Strategic changes in the luxury industry

A Gucci case

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Abstract

Luxury brands obey specific rules that differentiate them from other kinds of business. According to those rules, luxury brands should provide unique and out-of-the-ordinary experiences that allow consumers to identify with a social cast and express themselves. Brand identification is one of the main selling points of luxury brands, hence encouraging them to work on the image and values they reflect. This thesis focuses on Gucci's case, which has known exponential growth since the nomination of Alessandro Michele as the new creative director in 2015, becoming the Millennials’ favorite brand. Gucci’s public image and actions have always been intrinsically linked with the Creative Director’s vision, creativity, and engagement. Hence, this thesis analyzes the new strategies implemented since 2015 and how those strategies stick to the luxury brands’ requirements while making Gucci different, unique, and, therefore, a brand considered by consumers for its luxury products and its reflection on society.

This paper analyses Gucci based on its actions and values. The data collected consider the information given by Gucci itself on social media, on its website, and through annual reports. Much information displayed in this thesis comes from articles from fashion journals. Gucci’s actions are much discussed within the fashion world because it is one of the leading luxury brands. This thesis aims to show how Gucci differentiates itself and why the change implemented since 2015 is making the brand successful. The findings of this research aim to show that luxury brands can be genuine and follow their own path instead of following the traditional luxury sophisticated and exclusive image as other elements than the products are taken into consideration by the consumers.

Key words: Gucci, luxury, brand values, brand image, sustainability, brand experience, millennials, digital, collaborations, design, creative director
# TABLE OF CONTENT

## ABSTRACT

## I. INTRODUCTION

- Problem formulation
- Motivation of study
- The aim and scope of the study
- Research delimitation
- Structure of the thesis

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### I. LUXURY LITERATURE

- I.1. Global definition of Luxury
- I.2. Luxury since the 21st century
- I.3. Challenges and opportunities in luxury retail

### II. CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

- II.1. The importance of brand image: Luxury values
- II.2. Importance of shared values between the customer and the brand
- II.3. Applied to millennials
- II.4. Applied to luxury goods

## III. METHODOLOGY

- Research Philosophy
- Research Approach
- Data collection

## IV. DATA ANALYSIS

### I. GUCCI'S VALUES

- I.1. The origins of Gucci
I.1.1. Historical background 27  
I. 1.2. The Tom Ford-De Sole era 27  
I.1.3. Frida Giannini as Gucci’s Creative Director 28  

I.2. Organizational changes since 2015 28  
I.2.1. Finding a new creative director 28  
I.2.2. A change in the core values and the brand’s identity 29  

I.3. Alessandro Michele’s values for Gucci 30  
I.3.1. Bizzarri and Michele shared values 30  
I.3.2. Michele’s values from and for Gucci 31  
I.3.3. Michele’s personal inspirations for Fashion 32  

I. MICHÈLE AS A REVOLUTION WITHIN THE FASHION WORLD 34  

II.1. Gucci’s commitments: people 34  
II.1.1. Gucci’s commitment to people within the company 34  
II. 1.2. Gender at Gucci 35  
II. 1.3. Chime for change 36  
II.1.4. Culture and access to education 36  
II.1.5. COVID-19 initiatives 37  
II.1.6. Societal issues: 37  

II.2. Gucci’s commitment: environment 38  
II.2.1. External engagements 39  
II.2.2. Internal engagements 39  
II.2.3. Second-hand at Gucci 40  
II.2.4. Sustainable fashion creations 40  
II.2.5. The use of new materials 41  
II.2.6. A more sustainable supply chain 41  

I. GUCCI UNIQUE SELLING POINTS 42  

III.1. Gucci’s experiences 42  
III.1.1 Permanent experiences 42  
III.1.1.1. Stores and pop-ups 42  
III.1.1.2. Gucci Garden 43  
III.1.2. Gucci’s temporary experiences 43  
III.1.2.1. Product based experiences 43
III.1.2.2. Art-based experiences

III.2. Design

III.2.1. Overall Gucci designs

III.2.1.1. The internal vision of Gucci’s designs

III.2.1.2. The press’ opinion of Michele’s designs

III.2.2. Modernization

III.2.2.1. The use of logos

III.2.2.2. The brand heritage as a source of inspiration

III.2.2.3. Counterfeit as an opportunity

III.3. Collaborations

III.3.1. With artists

III.3.2. With celebrities

III.3.3. With other brands

III.4. Digital at Gucci

III.4.1. NFTs and Metaverse

III.4.1.1. NFT

III.4.1.2. Metaverse

III.4.2. Digital as part of the consumer’s experience

III.4.2.1. A personalized and exclusive experience

III.4.2.2. A way to connect with the brand

III.4.2.3. Social media to create a community

III.4.2.4. Digital to communicate messages

V. DISCUSSION

VI. CONCLUSION

VII. REFERENCES

Academic references

Press Release

Studies and reports
I. INTRODUCTION

Problem formulation

Luxury is a concept that, for most people, means exclusivity and rarity (Grassi, Wigley, 2018). Since the early 2000s, most luxury brands have started massifying their production due to societal changes (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003). Like any business concept, luxury is ruled by supply and demand (Zan, Jin, Wang, Ma, Hu, 2019). Some brands choose to stay very exclusive -like Elie Saab- or exclusive only for a few products -like Hermès and its leather goods- while some decide to answer the demand and make more benefits out of it. Since the 21st century, the middle-class situation has drastically changed as the average household income increased, the family structure changed, and people became more educated and self-aware (Aksu, 2020). Luxury brands started to answer the demand from middle-class people who have a different budget than traditional luxury customers (Zan et al., 2019). Most luxury brands considered the biggest and the most exclusive ones have been created in the XIXth and XXth centuries. Those brands have had specific clients who have a repertoire of brands they shop at (Dawnes, 2008). Since the massification of luxury, traditional brands have implemented different strategies (Tyan et al., 2010).

Throughout its history, Gucci has been influenced by its Creative Directors, who mainly implement the brand's image and design vision. That means that, as soon as a new Creative Director is nominated, the House implements strategic changes. The brand is currently one of the most well-known luxury brands worldwide (Bloomberg, 2018) and the most popular online in 2021 (Beauloye, 2021). Since 2015, Alessandro Michele has been nominated for Gucci's Creative Director (Kering Press Release, 2015). According to the press and fashion critiques, Gucci is a versatile brand (Sutton, 2016) that is authentic to itself (Kim & Reed, 2021). From the consumer's perspective, Gucci has two facets: a very high-hand one that dresses celebrities for the red carpets and offers clothes with impeccable cuts to a high price and allows Gucci to communicate its cultural meaning (Solomon, 2018), while the other facette, despite being expensive, is a more accessible one that is following the consumers' desires and behavior by designing and communicating on that behalf (Kim et al., 2021).
Gucci's designs and values evolve with society's. The House is one of the leading luxury retail brands worldwide. It is part of the Kering Group, the main competitor of Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton (LVMH), which ranks in the top 100 of the most significant companies worldwide according to Forbes (Murphy, Haverstock, Gara, Helman & Vardi, 2021). In the same ranking, Kering is number 282. The power and influence that Kering holds with this position and its brands are enormous. Kering is well-known to the global public for owning some of the most iconic brands. In the fashion sector, Kering is recognized as one of the most committed companies regarding societal issues (McKinsey, 2020). The company is often cited in rankings focused on gender equality and sustainability (Corporate Knights 2021; 2020; 2019; 2018). Gucci is one of the most sustainable luxury brands, and many initiatives are taken on that behalf.

People use luxury brands to be part of a specific social cast and recognize each other (Jaysson-Boyd, 2019). Since 2015, Gucci has been given momentum thanks to the vision of Alessandro Michele. Rather than being seen as a very exclusive brand as it was in the '60s, Gucci is put at the same level as the most luxurious brands worldwide while influencing pop culture and creating streetwear products. Hence, it attracts fewer exclusive customers (Kim et al., 2021). Therefore, the House is recognized in the luxury fashion sector but is also very much identifiable in everyday life while worn by people who are not the typical luxury brand's clients. Gucci uses modern platforms to promote its products, and part of its new strategy is to be highly present on social media (O'Connor, 2018). The brand's level of activity regarding societal issues and its presence on social media makes it one of the most popular brands among the 18 to 35 years old, along with Louis Vuitton (Bloomberg, 2018).

In 2018, consumers from 18 to 35 years old represented about 55% of Gucci's sales (Kim & Reed, 2021). Since Alessandro Michele's nomination as Creative Director, the brand started following a more streetwear approach and increasingly influenced popular culture (ibid). 2015 to 2022 Gucci is very different from the Gucci people have known before 2015. Many new strategies have been implemented while the brand stays true to its core values. In this thesis, I will explain what new strategies have been used by Gucci since the nomination of Alessandro Michele to stay one of the most popular luxury brands while deviating from a traditional luxury brand image?

We will answer this research question by first talking about Gucci’s historical values and understanding how the new values brought to Gucci are connected to those core values.
while being something the luxury customers appreciate and are seeking. Then, the focus will be on Gucci’s actions regarding sustainability. The third and final part of the data analysis will be about Gucci’s key actions based on the creative position of the brand (experiences, design, collaborations, and digital).

**Motivation of study**

I am following a Master's degree in Business, Language and Culture - Diversity and Change Management. Before that, I studied at Sciences Po (studying political sciences, sociology, languages, and laws) and graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Economics. My background includes different experiences abroad. My studies are pretty complete in Economics and Human Sciences. However, in my opinion, my curriculum lacks academic and working experiences when it comes to anything related to sustainability, fashion, or creativity. When arriving in Denmark, I reconnected with my creative part, which I had long forgotten. Therefore, when I got the chance to take electives, I decided to focus on marketing, consumer behavior, and design. Taking those different electives allowed me to have a broader vision of the business world. The class dispensed by Mia Münster (How design creates value) was very practical and pushed me to see the work of different designers here in Copenhagen. This course also got me out of my comfort zone and opened my mind to all the business strategies and artifacts behind something aesthetically pleasing.

After multiple work and study experiences in the creative world, I have decided that my future career would be in the creative industry, specifically the fashion industry. Being not very creative, I think my career would primarily focus on management and strategy, so I decided to focus on that part of Gucci in this thesis. I wanted to take the opportunity of the master thesis to deepen my knowledge regarding the fashion industry. My diverse work experiences in the creative industry and the How design creates value course pushed me to apply to a Masters in Fashion and Luxury Management, which I will attend from the 2022-2023 academic year. Being admissible in the Institut Français de la Mode, in a management program in the industry of my choice, comforted me in my decision to write this thesis based on a renowned House that is Gucci.

Gucci is a well-known House and has an excellent reputation within the fashion industry. It is also famous among people who do not care about fashion. Being
French, I grew up with a sensibility toward luxury and fashion. However, from personal experiences, I am more informed about French Houses than about any other kind of fashion business. Next year, I will have to study Italian and, therefore, I thought that studying Gucci would allow me to know more about the Italian fashion world, which is big worldwide. Of all the Italian luxury houses, I chose Gucci because of the new positions it has taken over the past seven years. Its identity always stays authentic while being deeply linked to the creative vision of its CEO and Creative Director. Since Alessandro Michele's nomination, the House's aesthetic completely shifted and, with it, its strategy. I find it extremely interesting to see how two people working together can make a brand shift dramatically while staying authentic.

Furthermore, consumer behavior is an interest of mine. In the case of this thesis, seeing how a group of people with standard features can react similarly is so interesting to me since I have a bit of a social and human sciences background. I always grew up with technologies and the internet. Gucci is one of the most popular brands among Millennials, making it one more reason to choose this brand, this creative industry, and this field of study.

The aim and scope of the study

Gucci’s identity shifted from the nomination of Marco Bizzarri as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Alessandro Michele as Creative Director. This thesis aims to understand what new strategies have been used by Gucci since the nomination of Alessandro Michele to stay one of the most popular luxury brands while deviating from traditional luxury experiences and brand image? Gucci is one of the most popular brands among the Millennials. Hence, they will be a big part of the discussion. One of the aims of this thesis is to see what changes a big worldwide company can implement to fit the societal changes and respect and match its core values and consumers’ values. The second main objective is to understand what strategic changes and actions Gucci made to shift from a jet-set-like image to a brand that appears accessible and relatable to the grand public while respecting its core values and staying exclusive. Overall, this thesis is about the brand’s strategy since 2015 regarding public image, branding, designs, communication, actions, and values that make it so popular.
As the research question is broad and could include various parts of the fashion luxury business, three additional research objectives are added:

- **What are Gucci's strategic differentiating points?** Gucci is different from most traditional luxury Houses and attracts specific consumers as well as traditional consumers. This question will help us understand what Gucci is doing differently and how it is attracting the consumers rather than scaring them away.

- **Are Gucci’s values aligned with the luxury consumers’ values?** This question has to be answered as Gucci implemented new strategies from 2015, going from a jet-set image, that is representative of the traditional luxury brand image, to a brand that fits the open mind and creativity of its Creative Director.

- **Why is Gucci the most popular luxury brand among Millennials?** Gucci is currently ranked as the most popular luxury brand among the Millennials while it was not the case under Giannini. Hence, the strategic changes implemented under Michele have led Gucci in that direction. This question has to be answered to understand what are the specific strategies that led to this result.

**Research delimitation**

This research is specifically focused on luxury consumers and will take into consideration specific consumer behavior such as the Millennials’ because the brand is the most popular among this generation. I studied Gucci and not the fashion sector overall because luxury brands tend to give themselves a very exclusive image reserved for a closed community. However, Gucci is the only brand that interacts with its consumers, collaborates with streetwear brands, and yet, manages to have a high increase in sales and be considered a luxury brand. Therefore, I find it very interesting to focus on this brand’s strategy without comparing it to other luxury brands as it is a particular case.

On its website, Gucci offers its consumers to find the brand on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube. In this thesis, the information coming from social media comes from Instagram only. This choice is due to multiple factors: the posts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are the same, but Instagram is more a visual platform than the two other social media. Gucci is a luxury retail brand, and aesthetics are essential. YouTube either posts long videos of runway shows -which is not a scope of study in this thesis- or posts concise videos that are also available on Instagram. Finally, Pinterest has not been chosen as
it is exclusively about the aesthetic, and the same pictures as on Instagram are posted. However, Instagram allows us to communicate messages and interact more directly, which is why this social media has been preferred over Pinterest. Finally, the choice of Gucci’s social media studied was confirmed as Instagram is the social media with the most followers, and 90% of the people follow a business account on this platform (Instagram Internal data, 2019)

**Structure of the thesis**

The thesis will have four additional parts. The first one will be the literature review, which will focus on luxury (definition, evolution throughout the 21st century, and main challenges in the luxury retail sector) and consumer behavior (brand image in the luxury sector, the importance of shared values, Millennials consumer behavior and consumer behavior specifically for luxury goods). The second one is the methodology, in which I will explain my research philosophy as well as my method of collecting the data. The third will be my data analysis which will start with a detailed background of Gucci and Alessandro Michele’s values (I), followed by Gucci’s actions towards more sustainability (II) and, finally, Gucci’s new strategies in terms of experiences offered, designs, collaborations and digitalization (III). Those findings will be discussed in the discussion part (IV), and, finally, the conclusion will answer the research question (V).
II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review of this thesis is divided into two main sections. As Gucci is a luxury brand, I will first define the word “luxury” and explain further what it implies in terms of evolution, values, and challenges. The second main topic of interest is consumer behavior. I will explain the importance of shared values between the brand and the consumer to go in-depth. I will then apply the consumer behavior literature to the Millennials and the luxury brands.

I. Luxury literature

I.1. Global definition of Luxury

Luxury is a complex word to define. According to Michaut & Kapferer (2019), luxury is three things: a concept, a "lucrative macro-economic sector," and a specific strategy. Luxury is a subjective concept (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009), and this term keeps evolving while encountering new challenges. What could be considered luxurious or a luxury good by one person could also be seen as banal by someone else. To some researchers, luxury is anything that is not necessary (Kemp, 1998 in Michaud & Kapferer, 2016). To others, luxury is defined by a ratio between the utility of a product and its price (Wiedmann, Hennigs, Siebels, 2007). For example, buying good sneakers to run can be a reasonable expense as it is necessary to avoid health issues. On the other hand, buying 798 euros, Versace training sneakers could be a luxury. The top five most famous luxury brands online are Gucci, Chanel, Hermès, Dior, and Louis Vuitton (Beauloye, 2021). In 2012, Edwards ranked the luxury brands the same way but replaced Dior with Rolex. Stability is, therefore, a factor to be considered a luxury brand. Brands in this field have a high price, high quality, and care about craftsmanship, heritage, and storytelling (Grassi, Wigley, 2018). If a brand has those conditions, it can be considered a traditional luxury brand (Grassi et al., 2018). The confusion about this word obligates "luxurious companies" to always stay within the luxury pillars: quality, craftsmanship, design, attention to detail, uniqueness, and authenticity (Danziger, 2019).

The luxury sector is very lucrative (Michaut et al., 2019). In 2020, the luxury goods sector generated US$252B in revenues (Deloitte, 2021). While some brands are family-owned -like Hermès-most of them belong to a group -such as Louis Vuitton belongs to
LVMH-and can be part of a giant conglomerate of companies worldwide (Forbes, 2021). This sector is very stable in revenues (Ko, Costello & Taylor, 2019) but is always driven by change and novelty. Most luxury consumers motivate their purchases by status-seeking (Jung & Shed, 2011). Crises increase wealth inequalities (Kuhn, Schularick & Steins, 2018), which means that the upper class is less affected by it than the middle or lower class -but still affected-. Therefore, even though the luxury sector also suffers from crises, it is one of the most resistant (Orlorenshaw, 2011). The luxury brands also earn enough money to find new strategies to counter many difficulties.

The luxury sector does not obey the same rules as any economic sector as complexity, constant evolvement, and increasingly fierce competition define it (Cabigiosu, 2020). Many factors are specific to this sector (the ones called earlier "the pillars"), which leads to peculiar strategies as brands have to respect and preserve the impeccable image of the brand while being innovative (Tynan et al., 2010). Bastien (2015) listed "24 anti-laws of marketing" applied to the luxury sector. For this research, we will remember the need for positioning and creating a sense of exclusivity due to limited accessibility (Grassi, Wigley, 2018). It is crucial to be faithful to the brand and heritage and make the client live a "sensory rich retail experience" (Diorio, 2019). While the focus of many economic sectors is to sell and make a profit, luxury brands have a different strategy: most of them focus on segmentation. In this thesis, we will Millennials will be an important segment as their purchasing power increases (Schwickert, Schaab, 2020), which will make them get an ever-increasing share of the customer segment in the fashion luxury sector (Shin, Eastman, & Mothersbaugh, 2017). Luxury brands want to have a certain prestige and a range of clients, which allows them to have more specific strategies (Cornelissen, 2017).

### I.2. Evolution of the term luxury since the 21st century

While the pillars of luxury have not changed, the way of experiencing (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012) and advertising luxury (Diorio, 2019) did, and the traditional consumers differ from what they used to be (Kim & Reed, 2021), pushing the luxury sector towards innovation
(Diorio, 2019). Therefore, the way of thinking of “luxury” has evolved. According to Danziger (Forbes, 2019), luxury faced diverse phases throughout the XXIst century. Those phases are “Democratization (2001-2007); Crisis (2008-2009); Chinese Shopping Frenzy (2010-2013); Reboot (2015-2016); and now the New Normal (2017 onward)” (Bain & Company and Altagamma in Danziger, 2019)

The 21st century led to a lot of societal and economic changes worldwide. The main changes that impacted the luxury sector have been the apparition and development of new technologies (Cobre et al., 2021). While the luxury experience is traditionally very exclusive and happens in a shop surrounded by a salesperson devoted to one client, the increasing digitalization of the society obligates the luxury brands to adapt (Business of Fashion, 2018). Since the rise of the COVID-19 crisis, the digitalization of the luxury experience has become a must, and brands have become much better at it, offering experiences worthy of their names (Mallevays, 2021) while allowing the development of the brands (De Acetis, 2020). “Luxury” is, therefore, not only composed of exclusive products and experiences anymore; it is democratized while staying extraordinary (Grassi, Wigley, 2018) thanks to controlled promotion and product distribution (ibid.).

The 21st century also marks the apparition of Gen Z as consumers and the increasing part of Millennials as luxury consumers (Cabigiosu, 2020). According to Eastman and Lui (2012), gender, income, or education does not significantly impact luxury purchases (as cited in Vanhamme et al., 2021), but age does. Millennials are the group that would most likely buy luxury garments as they are supposedly going to represent 45% of the global personal luxury market by 2025 (D’Arpizio, Levato, Kamel & de Montgolfier, 2017). People within this generation represent a big part of the luxury brands’ sales. They will keep increasing (Rein, 2016), which obligates luxury brands to take their values and opinions seriously (Lu et al., 2013). Millennials are reputed to be concerned about social and environmental issues (Amed, Balchandi, Beltrami, Berg, Hedrich & Rölkens, 2019). However, some luxury brands act little about sustainability (Achabou & Dekhili, 2013), while others care more about it and consider the whole supply chain to make efforts (Cervellon & Wernerfelt, 2012).

Millennials grew up with new technologies (Deloitte, 2012). They, therefore, have different interests and ways of communicating than the previous generations as they are familiar with social media (Sharp, 2013) and new technologies (Cobre et al., 2021). One of
the brands’ primary missions is to attract and gain the loyalty of those generations (Dobre, Milovan, Dutu, Preda & Agapie, 2021). Luxury brands have to stay relevant and attractive (Keller, 2009), and, therefore, they now have to evolve fast and cleverly while staying updated (Danziger, 2019). Luxury brands are not only bought for the product but also for the brand and what is behind it, as it allows consumers to identify with them (Tuskej, Golob & Podnar, 2013) and create a stronger relationship (Rohm, Kltcheva, Milne, 2013). Hence, brands must be socially and environmentally engaged (Schewe et al., 2013) while being present and active online (Kim, 2015). Luxury brands also have to promote their products in new ways -through social media, reality shows,...- (Fromm, 2018).

1.3. The main challenges and opportunities that luxury retail companies face

The evolution of the meaning of “luxury” implies that the luxury sector faces many different challenges. The vision of luxury and the expectations of the people are constantly evolving. Some challenges that can be seen as threats can become opportunities -such as sustainability (Business of Fashion & McKinsey, 2020, Hooley et al., 2017), counterfeit (Baghi, Gabrielli & Grappi, 2016), and the search for new experiences (Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2014).

To validate their integrity as a luxury brand, companies need to follow some rules regarding savoir-faire, price ranges, and experiences (Grassi, Wigley, 2018). Whether online or in-person, the final product and the initial price of luxurious products will not change. However, the experience is much different without necessarily being less qualitative (Langer, 2021). Online shopping can increase a company’s sales, but can also threaten a luxury brand's integrity (Danziger, 2019). A House is in control of the experience offered on its website, but it might not be able to control the experience that retail websites such as Farfetch, Nordstorm, or Theresa offer (Amed et al., 2019). Digitalization is a great opportunity for luxury companies, but they take time to develop it according to their brand image (DeAcetis, 2020). During COVID-19, digitalization has amplified, and the online experience became on another level. Luxury brands try to interact directly with their consumers (Chitrakorn, 2020) and
create a community (Grunberg, 2021). Digitalization is an opportunity for brands to create an out-of-the-ordinary personalized experience (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013).

The increasing proportion of young shoppers and their purchasing power influence the norms in the fashion industry (Williams & Page, 2011). It is no longer enough to be neutral regarding any societal issue (Threlfall, Beatty & Vella, 2019): by not taking a stance, brands take a bigger risk than if they were neutral (Business of Fashion, 2018). The young generations are more concerned than the older ones about their environmental impact when buying a product (Haus von Eden, 2021). They expect luxury fashion brands to be carbon neutral and act in favor of environmental initiatives (Webb, 2021). However, consumers are still doubting the companies’ actions (Hill & Lee, 2012), pushing them towards more transparency and communication (Hahn & Kuhn, 2013). Brands have to act towards sustainability or they could be excluded from the purchase repertoire of numerous consumers (Oakes, 2019 in Vanhamme et al., 2019).

The second-hand luxury market resale has boomed, and its importance keeps increasing in the luxury retail sector (Berg, Berjaoui, Iwatani & Zerbi, 2021). Resale platforms such as Vestiaire Collective or TheRealReal are an immense success. While the resale sector could be identified as a threat to luxury retail companies, it can also be seen as an opportunity. Those resale websites have to make sure that the products offered are legit and faithful to the brand’s values and quality to get a good reputation and be trusted by the brands (Bloomberg, 2019). Furthermore, luxury fashion houses can invest in resale websites to offer the best customer experience and stress their action toward a more sustainable fashion sector (Kering, 2021). Some luxury fashion houses also collaborate with resale websites to save time, and money and have a greater environmental impact (Farra, 2020).

Being sustainable does not only mean being environmentally involved. Sustainability in fashion also involves CSR, workers' rights, materials, and the supply chain (Vogue, 2022). As the world became more globalized, so did the fashion industry. Nowadays, the luxury fashion industry has a close relationship with China because many luxury customers are Chinese, and the country is of major importance in the supply chain (Galli, 2020). Some luxury brands have been called out for exploiting workers (Zilber, 2018). As more and more people care about sustainability, not following the CSR norms is not acceptable anymore. It is
a defining factor that can play a role in the consumer’s purchase decision (Thomas et al., 2007).

During the COVID-19 crisis, shortages of products and resources happened because the world is interdependent, and can be unreliable in difficult times (McKinsey, 2021). The shift in consumer behavior and the realization that the whole supply chain could be local instead of worldwide makes the luxury brands shift in their way of producing and creating. This is an opportunity to produce qualitative products that use local craftsmanship. Crises are a way to make consumers realize the impact of their consumption: luxury goods are some of the most “unnecessary” ones and, in difficult times, they will be the “postponable purchases” (Danziger, 2019). Luxury retail brands have to differentiate themselves and have a brand image to sell and face the competition.

II. CONSUMER BEHAVIOR LITERATURE

II.1. The importance of brand image: Luxury values

Brand image means impression, recognition, and credibility, and can show that your brand is put together (Thimoty, 2016). It is a determinant of the value that consumers give to a brand. Brand image is the impression that consumers have of a brand. An impression can be just a visual one as well as a more in-depth one that includes the brand’s values (Gill, 2011). Regarding the first visual impression, luxury brands have to appear unique, elevated, and expensive (ibid.). The luxury brands’ logos are either very simple (such as the Dior logo) or are a reference to the Maison’s heritage (such as Hermès -equitation- or Chanel -the initials of the creator-). Some brands are linked with a specific color which is now part not only of their heritage but also of their identity and image (Hermès orange or the green-red-green combination of Gucci). A strong and positive brand image is very important in the luxury sector: it makes the products appear extraordinary (Pickton & Borderick, 2005). The second part of “impression” would be the experience’s impression as millennials need to invest in experiences with the brands they own (Mundel et al. 2017). Experience includes the product and its quality but also the shopping experience as well as the customer support experience (Gartner, 2019).
Impression and recognition are linked. Luxury brands have to exceed the customers’ expectations as it makes the experience memorable (Burns, 2020). A memorable experience can make the customer more faithful to a luxury brand and make the brand be part of a purchase repertoire. If the impression is a success, the recognition happens with ease. Luxury retail brands use advertising and marketing, just like any other kind of business. However, since the products offered are memorable and outstanding, luxury brands are easily recognizable (Tynan et al. 2020). Logos, colors, and iconic products of the brand will be some of the most common elements that lead to recognition (Zan et al., 2019). Recognition can also be linked with the brand’s reputation (Cornelissen, 2017).

A luxury brand has to be credible. It means that the brand has to make its strategic decision make sense and fit its brand identity and its commitments. Luxury brands are very powerful and represent a non-negligible part of the global market (Deloitte, 2021). Consumers are increasingly becoming aware of societal issues. The younger generations are taking the companies’ actions into consideration in their purchase decision as they are most likely to buy from a brand that aligns with their values and principles (Williams & Page, 2011). Therefore, companies, including luxurious ones, act towards societal progress (Ipsos, 2020). This includes sustainability, social changes, and involvement in any kind of progress and development (ibid.). As luxury companies are promoting quality products, they appear more credible when they promote craftsmanship within their country of origin (Hitzler & Müller-Stewens, 2017). Following the brand’s values and heritage is a great way to show some consistency.

Lastly, to conform to the image they reflect and the image they want to have, the actions taken by the luxury companies must make sense. Brands have to show consistency. Their words and actions have to match in order to get the consumers’ trust. Trust is one of the main variants that will make a consumer come back (Ding, Veeman, Adamowicz, 2013). In fact, consumers have a planned behavior as they recognize a brand or a product (Clement, Kirstensen, Grønhaug, 2013). Apart from the trust, luxury brands also have to match the experiences and products they offer with the standing they pretend to offer (Reiman & Aron, 2009) as it is now a requirement instead of an option (Chandon, Laurent & Valette-Florence, 2017). Consumers are ready to pay a high price for specific products. However, those products have to either be a need or, if it is a luxury, correspond to the consumer’s expectations in terms of quality and reliability (Zan et al., 2019), fulfillment of desires
(Wegrzyn, 2013), or status (Jung & Shed, 2011) and sense of belonging (Jansson-Boyd, 2019). Lastly, in the global and socially aware world that we live in together, luxury brands have to take the lead in terms of initiatives toward a better future. Brands that are not taking any action are still being bought. However, the ones that take those initiatives are being preferred by some consumers as they share values with the brands (Townsend, 2018).

II.2. Importance of shared values between consumers and the brand

Sharing values with a brand is an important part of the purchase decision process. According to the 2017 Cone study about CSR, 76% of Americans would not buy a product or service from a brand that supports issues contrary to their beliefs.

The consumption values are part of the purchase decision (Tanrikulu, 2021). Consumers usually take into consideration the functional and financial parts of the product before buying it. However, when it comes to luxury, functionality, and price might not be an argument for all consumers: consumers happen to “have different perceptions of the value of a brand” (Wiedmann, Hennigs, Siebels, 2007, p.1). While some consumers are ready to pay a high price for a low-functional product, some will not be able or willing to pay that price. Therefore, when it comes to luxury, the brands have to justify the price to the customers (Kapferer, 2009). The most efficient way to do it is to target consumers that give your brand a high value (Kapferer in Danziger, 2022). The value of the products has to do with the value given to the brand selling them.

To match the brands’ and the consumers’ values, social aspects of a brand have to be taken into consideration. Those social aspects include “displaying status, success, distinction and the human desire to impress other people” (Wiedmann et al., 2007, p.4). To be successful, brands have to explore and follow consumers’ values to build strong and meaningful relationships (Fournier, 1998) as it will allow them to reflect and be self-aware (Rimanoczy, 2014). Consumers are buying from brands they relate to, and corporate values and personal values overlap (Gill, 2011). Value for the consumer does not only include a price value, it can also include an emotional attachment (Kumar & Lim, 2008) and a representation of the brand in the mind of the consumers. Therefore, to sell, brands have to make their brand value and image fit with the consumers’ standards that they are trying to attract (Tusjek et al., 2013.). The value of a brand depends on the cultural context and the
people concerned by this specific brand’s targeting (Wiedmann et al., 2007). Consumers will buy a brand that fits their values and their social status.

The fashion industry is the world’s second most polluting industry (United Nations, 2019) due to the production processes (Caniato, Caridi, Crippa, Moretto, 2012). The industry being ruled by seasonal collections is a barrier to sustainability (Tobialsen as cited in Hansen, 2019) and gives the designers less time to design sustainable fashion (Nielsen as cited in Hansen, 2019). While the consumer’s assumption is that sustainable clothes are not fashionable (Adler, 2019 as cited in Hansen, 2019), they are leaning toward quality over quantity. Buying slow fashion (Brodish, Nixon & Cirka, 2011) and recycling, upcycling, or reusing clothes (Roberts-Islam, 2019) is a way to go towards more sustainability while being time-saving for the consumers as they do not have to repurchase extendly (Niinimäki, 2010). Hence, consumers and brands have to go towards more sustainability.

The last main part of the values that consumers and brands have to share is our moral values. Brands that take action regarding social and environmental issues are more likely to be taken into consideration (Cone, 2017). Brands that take a public stand will come to the buyer’s mind. On the same note, brands that are actively fighting societal issues are most likely to be considered in the purchase process. In effect, the consumers that are sensitive to this kind of action will research the brand’s action and consider it. On the other hand, problematic brands struggle to get back on track and clean their public image (Hills, 2021). The older generations mostly care about the product, but the younger generations are more interested in what is happening in society and the changes possible (Gardiner et al., 2013). Therefore, Millennials pay attention to what the brands are making apart from the experience and the product.

**II.3. Applied to millennials**

In 2022, Millennials, also called Gen Y, are between 28 and 45 years old (Barton, Fromm, Egan, 2012). According to the 2012 BCG report “The Millennial Consumer”, Millennials are “digital natives” who “put a premium on speed, ease, efficiency and convenience”, and will take advice from another consumer instead of an expert (Smith, 2011). Furthermore, they have a desire for connection and shared experience (Mundel et al., 2017). They also want to make the world a better place.
As Millennial consumers get in touch with many different products and brands in their daily life, they feel an intense emotional bond only with a limited number of luxury brands (Thomson et al., 2005). Therefore, they look for “distinctive products, memorable experiences, brand authenticity, and the creation of a relationship with brands based on a two-way communication” (Giannachi et al., 2014). During the purchase process, millennial consumers choose a brand that shares the same values, experiences, and inspiration as them (Wegrzyn, 2013). Choosing a brand shows implicit social motivation and serves a value-expressive function (Zan et al., 2019). Fashion allows people to express themselves (Lynch & Strauss, 2007), both as individuals and who they want to become (Sauerberg & Leicht, 2020). By choosing their way of getting dressed, people can develop their identity and reflect the image they want (Niinimäki, 2010) as well as the socio-category they want to belong to while preserving their individuality (Lynch & Strauss, 2007). Getting dressed is a way to present oneself to the world (Zan et al. 2019) as one can be identified based on their possessions, which can be representative of certain beliefs and values (Jansssson-Boyd, 2019).

For Millennials, luxury is a way to have a sense of belonging as purchasing specific products can allow them to be part of a group (Jansssson-Boyd, 2019) they want to be part of based on the assumptions made about that group (Schein, 2004). The belonging group of the consumer might influence him (Nayeem, 2012) and have a big effect on his luxury consumption. Therefore, brands should care about uniting their consumers as it would create a strong image for the brand (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) and create a sense of unity that leads to brand love (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010). Having a good reputation and the trust of the consumer can give a brand a competitive advantage and lead to the brand being chosen over another similar luxury brand (Cornelissen, 2017).

Social media are also used by millennials to socialize and get a sense of belonging and community, while sharing their interest, leading to an emotional attachment (Pentina et al., 2018). Some consumers engage with the brands and with other consumers to learn about the novelties (Bai, Filieri, Gorton, 2020). Social media is widely used by Millennials, which encourages brands to engage with their community (Athwal, Istanbulluoglu & McCormack, 2019). Through social media, the brands can create an inclusive relationship with the consumers (Grassi & Wigley, 2018) and, therefore, connect and sell directly to the customers (Bain, 2018) as they have full control over their standard aesthetics and image overall.
Digitalization is a big part of the buying experience of Millennials (DeAcetis, 2020). Online buying keeps increasing (Sharif & Yeoh in Dharmesti, Kuhne & Thaichon, 2019). Millennials are very active online as they use it to search and generate (Smith, 2011) information that they will then use in their purchase decision process (Thomas et al., 2007). Therefore, brands have to create and constantly improve their online business to attract and retain the younger generations as customers (Rodrigues & Rodrigues, 2019). However, luxury companies have to offer prestigious and exclusive online experiences (Kim, 2015) as the easy availability of the product online might alter the consumer’s perceived value of the product (Hennings, Wiedeman & Klarman, 2012). Therefore, online shopping personalization is now crucial for an online business to develop and have a higher conversion rate (McKinsey, 2021). While they buy the product, Millennials value the experiences more (Oyedele & Simpson, 2019). Millennials enjoy having an experience that fits and exceeds their expectations (O’Connor, 2018). If a company manages to anticipate the consumer’s behavior and offer reliable product recommendations then this company will sell a lot because millennials expect everything very fast while not having the feeling of being forced to buy (Friedman, 2017). The customers expect to be understood and to be offered a personalized shopping experience or they get frustrated (McKinsey, 2021).

While online shopping on a website is a new norm, millennials also shop and take advice from social media platforms. Most of them do not trust ads anymore (Friedman, 2017). Therefore, having the opinion of real customers and the online community can be beneficial for a brand. While connecting with their millennials, brands improve their conversion rate and brand fidelity (Cornelissen, 2017). Interacting is a foundation to brand experience (Hudson, Huang, Roth & Madden, 2016). Sharing an experience with a brand and other consumers allow Millennials to feel trust and a sense of belonging (Muntigna, Moorman, Smit, 2011). While product and experience are important for millennials, sharing values with the brand and purchasing from brands that support social issues also impact this generation’s purchase behavior (Williams et al., 2011).

Nowadays, purpose-driven brands are attracting millennial consumers. Gen Y is one of the most relevant markets regarding ethical consumption (Hancock, 2017). Sustainability is a value millennials look for in a brand and a product (Shin et al., 2017). Being neutral is not enough, the brands have to be engaged in sustainability because millennials seek to make a difference in the world (Schewe et al., 2013). Millennials are ready to sacrifice some
materials and boycott a brand to achieve sustainability within the fashion retail sector (Ro, 2020) because they expect their purchase to serve an end goal and not only be a product of consumerism. Millennials expect transparency, flexibility, and fairness (BoF Studio, 2021). They care about the social actions of the brands they are buying. The “cancel culture” is gaining in popularity. The amount of brands increases. Therefore, stopping buying from a few brands which do not act would be easier due to the number of alternatives. On the other hand, millennials would rather be attracted to a brand that fits with their values and supports the same issues as them as they believe that businesses can bring global change (BCG, 2012).

II.4. Applied to luxury goods

Some psychology research found that countries have a different social representation of "luxury" (Kapferer et al., 2016). This social representation influences luxury buying behavior (Kapferer et al., 2016). Luxury is subject to interpretation. Therefore, consumers' behavior differs from one to another.

According to Wiedmann et al. (2007), purchasing a luxury good has a value both to the individual purchasing it and their reference group. To some social groups, luxury will have a high value and will give a sense of belonging. While luxury might seem unattainable for some (Grassi, Wigley, 2018), the traditional prestige that luxury brands have is fading as the demand increases and it is becoming consumed by the masses (Zan et al., 2019). Logos are trendy among luxury consumers, trying to impress others with easily recognizable products (Dubois, Czellar, Laurent, 2005). Wearing logos can be seen as a way to expose yourself to get social approval (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2017). Luxury goods “prompt a sense of elevation in social status, cultural superiority, or pleasure” (Kapferer et al., 2016). Luxury goods will mostly be consumed or possessed by elites and will be used to show power and impose their taste (Bourdieu in Kapferer et al., 2016). While the public reputation and vision of the brand are taken into consideration during the purchasing process, brand attachment is crucial in the luxury sector.

In-person shopping is included in the experiences offered by luxury brands. While online shopping has been developed and allowed the democratization of luxury, physical retail is proof of competence and inaccessibility (Ordabaya et al., 2019). Therefore, stores offer the atmosphere that the brands recreate thanks to the space, color, scent, and sound.
(Solomon, 2018), calling for hedonic and multisensory senses that are crucial in luxury experiences (Pantano et al., 2018), making it easier to affect the buying process (Solomon, 2018). While physical stores are expensive to maintain (Bain, 2018), online retailing comes at a price as brands have to pay for ads and ways to generate traffic (Bain, 2018).

Luxury brands are attached to their heritage, and savoir-faire and pay a lot of attention to the image they project. Brand attachment is a mediator between the purchase intention of a consumer and the actual purchase (Shahid & Farooqi, 2019). Luxury brand attachment calls for emotional attachment and shared values (Shimul, Phau, Lwin, 2019). It is needed to create a long-lasting relationship in-between the luxury brands and the consumers. Luxury goods have a specific place in a world of consumerism. While some people can consume them as everyday goods, it is still rare and expensive products that have to be a conscious acquisition for most people (Zan et al., 2019). Luxury brands have a reputation to live up to. Therefore, when acting against societal values, they get exposed. As previously said, consumers purchase luxury brands partially to belong to a social cast. Therefore, the values and actions of the brands reflect the public image of the consumers (Tuskej et al., 2013).
III. METHODOLOGY

In the first place, the research philosophy will be developed, followed by the research approach and, finally, the data collection.

Research philosophy

The understanding of the research depends on the research philosophy (Saunders et al., 2003). Hence, it is important to define the philosophy used in this thesis. Here, the interpretivism philosophy will be used as the luxury consumers’ beliefs and motivations will be analyzed to understand the social phenomena that is Gucci. The interpretivism philosophy allows understanding the role of social actors and their impact (Saunders et al., 2003). In this thesis, in the ontology concept, it will be assumed that reality is a subjective social construct that is prompt to change (Saunders et al., 2003). In the interpretivism philosophy of epistemology, the writer’s view is subjective (ibid.) and the reality behind the subjective assumption and data are what motivates the actions (ibid.). Finally, axiology is in regard to the values in the research from the researchers’ perspective (ibid.), which, in this thesis, is defined by the topic chosen and the approach used to answer

Research approach

The research approach is either inductive, deductive, or abductive (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson, Jaspersen, 2018). Since this thesis is about a case study and has to answer about the actions of a specific brand towards a specific kind of consumers, the deduction approach can not be used. However, both the induction and the abduction methods are being used. The induction method is being used as this thesis is supposed to generate new theories rather than using existing ones (ibid.). However, as this case study is following a descriptive approach, the conclusions drawn can not be considered the only truth. In the case of this thesis, the induction approach has been used to generate conclusions about why Gucci keeps its standard while changing its strategy. Gucci’s actions and its result as being one of the most popular luxury brands will be used to get to the conclusion that Gucci is using the right strategy.
This thesis is mainly based on qualitative data but quantitative data will be used from Kering’s annual reports and studies about consumers and the fashion industry. As Gucci is a private company owned, it does not communicate quantitative or qualitative data outside of what is already publicly available. Gucci declined my request to send non-confidential documents via email as a way to get primary data. A Gucci worker explained that they have too many requests of that kind every day, and can not answer everyone’s. The brand only supports the thesis and projects from students that are doing an internship at Gucci. This lack of primary data, especially regarding the brand’s strategy, might have been an issue for this thesis as some information are assumptions on my part based on the interview and articles I have read instead of information coming directly from Gucci or Kering.

The research has been limited to the existing literature, articles, and documents available to the grand public. Most of my resources are from articles on the internet but I also used some academic writings about luxury, luxury consumers, values, and sustainability. For the sole purpose of this study, Gucci has been seen as a brand on its own rather than a brand that is part of a conglomerate as very little literature exists about this kind of business. I found sources from different places, going from online libraries to articles from different journals. Some of my sources are primary data as they come from Gucci’s website, Kering annual reports, and Instagram. The Instagram data has been collected by saving the posts under different categories that follow the thesis topics: Gucci activism, Gucci experiences, Gucci and Social Media, Collaborations, Gucci logomania, Gucci and the celebrities, Gucci stores, and NFTs. A few categories have been added and the posts present in those categories have been used to back up some arguments within the thesis that are not part of one specific division of the thesis. Those categories are Gucci and art, Gucci at events, Alessandro Michele quotes, Gucci art, and, finally, Gucci and culture. The Instagram posts cited when developing arguments will be shown in the annexes.

Most of my sources regarding Gucci are secondary data from articles and websites that give practical information and opinions. These sources are mostly from 2015 to today as this topic is focused on Michele’s era. I will use the triangulation method and cross the
sources in order to make sure they are as reliable as possible as some of the websites are not well-known within the fashion industry. However, if the information is the same on multiple websites, I consider it reliable. The triangulation method has also been used to back-up Gucci’s sayings about its actions and makes sure that what the brand is saying is the truth rather than communicating about actions and values that are not confirmed. As I want to focus on the sustainable, age-based, strategy-based, and experience-based aspects of this particular brand, I will use the constructivist methodology (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018).

In this paper, I had to deal with the language barrier: Gucci is an Italian brand, and some academic sources, articles, and interviews specifically about this brand are in Italian, a language I do not speak. However, as Gucci is a big international brand, a few academic papers and a lot of articles are being written about specific Gucci topics. The articles were either in English or French. French translations are by the author.

This thesis will be following the American Psychological Association writing format, style, and referencing (APA).
IV. DATA ANALYSIS

I. GUCCI’S VALUES

I.1. The origins of Gucci

I.1.1. Historical background

Gucci was created in Florence in 1921 by Guccio Gucci. It was initially a reseller of leather goods but an embargo obligated Guccio to create his own products. Throughout the years, Gucci always had a very high-hand and very high-quality reputation. Celebrities and royalties started using Gucci products, and the brand started expanding. In 1951, the family business opened its first Milan store, followed by another one in New York in 1953. In the 1950s, the saddle-inspired alternation of the green-red-green colors was first introduced (Bazowsky, 2019) (Annexe 1). In the 1960s, the GG logo started being used on bags. In 1981, ready-to-wear was first introduced in the flagship store, using a lot of the Flora print that had been previously designed for the Princess Grace of Monaco.

Family-owned businesses are complex as both business and emotions are at stake (Terentia consultants for Forbes India, 2017), and Gucci was no exception, leading to a transfer of the family shares to Investcorp in 1993 -which already had 50% of the shares since 1989- (Blackhurst, 2021). Thanks to this transaction, new strategic decisions have been taken, including appointing Domenico de Sole as CEO. The latter had worked for Gucci for years. Hence, he knew and understood the company’s heritage and was aware of its past difficulties. DeSoli and the investors gave Tom Ford his chance as Creative Director of Gucci in 1994 after four years at Gucci (Business of Fashion). By being nominated Creative Director, Tom Ford got the right to implement his vision for the brand in his designs and publicity campaigns (The New York Times, 1995).

I.1.2. The Tom Ford-De Sole era

Ford reinvented Gucci. While he was artistically limited due to Maurizio’s traditional view of the House until 1994, Gucci’s sales kept increasing once he could express his vision (Pieri, 2015). In 1994, Ford had to beg fashion writers to attend the Fashion Show while, in 1995, the spots were coveted (Sarah Mower in Sleek, 2016). Tom Ford is well-known for his
sexy and provocative vision of Gucci (Lalanne, 2019) as “sex sells” (Hyland, 2015). His decade is described as a “porno-chic era” where extravaganzas and provocations were his norms. Ford has been criticized for the provocative advertising campaigns -including one where the model’s pubic hair was shaved in the G logo- and his objectification of women. According to him, “sex sells” and he transcripts this in his vision (Hyland, 2015).

Tom Ford and De Sole were a duo that shared a vision and ambition, and disagreements with PPR -now Kering- on Gucci’s future, after the conglomerate became the majoritarian owner of Gucci, led to their resignation (Hays, 2017). The Tom Ford and De Soles era revolutionized the fashion world and relaunched the brand to the grand public (Khan, 2020). Harper Bazaar described the 1994-2004 Gucci as a “golden era in sales and stature for the label” (Pieri, 2015). After De Sole and Ford’s resignation, Gucci’s identity shifted. At Gucci, the CEO and the Creative Director have a great impact on the public image of the brand and the next one gave the brand a more wise and high-end image.

**I.1.3. Frida Giannini as Gucci’s Creative Director**

After Ford’s departure (Deen, 2001), three designers who worked under his direction were picked as his replacement (ibid.). In 2006, Giannini became the Creative Director of the whole brand (Kering, 2006) after her big success in the accessories section: in 2005, the accessories represented 80% of Gucci’s sales (Wilson, 2005). She got responsible for the brand vision and decided to go away from Ford's vision (Mower, 2014) by having a more sophisticated and elevated style (WWD, 2019). She revisited Gucci’s classics and celebrated the brand heritage by getting inspired by the archives and subtly re-introducing the GG logo and the Flora pattern that made the brand’s reputation when worn by Grace Kelly (Sowray, 2009).

Giannini took some initiatives to redesign the House’s shops (Lidbury, 2009). Giannini has been implementing new strategies within the company: she collaborated with Florence and the Machine (Danneskiold-Samsoe, 2017) to reach a wider audience. She also started to collaborate with NGOs to implement change in society (Milligan, 2014). In 2008, she combined her social ambitions, her will to see Gucci worn by celebrities, and her previous success in the accessories section: in 2008, Gucci launched a UNICEF campaign (Milligan, 2014) that included a collaboration with Rihanna (Bumpus, 2008). After ten years
as Creative Director, Giannini had to leave Gucci, mainly due to her lack of renewal of her collection by staying on the safe side and having lower sales (Bloomberg, 2014).

I.2. Organizational changes since 2015

I.2.1. Finding a new creative director

In 2015, Giannini left abruptly just two weeks before showing her collection despite having an agreement with Gucci to leave after the presentation of the last collection (Bloomberg, 2015). At the time, Michele was about to quit due to a lack of creativity in his work (Michele for Ebert & Michaelson, 2018) but Biazzari asked to meet after Michele had been recommended to him internally multiple times. During their first meeting, which lasted for hours, Michele felt free to express himself and explained to Bizzarri why the brand was not relevant in his eyes as it “lost this kind of beautiful strangeness” (Alfonsi, 2021). They were “in total agreement about the main Gucci values, the objectives, the positioning, and the strategy” (Bizzarri for Wingfield, 2016). Afterward, Biazzari asked Michele if he would be willing to do the men’s wear show (Alfonsi, 2021). Michele decided to re-do a whole new collection within five days after making sure to be on the same page on Gucci’s vision together (Bowles, 2015) because “passion is more important than time” (Ebert et al., 2018).

After Giannini, the brand’s sales were low, and renewal was necessary for the brand (Bloomberg, 2014). Michele’s Women Fall 2015 collection looked nothing like Giannini’s aesthetic. While it was not a mitigated success, it was a much-needed change, a move forward (Baron, 2016). The press and fashion critics mostly welcomed the collection with positive opinions -Anna Wintour was seen wearing the collection later that year-. However, the criticisms on social media were harsher (Baron, 2016) and people were asking for Giannini -and her jet-set aesthetic- to come back to Gucci. After the meeting and the show, to Biazzari, “something clicked. (...) The history of the house. The best, boldest possible version of its future. How it all worked” (Bizzarri for Baron, 2016). The CEO was impressed by Michele’s work and considered him to be a great potential candidate to implement the change needed within the brand. Therefore, following Michele’s first collection, Bizzarri decided to name him Creative Director on the 21st of January 2015 (Kering Press Release, 2015) as Biazziri thought “(...) why should I look for someone else when he can translate the heritage—and when the values of Gucci are in his veins?” (Bizzarri in Bowles, 2015).
I.2.2. A change in the core values and the brand’s identity

In 2013, when Giannini was Creative Director, Kering described the “four core values that differentiate Gucci” as confident sensuality, iconic fashion leadership, Made in Italy, and social responsibility (Kering annual report, 2013) while in the 2015 report the values mentioned were innovation and superior Italian craftsmanship (Kering annual report, 2015). Kering said about that year that it was a “new chapter in Gucci’s creative history with the introduction of a new contemporary vision. (...) The House is currently inventing a new approach to fashion (...)” (Kering annual report, 2015, p.39). The CEOs of Gucci and Kering were expecting a lot of change from Michele’s work and creativity and the change was in march from Michele’s nomination. Changes do affect the whole company’s functions within the process, the people, the whole organization, and anything linked to the structure and process of production, distribution, advertisement, and sales (Wingfield, 2016). Part of the changes implemented by the CEO and designer was to make the environment more creative and stress-free (Wingfield, 2016).

At Gucci, the Creative Director is responsible for the creative direction of the new collections and design and for the brand image reflected by the public (Bowles, 2019). Bizzarri is described as the “impeccably tailored Yin to Michele’s Yang” (Alfonsi, 2021). Hiring Michele was a strategic decision from Bizzarri who trusted him but did not know anything about creativity as business is his sector. However, they share a vision of Gucci, which is Gucci itself (Alfonsi, 2021). Hence, Bizzarri said “Do whatever you want (…)” while Michele risked a lot (Bowles, 2015), but had the space to create and explore while doing his job and pursuing his passion. They are also both aligned on the “new contemporary vision needed by the brand” (ibid.). François-Henri Pinault, CEO of Kering, also seemed to see Michele as a person who has the “qualities and vision necessary to bring a new contemporary perspective to Gucci and lead the brand into an exciting new creative chapter of its history” (Kering annual report, 2015, p.39). Indeed, Michele’s talent and knowledge about Gucci and his experience with the Gucci design teams were a guarantee that Michele could do an efficient job to implement his creative vision.
I.3. Alessandro Michele’s values for Gucci

I.3.1. Bizzarri and Michele shared values

The shared vision and values regarding Gucci have been a decisive point. The CEO and Creative Director both wanted Gucci to be a leading fashion House again, which would surprise the luxury consumers with exciting and anticipated shows during the Fashion Weeks (Wingfield, 2016). Michele’s mission is to lead to the omnipresence of Gucci in the minds of fashion people to make them want to shop there (Bourne, 2015). To achieve that, the CEO and Creative Director agreed to go towards something modern and relatable (ibid.) while staying aware of Gucci’s core values and respecting them. Michele’s role is to design and transcribe a vision while Biazzari has to focus on the outcome of the sales. The trust the both of them have in each other makes it easier to collaborate and communicate the brand’s needs. They both knew that Michele was able to give the House a new life and image based on his personality and experience (Bowles, 2015) as Michele understands and appreciates Gucci’s historical codes but also tries to bring a vintage and modern style (Philips, 2018). Being Italian makes it easier for the CEO and the Creative Director to understand and pursue Gucci’s Italianness (Kering’s annual report, 2016). The brand was born in Florence and got its headquarters moved back to this city in 1989, as Gucci’s history is too deeply rooted in the city (Zargani, 2021). Gucci is a guardian of craftsmanship, which is part of the Italian DNA.

Besides the aesthetic values, Michele and Biazzari would like to create a “faster and more connecting approach to consumer engagement and creative partnerships” (Philips, 2018). Biazzari’s wish to “move from a culture of fear to a culture of empowerment” (ibid.) led to a new positioning of Gucci in the luxury sector, making the brand one of the spokespeople for societal change. It goes through the company's culture in which they want to emphasize respect and humility among the staff (ibid.) and through the brand’s image and communication. Those values already existed at Gucci. However, having Michele as the public image of the brand makes it easier to implement them inside and outside of the organization. Michele is described as “supernormal, humble and a very respectful person” by Biazzari (Wingfield, 2016) and as someone who “has his own opinion but is keen to listen and is a bowl of fresh air that should become an example within the company” (ibid.) while Michele describes Biazzari as “really open to something different” (Philips, 2018). While Giannini said she would send employees home if they were wearing Birkenstock (Martin, 2008), the CEO and Creative Director try to implement a pleasant environment where people
respect each other, are harassment-free, and with no authority for authority’s sake (Wingfield, 2016).

I.3.2. Michele’s values from and for Gucci

After 13 years at Gucci, Michele has interiorized the brand values which are "Made in Italy", outstanding quality, superior craftsmanship (Kering annual report, 2011), creativity (Kering Annual report, 2012), and innovation (Kering Annual report, 2014). When designing his first fashion show, Michele: “was thinking of codes that belonged to the brand, and that could fit his vision” (Zargani, 2020). Michele created a whole new identity with this show, “thinking of (...) a less precise gender, of the beauty of a new generation (...)” (Zargani, 2020). He managed to mix his ambition, vision, and reality with the brand heritage and the requirement it takes to be a luxury brand in the mind of the masses. Michele’s interpretation of Gucci is based on his aesthetic, his passion for decoration, his experiences within the House, and the way he sees its Italianess (Wingfield, 2016). The brand is rooted in Florence, the Renaissance, and the idea of Italian beauty (Michele in Wingfield, 2016), and the Creative Director is connected to it on a daily basis as he enjoys walking in the Romanian streets to observe the history of his country and appreciate its beauty and heritage. The Creative Director, who started his career at Gucci under Ford’s management, wants to re-introduce the Italian chicness and sexiness to Gucci (Wingfield, 2016).

Nowadays, Gucci is what comes from Michele’s imagination, and “too much is never enough” is his motto (Alfonsi, 2021), which is very far from Giannini’s minimalistic vision. Roberta Bentler describes Michele’s input as a “(...) fresh perspective and welcome change (...)” which “(...) made fashion fun again (...)” (Soames, 2016). He switched Gucci’s sophistication for a "beautiful strangeness" and tripled sales in the process (Alfonsi, 2021; Ebert et al., 2018; Brinded, 2016). Michele is working with emotions and truth (Soames, 2016). Michele estimates that he needs to be connected to the world in order to learn and be relevant to the people (Bowles, 2019). While it might not be everyone’s favorite Gucci era, fashion critics and luxury consumers are admiring and appreciate the brand’s authenticity and sensitivity. Since his nomination, Michele’s creativity kept evolving. To him, the creative process is a way to tell a story and offer a great customer experience throughout the product, the collection, and what is transcripted by the show (Bowles, 2019). As many people are
invested in the process of making Michele’s Gucci reality come true, he is spending a lot of time transcribing his vision of the brand to his colleague (Bowles, 2019).

### 1.3.3. Michele’s personal inspirations for Fashion

Michele puts emphasis on the creative process as "fashion comes first, then the strategy for how to sell it" (Ebert et al., 2018). To Michele, the healthy approach to working as a fashion designer is to have "freedom within a framework" (Wingfield, 2016), as it allows him to design "the craziest things" and have fun (Bowles, 2015). Michele's first inspiration is his family and education: seeing his mother getting ready made him understand that "The way you dress is really the way you feel, the way you live, what you read, your choices." (Bowles, 2015) and he transcribed this in the stories behind his designs. His father, on the other hand, inculcated in him that beauty could be found anywhere (Baron, 2016). Beauty is a value that is present in his creations as the designer gets inspired by everyday life and especially by nature: in 2016, animals and nature were a recurrent theme -especially serpents and bees- (Bruni, 2018). For Michele, Fashion means beauty, which means flaws. Flaws reflect life, and it inspires him as it has no limits or rules (Ebert et al., 2018) leading the brand towards "beautiful strangeness" (Alfonsi, 2021). Michele "does not know what beauty is but he knows that individuality plays a part" (Gucci's Instagram, 17 September 2015, Annexe 2). The Creative Director wants people to feel beautiful and unique and, to achieve that, he creates and offers products that are unique and have a story and a vision behind them rather than generical luxury products.

Lastly, the Creative Director’s other big inspiration is culture. His father's education made him believe that "fashion can be found in the new and from the past" (Gucci's Instagram, 23 June 2016, Annexe 3; Bruni, 2018), making him very inspired by sculptures and art in his work (Alfonsi, 2016). Michele is attracted to "vintage quirk, witty details" and androgyny (Bowne, 2015). He is also attracted to mythology and Hollywood (Bowles, 2019). To him, "The past is an infinite resource" (Gucci's Instagram, 23 September 2015, Annexe 4). His interests are very often omnipresent in his creations and the brand image: on the Gucci website, classical music and art are used in the "epilogue" pages (Zargani, 2020), while his designs are sometimes compared to traditional art (GQ in Baron, 2016). To him, "More than anything, fashion is an expression of a way of life, a point of view." (Philips, 2018). Gucci
products under Michele are created to allow people to make their voices heard in a way that they feel comfortable and familiar with (Alfonsi, 2021).

II. Michele as a revolution within the fashion world

2015 was the year of renewal for Gucci. The brand had already been deeply involved in societal questions under Giannini, but the nomination of Michele as a Creative Director allowed the brand to implement a new dynamic that follows the Creative Director’s values (Bowles, 2015). Sustainability is both a challenge and an opportunity for fashion brands (Business of Fashion & McKinsey, 2020) but Gucci chose to take it mainly as an opportunity as Michele stated, “We have to use our voice (...).” (GQ, 2018).

About him, Jim Moore, GQ’s Creative Director, said, “Every so often, a designer creates clothes so inspiring they push fashion in a whole new direction, and right now that designer is Alessandro Michele of Gucci.” (GQ, 2016). Bizzari said that “Corporate neutrality is completely finished. Today you need as a corporation and as a leader to take [a] stance.” (Philips, 2018), while Michele estimates that “At the end, you can just do better” (Bowles, 2019). Gucci is now an example of social responsibility. On its website, the company uses two main categories to talk about sustainability: people and the planet.

The brand says to be making commitments toward people and the planet “to reinforce its culture of purpose, demonstrating its values through innovative pathways towards social and environmental sustainability.” (Gucci’s website). Most of the data following is from Gucci’s website page called “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Gucci,” written on the 18th of February 2022 and is backed up with other sources to validate Gucci’s words.
II.1. Gucci’s commitments: people

II.1.1. Gucci’s commitment regarding people within the company

Biazzarri believes that diversity allows the company to develop creativity, culture, and growth further. Therefore, corporate values are here to guide people in their behavior (Gill, 2011). Gucci has been certified "Great Place to Work® in Italy" twice in a row (Greatplacetowork.it), which shows that the brand’s internal involvement in well-being is successful. The House wants to achieve pay parity by 2025 (Anyanwu, 2021) and to increase diversity within management by setting different targets in each region (Bobb, 2019) thanks to the hiring of global and regional directors for diversity and inclusion (Wilson, 2020).

Before Michele and Bizzarri, inclusion and company culture were not much discussed within the company (Bobb, 2019). After a few faux pas, the executives hired women as the House's Executive Advisor on Global Equity and Culture Engagement (Banks-Walker, 2019) and Global Head of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (Bobb, 2019). This decision came after the design of a balaclava got interpreted as a black face (Asare, 2019), which also led to the hiring of five designers to increase the diversity perspective (ibid.). To react quickly to the scandal, Gucci sought advice from someone who has had issues with the brand and is part of the community affected by the garment by asking Dapper Dan for advice (Business of Fashion), allowing a quick, effective and respectful reaction from management.

In 2019, a Global Equity Board -that includes activists (Schumaker, 2021)- was put responsible for envisioning and prioritizing the company's culture and employees' experience (Schumaker, 2021). The board created an action plan to lead to "cultural diversity and awareness in the company" (Bobb, 2019). The 2019 action plan includes talent hiring and Global learning (Asare, 2019) to focus on inclusivity during the hiring process. The brand acts upon global learning through a diversity and inclusivity awareness program and training (Asare, 2019). It also encourages its employees to inform themselves on the diverse societal question. Gucci follows the UN LGBT Business Conduct Standards.
II. 1.2. Gender at Gucci

The place of gender at Gucci has been the first topic that made noise in Michele’s Gucci. To the Creative Director, gender is not bipolar and can be ambiguous: it needs to give people a sense of themself rather than following a norm (Ebert et al., 2018). During his first show in 2015, Michele blurred the line between the genders and it was very much talked in the media despite being a norm and a reflection of society for him (Blanks, 2022). For the 2017 Milan Fashion Week, the House created a “genderless blur” show (Bruni, 2018) by showing the women’s and men’s wear together instead of separately as it is traditionally done. The CEO and the Creative Director defy the fashion codes (Blanks, 2022) and have a strong societal impact (Baron, 2016).

In July 2021, Gucci created the “MX” collection (Annexe 40), described as “genderless” (Expositio, 2020), non-binary (Russo, 2020), and genderfluid (Marine, 2020). In 2018, Hari Nef, a transgender model, and actress, was named ambassador of Gucci’s fragrance. The brand’s Creative Director is seen as someone who “shifted the industry’s course, altering the way the world sees value, gender, and even identity” (Bruni, 2018). Since 2018, about 63% of the employees have been women, and they represent about 58% of the management each year since 2018 (Gucci., 2018). Gender equality is not achieved yet, but Gucci’s 2020 Gender Parity Index result in France is 98/100. Gucci is developing a “Gender Gap” report and signed the Women’s Forum CEO Champions Commitments at the Women’s Forum G20 Italy in 2021 to accelerate the change towards gender equity and commit to objectives.

II. 1.3.Chime for change

Gucci’s most famous commitment is called “Chime for Change”, which is a campaign that was created in 2013 by Giannini, Beyoncé and Salma Hayek (Pinault’s wife) to improve women’s education, health and justice worldwide. It aims to “inspire participation in a collective community, bringing people together across borders and generations in the fight for equality” (Gucci’s website, 2022). Since 2005, Gucci and UNICEF have been partners to help young girls to get access to education, health and justice (unicefusa.org, 2022). However,
since the departure of Giannini, a focus has been made on communication and a sense of belonging. Gucci shows its progress and actions to its community and encourages them to participate as it was the case on the Instagram publication of the brand from the 20 May 2020 in which the caption says “Join Chime for Change and the Kering foundation to take a stand against gender-based violence. Visit -website- to directly support the safety and rights of women around the world” (Gucci’s Instagram, 20 May 2020).

To take action, Chime for Change organizes events such as the 2013 Sound of Change Live Concert which raised $4 million and allowed the realization of 200 projects in 70 countries (Hamilton, 2013). The projects vary and have different goals but they are all linked with leading girls and women towards a better life and towards gender equality. In December 2013, Gucci partnered with Twitter, Women Who Code and UNICEF (Women Who Code, 2013). This initiative shows how diverse Gucci’s Chime of Change initiatives are and, yet, relevant for pushing women to go towards their wishes and towards gender equality. On May 2019, Gucci described Chime for Change as a way of “funding projects around the world to support sexual and reproductive rights, maternal health, and the freedom of individual choice. Learn more about the global partners for sexual and family health rights the campaign is donating to in 2019” (Gucci’s Instagram, 29 May 2019).

Gucci’s love for art is important. The brand uses it not only to express its vision of life, but also to send messages and have a voice. Therefore, Chime for Change has been using murals since 2013, when a feminine artist and activist -Lydia Emily- painted a mural for Gucci as an hommage to the survivor of sex trafficking Jessica. In 2019, Gucci launched a campaign called “To Gather Together” that shows people without distinctive gender attributes. This campaign has been declined in different ways, including as an exhibition, a mural, a movie and a zime and has been created to promote gender equality (Turra, 2019).

Recently, Gucci also started using its products as a way of sending a message, in addition to its platforms and actions. In 2019, The brand collaborated with Adam Eli, an LGBTQ+ activist, to create a yellow t-shirt with the slogan “My Body, My choice” which profits have been donated to Chime for Change. However, for this collaboration to happen, Adam wanted to focus not only on women and girls, but also the other gender minorities (Weir, 2019). On the Cruise 2020 Runway, the slogan “My body, my choice” could also be noticed on garments. This stand has been taken by the brand as some american states tried to “stripe women of their right for abortion” (Fisher, 2019). Alessandro Michele took a social and
political stand by designing this collection. The Gucci brand being very attentive to its heritage, the date of the legalization of abortion in Italy was embroidered on the garments (Fisher, 2019).

II.1.4. Culture and access to education

Alessandro Michele is inspired by the younger generation because “The fearlessness of this generation to express themselves gives me hope that a future of freedom and equality is possible” (Gucci’s Instagram, 9 June 2020). Therefore, making culture and education widely available is essential for him. On top of improving its recruitment process overall, the brand sponsors fashion degrees in Italy (Wallace, 2017). In 2020, Gucci chose to focus on other young people (AbuSulayman in Schumaker, 2020) and created a multicultural design scholarship program -Gucci Changemakers- (Greenfield, 2022) to “cultivate new talent” that comes from diverse backgrounds (Anyanwu, 2021) and, therefore, get a more diverse and inclusive workplace in the long term (Asare, 2019). Multiple programs are launched by Gucci. One of them is the Gucci Changemakers global volunteering program which consists in facilitating the connection between Gucci employees and their local communities in order to create, together, projects towards gender equality, education, and help of the refugees... The Gucci Changemakers program includes the Gucci North America Changemakers Impact Fund that is fully dedicated “in serving communities of color in twelve cities across North America” (Gucci, 2022).

Gucci is trying to make a change in the creative industry. Back in 2008, the brand initiated the Gucci Tribeca Documentary Fund with the goal to use $80,000 to finance movies that are being produced to promote social change (IMDb, 2020). The movie that has been funded is then presented to the Tribeca Film Festival. Furthermore, in 2011, the House launched an Award for Women in Cinema in collaboration with the Venice Film Festival to pay tribute to the women producers (Eggleton, 2010). In 2015, Gucci posted a picture stating that the brand was in Los Angeles to “present the fifth annual @lacma #ArtandFilm Gala” that was taking place in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Gucci’s Instagram, 7 November 2015). In October 2016, the House posted diverse Gucci outfits of the people who attended the
LACMA (Instagram, 2016), reinforcing that way its position as one of the main brand dressing celebrities for Movie-related events.

**II.1.5. COVID-19 initiatives**

Gucci was the first brand to act immediately against the COVID-19 crisis. The brand announced on Instagram that it donated to the Hubei Red Cross Foundation to help fight the spread of the virus and summed up its additional donations and actions taken to help people and governments. Gucci is based in Italy, and Kering is a French company; the efforts have been primarily focused on those two countries (by donating to Institut Pasteur and Regione Toscana (Davis, 2020)). Gucci's actions went further than donations: on 26 March 2020, the House encouraged donations from the #GucciCommunity by creating two crowdfunding campaigns with a dedicated webpage directed towards the Italian Civil Protection and the Solidarity Response Fund (US) -and donated 2 million euros to each of them-. On Instagram, Gucci kept informing the community about the virus, reminding them actively of the hygienic rules and giving tricks to feel a taste of social life and stay connected despite the mandatory distanciation. On 20 May 2020, the company also called for donations on an Instagram post (Annexe 41) to stop the increase of gender-based violence since the outbreak of the virus (UNWomen, 2020) raising, once again, awareness on societal issues.

**II.1.6. Societal issues:**

Some specific issues catch Gucci's interest. Those are either much talked about within the society or touch Gucci on a personal level, or both at the same time. In June 2016, Gucci gave its vision on gun control after the mass shooting that happened in a club in Orlando. This one deeply touched Gucci as it happened in a gay club -and House supports gay rights- and one of the employees has been killed on the night of the 12th of June (Fernandez, 2018). Gucci rejoined a few fashion American brands in the March for Our Lives movement by donating half a million dollars to support gun control (Wolf, 2018) and having a team to represent the company at the demonstration (Fernandez, 2018).
In May 2020, the movement Black Lives Matter was launched after the murder of George Floyd. On the 3rd of June 2020, Gucci released a statement on Instagram (Annexe 5) on behalf of Bizzarri, Michele, and all the Gucci employees saying that they condemn this oppression and stand with the black community. The House has taken the opportunity to give to black-violence focused organizations to The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Bougro, 2020), Campaign Zero -an association that fights against police violence in the US- and Know Your Rights Camp through Gucci’s North America Changemakers Impact Fund (Gucci, 2020).

Gucci cares about inclusion. While including people of diverse races or with specific unique traits has become the norm in the fashion industry, disabled people are still not fully included. Zebedee Management is a talent agency whose goal is to lead to inclusion in the fashion world (Webb, 2021). Through this agency, Gucci found Ellie Goldstein, a model with down syndrome, and made her one of the faces of the “Unconventional beauty” ad that was launched in 2020 (Callahan, 2020). Shooting a Gucci campaign is a big opportunity and leads to getting more doors open. Hence, not only is Ellie Goldstein successful nowadays but, by hiring her, Gucci promoted the inclusion of disabled people. Furthermore, Gucci asked Sinéad Burke, a teacher, activist, and writer who wants to make the fashion world accessible to people with disabilities, to join the Advisory Board of CiC to give the House some advice on how to make disabled people feel included in campaigns and with the garments (Gucci’s website, 2020).

II.2. Gucci’s commitment: the environment

According to the BoF Sustainability Index, Kering is the most sustainable major brand (Haus von Eden, 2021). Gucci is Kering’s main brand and is a pioneer and an alert launcher in sustainability, including the environment. Bizarri said, “We are committed to generate positive change for people and for nature across our business” (Gucci, 2021) which explains Gucci’s involvement in regard to environmental issues.

II.2.1. External engagements

Gucci signed the Fashion Pact G7 France Biarritz 2019 that has three focuses: climate (mitigating and adapting to climate change), biodiversity (bending the curve on biodiversity
loss within ten years), and oceans (addressing the critical loss of ocean functionality) (Fashion Pact G7 France Biarritz, 2019). This means that Gucci commits to doing anything possible to reduce its emissions and move towards a more sustainable future (Wells et al., 2021). The engagements regarding the ocean are primarily regarding plastic, for which Gucci is currently working with the “plastic-free initiative” that consists in banning all the single-use plastic from the Italian offices, the retail packaging, and industrial packaging (Gucci.com). Small actions go a long way: the brand eliminated about 250,000 plastic bottle waste in a year by giving its employees reusable water bottles. It also raised awareness within the company on personal impact.

Gucci is now part of the CEO Carbon Neutral Challenge, which was created by the House three years ago: the brand wrote a letter to CEOs to urge them to commit to addressing the Greenhouse Gas emissions immediately. So far, CEOs of big brands like Cartier and The RealReal have joined the movement. Gucci makes its message and actions more trustworthy by having its efforts supported outside of the organization (Scott-Phillips, 2008). The committed brands have to follow a climate strategy supported by stakeholders and climate experts to protect forests and biodiversity worldwide. The main principles of this challenge are that brands have to hold themselves accountable for their actions, recognize their impact on the environment, and promote sustainability.

II.2.2. Internal engagements

Because Gucci thinks that companies are responsible for their actions and should use their voice to spread awareness, the House created a sustainability strategy which consists of a “ten-year sustainability plan to reinforce a culture of purpose” (Gucci.com, 2015). The program was created in 2015, and the goals are to be achieved thanks to a more sustainable business model. Some of the goals are the following: reducing the total environmental footprint by 40%, decreasing greenhouse gas emissions by 50%, and making the raw materials 100% traceable… Gucci’s annual reports are made public and allow consumers to see the progress. Those reports include the Environmental Profit and Loss accounting that takes into consideration all the consumption and emissions of the brand and then gives a cost to society and potential changes within the business activity (Wells et al., 2021).
II.2.3. Second-hand at Gucci

Consumers demand better sustainability and urge companies to act upon it (Threlfall et al., 2019). Acting towards sustainability can become a competitive advantage (Hooley et al., 2017), and Gucci acts to better its environmental impact. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the company decided to create its own second-hand retail website, Vault, as second-hand luxury is gaining in popularity due to high demand from consumers (Roberts-Islam, 2019). The 8 September 2021, Gucci announced via Instagram that it was launching a line for upcycling (Annexe 6). The caption says, “Everything will be vintage, one-day #GucciVault, coming soon.” Getting the clothes reused can reduce waste (ibid.). As said previously in the thesis, luxury brands have to offer specific standards in terms of quality and experience (Zang et al., 2019). Therefore, by creating Vault, its second-hand online shop, Gucci keeps the hold on what is offered to its customers while showing that they care about the environment.

II.2.4. Sustainable fashion creations

The House is also trying to reduce waste by using circular approaches. To do so, Gucci addresses the end of life of materials and products. The brand can get creative and create new clothes or products as shown through Billie Eilish’s Met 2022 upcycled dress (Bruce-Smith, 2021). Gucci dressed multiple celebrities who attended but this dress was the most talked about as it was in theme and respectful to nature. To adopt circularity, a brand needs to know what materials are used. In 2020, Gucci launched its first sustainable collection, “Off the Grid,” for people and the environment (Carreon, 2020). Consumers are going towards slow fashion (Haus von Eden, 2021), which goes against unsustainable fashion (Brodish et al., 2011). They expect their purchases to be an investment (Diorio, 2019), making them save time in the long run (Niinimäki, 2010). By providing qualitative products, Gucci is reducing its environmental impact as the products will be used in the long term. While upcycling, adopting circularity, and offering qualitative products is an excellent steps toward more sustainability, sourcing and using raw materials and materials sustainably sourced are another step.
II.2.5. The use of new materials

Gucci has been recently acting towards a more sustainable future thanks to a change in the materials used. The brand is, for example, not using fur anymore. This decision was taken about a week after discussing the matter between the CEO and the Creative Director (Bowles, 2019), which proves that even big brands can react and make changes quickly. The materials used in the fashion industry heavily impact the environment (Caniato et al., 2012). Therefore, Gucci's actions are part of the brand's sustainability strategy. These include increasing low-impact alternatives and sustainable materials, developing eco-friendly sourcing solutions and raw materials that could come from "sustainable sourcing and innovative on-the-ground programs," and sourcing solutions developed by the brand (Gucci.com). The House wants innovation to be a way of reaching sustainable goals by allowing the production and use of low-impact materials, better traceability, and the measurement of the production impact.

II.2.6. A more sustainable supply chain

Sustainability also means people. By sourcing the materials closer, Gucci is shortening the supply chain, allowing the continuation of Italian craftsmanship traditions, optimizing the production time and the creative approach, and allowing work within a more sustainable and caring work environment. By using more qualitative and self-sourced products, Gucci enables the designs to be more qualitative and artsy, which goes against the assumption that “sustainable products are not fashionable” (Adler, 2019, as cited in Hansen, 2019). The House is still one of the fashion luxury leaders while allowing changes within the company to fit the society and the customers’ standards. Therefore, the brand keeps control over the production and does not ruin its reputation or quality as sustainability is one of the factors taken into consideration during the purchasing intentions (Tsai as cited in Ismail, 2017). As Aldo Gucci said, “Quality is remembered long after the price is forgotten.”

III. Gucci’s unique selling points

Gucci is currently among the most popular brands among the Millennials. In order to understand its consumers and involve them in strategic business decisions, a "shadow committee” has been created under Michele's Gucci (Bain, 2017). This committee follows
"bottom-up" management, allowing the members to bring up their ideas and maybe see them happen (Harding, 2017).

III.1. Gucci’s experiences

As a luxury brand, Gucci cannot neglect experience. While the product is part of it, the way customers are being treated and the Gucci attractions offered besides the shopping experience are also a way to provide memorable experiences (Reimann et al., 2009), make the consumers loyal and make them appreciate the brand, even more, thanks to a controlled promotion and distribution (Grassi et al., 2018)

III.1.1 Permanent experiences

III.1.1.1. Stores and pop-up

Stores are an essential part of the customer experience (Pantano et al., 2018). Alessandro Michele uses his maximalist vision to life and shares it with the customers through the way Gucci’s creations are presented. On 20 September 2015 (Annexe 7), Gucci posted pictures of the #GucciPopUp and installation of the Milan Store on Instagram. The pop-up is presented as a concept that gives sneaks peeks of the #GucciCruise16 by Alessandro Michele. In that situation, the stores are used to give an insight into the designs coming up during the Fashion Week by creating an atmosphere (Solomon, 2018). Alessandro Michele said about the 2015 pop-up, “The new store design (...) allows the clothes and accessories to speak for themselves.” (Gucci’s Instagram, 18 September 2015, Annexe 8). In 2017, the stores were used extensively to match the brand’s identity: the 15 February, the store windows showed mirrored sequins and pink velvet as a reference to the latest fashion show. Stores are a way to recreate a brand’s universe. As said previously, Alessandro Michele is part of Gucci’s public image, and he is inspired by art in all its forms. Therefore, it makes sense when a store resembles a theater dressing room (Gucci’s Instagram, 5 May 2017, Annexe 9) or that the Tokio store is filled with red velvet staircases and mirrors everywhere (Gucci’s Instagram, 21 July 2017, Annexe 10).
III.1.2. Gucci Garden

Gucci Gardens are located in the Piazza Della Signoria. In this space, there is the Gucci Garden shop -filled with exclusive products that are described as an experience (Fardoe, 2021)-. One of the four Michelin “Gucci Osteria” in the world is also in the Gucci Garden. In this restaurant, customers can have a Gucci experience while eating in a Gucci ambiance, with products that are part of the Gucci Décor collection. The Gucci Garden houses the Gucci Museo. Opened in 2011, the Museum is located in Florence, the city of origin of the brand. It is filled with archives and reveals unknown sides of the House (Holgate, 2011). The building itself is part of the brand’s heritage and history and allows an understanding of the brand’s craftsmanship. While the Tom Ford era has been one of the brand’s most outstanding, it has been absent from Gucci Museo until Michele decided to create two new cherry red rooms to present Tom Ford’s pieces, making it a complete museum. Those pieces represent Ford’s aesthetic and include the scandalous GG-string from 1997, handcuffs, and a dog spank.

III.1.2. Gucci’s temporary experiences

III.1.2.1. Product based experiences

Some experiences are product-based, such as the customization service for men’s tailoring (Gucci’s Instagram, 17 June 2016, Annexe 11) at a pop-up store with exclusive products that was opened in Milan for eleven days. The brand also partnered with FARFETCH to create a “Gucci in 90 Minutes” experience to deliver Gucci products to people’s houses less than ninety minutes after ordering them. Other experiences take Gucci’s heritage as a base, such as the “Gucci Bamboo House interactive exhibition” (Andreas, 2021) or the presentation of the Palazzo Settimanni which now contains the House’s archives and is a historical building of the company (Gucci’s Instagram, 3 July 2021, Annexe 12; Carrera, 2021). Owning a Gucci product is an experience itself as it allows the buyer to be part of the Gucci consumers. The products created by Michele and his team reflect an ideal and a vision while being qualitative and luxurious.
III.1.2.2. Art-based experiences

In April 2019, Gucci invited the public to participate in "The Club" which includes two workshops to see and understand how the brand’s products are created (Gucci's Instagram, 18 April 2019, Annexe 13), allowing a new type of exclusive inclusivity. Finally, a lot of Gucci's experiences are art-based: the ArtLab is fully focused on finding new creative ideas through sensorial experiences. The Gucci Garden Archetypes have been shown in Shanghai, allowing the Gucci Garden experience to be lived worldwide through an exhibition. Overall, the House plans many art exhibitions dedicated to diverse causes and artists. In 2016 Gucci launched #BlindForLove to encourage its community to break boundaries and explore the truth (Gucci's Instagram, 28 October 2016, Annexe 14) and kept going with it by decorating the walls of the Gucci Garden, a historical place, with a verse from "The Garden of Love" (Gucci's Instagram, 13 June 2018, Annexe 15).

III.2. Design

III.2.1. Overall Gucci designs

III.2.1.1. The internal vision of Gucci’s designs

Since 2015, Gucci has had a new brand image and, therefore, new designs. Alessandro Michele expects his clothes to be alive and tell a story, a memory, and life… His designs are inspired by art and by everyday life. In an Instagram publication from 24 January 2016 (Annex 16), the caption was a quote of Alessandro Michele saying, "I love the idea that there is an energy in every single thing you do, and every single piece that you put in the clothes. Everything is very precious". Michele's creative vision is based on what he sees, loves, and appreciates. For years, Gucci's Creative Director has been living in England. He loves the English aesthetic as he feels like it is close to his own: a mix of the past and the present (Gucci's Instagram, 2 June 2016, Annex 17). He described his 2016 collection as a "little poem to London" (Gucci's Instagram, 3 June 2016, Annex 18). Alessandro Michele is very much into details (Alfonsi, 2021). The flower prints from the 2016 collection were inspired by the garden filled with flowers that one can observe in London (Gucci's Instagram, 2 June 2016, Annex 19). Michele's creations are unique because they come from his experiences and open-minded vision of life and society.
II.2.1.2. The press’ opinion on Michele’s designs

Jim Moore, from GQ, said about Michele that "In the year since he was named Creative Director, Michele has completely re-imagined the storied Italian fashion house. His clothes are younger. Bolder. Wilder. (...) All hail the new king of cool and the raddest clothes on the planet." (GQ, 2016). With his 2017 Fashion Show, Michele created what has been qualified as a “glorious ball of confusion” (Blanks, 2022). While creating eclectic, contemporary, and romantic designs, Michele respects the brand's heritage by using Italian craftsmanship with parsimony, leading to detailed qualitative products (Bhasin, 2018). Michele has given Gucci the young impulse needed by creating eccentric, eclectic, and inclusive designs (Bruni, 2018) and he is selling sensibility (Bruni, 2018). GQ says that the clothes "inspire not just for admiration from people who are able to understand the reference and the technique, but emotion from people (...) who generally can't" (2016). Garments can be a way to express emotions, and that is the way Alessandro Michele is doing it: he said, "To me, clothes are an atlas of emotions." (Gucci's Instagram, 24 September 2015, Annexe 20).

III.2.2. Modernization through the use of logos and the revisitation the brand’s heritage

III.2.2.1. The use of logos

Giannini was the Creative Director of Gucci in the post-logo era of fashion (Binkley, 2014), and, to this day, she thinks that logos are overused, especially by Gucci (Turra, 2020). On the other hand, Michele has been exploring logomania and playing with it as it is back in trend because the stigma around it is gone (Kim et al., 2021). Buying logos is, instead, seen as an investment (Kim et al., 2021) as it fulfills a social-adjustive function assured by luxury brands (Zan et al., 2019). In 2015, Michele designed the iconic gender-fluid GG belt (Gucci’s Instagram, 4 August 2015, Annexe 21) which fit his vision regarding gender, brand heritage, and renewal. He then created the #GGBlooms pattern -a pattern with flowers inspired by London that could remind consumers of the famous flora pattern, and a brown GG logo- and declined it for shoes, backpacks, and sneakers (Gucci’s Instagram, August 2015, Annexe 22). While creating new patterns, objects, and garments, Michele is also revisiting Gucci’s classics and icons. It was the case in 2015 when he put the brown pattern with G on the
Dionysus bag and exposed it in the 5th Avenue Gucci flagship store in New York (Gucci’s Instagram, 12 September 2015, Annexe 23).

III.2.2.2. The brand heritage as a source of inspiration

Michele kept revisiting the House's heritage: he validated the design for the Horsebit bracelet (Gucci's Instagram, 11 November 2015, Annexe 24) inspired by Gucci’s history as a seller of leather goods when horses were part of people’s everyday life. Michele also presented a jumbo-sized GG monogram and Web strip belt bag for the Love Parade collection (Gucci's Instagram, 26 April 2022, Annexe 25). On top of the GG pattern, Michele started using the green-red-green Web stripe on dresses, bags, and mocassins (Gucci's Instagram, 22 October 2015, Annexe 26). On some shoes, he added his bee pattern, which was initially only part of his identity but is now fully part of the brand’s identity (Gucci's Instagram, 22 October 2015, Annexe 27). On November the 30th, the House presented the Web and Bee shoulder bag that includes an embroidered bee, the green-red-green Web stripe, and brown leather with the GG pattern (Gucci's Instagram, 30 November 2015, Annexe 28), reaching the top of Gucci's logomania.

III.2.2.3. Counterfeit as an opportunity

Logo bags are the most counterfeit products from Gucci. However, while most designers can see counterfeiting as a big issue, Michele sees it as an opportunity and believes that a brand with knock-offs is a sign that the brand has power and is popular (Alfonsi, 2021). The designer accepts knock-offs as he sees it as an homage to the brand, but Gucci has threatened Forever 21 with a lawsuit as the fast-fashion brand was using some of Gucci’s trademarks for its own designs. Gucci is having fun with its reputation as a brand that has to deal with a lot of counterfeit and, in 2020, the House took advantage of the situation and did a “playful take for the Fall/Winter 2020 collection by using distinctive House codes” by putting the words ‘Not’ and ‘Fake’ on real Gucci backpacks and totes printed with the GG pattern (Gucci’s Instagram, 12 October 2020, Annexe 28). The brand showed those products again in January and April 2022 and used the words “contemporary functionality with classic sophistication” to describe them.
III. 3. Collaborations

III.3.1. With artists

Gucci has been collaborating with many brands and artists. As the brand focuses on art, some artists are asked to collaborate with the House to create new designs and patterns. On 14 September 2016, Troubleanddrew created symbols such as an egg and a piece of pie and put them on some Gucci accessories (Gucci's Instagram, 14 September 2016, Annexe 29). The brand then collaborated with Gucci Ghost -who initially used the Gucci logo without authorization- to put his artwork on accessories (Petrarca, 2016). While artists want to collaborate with Gucci, Michele also wants to be part of a creative world other than the fashion one, and, since 2017, the House has hosted the #C2CMLN, which is a festival of avant-garde and new pop music (Gucci's Instagram, 6 April 2019, Annexe 30). Michele designed the cover of Baustelle, which contains the soundtrack of the #GucciDreamscape campaign (Gucci's Instagram, 2 April 2017, Annexe 31).

III.3.2. With celebrities

The brand has muses and does not usually go with the safe choice, but rather with people that fit Michele's free spirit (Alfonsi, 2021). Since 2012, Florence has been one of Gucci's muses and she is now the ambassador for the House Timepieces and Jewelry (Gucci's Instagram, 12 February 2016, Annexe 32). Harry Style is another muse: since 2018, he has been one of the faces of Gucci's perfume and is dressed by Michele for every significant apparition (Pike, 2020). Dakota Johnson, Jude Law, Serena Williams, and Miley Cyrus also wear very often garments and accessories from the brand. Those celebrities fit the brand image and give a new impulse to it while staying in accordance with the brand image. On the other hand, Gucci is also dressing other significant celebrities for specific occasions, such as Madonna in a Prince outfit for the 2016 Billboard Music Awards (Gucci's Instagram, 23 May 2016, Annexe 33). In February 2016, Gucci-inspired bodysuits featuring the GG pattern and Web details were present in Beyoncé's Formation video. They were an homage to the House, "celebrating its past and present" (Gucci's Instagram, 7 February 2016, Annexe 34). The House makes the creative ideas of celebrities a reality and provides them with performing outfits.
III.3.3. With other brands

Gucci also collaborates with brands to create new garments and designs that fit both brands’ identities. In 2015, the House collaborated with Comme des Garçons to create silk scarves that featured a Gucci floral pattern and the brands' names. The products were exclusively sold in the Gucci flagship store in Milan and the Comme des Garçons boutiques. (Gucci's Instagram, 12 December 2015, Annexe 35). Lately, the House collaborated twice with The North Face, making itself a comfortable spot in the streetwear culture that is very popular among the younger generations. For the last collaboration, Gucci and The North Face staged Francis Bourgeois, a popular TikTok star passionate about trains, in a short movie advertisement to represent the most recent collection. This collection "strays true to its core, celebrating the spirit of exploration in all its forms" (Gucci's Instagram, 27 December 2021, Annexe 36). Francis’ freedom to live and share his passion fits Gucci’s vision of expressing oneself and his popularity on social media made him the perfect person for this collaboration. Gucci is also familiar with creating collections for reseller websites: in May 2016, a Gucci collection was created to be exclusively sold on Net-à-Porter (Périer, 2016). The Major League Baseball one, is exclusively available on Vault (Gucci's Instagram, 15 April 2022; Saunders, 2022, Annexe 37). Gucci keeps control over the selling points and the products sold. It also implements itself to new segments by collaborating with streetwear brands.

Two Gucci collaborations have been highly talked about in the fashion world: Gucci x Balenciaga and Gucci x Adidas. The latter was presented during the Gucci show during the Milan Fashion Week in February 2022. The collection is described as a blend between sportswear codes and Gucci's signature silhouettes on Gucci's Instagram (26 February 2022). Alessandro Michele said about that collection that he has "always been averse to the myth of the exact vision that inevitably ends up in freezing the magnifico power of the world" (Gucci's Instagram, 26 February 2022), and this collection showed it, the same way the Balenciaga x Gucci collaboration did. For both collaborations, the Creative Directors of both brands have met to blend each brand's iconic pieces and details to make a new product that respects both brand identities. Those collaborations have been possible because all of those brands have a strong brand identity and are very successful in their market. The Creative Directors of all of the brands are comfortable enough with the brand identity to collaborate together. By mixing the visual heritage of the brands and offering new products that are easily
recognizable as a mix of Gucci and another brand, both Balenciaga and Adidas support and agree indirectly with Gucci’s current values and vision.

**III. 4. Digital at Gucci**

**III.4.1. NFTs and Metaverse**

**II.4.1.1. NFT**

Gucci recently surfed on the NFTs trend. While the brand’s collaborations are mainly done with artists, celebrities, and brands, on 18 January 2022, the House announced a collaboration with Superplastic called #SUPERGUCCI (Gucci’s Instagram, 17 January 2022, Annexe 38) to create ten handmade ceramic sculptures -in Italy-“bridging the digital with the physical” (Gucci’s Instagram, 1 February 2022, Annexe 39). All ten sculptures are different and have been designed by reimagining the House codes and heritage, such as the Flora pattern or other designs from Alessandro Michele. The brand stepped into the imaginative metaverse. This is not Gucci’s only attempt at being part of the online financial world: on 5 May 2022, the brand announced to accept crypto payments in some of the U.S. shops, specifically bitcoins (Rascouet, 2022). Gucci is open to societal changes.

**II.4.1.2. Metaverse**

Gucci also uses other digital trends to sell Online life has been becoming bigger and bigger, and, now, paying for virtual clothes is not absurd: these are objects that can be shared, “worn” over and over again...(Bain, 2018). To Gucci’s CMO, “The virtual world is creating its economy,” and the brand has to take advantage of it (Segran, 2020). The House chose the Drest app, which includes many brands, models, and all kinds of body sizes to be used as Gucci’s metaverse platform: on this app, one can create virtual outfits and buy them on the brand's webshop. The idea behind it is to encourage people to buy the products they see worn by the avatars and to share time with other people online (Sullivan, 2020).
III.4.2. Digital as part of the consumer’s experience

III.4.2.1. A personalized and exclusive experience

Gucci uses digital solutions to make the customers feel understood and feel like they are part of a community. Today’s internet experiences are not experiential enough (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). However, the House is never lacking ideas. In July 2017, the House launched Gucci Places, a digital feature that allows the community to see the different places that have inspired Gucci (Vogue, 2017). However, during the COVID-19 crisis, the House had to double the effort and offer personalized virtual experiences to its customers, or it could have ruined the perception of the value of the luxury products and scarcity (Hennings et al., 2012). While physical stores are expensive to maintain (Bain, 2018), they allow an outstanding consumer experience, which Gucci tried to reproduce with its online store: as stores were closed, customers could have a virtual tour in a faux luxury shop with a personal sales assistant helping them and advising them in an experience called Gucci Live (Jamali et al., 2021) and, therefore, allowing a one-to-one communication (Petit et al., 2019), replicating what is possible in store.

III.4.2.2. A way to connect with the brand

While the Gucci online experience got more personalized because of COVID-19, it was not the brand’s first try at making its customers included: in 2017, Gucci launched the #TGWGucci challenge, which consisted in asking the #GucciCommunity to create memes (Anyanwu, 2017) and the brand reposted some of them on Instagram. It made the community connect on a deeper level than just fashion. Earned media is the best way to be credible (Cornelissen, 2017). Gucci also launched the #GucciGram, which consisted in creating artworks by merging classical art pieces and Michele’s floral pattern. The brand reiterated this in 2022 by trying to launch some TikTok trends and reposting on its TikTok page some of the videos from the Gucci community (Gucci’s TikTok page). By making people who appreciate Gucci focus on the brand’s products and experiences, Gucci is creating a connection with the masses. People are able to produce the content they want on the brand. They are participating in Gucci’s advertisement. While the brand is not responsible for what people post if they are not related, Gucci posts the best content produced on its social media, which creates the image of an accessible brand that cares about people’s expression.
III.4.2.3. Social media to create a community

Millennials grew up in the digital era and with social media, which gives brands more options to communicate and reach their target audience (Sharp, 2013). While Michele feels somewhat manipulated by social networks (Ebert & Michalesen, 2018), using them allows Gucci to make sure the customers understand the changes happening within the company (Wingfield, 2016). For the CEO, “this younger generation will guarantee the survival of the brand in the future” (Wingfield, 2016). As we have previously seen, the #GucciCommunity is encouraged to experience and share what Gucci offers, such as workshops in the Gucci Garden. By doing so, the House is interacting and engaging with the consumers and, thereby, offering a significant experience (Schmitt et al., 2013) by responding to the Millennials’ desire to get experiences associated with the brands they purchase (Mundel et al., 2017). Furthermore, young consumers want to make a change in society, which is one of the reasons why they follow Gucci. Hence, when Gucci makes them participate in changes as has been the case during the COVID crisis, Gucci is allowing its consumers to have a sense of belonging by showing that they share values and care and act upon it.

III.4.2.4. Digital to communicate messages

The brand is currently the most popular luxury brand on TikTok among the younger generations (Hobbs, 2021). Digital allows a new type of experience. To Bizzarri, Gucci’s “culture and way of connecting people and being authentic and passionate and joyful is speaking to a crowd, [and] that cannot grow enough going forward.” (Philips, 2018). Any kind of platform can be used to spread the messages. Alessandro Michele understood that. Therefore, he is communicating new messages to the younger audience by using online films, making social media campaigns (Alfonsi, 2021), which allows a brand engagement from the consumers (Hudson et al., 2016). Gucci is also the most followed brand on Instagram during the Milan Fashion Week (O’Connor, 2018). The brand uses any digital platform to communicate about its creative work, but also about its values and sustainable actions. Gucci is highly followed on social media despite posting regularly about the change that could be implemented in society and not only about the brand itself. People care and keep following the brand on social media.
V. DISCUSSION

In this section, the data presented previously will be linked with the theories presented in the literature review section in order to give insights to answer the three sub-questions that are What are Gucci’s strategic differentiating points?, Are Gucci’s values aligned with the luxury consumers’ values?, and Why is Gucci the most popular luxury brand among Millennials? Those three questions have been previously asked to help answer the research question What new strategies have been used by Gucci since the nomination of Alessandro Michele to stay one of the most popular luxury brands while deviating from a traditional luxury brand image? In the discussion part, the limitations of this research will be presented.

- **What are Gucci’s strategic differentiating points?**

Gucci is unique in its vision of fashion that has been brought differently to life by each Creative Director. While the creations of Giannini could be compared to any luxury brand products, Michele is a free spirit that sees fashion as a way to express oneself (Philips, 2018). By using everyday life in his design, Michele makes it intellectually attainable and understandable to everyone, which allows him to be relevant and relatable to new and existing customers (Reiman et al., 2009). His inspirations come from his family and education and, hence, are genuine, but he also interiorized Gucci’s values after working for the brand for years. The value given to a product by the consumer is not only based on the price: emotional attachment is also a variant taken into consideration (Kumar et al., 2008). Michele has also used emotional attachment by being inspired by the Greek and Roman cultures to go towards gender neutrality and revive the idea of letting people be and express whom they think they are (Ebert et al., 2018.) and having a background within Gucci.

The House can be considered a socially active brand due to its engagement towards more sustainability (inside and outside of the company) and freedom of expression (by giving a platform to its consumers and its products). By allowing consumers to express their individuality through fashion, Gucci allows them to have a sense of belonging and be more creative (Tuskej et al., 2013). Consumers buy from brands they relate to. If corporate and personal values overlap, consumers will be more attracted and attached to the brand (Gill, 2011). When the brands’ values and the consumers match, they can build meaningful relationships (Fournier, 1998) and be self-critical (Rimanoczy, 2014). Gucci’s involvement in
terms of sustainability and societal issues overall is a point that makes the brand different from many other luxury Houses.

Gucci chooses its collaborations to fit its image and its free spirit. Gucci chooses wisely the people who are getting dressed sur-Mesure and the events they attend to. As there is a logical connection between the brand's identity and the celebrity, the communication of the products and image is more effective (Solomon, 2018). Doing so gives the brand's value more authenticity. The House differentiates itself by creating a memorable experience (both temporary as some exhibitions and permanent as the shops), being authentic (by sharing insight from the brand as is the case in the Gucci Garden), allowing two-way communication (with the use of social media) (Giannachi et al., 2015), and creating an emotional bond (by constantly sharing about the brand, listening to the consumers and acting upon societal issues that affect the community directly) (Thomson et al., 2015). Having a bond with its consumers is one of Gucci's strategies for retention and loyalty. Hence, Gucci uses diverse experiences, such as #GucciGram, to link the consumers together and immerse them in the brand's inspiration and heritage, which improves the brand image (Williams et al., 2011). While connecting in stores might be hard, social media gives a sense of presence and closure between the brand and the customers by offering a sensory, social activity (Petit et al., 2019). Gucci is the most popular luxury brand on TikTok and Instagram.

With its initiatives and involvement in multiple sustainable actions, Gucci encourages its consumers to donate on its platforms. The brand gives itself an excellent reputation by being a pioneer, acting toward a better society financially, and being a source of information and a link between the consumers and diverse causes. Brands that take action regarding social and environmental issues are more likely to be considered (Cone, 2017), especially by the younger generations, as they are more interested in the societal issues and the potential changes than the product itself (Gardiner et al., 2013). As consumers assume that companies do not act ethically (Hill et al., 2012), Gucci communicates its involvement on social media and gives further information on its website. Creating reports allows brands to signal their efforts regarding sustainability and obtain a more legitimate image (Perez, 2015). The House tries to make its progress and results available to the masses. Thanks to its high involvement, Gucci received multiple awards. Being recognized outside of the organization and communication makes Gucci's actions toward sustainability more reliable, plausible, and trustworthy (Scott-Philips, 2008).
Are Gucci’s values aligned with the luxury consumers’ values?

Luxury is a synonym of high prestige and exclusivity. While the availability has threatened the luxury brands' exclusivity to the masses, they still have to offer products and experiences that are of high standing and fit the consumers' expectations (Reiman et al., 2009) and even exceed it to be more memorable (Burns, 2020). In the case of Gucci, the main experiences involve the shops, the products, the online experience, and the connexion with the brand and within the community. Michele has been redesigning the shops to purchase there but also for being, breathing, and dreaming (Bruni, 2018) as luxury brands now have to deliver superior (Chandon et al., 2017) and sensory rich retail customer experience (Diorio, 2019) and the shops fit Gucci's image. On the other hand, it is a challenge for luxury companies to keep their high prestige and exclusivity while offering online experiences (Kim, 2015). Hence, internet experiences must be personalized and multisensorial (Kapferer et al., 2009). Therefore, Gucci is communicating and connecting with its consumers via social media and is offering a personalized experience with a salesperson on its website.

The symbolic of luxury is different for everyone and the purchase process varies from one person to another (Zan et al., 2019). Luxury has to fulfill the consumers' desires (Wegrzyn, 2013). Those desires can be the will to be different, making a limited production a thing that people are looking for in a luxury brand (Janssen et al., 2014). While Gucci has collaborated with brands that are more accessible to the masses, the collections from those collaborations are very limited in quantity, making it an object of desire. By creating ten Gucci NFTs, the brand reinforced the exclusivity of its products. The brand is accessible to the masses in terms of quantity for most products but restrains the quantity for certain products and gives exclusivity to some collections to the website of its voice (Vault or Net-à-Porter usually). Gucci is the victim of counterfeit. However, this phenomenon can make a brand more desirable and highlight the importance of the original product (Baghi, Gabrielli, Grappi, 2016) as it is representative of a person's decision to buy this specific Brand (Zan et al., 2019). Gucci uses counterfeit to promote the brand and create new products, as it has been the case with the "not" "fake" leather goods designed by Michele. A brand's potential consumers will protect the original products, reinforcing its relationship with the Brand (Baghi et al., 2016). Gucci is so well implemented in the luxury world that the brand can afford to play with its reputation and create products on a funny note.
While counterfeit can be a way to make the brand different in the eye of the consumers, the luxury brands have to stay authentic (Yu et al., 2018) and be worthy of the consumers' trust (Ding et al., 2013) by offering quality and reliability (Zan et al., 2019), which will justify its price (Kapferer, 2009). One of the main ways to do so in the luxury sector is to offer qualitative products that respect the brand's heritage (Hitzler et al., 2017). Gucci has units in Italy (TFL, 2018) and respects its brand heritage by respecting its Italianess and offering products based on the archives. While the current designs are different from Giannini's, the quality of the products did not lower, and Gucci is still using craftsmanship to fabricate the products. Gucci's brand image is solid and stable despite a change in vision every time a new Creative Director takes over. The brand's image makes the products appear as extraordinary (Picketon et al., 2005). Most of Gucci's products are considered timeless -such as the Jackie bag- and are very high quality, making them reliable to the consumers and in phase with Gucci's image of a sustainable brand. By fitting its actions with its words, the brand becomes more trusted by its consumers, who will be more likely to buy from it.

Luxury is a way to access and be part of a social cast or elevate oneself to a higher status (Kapferer et al., 2016). Luxury brands are recognizable since the products offered are memorable (Tynan et al., 2020). In the case of Michele's Gucci, the designer did not hesitate to create products that fit the brand's heritage but that is also easily recognizable as being Gucci products. By offering products with logos, specific colors, patterns, or designs, Gucci allows its consumers to be recognized (Zan et al., 2019) and recognize the brand, making it easier to plan a purchase behavior (Clement et al., 2013). Buying Gucci is a way to fulfill a status (Jung et al., 2011) and belong to a community (Jansson-Boyd, 2019). The brand builds meaningful connections through social media and creates a community. Gucci also allows consumers to discuss and share information by connecting them, which helps them in their purchase decision process (Thomas et al., 2007) and gives them a sense of belonging to a group (Nayem, 2012). Earned media is the best way to be credible (Cornelissen, 2017), and Gucci allow this kind of advertisement by connecting people with similar interest through its values, experiences, and designs.

Gucci's main selling point is its freedom of expression through its products. Luxury consumers use products to express themselves (Lynch et al., 2007) and their personalities (Mattingly et al., 2014). Fashion is known as a reflection of society (Militano, 2020). It is a
language to express change. The way people dress depends on social and societal factors. Usually, consumers buy from brands with the same beliefs and values (Gill, 2011). Gucci's way of acting for social justice and sustainability overall attract and retain a specific segment of luxury consumers. The Creative Director's ideal of uniqueness and individual identity also fits the consumer's desire to be unique while identifying with a brand (Tuskej et al., 2013), which is made easier through Michele's free spirit and his designs based on his inspirations and values. Gucci is educating its community and allowing consumers to identify with the brand through its actions by using its voice.

- **Why is Gucci the most popular brand among Millennials?**

Michele sees young people as people who "invent versions of themselves that they consider attractive and promising" (Ebert et al., 2018). While he is living in sync with his soul, the designer wants to talk to the new generation and answer their needs for individuality and expression. The shadow committee gives young people a voice to discuss topics the same topics as the one discussed during the executive meetings and give ideas and opinions on some processes. This initiative is making Gucci one of the most relevant brands for young people because the House listens to them, and it led to some of the most significant commercial successes (Bain, 2017). Michele uses Gucci to give a platform and a way to express themselves to the Millennials by offering designs from the everyday life, collaborations with their favorite brands, and social media with interactions between the brand and the Millennials and in-between the Millennials. They are Gucci's target segment as the brand is very active regarding societal questions and does not hesitate to share its actions and values.

By 2025, Millennials should be about 45% of the luxury brands' consumers (D'Arpizio et al., 2017). Hence, they are an important market for luxury brands. Millennials value the experiences more than the product. While Gucci's products are part of the purchase decision, the fact that the brand creates experiences different from other luxury brands and tries to include people in the world of Gucci makes the brand even more popular among the Millennials. The brand responds to one of Millennials’ desires by connecting with them, sharing experiences, and offering unique experiences such as the Metaverse, the Gucci
garden, or other immersive experiences online or in person. Making product-based and brand-based experiences available makes the Millennials feel like they belong to a specific socio-category. Hence, allowing Millennials to immerse themselves in the brand's heritage through the Gucci Bamboo House interactive exhibition or a visit to the Palazzo Settimanni allows the Millennials to connect with the House. This new exclusive inclusivity charms Millennials (Grassi et al., 2018). The brand creates a strong emotional and psychological attachment through its authenticity. It is done by communicating and interacting with its consumers and making them part of a community through their participation in events (like the workshop in the Gucci Garden or at "The Club") and Gucci initiatives (like asking the community to donate to the causes Gucci is supporting or making them create content from a creative idea of the brand).

Gucci has been trying to answer the Millennials' need: while they have a high purchase power, the people issued from this generation are often neglected by the brands. Their purchase behavior consists primarily in buying things that make them feel like themselves and buying things from a brand they relate to that has a purpose while telling a story (Muntigna et al., 2011) and interacting with other customers. Gucci sustains its image of a young free soul brand by using celebrities that fit the brand and are popular among young people. Millennials are using social media as a way of making themself heard and sculpting their image (Pentina et al., 2018), and so does Gucci (Bruni, 2018). Social media is a way to engage and connect with young customers, and the brand's investments in digital allowed it to grow and gain appeal to the Millennials (Diorio, 2019). On Instagram, Gucci interacts with its followers by regularly posting on its stories, communicating messages through its posts, and by going live.

Furthermore, Gucci is the most popular luxury brand on TikTok. While it is not its most successful social media, the brand shows that it understands what the young generations want by creating interaction there and by choosing one of the most free-spirit tiktoker -Francis Bourgeois- as the representative of the second collaboration with The North Face. By creating a two-way dialogue while staying exclusive, the brand creates a brand image based on intimacy, which Millennials appreciate (Rodrigues et al., 2019). As luxury is, for young people like the Millennials, a way of reflecting their public image, there need to be high similarities between the brand's image and their self-image (O'Cass & Frost, 2022).
This generation tends to buy from brands with similar values and principles. Gucci is always trying to understand the younger generations (Alfonsi, 2021), primarily due to the Creative Director's wish. Michele leads the millennials and gives them a voice and a "visual vocabulary" to express their thoughts, expectations, and intentions (Bruni, 2018). This identification with the brand's values makes the millennials more prompt to buy from Gucci. They see similarities to its values and principles (Williams et al., 2011) and, therefore, have a better relationship and more faithfulness to Gucci (Rohm, 2013). Michele's sensibility, vision of fashion, and revision of Gucci's image make the House more appreciated by Millennials: they care about the emotional value of the products they buy (Kumar & Lim, 2008) and want the brand to be genuine, authentic, and follow its heritage (Rimanoczy, 2014). Since Millennials use luxury to signal their social influence (Shin et al., 2017), the political and social stands taken through the design of some garments -like the t-shirts "My Body My Choice"-, the fashion shows -like the 2017 mixed-genders show- or the campaigns -like the "To Gather Together" one- make it particularly appreciated in this generation. Millennials are a generation that transcends gender, sexual identity, and race norms, and Alessandro Michele does it with them. In 2017, Gucci was among the most popular luxury brands for the Millennials thanks to its openness, open-mindedness, and talks about societal questions.

While social questions are essential for the Millennials, environmental stands are also crucial to them as they are reputed to be concerned about social and environmental issues (Amed et al., 2019). They want to make the world a better place, making Gucci's social, societal, and environmental initiatives crucial for the brand image and sales. Millennials are active and aware of societal issues and are conscious about their purchase, and they would rather buy from brands they share values with. They are willing to pay more for sustainable products, which Gucci is now offering via Vault or its upcycling line. Hence, Gucci's implications regarding people and the environment give the brand a competitive advantage compared to other brands, which are not a pioneer in sustainability (as Gucci became when creating the CEO Carbon Neutral Challenge) and do not communicate about it (compared to Gucci which communicates about its "ten-year sustainability plan" on Instagram), or do not do anything about it (Gucci has to fulfill the objectives given by the Fashion Pact G7 France Biarritz 2019). In 2015, in the process of completely changing the brand's identity and public image, Gucci lost some customers who did not identify with the brand anymore. However, the change in aesthetic and position brought the millennials into the fashion luxury world, and many of them became Gucci's customers.
Limitations

This research has been made to understand the importance of brand identity and brand individuality. In this thesis, Michele has been considered the main reason for the shift in Gucci’s identity. However, every time a new Creative Director was nominated, a new CEO was hired. The CEO may have a deeper impact on the brand image than what is presented in this paper. However, as every article and paper about Gucci presented Michele as the one who changed Gucci’s strategy to shape it to his mindset and vision, I followed this idea. If I had found my results earlier, I would have liked to interview some CEOs and Creative directors of design, retail or luxury brands to understand what the role is both separately and as a team. This kind of relationship could be a topic for another research as academic literature is lacking.

Gucci is Kering's leading brand. However, the brand is not more discussed than any other in Gucci's Annual reports or anywhere. The strategies adopted by Kering are very much different from one brand to the other, even though they are part of the same company. There is little literature about the implications of being part of a conglomerate. Gucci does feel like a very independent brand even though it relies upon Kering's decision in the long term. Hence, it could be fascinating to analyze the relationship between Kering and its different brands to understand the strategic decisions. However, as said previously, Kering is privately owned and is reluctant to give away information to outsiders.

Another limitation of this paper is the lack of primary data. As the luxury sector is not available to everyone, even though it is becoming more available to the masses, I did not create a questionnaire, and I did not conduct interviews. The questionnaire has not been a chosen method as I already tried to work on a less high-end luxury brand, and the results were unsatisfying as most people were not consumers of that brand. Gucci is more pricy than the brand I studied earlier this year, which made me believe that the questionnaires would not have been answered by consumers of a luxury brand -specifically Gucci, which interested me here. Conducting interviews could have been an option but the Gucci workers I asked on LinkedIn refused or never answered. On the other hand, I could have asked Gucci consumers to answer some questions, but I did not know where to find them as they are not part of my
social groups or everyday life. If I had more time, I would have been to a Gucci store to ask the actual Gucci consumers questions.

VI. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to analyze the strategies implemented by Gucci since 2015 and understand how the brand is now perceived and what it implies for its reputation and its business overall. Gucci's new strategy includes making its products more available to the masses, getting involved in sustainable matters, targeting a new customer segment, the Millennials, and creating a relationship with the consumer through new channels.

The most significant change since the departure of Giannini is the change in aesthetics. It has been relatively immediate and extreme and led to a change in identity. Hence, the brand had to develop a way to make its consumers understand what caused this and what it meant for the brand. By interacting with its consumers and being extremely active on social media, Gucci allows itself to communicate about the changes in a controlled way. The brand is communicating extensively about its image by sharing digital experiences with the broader world and allowing communication on its social media. Hence, Gucci gets to be known by everyone for its societal stands, its genuine designs and creations, and its experiences out-of-the-ordinary while keeping a sense of exclusivity and creating a sense of belonging, even to people who do not purchase the brand. Gucci has authority over its brand image.

The brand does not want to reflect an exclusive jet-set image anymore. Instead, the House is mastering the inclusive, exclusive strategy by choosing the celebrities it dresses, the resell platforms it uses, the brands it is collaborating with, and the experiences offered -and to whom-. By controlling its image, Gucci is making sure that it keeps a certain exclusivity required in luxury brands. While the brand is taking a stand and changing its designs to take action, Gucci is no denying its core values and heritage. The core values are shared between the brand and the management team. While Michele is a free spirit and wants to get high creative freedom, the Creative Director has had time to interiorize them, and its discussions with the CEOs of Kering and Gucci led to the conclusion that they were all on the same page. Hence, Gucci's new identity is a choice, and it is linked with its origins.
The change of identity is caused by a change of value due to the change of Creative Director. While Michele has intense creativity, Gucci has an extensive heritage, and it is crucial to respect it. However, the 2015 change of direction led to a switch in the creative process and how to think about the products' utility. Until the arrival of Michele as creative director, the brand was rather exclusive, and the products were a way to express belonging to a high social cast. Now, Gucci wants its products to be used to express identity and values. The brand is not just representative of luxury anymore; it is also a way of communicating and creating a sense of belonging to a social category that cares about people, the environment, and freedom. The company is taking a stand by expressing its values clearly and supporting human rights in its globality, which led to the loss of many consumers but a gain of others, more aligned with the brand. The current Gucci consumers are the ones that have matching values with the brand and, for most of them, are not afraid to let the world know about their stands, the same way Gucci does.

The world is changing, and Gucci wanted to change in adequation. Gucci is seen as a pioneer in terms of sustainability. The brand acts towards social justice and tries to keep its carbon footprint low by offering and creating new alternatives. While many brands also say to do so, Gucci is committing and taking initiatives and communicating about the issues the brand support. Since 2015, the brand has raised its voice and encouraged its community toward action. Through its social media, Gucci allows two-way communication with its consumers and making makes them feel included in the decision process by encouraging them to participate in the same actions as the House. Making consumers feel like they are part of a community makes them more faithful to Gucci, to which they relate more than a traditional luxury brand.

Overall, Gucci's change in strategy is due to a will from the management to switch the brand's identity. Michele has been the first strategic choice taken by the brand because he represents something completely different than what was being done by Giannini. According to their expectations, visions, and values, Michele and Biazziri led Gucci towards the direction expected by Kering. The identity change was a bet, and it could have gone wrong. However, the constant control over the messages communicated and the relationships with the consumers allow Gucci to create its image in adequation with its values while being recognized as one of the leading luxury brands.
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