lead to even more questions, many of my

conclusions have come down to the differing nature of Italian and American culture. Italy, the culture where flip flops aren't allowed anywhere but the beach, is also the culture that doesn't mind seeing a couple passionately make out on screen. The United States, the culture where going to college classes dressed in sweatpants and a baggy shirt is commonplace, is also the culture that has strict content ratings for its films and a society that is never afraid to give backlash to controversial ads that air on television. While these two cultures may appear as opposites with their mass media and entertainment, where they come together is in the way they're both being changed by the digital revolution. Even though Italians still primarily watch television the traditional way, digital platforms like Spotify, Netflix, and YouTube are changing the way consumers are marketed to. Nothing can truly compete with the effectiveness of digital advertising, with its ability to target consumers with the smallest detail, and because of that, it will be interesting to see how long traditional television ads can last in these two countries.

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