Inclusiveness in the fashion industry
The case of Gucci

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ABSTRACT

Just until a few years ago, luxury fashion brands were considered to be exclusively for the upper class and mostly unattainable and elusive for the everyday people. However, nowadays, it is not uncommon to see people on the streets wearing an outfit by fast fashion companies topped with a luxury accessory, such as Louis Vuitton shoes or a Balenciaga bag. This situation has been evolving during the last years and one crucial reason for it is the rise of social media. Therefore, and due to the rapid digital transition, the question that arises is how luxury fashion brands can stand out and establish themselves in such a competitive marketplace? One answer could be by utilizing pioneering and differentiated strategies, by interacting with the audience and building a strong corporate brand positioning. Many state that "inclusive is the new exclusive" and this is how they can differentiate from others, but few luxury brands promote it. One of them is Gucci and this is the house where the present research focuses on.

Despite the increasing interest from luxury fashion brands to include more diverse audience, there has been little research on online marketing communication strategies through which they are trying to promote inclusiveness. This research therefore addresses this gap and explores the strategies through which luxury fashion brands and specifically Gucci communicates its position and convinces the audience of its inclusivity; that everybody needs to become part of Gucci's world.

400 posts (taking both visual and text of each post) from Gucci's Instagram official profile was the extracted data that was examined in-depth. The posts were analyzed using the qualitative research method of thematic analysis. The analysis resulted in two core codes: firstly, it showed that the luxury fashion brand uses often *direct strategies*, such as storytelling, sustainability, community and art. Secondly, it was found that there are also *indirect strategies* that can be identified by investigating Gucci's profile. Some examples are the categories of social diversity, familiarity, brand values and emotions. Both strategies have one and main goal: to promote inclusiveness within the fashion industry.

KEYWORDS: inclusivity, online marketing communication, luxury fashion brands, brand positioning, qualitative content analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the rise of social media in the last few years, almost all kinds of industries have faced several new challenges (Hofacker & Belanche, 2016). As people spend increasingly more time using social networking sites, with the average time spent in 2018 of 144 minutes per day, which represents a 62,5% increase over 2012 ("Average time spent daily on social media," n.d.), brands' content is also a big part of the media content that people watch every day. Therefore, they have to adapt to new circumstances and rethink their strategies in order to differentiate themselves from other brands and gain more customers. Online marketing is one of the areas that was affected the most from the changes, due to the fact that over this area the possibility of (online) communication with the customers is being offered (Krishnamurthy, 2006; Krishnamurthy & Singh, 2005; Sheth & Arma, 2005).

According to Enu and Taranpreet (2017), marketing communication, in general, is "a management process through which an organization engages with its various audiences". Successful marketing communication includes a range of tools such as direct marketing, advertising, public relations and personal selling (ibid). These tools are known as promotional mix and they are being used by businesses to effectively communicate with their customers regarding a product or a service they offer. With online marketing communication (OMC), firms utilize social media platforms by using digital channels and information technology (ibid) in order to promote themselves in the high competitiveness of the online world. Due to the information overload in the online ecosystem, such a change is challenging: the brands need to stand out, thus, they have to be innovative, create interesting and unique campaigns that can become spreadable on social media, and find ways to engage with a broader audience (Jenkins, 2018).

One of the industries that has been influenced by all the changes mentioned above and still faces challenges is the luxury fashion industry (Kapferer, 2014). Previous studies sought to define the "luxury brand" concept and offered the characterization of luxury products in terms of quality, authenticity, creativity, uniqueness, high price, innovation and inspiration (González, Garcia-Medina & Romero, 2017; Ko, Kostello & Taylor 2017; Fionda & Moore, 2009). The definition will be further explored in the theoretical chapter. It has been observed that in the past two decades, luxury marketing had a noticeable growth. Moreover, luxury is not anymore as exclusive as it was; it has become more available to people than before (Al-Najjar, 2014). It

should be considered that there are thousands of people on Instagram "liking" photos of Kim Kardashian or Irina Shayk advertising luxury bags. These people would not spend $3.000 on such products but they help build the hype, desire and fantasy around a luxury fashion brand. By building this desire, they can be included in a certain group of audience which also has a crucial impact on brand awareness. Therefore, inclusivity does not necessarily mean good financial background but also it requires appealing to all ages, sizes and races (Grassi, 2018). The evolution of mass media toward digital channels has made customers more aware of luxury fashion brands than ever before (Willersdorf, Hazan, Ricci, Prenaud, Bianchi, Seara & Yang, 2020) and that is why brands also want to promote inclusivity and expand their clientele.

The luxury fashion brand that has been selected for analysis is Gucci. Gucci is an Italian brand founded by Guccio Gucci in 1921 ("Gucci," n.d.). Despite its history and tradition, Gucci tries not only to keep up with current trends in the fashion industry, but also to create new ones as a part of its innovation strategy (Triefus, n.d.). The reason why this research will focus on Gucci is because it has the most followers on Instagram compared to the rest of luxury fashion brands (39.3 million) (Gucci, n.d.) followed by Chanel (38.8 million) (Chanel, n.d.). These numbers were recorded on February 2020. Furthermore, it has an active profile on Instagram with 6.5 thousand posts and, finally, according to the global fashion search platform, Lyst, Gucci was the most popular luxury fashion brand of 2019 ("Lyst," n.d.). This measurement was based on revenues from innovative collections, and on the brand's general presence in social events like the Met Gala, the Oscars, etc. The present research aims to examine communication strategies utilized by luxury fashion brands, and specifically by Gucci, through social media platforms, because it is crucial nowadays to build a stronger brand identity and be different from other brands.

Therefore, the research question can be formulated as follows:

RQ*:*   *How does the luxury fashion brand Gucci use online marketing communication on Instagram for promoting inclusiveness?*

The media platform chosen for the analysis is Instagram because it is one of the most famous online platforms with over one billion monthly active users (Clement, 2019). For the purpose of this inquiry, the method used is the qualitative thematic analysis, which will be described in detail in the "Methodology" chapter. The gap that the current inquiry tries to cover is the ways that Gucci uses Instagram in order to make luxury less exclusive and considered by a wider audience. Specifically, the *social relevance* is that at the forefront of mass communications and technologies, brands have to build an adequate mix of marketing communications with the goal of standing up against a large number of competitors. Thus, this research aims to find out the strategies followed by Gucci and how it communicates its position through Instagram as an inclusive brand. Regarding *scientific relevance* now, there are a lot of researches for online marketing communication strategies (Kingsnorth, 2019; Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015). Limited literature is being offered on the combination of OMC and luxury fashion brands' presence on Instagram and even less about the concept of inclusivity that, over the past few years, luxury fashion brands want to promote.

The research paper consists of five chapters. The "Theretical Framework" section contains a review and critical analysis of relevant theories and previous researches related to the present topic and it has four sub-chapters. Firstly, it introduces the definition of luxury brand presenting various important theories on what makes a product "luxury". Secondly, there is an explanation of marketing communication which is subsequently, lays-out in three sub-themes: definition, content marketing, and Instagram, since it is the online social media platform through which the research took the sample from. Thirdly, it is important also to present about the communication of luxury exclusivity online as well as which is the best target audience. Lastly, the sub-chapter about brand positioning addresses factors contributing to the development of brand's reputation and brand identity but also the overlap amongst other similar terms.

In the "Research Design" chapter, the details regarding the process of the analysis, data collection and the actual analysis are presented, always by justifying them with literature. The chapter starts with the description of qualitative method as well as the reason of choosing it for the current paper. It continues with the approaches and the operationalization of the research question. The steps of coding are also decribed analytically and further, details regarding sample collection, such as the type of data, time frame, and selection criteria are provided within the section. Finally, the aspects of reliability and validity of the inquiry is also addressed.

"Results" chapter interpret and discuss the outcome of the data analysis and highlights important aspects with a critical point of view, by connecting them sometimes with the previous research from the "Theoretical Framework". It is structured from the researcher in a logical order, covering the outcomes of selective and axial coding. Lastly, the "Conclusion" presents in brief the results of the study, highlighting the most crucial findings and the most unique ones. It also includes limitations and possibilities for future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. DEFINITION OF LUXURY BRAND

Previous literature around the concept of luxury brands seeks to define precisely what a luxury brand is. Researchers have made many attempts without a widely accepted agreement until now (Ko, Kostello & Taylor, 2017). Miller and Mills (2012) have successfully pointed out that there is "(…) a lack of clarity regarding a definition, operationalization, and measurement of brand luxury." Kapferer (2014), in his attempt, argues the difference between the categories of premium and luxury. Specifically, he mentions that even though luxury is the ultimate value achievement for a brand, not all brands can achieve luxury, but they show their premium products, highest standards within a category. Thus, both concepts involve the top-end of a product.

Fionda and Moore (2009), in their attempt to examine luxury fashion brands, have stated that "luxury" is a concept that can be defined in psychological terms, while the perceptions of it differ. Additionally, "luxury" is considered to be highly subjective, as what is luxurious for one person may vary for another. As a result, it is hard to measure the level of luxuriousness that a brand includes in its products. Semiotics might be a way to transcribe some of the codes of what defines luxuriousness, but they raise some difficulties during the process (Fionda & Moore, 2009). Lack of validity of collecting the appropriate sample is one of them, since the criterion might differ from person to person because everybody has other personal experiences and mindsets (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015).

Besides these difficulties, there are three approaches to define "luxury brands." The first group of definitions refers to some identifiable characteristics: high quality and price, exclusivity, uniqueness, innovativeness, creativeness, rarity and objective beauty are some of them (González, Garcia-Medina, & Romero, 2017; Fionda, & Moore, 2009). Furthermore, a luxury product is identified by its popular image to the public, authenticity, inspiration but also by the excellent service quality, which is offered in the sales process, either directly (e.g. in flagship stores) or indirectly (e.g. online) (Ko, Kostello, & Taylor, 2017). Jin and Cedrola (2017) sum these characteristics up by referring to the following: a luxury product has "excellent quality, high price, scarcity and uniqueness, aesthetics and poly-sensuality, ancestral heritage and personal history, and superfluousness" (Jin & Cedrola, 2017, p.4). Some of them have already been mentioned before, but some explanation is needed in order to add clarity to the list. To

begin with, superfluousness relates to the fact that nobody needs to pay such high amounts of money for luxury items, but everyone desires them. Historically, luxury products were made mainly for the upper classes and aristocracy, and this is likely how people feel now when they buy such items (Page, 2020). Another critical characteristic of a luxury brand is authenticity, which, according to González, Garcia- Medina, and Romero (2017), can be added through brand heritage and history of a product, and then customers feel like they buy something sui generis. Moreover, the high price of these products might come from excellent quality, aesthetics, poly-sensuality, scarcity, and uniqueness (Dubois, Laurent & Czellar, 2001). There is a strong aesthetic appeal which according to many customers should always be in such luxury products. This dimension needs to be not only in the products themselves but only in the context that are presented. Lastly, the high price of luxury products is associated with the concept of scarcity which according to Dubois, Laurent & Czellar (2001, p. 11) is because of "the very special characteristics of the components used, the uncommon nature of the skills so essential to the manufacturing and delivery process, and the exclusive corresponding price levels, (…) make luxury products and services not to be mass-produced and vice versa."

The flagship store of a luxury brand is another way of identifying luxuriousness. It is usually located in an impressive architectural building with much history behind and is there to welcome customers for an unforgettable experience (Fionda & Moore, 2009). These stores are established in the brand's country of origin with great financial investments and "brand's marketing communication process and reputation, as a support for the wholesale business" (Fionda & Moore, 2009). Multiple luxury brands have a long history, and their "present artisanal heritage is closely linked to its cultural patrimony" (Jin & Cedrola, 2017, p. 5). Examples can be Italian romanticism, like Ferragamo and Gucci, or French couture, such as Dior and Balmain.

The second approach does not examine luxury items by identifying their characteristics (as happens in the first one). Alternatively, in this view, luxury should be considered as "concerning three spheres, i.e., material, individual, and social, which lead to three dimensions of luxury: functional, experiential, and symbolic" (Sjostrom, Corsi & Lockshin, 2015, p. 77). Utilitarian and luxury cannot be considered separately here, but they co-exist "depending on the occasion, the market segment, and the individual consumer's preferences" (ibid, p.77) for a specific product or service.

Lastly, the third approach is closer to the first one with one difference: it does not try to find

what makes luxury products differ from ordinary ones, but it investigates if the way that people buy luxury and ordinary items is the same (Sjostrom, Corsi & Lockshin, 2015). If the answer is affirmative, then luxury brands can use the same strategies with the regular ones that are famous nowadays. There are more approaches that researchers use to explain the definition of luxuriousness but the aforementioned ones explain the concept in a very concrete way.

2.2. MARKETING COMMUNICATION (THROUGH INSTAGRAM)

2.2.1 Definition

In order to analyze online marketing communication strategies, specifically through Instagram, it is necessary to make a literature review on the concept. To begin with, marketing and marketing communication are both related to business, but they are not the same. Marketing is a broader concept for describing business strategies, while marketing communication has to do with specific tactics that businesses use in order to create these strategies (Ahmed, 2019). The means are selected from the companies for passing messages about their brand, services and products through a direct or indirect way of communication. Marketing communication is one of the most effective methods to build close relationships with customers and bring people together around the brands (Duncan, & Moriarty, 1998). According to Kotler, Wong, Armstrong and Saunders (2008), it consists of the following factors: the sender (a party sends a message to another party), the receiver (the party who receives the message from the sender), the encoding process (the process of putting a sequence of characters into a symbolic form), the message (the set of symbols that the sender communicates), the media (the communication channels that are used in order for the message to be delivered), the decoding process (the process of placing all thoughts into a symbolic form), the response (the reactions of the receiver when the message is delivered), the feedback (the part when the receiver sends the response back to the sender) and the noise (the unplanned deterioration during the communication process which ends up with a different received message and not the initial one). These are elements of a model regarding the communication process that marketers use often.

Nowadays, in the digital era, social media and multiple online platforms serve as vehicles for new ways of communication. They are preferred by some over, so-called, traditional media

for a number of reasons, such as the fact that they are quicker, more direct and easily accessible from a great number of people (Wilson, 2020). The nature of social media clearly reveals that "traditional forms of brand communication are not always applicable and brands need to adapt accordingly" (Hellberg, 2015). Therefore, the social media that a brand selects to handle and operate in, declare multiple things such as the content that the firm wants to create, the manner to communicate this content, the range of the audience and the amount of interaction with it (Castronovo & Huang, 2012). Via any format of social media, a brand can transform "consumers into loyal customers (…) and cultivate meaningful relationships with them" (ibid, p. 126).

Previous studies have shown that the emergence of social media has changed customers from passive to active receivers, who can create a great meaning for a brand together with other users (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner, 2010; Geurin & Burch, 2017). This happened because nowadays there are at least 3.5 billion people online from the total population of 7.7 billion people worldwide (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019); meaning that one to three people are users on social media platforms and more than two thirds are active on the internet in general. More specifically, active users can support building the image of a brand, influence perceptions, raise awareness and share their comments in order to help other users in decision making (Teo, Leng & Phua, 2019). In this new digital environment, more people can be the communicators without the presence of the institution (Gurau, 2008). In addition, more than 70% of users observe a brand through social media and have access to a vast amount of information which previously, with limited access to the internet, was not possible (Sharma, 2019). Hence, brands put a lot of effort in developing a customer-welcoming environment by creating an interesting and attractive profile/interface in online networking platforms, having gentle online customer service and making customers more satisfied. Therefore, users do not only receive information but also they can actively engage with the brand and brand activities (Appel, Grewal, Hadi & Stephen, 2020).

According to Gurau (2008), interactivity, transparency and memory are the main key features that differentiate online marketing communication from other types of communication. Interactivity refers to the utilization of platforms, meaning that certainly social media is not one way of communication, but consumers can also interact with the brands (ibid). Moreover, companies have a lot of platforms to contact people and stakeholders, quicker way to deliver a message and many techniques to build a strong, long- term relationship not only with existing

customers but also with a wider, potential audience (ibid). Transparency refers to the availability and accessibility of information about the company. Lastly, memory refers to the fact that networks save almost everything; all the current or past information regarding a brand, users can always keep track of.

2.2.2. Content Marketing

Content marketing is an important field of marketing communication which is necessary to be mentioned because it is also used by companies as a means to attract potential customers and build their brand loyalty (Scott, 2013). Content marketing is not new in the marketing field since it refers to "content". The thing is that nowadays, with more than four billion users worldwide having access on the internet (Clement, 2019), businesses deem that it is needed to focus also there –as part of marketing communication- and their revenues seem to benefit from it. Specifically, the content of posts on social media should be consistent, authentic and interesting and it is necessary for the company to know the target audience that it refers to (Scott, 2013). Specialists in the field can create content in the shape of images, videos, texts and audios (ibid). This digitally new era is challenging but at the same time, very innovative and promising. Hence, companies have to face a diverse spectrum of audiences which results in a difficulty to reach everybody's preferences. Besides that, content marketing can be considered a creative field which gives a lot of space to a brand to express its image (Harker, 2020).

2.2.3. Instagram

Instagram is an online social media platform with over one billion active users (Clement, 2019). It is an American photo and video sharing application that was founded by Mike Krieger and Kevin Systrom in October 2010 ("Instagram," n.d.). Nowadays it is one of the most widely used applications amongst Facebook, Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp (all owned by Facebook) (Clement, 2020). The application has multiple features: users can upload videos and photos, edit them with filters, add a description in the caption, use hashtags and geotags, just to name a few. In the last years, the Instagram team seems to get inspired by competitors such as Snapchat and Youtube, and they try to include a diverse spectrum of functions in one application. Specifically, they have added Instagram stories – after Snapchat stories - and IGTV, which allows users to upload videos (the Youtube counterpart offering video content) up to 10

minutes and for verified profiles, up to 60 minutes.

Along with the rise of users, brands tend to focus more on this platform in the last few years and it is also the focal point of this research. Instagram is used as a means of communication and interaction for specific goals (promotions, advertisements etc.), not only with the existing audience but with a wider one. All the aforementioned Instagram features can be used differently like marketing communication tools because they add more value to a brand's identity and brands can daily engage with a wide audience through these tools and create innovative and original content (Harker, 2020). The goal of this research is to investigate the strategies that luxury fashion brands use, in order to promote inclusivity and attract new target groups.

2.3. COMMUNICATING LUXURY EXCLUSIVITY ONLINE

Kapferer (2000) has claimed that with the easy and quick accessibility to the Internet that people have nowadays, luxury brands more than any other brand category have a great probability to win or to lose certain values. On the one hand, the Internet, and specifically social media, offers an opportunity to gain potential customers, create relationships and communicate the brand's identity. On the other hand, luxury brands have started to lose the allure of exclusivity which differentiates them from other ones (Grassi & Wigley, 2018). According to Dubois and Paternault (1995), it is considered that the reputation of a luxury brand is eroded if there are a lot of people that own its products. Therefore, the luxury businesses have to decide either to keep a "fragile equilibrium" (Radon, 2012) and maintain their perceived exclusivity or to let the masses buy their products in order to maximize their selling profits.

Luxury fashion brands can take advantage of the accessibility of social media and use them as a tool for communications. As Rubinstein and Griffiths (2001) have pointed out "(…) on the Net you have to orchestrate everything you do to deliver a highly differentiated and consistent positive experience" (p.401). Thus, in this digital era, it may be more beneficial and profitable to remain inclusively exclusive, meaning that more customers can enjoy the luxury fashion brands, than remaining highly exclusive as they were some years ago. Brands will surely keep up cultivating the concept of luxury, brand heritage and brand identity but also it is crucial today to

offer accessibility, open communication and engagement with a wider audience (Halwani, 2020).

2.3.1. Target

Millennials are the most common and ideal target group that luxury fashion brands focus on nowadays, because they are constantly bombarded with advertisements and content (Jain, 2019). More specifically, they are the first generation that has seen the whole transition from analog to digital, and has grown up in a world full of choices; that is why they are also often called "digital natives" (Dimock, 2019). Therefore, they are active users, since they know online social media platforms from scratch.

A fashion designer, Grava Gupta (2019, as cited in Sharma, 2019) has mentioned that "luxury, to Millennials, is unique. It does not have anything to do with the acquisition; it is an experience. They like to invest in a meaningful narrative rather than a superficial image". They prefer to gain experiences and if these experiences are more exclusive for the audience but at the same time personalized, they can become the ultimate definition of luxury, as well as a great emotional attachment. Furthermore, pre-Millennials have also changed their thinking towards the luxuriousness of an item and authenticity is what they are searching for (Sharma, 2019). Real people and storytelling are the most needed features for making a product luxury; and they are the spoken values and real actions of a brand (ibid). Therefore, luxury fashion brands try to communicate their inclusivity online, by taking advantage of the current influence and impact of social media. The specific strategies used will be discussed in the following pages.

2.4 BRAND POSITIONING

Positioning is what a brand wants to be known for in a definite or indefinite period of time (Blankson, 2016); definite meaning according to current trends and global awareness, such as sustainability and diversity, and indefinite for general brand values, lifestyle, aesthetics, quality, etc. Brand positioning is undoubtedly one of the most important parts of building a strategy (ibid). If the brand position is clearly defined and communicated internally and externally, the firm will gain more efficiency, notice from and influence on the audience (Semans, 2010). The concept of positioning firstly became popular from Ries and Trout (1981, as cited in Thompson,

2003) with their book "Positioning: a Battle for Your Mind" and this definition was given: "Positioning starts with a product; a piece of merchandise, a service, an institution, or even a person. But positioning is not what you do to a product. Positioning is what you do to the mind of the prospect." Nowadays, there are many definitions that include the same basic themes. However, it is interesting to present some of them: a more general definition is given from Semans (2010) saying that positioning is for "creating a distinct place for your brand in the mind of the consumer and that key messages are derived from that position." Focusing more on the "message" Copernicus Marketing (2018, as cited in Magwagwa, 2018) defines it as "The message a company wants to imprint in the minds of customers and prospects about its product or service and how it differs from and offers something better than competitors." The last and more concrete one explains that positioning is "…the part of the brand identity and value proposition that is to be actively communicated to the target audience. Thus, the brand position, which should demonstrate an advantage over competitor brands, represents current communication objectives." David Aaker (1996).

Since there are a lot of times that the concept of brand positioning overlaps with some other concepts, such as brand identity, brand equity and brand loyalty, it is necessary to focus on four elements in order to be able to identify it: relevance, differentiation, credibility and stretch (Thompson, 2003). Firstly, *relevance* refers to the strong connection between brands and their customers. The connection refers mostly to the emotional part when customers feel satisfied and completed for selecting a brand; more connected to it. Secondly, *differentiation* is a key characteristic that makes the brand unique compared to other competitors. The firm can differentiate themselves in many areas "in view of customers' perceptions, customers' needs, and real organizational competencies" (ibid, p.86). Thirdly, the feature of *credibility* indicates to keep the promises to customers and creating trust with them for sustaining brand loyalty. Finally, *stretch* is a concept that has to do with the fact that a brand not only has to be up-to-date in such a fast-changing world/market, but embracement and creation of innovation should become a part of its whole philosophy. Presenting new innovative products is also a way to extend the value of a brand. In order to be able to understand how the brand can be stretched, it is fundamental to understand the target group, to conduct research about future marketing trends, to have a good brand bible, and above all, inspiration.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, the method that is most appropriate to answer the research question will be introduced. As it has already been mentioned in the Introduction, the purpose of the current study is to gain knowledge about strategies that luxury fashion brands use through social media, particularly Instagram, to promote inclusiveness and the research question has been formulated as follows:

RQ: How does the luxury fashion brand Gucci use online marketing communication on Instagram for promoting inclusiveness?

3.1 QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Qualitative approach is defined by Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa and Varpio (2015, p.669) as "a systematic exploration of social phenomena in their natural context". More specifically, the implementation of qualitative ways of research is relevant when there is a need of clarifying people's experiences, behaviors, feelings and perceptions or to identify new strategies mostly in the fields of marketing, branding, advertising and communication (ibid). What is more, this research approach is appropriate to answer research questions that focus on "how" and "why" (Snape & Spencer, 2003). By looking at the research question of *how does the luxury fashion brand Gucci use online marketing communication on Instagram for promoting inclusiveness,* a qualitative approach is used in order to investigate new strategies that luxury fashion brands apply on social media to attract a wider audience and bring luxuriousness closer to it. These strategies will arise from the analysis of Gucci's official posts, which have been collected from their natural setting, Instagram, the online networking platform.

3.1.1 Qualitative Content Analysis

As one of the most extensively used analytical tools, qualitative content analysis is the method that also the present research is constructed on. Researchers agree that it is a flexible method of analyzing both verbal and visual communication messages (Cole, 1988).

Zhang and Wildemuth (2017) in their paper quote some definitions and it is interesting to mention a couple of them in order to better understand why the researcher selected this method for the current inquiry. The first says that it is "a research method of the subjective interpretation

of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The second one describes qualitative content analysis as "any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (Patton, 2002, p. 453). These definitions show clearly that research using qualitative content analysis as a method focuses on the awareness of the content or the contextual meaning of the text (Hsieh & Shanon, 2005). Hence, the main purpose is to investigate meanings, themes and patterns within a specific context. It is necessary to mention that for this inquiry, the researcher will not be limited only in the text but both text and visual will be analyzed for each sampling post. More specifically, through the analysis will emerge concepts or categories that describe a broader phenomenon and taking both visual and text from every post make the concepts more accurate. According to Kyngas and Vanhanen (1999), it is necessary to refer one of these terms and for the present paper "category" is going to be used because firstly, it is found more often in literature and secondly, the term of "concept" is used mainly when the goal is to develop a theory (Elo & Kyngas, 2007).

3.1.2 Thematic analysis

Content analysis that was presented above is the umbrella term of more specific research methods for analyzing the data. Therefore, the most accurate methodology that has been implemented in order to conduct the current research is the thematic analysis. Due to its flexibility, there are two concepts characterizing this method, lack of clearness and precision. (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, in the last few years more explicit guidelines have been written which are certainly helpful for this research, in order to make it transparent and concise in each step taken throughout the process. Hence, there is no specific agreement on what exactly thematic analysis is, but according to the attempt of framing the definition from Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 6) it can be described as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data". Furthermore, Boyatzis (1998) portrays clearly the five purposes of the analysis by saying that it is a means (1) of seeing, (2) of finding relationships, (3) of analyzing, (4) of systematically observing a case and (5) of quantifying qualitative data. The thematic analysis allows collecting and interpreting large available data in a more descriptive way. Thus, it leaves a great space for combing inductive and deductive coding (Alhojailan, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The *themes* – meaning topics, ideas and patterns that appear repeatedly-

play a principal role in this particular research method as they "capture something important about the data in relation to the research question and represent some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Within these themes, useful insights can be identified, and it is essential to interpret them in an understandable way, make clear how they are connected with the research question and how they can help to answer it. In some cases, the interpretation of the content requires both visual and written text, such as social media, magazines and newspapers (Walters, 2016; Stevens & Teo, 2014). This is the situation with the current paper. More specifically, social media posts are the units of analysis of this research which is based on both visual and textual analysis of the whole sample; meaning that both pictures and captions from each post are analyzed and the researcher built the coding tree according to them.

3.2 INDUCTIVE & DEDUCTIVE APPROACHES

Depending on the purpose of the study, qualitative content analysis can use an inductive or deductive way of analysis or a combination of the two. For the inductive approach, the main process requires "transforming" raw data into themes and patterns through a valid and concrete interpretation (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). The researcher needs to be careful and critical when examining the available data, making constant comparisons, and classifying the data into categories. These categories "are derived from the data in inductive content analysis" (Elo & Kyngas, 2007, p.109). Nevertheless, Patton (2002) mentions that by using this type of methodology it is not obligatory to exclude the deductive way of reasoning. On the contrary, it is relevant, helpful -(and more valid sometimes)- to create concepts that are explained based on previous literature and theories (Snyder, 2019).

The analysis for the current research includes both inductive and deductive approaches. That is the case because on the one hand there are several concepts that have been previously researched thus, they can work as core strategies of the luxury fashion house. On the other hand, inductive reasoning is also necessary for this inquiry, since the topic is understudied and there are also observations from the researcher which are important too because they provide perceptions and behaviors of current and potential audiences. In addition, there are new trends that are constantly coming into the forefront of the fashion industry. A framework of analysis –

developed basing on Boejie's work (2010) –is analytically presented in the following sections.

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), there are three techniques based on inductive approach for conducting the qualitative content analysis. First, in *the conventional qualitative analysis of content*, the coding categories have emerged directly from the raw data (ibid). Second, in the *directed analysis of content*, the researcher bases the initial data on previous theories and relevant researches but during the process, allows the themes and patterns to come out from the data (ibid) which is actually the approach that also has been applied to the current research. The aim of it is either to validate or to expand an existing theoretical framework or theory. The present research will use both of these techniques. However, there is a third and last one, *the summative analysis of content* which refers more to the quantitative approach (ibid) so it is deemed not appropriate for this qualitative inquiry.

In both inductive and deductive approaches, there are three main phases that should be followed by the researcher (see Figure 1): preparation, organizing and reporting (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). However, there is no specific agreement on the process of analyzing the data. To begin with, it is necessary to first define the units of analysis which could be a word, a sentence or lengthier (depending on the research question) and the sample has to be in a representative size. Then, the researcher has to code the data carefully in order to better understand the sample and get familiar with its content. Thereafter the data becomes more comprehensible and analysis is conducted by using the inductive or/and deductive way of approach. The inductive analysis moves from the specific to the general and it is recommended if there is not enough knowledge about a phenomenon. According to Elo and Kyngas, (2007), the process of this approach includes open coding, creating categories and abstraction. Abstraction means "formulating a general description of the research topic through generating categories" (ibid, p. 111) and the previous stages have analytically been described in the 'Coding' section of this chapter.

Regarding the deductive approach the researcher intends to re-examine existing data within a new context. As it has already been mentioned, it is based on earlier studies, theories, theoretical models and hypotheses which are going to be tested subsequently. The deductive process, in some points, is slightly different from the inductive way of research but the steps of open, axial and selective coding remain the same. However, the main difference is the fact that it moves from the general to the specific and the whole analysis of the data should be going the

other way around (Burns & Grove, 2005). A scheme illustrates the processes and the differences between them (Figure 1).

Preparation phase
↓
Units of analysis
↓
Organizing and making sense of the data

Open coding

Axial coding

Abstraction   Selective coding

Inductive approach   **Deductive approach**

↓   ↓

Main category (-ies)   Sub-categories

Generic categories   Generic categories

Sub-categories   Main category (-ies)

↓

Reporting the analyzing process and the results

↓

Conceptual system, Categories

Figure 1. Based on the description from Elo & Kyngas (2007)

According to the research question, *inclusivity* is the main concept on which the researcher will focus. Inclusion refers to "a climate in which diverse individuals come together to form a collective whole, enabling and empowering individuals to make contributions consistent with their beliefs and backgrounds" ("Inclusion & Diversity in the American Fashion Industry," n.d.). In the fashion industry, inclusivity has started to appear in the 70s. Back then, there was a model, Donyale Luna, who was the first-ever woman posing in the editorial of Vogue magazine with different skin colors and she influenced a lot the fashion world (ibid). In the following years, more African-American models were conquering the catwalks. These models paved the way for the later supermodels, Naomi Campbell and Tyra Banks. The concept of "exclusivity" in luxury fashion brands has almost disappeared mainly thanks to online social media platforms. Specifically, since everybody is nowadays able to connect with luxuriousness, luxury fashion brands have re-defined their strategies because they want a general audience to sustain themselves (ibid). Moreover, there is observed an increasing desire to become a part of the world that brands shape, as firms embrace authentic influencers that can communicate aspirational messages to the audiences. More specifically, as consumer behaviors change "to prioritize experiences and ethical social consciousness, the cultural narrative of marketing for people has shifted from favoring exclusivity and financial success to content promoting diversity and political activism" (Dhankar, 2019).

Dhankar (2019) has extensively researched some of the categories that are included in the concept of "inclusivity" and that the researcher has taken into consideration during the analysis and coding process:

1. *Ageism* – the mindset that models need to start their career at a very young age and leave the fashion world at 30 or 35 years old. Modeling is considered one of the most short-lived professions. Nevertheless, nowadays there are many models over 60 years old such as Daphne Selfe who at the age of 70 is working for the biggest brand names in the luxury fashion world and convinces the audience that age is not a barrier to define beauty.

2. *Sexuality* – referring to the years of fighting of LGBTQ communities for equal social rights. A lot of famous people from diverse areas, including fashion designers (like Marc

Jacobs), have openly come out to redefine their sexual identity. A great number of luxury brands have created a field of freedom of expression and support these communities to live life as everybody else does.

3. *(Skin) Color* – the acceptance of different skin colors in fashion as well as the fight to abolish racism. As previously mentioned, Naomi Campbell and Tyra Banks are two super-models who empower diversity and definitely prove that skin colors do not play any crucial role. Movements like #blackmodelsmatter are still happening to emphasize their importance.

4. *Size* – the change of perception that models need to be thin and fit; inclusivity in different body types. The last few years it is clearer that models in "bigger sizes" are included in the fashion industry and many more people are feeling now accepted from society – something that was not the case in the 90s when, for example, Kate Moss was representing the idea of perfection.

5. *Disabilities* – the most ignored category in the fashion world until now. People with disabilities might be different, but looking closer and referring also to the aforementioned groups, beauty is hidden in the difference and such people can offer another perspective to the public. Everybody seeks equality and this is what a great percentage of the world's population now fighting for.

3.3 CODING

One of the biggest benefits of using thematic analysis is the fact that, throughout a large amount of data, the researcher can end up with few codes that stem from "explicit coding rules" (Stemler, 2001). This coding process in a qualitative content analysis has its roots in the grounded theory approach. The procedure of thematic analysis originated from the work of two sociologists Glazer and Strauss (1965), even if it is different from other grounded theory methods. The key characteristic of this method is the fact that through the systematic collection and analysis of the data, a new theory can be constructed which has to do with a social

phenomenon (Hussein, Hirst, Salyers, & Osuji, 2014). For conducting the actual analysis three steps have respectively be followed: open, axial and selective coding.

3.3.1 Open Coding

Starting from the first step, open coding, the researcher needs to break down all the data and separate it into relevant and irrelevant, based on the research question (Boeije, 2010). In order to be able to do this, it is necessary to get familiarized with the data by reading everything repeatedly. Afterwards, it is time to divide it into smaller fragments and read them time and again in order to be sure that they are appropriately answering the research question (ibid); this should be the main thought towards the whole procedure, otherwise it should be repeated. Each group now received a code that summarizes the content and is relevant to the research question. This step is the initial one and therefore less structured than the next ones. The open coding was conducted manually. After getting familiarized with the collected data, every post was analyzed in detail by using both image and caption. Boeije (2010) suggests an additional round of data collection during the whole analysis. For this research, it was not necessary because the research question was defined at the beginning and also the sample size was set by the methodological guidelines.

3.3.2 Axial Coding

Continuing to the second step, axial coding is where the researcher identifies the link between the open codes and "relating subcategories to a category" (Kolb, 2012). Hence, irrelevant information and data are not included and there is a certain reduction. The categories have been created based on similarities and dimensions and they can be renamed a lot of times, if necessary (ibid). Broad categories are replaced with new, more specific ones. As a result, less but more representative and important codes are included which, certainly, are able to better respond to the research question (Boeije, 2010). Broader themes are merged through similar or common features. Talking more specifically about the procedure of the current research, eight categories were merged through Instagram analysis (coding tree available in Appendices A and B).

The categories came up mainly by capturing the uniqueness of each of them and described (see more in "Results" chapter) by summing up their core part. Finally, all of them were checked

multiple times in order to make sure that they are able to answer the research question but also that they have a clear relation to the coded data.

3.3.3 Selective Coding

The last step of the thematic analysis is selective coding where all the relevant data is linked to each other with one purpose. More specifically, the themes from axial coding were compared and connected in order to identify the key concepts, as well as the core category (-ies) of the current research. The core category (-ies) of the inquiry is the central concept that is able to explain all the researcher's observations throughout this process (Boeije, 2010). Only if this stage is completed, the analysis is finally over. Regarding the present inquiry, the selective themes that were identified and the core categories are *direct strategies* and *indirect strategies*. The first thing that was taken into consideration was the research question and if the core categories are able to answer it. Moreover, it was also necessary to make sure that there are connections with the previously presented theory, the uniqueness of the findings and their reality (ibid). As it is the final step of the analysis, all the parts of the data (axial and selective coding) will be presented in the "Results" chapter. There, the categories will be developed and discussed in detail.

3.4 SAMPLE & DATA COLLECTION

Non-probability purposive sampling is the applied method. The "purposive" approach has been chosen because of the followings: firstly, there is a "freedom" to collect all the sample elements and secondly the selection is "based on the researcher's judgment or expertise" (Sarstedt, Bengart, Shaltoni & Lehmann, 2018, p.5). This means that the sample of this research is considered as appropriate for achieving the purpose of answering the research question (always according to the researcher). The main criterion that the posts needed to meet in order to be selected from the researcher was to present and support an interesting topic and not just to describe the available or upcoming products of the luxury fashion house.

The sampling size for this thesis is 400 Instagram posts taken from Gucci's official Instagram profile (@gucci), following the rules of the qualitative content analysis of social media data (*Methodological Guidelines Thesis Research*, September 2019-2020). Therefore, the

units of analysis are Instagram posts and it needs to be clear that each post is analyzed for both text and visual (see Figure 2).
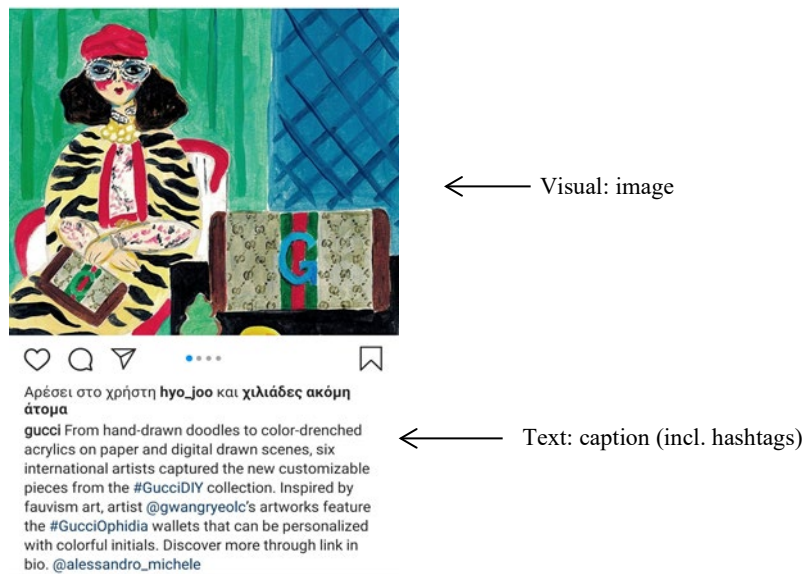
Figure 2

The posts were collected from the 20th of June 2018 until the 28th of June 2020 because by then Gucci has gained a great rise in its revenues (Statista, 2020) with nearly doubled sales (Kim & Reed, 2018). This fact identifies the beginning of the period that Gucci started to communicate inclusiveness. Lastly, the researcher gathered the data in the end of June 2020.

Gucci is an Italian, Florentine luxury fashion brand which despite its tradition, often tries to remain up-to-date (Wingfield, 2015), follow the trends of the present era, is always close to its customers and makes a difference between other firms to gain a wider audience. The inclusiveness is one of today's trends that Gucci openly endorses throughout its Instagram page and that constitutes one of the main reasons for selecting this luxury fashion house. In addition to the aforementioned criteria, Gucci is chosen also because in 2019 it was declared as the most popular luxury fashion brand. According to Bowles, Gucci and its creative director, Alessandro Michele, has shaped and influenced the current fashion around the world in a large scale. Furthermore, when the director was the chairman of the MET Gala, Gucci has gained a growth of 20% higher revenues and by then, it had also launched a new VR technology with which clients can try on Gucci sneakers (France-Presse, 2019). These and many more reasons make it

interesting to investigate the strategies that the luxury fashion house utilizes in order to become more inclusive, broaden its target group but at the same time keep its high-end fashion status.

3.5 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

To establish validity and reliability of the research, two major procedures have been applied. First of all, the researcher is obliged to transcribe the entire procedure of the inquiry. This includes how, when and why the sample was selected, but also the documentation of the whole process and coding frames (Suston & Austin, 2015). Transparency of the process is guaranteed in this way. In addition, if the sampling method were random, the relevance of the posts regarding the research question would not be ensured. Therefore, based on the researcher's criteria, the purposive sampling method has been chosen to prevent a lack of validity. Finally, due to the fact that thematic analysis is highly subjective, when someone else will systematically apply the same dataset, it is expected to end up with different core codes. This does not make the results of the current research invalid.

4. RESULTS

The goal of the research is to identify the strategies that the luxury fashion brand, Gucci, applies in their online marketing communication on Instagram as a tool for own positioning and promoting inclusiveness. To answer the research question, the categories generated from the data analysis, their interpretation, but also their connection with the theoretical framework are presented in this chapter. This part is structured around the two core codes that were emerged from the analysis. Specifically, the analyzed data proven that Gucci uses online marketing communication on Instagram for promoting inclusiveness by the application of *direct strategies* and *indirect strategies*.

Each theme consists of four sub-themes presented in Table 1.

Direct strategies	Indirect strategies
Storytelling	Support Diversity
Sustainability	Familiarity
Community	Brand values
Art	Emotions

Table 1. Ways of strategies in the posts & sub-themes.

The coding tree is displayed in Appendix A and B. Specifically, Appendix A presents the direct strategies including axial and selective codes and Appendix B the indirect.

4.1. DIRECT STRATEGIES

The first selective code is regarding *direct strategies* and consists of themes that refer to direct messages mainly through text (captions in this case) which aim to enhance the need of many people to be part of Gucci's world. Storytelling is very often used in brand's posts, as well as references to sustainability, art and the importance of community.

The analysis of the data extracted from Instagram posts leads to the conclusion that *Storytelling* is one of the main direct strategies used by Gucci. Studies show that *storytelling* is "one of the key strategies in digital and mobile marketing" (Romo, Garcia-Medina & Romero, 2017) and it can be found "at the center of new marketing" nowadays (Pulizzi, 2012, p.118). It seems that the specific strategy can be considered the stepping-stone of successful marketing as it helps engage customers with a brand's identity and contributes to the creation of a strong brand-customer relationship (Loureiro, 2013). It influences perceptions (Lund, Cohen, & Scarles, 2017) and enhances relationships between the consumer and the brand (Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012). In addition, it allows companies and corporations to "gain a deeper understanding of consumer psychology" (Woodside, Sood & Miller, 2008) stemming from the consumers' personal history, memories and emotional connections that respectively result in an unambiguous perception of the market's needs. The story's veritableness itself is not of central importance since the goal is to communicate with the audience and to "create an atmosphere and enhance the uniqueness of service brands" (Lundqvist, Liljander, Gummerus & van Riel, 2013). Specifically, consumers can become a part of communication, relate with the brand and generally be a part of the brand's luxury world (González, Garcia- Medina & Romero, 2017) and brand history (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012).

In the following subsections, the paper will present on the ways that Gucci uses storytelling in order to communicate its messages to the customers. Five sub-themes have identified for storytelling strategies and they are (1) history, (2) shared experiences, (3) inspiration, (4) personalization and (5) social issues.

History: The examination of the dataset shows that one of Gucci's focal points is the *brand's history*. It is one of the most usual attributes that define a luxury product (González, Garcia-Medina & Romero, 2017), as has been discussed in the "Theoretical Framework". By presenting clothes and accessories that were part of historical collections and by analyzing the way that old motives and patterns are put in new use, the brand aim to create an optimal environment that will allow the customers to discover its heritage and its future (Fionda & Moore, 2009). This informative approach speaks directly to the audience and invites it in direct engagement with the

meanings that the brand is trying to produce. Moreover, it allows Instagram users to comprehend the context behind a collection or even a logo, and thus make them participate in the process of creation. It is also mentionable the fact that at the end of many captions, Gucci adds the phrase of "LINK IN BIO", where users can read the broader history behind a collection, a campaign or a product.

In the example below, a post (Figure 3) depicts a handbag piece carried by a model. "The Gucci bag", as it is called, bears some of the brand's trademarks in its design, such as the "GG motif" and the "Web stripe". The post's caption provides the user with information, not only concerning the characteristics of the displayed product but also their background and importance in the brand's course through time. By providing this kind of information to the public Gucci attempts to bring the audience closer to the ideas that shaped its identity and thus, to create stimuli capable of generating a bond between the brand and its customers. It is critical to note that in this kind of posts, the user does not confront a piece of raw product advertising. Instead, the user is thoroughly informed about the product's values in a way that his/her needs can be met and fulfilled on a deeper level.

Figure 3

Common Experiences: The next example is related to another technique of storytelling applied by Gucci. The use of the concept of *common experiences* is not rare in the brand's presence on Instagram. What Gucci attempts, is to depict experiences or scenes that common people can identify with. In cases like that scenes from everyday life are used in order to present a product or a collection.

Figure 4 is related to the promotion of the "#GucciTennis1977" shoe collection. -As the caption of the post describes, one can see an unfolding scene inspired by a very basic everyday life doing: that of grocery shopping. In the beginning, such a placement of models and products might seem bizarre. However, when the viewer overcomes the traditional perception of how a fashion photo shooting should look, this representation can serve as a tool to the present fashion and luxury brands as down-to-earth and widely accessible to all people. As a result, a prospective customer can relate to the situation and connected to the brand's world more easily; he/she does not feel excluded. Using a shared and universal experience as a set up can directly trigger the feelings of familiarity and comfort for users that probably seek intimate elements to relate with (Israelashvili, Sauter & Fischer, 2020). In addition to the promotion of the idea that everyone is welcome to participate in the brand's values, such an approach also strengthens the brand's appeal to the audience and works supportively in the process of brand-customer bonding (Loureiro, 2013).

Figure 4

Inspiration: Gucci seems to have perfectly grasped the significance of creating inspirational stimuli for its online followers and customers. As previous mentioned, studies seek to define "luxury brand", inspiration is also included in core characteristics for describing such products (González, Garcia-Medina & Romero, 2017; Ko, Kostello & Taylor 2017; Fionda & Moore, 2009); inspiration in many areas of the audience's everyday life. The way for achieving it is not only by presenting direct motivational posts. Gucci's responsible team choose to present the inspiration behind fashion pieces and the story that led to their design and creation. In the brand's Instagram feed, there are many instances of posts that present new works or collections. However, the most striking part of these posts is related to their captions. In this case, the captions work not only as tools of further explanation of the image but also as methods that allow the user to deepen the understanding of the story behind the product (Zhan, Tu & Yu, 2018). It is important to recognize that in the specific case the story and the image intertwine in a way that can grasp the attention and lead to a further extent of comprehension on how and why something was created.

Moreover, apart from the user's engagement with the brand and its artists, this category of posts can furtherly create inspiration for simple people in a way that they could not expect. It is likely that such a strategy could introduce people to the new aspects of themselves and serve as a medium for self-development and creation (Hill, 2019). When an artist communicates the story behind an idea, then it instantly becomes more accessible and humanized for everyone (Lewis-Williams, 2011). It can prove that from simple ideas and stimuli one can come up with great and influential projects. Inspiration, thus, is not a disclosed area where few have access. In contrast, it is free and open for everyone, and Gucci proves in practice (and not only in theory) that with the right examples everyone can participate in the process of creation.

In the following example (Figure 5) from Gucci's Instagram page, the user can vividly spot the principles of the brand mentioned above:

Figure 5

In the post (Figure 5), the model depicted wears a mask that is showcased in the campaign "#GucciPretAPorter". The caption of the post hardly focuses on the mask itself, as it turns its attention to the creator and the ideas behind it. It is mentioned that the "mask represents showing and hiding who we are, a means to protect the kindness and beauty inside." These are the exact words of Gucci's creative director, Alessandro Michele, describing what inspired him to design the specific piece of fashion. As a result, it becomes easier for the online user to get "in touch" with the artist's interpretation of the mask and, thus, understand the idea behind its creation. Furthermore, the user is no longer facing an incomprehensible image open to interpretations, but an image that makes sense and proves that from simple inspiring moments great ideas can be born. Design and creation are no longer a privilege or a gift, but something that everyone with an open and observational mind can afford.

Personalization: The notion of personalization is very important in Gucci's storytelling. In fact, a representative example is a whole campaign that allows the potential customers to actively engage and design their own home decorative objects through the Gucci App and by using "augmented reality technology". The campaign titled "#GucciDecor" invites users to design and purchase their own pieces that vary from scent candles to even armchairs. Such an open invitation can be considered as the epitome of customers' active engagement in the brand's creative processes and the building of a common identity and bond (Maslowska, Malthouse &

Collinger, 2016). Moreover, it constitutes an attempt to prove the loyalty of the brand's customer base, since the resonance of the campaign could be indicative of the brand's resonance in a more general framework. Gucci provides the tools and motivation, and what it gets in return is the willingness for participation and practical support. Finally, such an initiative is a proof of Gucci's devotion to directly communicate with its customers and provide them with a chance to narrate their own story and express their creative spirit through the brand's colors and logos. The specific practice could be considered as storytelling in reverse (Pulizzi, 2012), where customers take the front ground in the creation and the brand works communicating their ideas. Furthermore, personalized marketing is increasing "as consumers now expect brand experiences to be designed just for them and the real-time data available today allows companies to deliver unique messages to an increasingly micro-targeted audience." (Jones-Mitchell, 2020)

Figure 6   Figure 7   Figure 8

The three examples (Figures 6, 7, 8) showcase Gucci's initiative for active customer engagement. In all three posts, the captions describe the type of products on display, but more importantly, they invite Instagram users to personalize the items to fit their personal space and, thus, design a diverse variety of products that will reflect each and everyone's personal taste. In this case, Gucci does not just launch a campaign, but an initiative for its customers to express their own selves in the name of the brand.

Social Issues: The following subsection focuses on the social issues displayed in the Gucci's campaigns and Instagram posts. With dynamic posts and messages, Gucci manages to present the answers to the important questions that can be considered crucial to the modern society. Female emancipation and equality- independent from sexual preferences- are the two topics that are vividly represented and supported (Russo, 2019).

Figure 9

In Figure 9 that serves as an example, the viewer can see a jacket from the "#GucciCruise20" collection with the message printed on its backside: "MY BODY MY CHOICE". The jacket is worn by an actress during a Reproductive Rights Rally Washington D.C., according to the caption. The striking element of the picture is the strong message displayed on the jacket, in combination with the active involvement in human rights demonstrations. Gucci not only supports women's rights through its pieces of clothing, but it also supports active participation in claiming what should be considered elementary and granted in our modern society. Also, it is necessary to mention that, nowadays, there is a cultural push "for more inclusive feminism and focus on activism efforts" through which brands gain a greater social purpose (Dhankar, 2019).

In the second post (Figure 10), the set-up is much different. In a mythical place as the caption describes, the brand's creative director envisioned the existence of the society, where diversity is celebrated and not suppressed. The peaceful co-existence of people with diverse backgrounds and preferences takes the viewer to a parallel universe where human rights are considered an undisputed product of nature and society is depicted as a mosaic composed of colorful pieces. Diversity seems important and crucial in this case for the construction of a society where everyone is equal and social marginalization is vanished (Rawal, 2008).

Figure 10

Gucci manages to actively engage in the social struggles concerning specific groups that are considered marginalized in today's society. The brand attempts to show that it is imperative for people to unite and take action for the abolishment of oppressive ideas. Moreover, Gucci is trying to actively promote the idea of a progressive society where rights and coexistence are on the spotlight (Bhuiyan, 2018); depicting exactly what inclusivity supports and promotes in the fashion world. In addition, the way that diversity and struggle are portrayed in this kind of post, shows that from Gucci's perspective nothing is considered unnatural. Undoubtedly, this point of view opens new horizons and provides food for thought for at least a portion of the brand's followers.

In recent years, the word sustainability has acquired a central position in the terminology concerning the discourse around environmental issues (Leipold, Feindt, Winkel & Keller, 2019). Either on the news, in the environmental organizations' manifestations, or in the discussions of ordinary people, the term is lately used for the description of a new way of life that humans should adopt. With the term sustainability, one can describe a specific lifestyle where humans harmoniously coexist with their surroundings and nature (Iwatsuki, 2008). A new lifestyle differentiated from old habits that had a harmful and devastating impact on our planet's climate. Considering the global environmental crisis, the fashion industry is in the spotlight of environmental organizations and activists such as WWF and Greenpeace. Sustainability is a universal problem, that refers to everybody and exceeds exclusivity and luxury. For this reason, luxury brands have started adopting the widespread belief that business and society are dependent on one another (Chaudhri & Kaul, 2017) and taking stance on social issues with responsiveness to customer expectations in regards to sustainability (Amed, Balchandani, Beltrami, Berg et al., 2018).

Gucci seems to have realized that the idea of a sustainable society is unrealistic without sustainable fashion. Subsequently, the luxury house is taking certain actions in order to prove that fashion can be environmentally friendly and that luxury brands can be at the forefront of the fight for sustainability. With different campaigns, examples of which will be subsequently showcased, it provides an alternative point of view, which includes humans and animals. Nevertheless, when it comes to the salvation of the ecosystem, such actions are welcome, provided that they will be continued in the future and will not stay constricted in trending narratives that could be possibly abandoned later.

Animal Protection: As many are aware, the fashion industry has utilized animal products over the course of years. The discussion concerning the banishment of fur and leather clothing is not novel, but it is taking place for some years now (Livni, 2019). Animal cruelty is a very powerful topic that induces comprehension of how harmful humans can be. The brand, though, has taken this discussion a step further with its campaigns. Gucci does not only talk about the reduction of animal products in the fashion industry, but it introduces the public to new ways of

action. In the following examples, the brand, amongst some others, is taking initiatives to actively protect endangered species and to also make them part of its collection from the position of modeling.

In the first three pictures of the sample (Figures 11, 12, 13), the viewer is confronted with a spectacle. As part of the campaign "#OfCourseAHorse" Gucci used actual horses that served as "models", side by side with human models, or even, as one of the captions describes, with their" human friends".

The campaign celebrates the beauty of the noble animals that have accompanied and served humans patiently for thousands of years, as well as it clearly supports the ban on the use of horse leather by other fashion houses to create products. In addition, the portrayal of animals and people as equal, even if not new, provokes the viewer to realize that the differences between us and the beings with whom we coexist are minor. Such an interpretation can pave the way for a different society and a change in industries. Interpreting Gucci's example, it is understandable that all lives are of the same importance and that even animals can have roles that we couldn't imagine before.

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figure 14

The fourth example (Figure 14) is a direct statement of the brand under the hashtag "#SoDeerToME". The picture presents a model in a symmetrical set up surrounded by deer, and is inspired by childhood innocence, as the creative director Alessandro Michele mentions. However, even more importantly, another part of the caption is describing Gucci's initiative to donate for the cause of animal rescue and protection. In addition, 0.5% of the brand's advertisement budget is donated to the Lions Share Fund in order to actively contribute to the rescue of the endangered species of the planet. In other words, the brand, instead of promoting values and ideas for consumption, takes action first and then presents impactful solutions that the people could participate in.

Reutilization: Another principle of sustainability that Gucci puts in practice is that of reutilizing old patterns and unexpected materials. Reuse of materials is crucial for the survival of the planet and our ecosystem since it reduces excess waste (Korhonen, Honkasalo & Seppala, 2018). In addition, using materials that are unconventional is proof that with the right inspiration and tools everything can acquire a new life that can be valuable, instead of ending up in the trash.

Figure 15   Figure 16

For the "#GucciPreFall20", men's collection (Figure 15) Alessandro Michele chose to give "new life" to an old design of men's clothing. His approach demonstrates that older designs and materials, such as fabrics, do not have to be considered outdated and obsolete, because a designer can re-use them in original ways by adding new value. This perception can also be supported by the second post displayed (Figure 16) that shows a pair of shoes on top of a garbage bin that bears one of Gucci's trademarks. By placing the product on top of a rebranded unconventional material he equates their value and states that fashion can be originated even from the most unexpected things. A new way of seeing and using items that surround us on a daily basis is the most important value that these kind of posts promote. Giving new life in pieces of clothing or other materials can trigger two things: firstly, it can contribute to the decrease of waste, and secondly, it can provide new paths for creativity and expression (Ruppert-Stroescu, LeHew, Connell & Armstrong, 2015). Additionally, it could serve as a good resemblance of what common people would do, by not throwing away faulty clothes, but by repairing them and reusing them in different ways.

Sustainable Collections: In continuation of the previous category, Gucci does not limit its choices in partially reusing materials for its collections. With the launch of the campaign entitled "#GucciOffTheGrid", the brand introduces to the public and its (potential) customers a "new era" of clothing that are exclusively designed with sustainable materials.

Figure 17   Figure 18

The two pictures above (Figures 17, 18) constitute examples of a combinational campaign in terms of materials and modeling figures with inspirational output and focal point to the environmental discourse. David De Rothschild and Jane Fonda are both advocates in the fight to help for a more sustainable planet. Gucci selected these two dynamic figures to convey the message, which state that the only way to provide a better future for humankind is with immediate action. As a result, the firm itself initiates in actions that practically benefit the world's turn in alternative sources of energy and elements. Once more, Gucci seems to be completely aware of the changes taking place around the world and is able to come up with solutions and not just propositions.

Call for action: In addition to the previously discussed initiative, Gucci also launched a campaign named #GucciOffTheGrid. In the two images' captions mentioned before (Figures 17, 18), users can find the tag @gucciequilibrium through which they can reach more information on the "House's commitments and actions to reduce its environmental footprint and protect nature

(…)" (Wightman-Stone, 2020). The fashion house attempts to create a whole community which will fight for the preservation of the natural environment. It is necessary to underline the fact that this kind of posts can be considered an open *call for action* to the public and aiming to inspire people that would otherwise stay passive. Thus, Gucci and its Instagram presence constitute an example of a brand that is willing to serve its purpose seriously and comes up with ideas that are easily transmitted from a theoretical to a practical level. At least, that is what the brand is trying to communicate. One would argue that the specific attitude could be interpreted as a marketing trick that aims to attract environmentally conscious customers. Such an argument should not be considered invalid, since it is not easy to spot the explicit motives behind the brand's actions. Nevertheless, even the slightest contribution in the struggle for the occurring climate change is vital for people who could find it easy to use the brand as an inspiring example, proving that change can be finally achieved with specific actions.

4.1.3 Community

The interpretation of the last subsection can be used as an overture to the third direct marketing strategy used by Gucci. The term "community" describes a gathering of people who have common interests and goals (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). As previously mentioned, Gucci is attempting to build a community that will be aware of the environmental hazards that lay around people, as well as of the solutions that can be applied in order to minimize them. Moreover, another definition of community building, in a virtual or physical way, is that of creating a space where everyone can belong without discrimination, able to express her/his own true self (Masolo, 2002). Creating the feeling of belonging can result in a very strong bond between the brand and its customers (Loureiro, Ruediger & Demetris, 2012), and also contribute to "rekindling" contemporary social issues, such as social inequality, LGBTQ rights or female emancipation.

Direct Hashtags: The examples that will be used to portray the specific strategy align very well with the tragic events that took and are still taking place during the COVID-19 crisis. With the hashtag "#GucciCommunity", the fashion house chooses to portray specific pictures with analytical captions whose aim is to provoke an emotional reaction due to their kindness and

inclusivity. The three posts (Figures 19, 20, 21), serving as an example, refer to the power of the community to take care of its members and make them feel comfortable and safe. The diverse setups and people of the photographs promote the idea that everyone is equal and that no exclusions should be made, especially in turbulent times like nowadays. The two first images (Figure 19, 20) capture the joy of sharing moments with loved people and how this can be beneficial for our society. The third one (Figure 20) shares a more intimate moment between a mother and her child. An image that reminds the viewer of the importance of love and sharing in our lives. All the captions have the goal to motivate online users to express empathy and compassion that can result in a better way of life. Furthermore, love and understanding of other beings play a crucial role as well and are openly promoted. In this way, Gucci attempts to share some of the brand's principles that define its identity, as well as the identity of the community that is built around the brand. Moreover, it tries to strengthen the bond and interaction with its customer base when they seek a grip through difficult periods of time and to share their thoughts.

| Figure 19 | Figure 20 | Figure 21 |

Cultures: By applying the direct hashtags, Gucci attempts to create an inclusive community around the brand. However, by looking again at the same examples, it is comprehended that Gucci supports and promotes inclusivity in practice. People of different cultural backgrounds, sexuality, skin color are all welcome and needed in this newfound community. Diversity seems to be the most important element for the fulfillment of "the dream for a better world". Subsequently, the luxury fashion house presents and embraces all these different cultures that

include parents, party people, artists, workers and more. This is a tool in the hands of the brand's directors that, ideally, should be used in order to raise equality and human rights issues. Furthermore, it is a tool that can be used to give voice to people who are socially marginalized and unable to stand for themselves. Gucci is, thus, trying to build a multicultural community that is promising a, possibly, better future for the coming generations.

4.1.4 Art

The final direct marketing strategy that Gucci applies can be identified as *art* in different types of forms. Art has played an important role throughout time in the formation of human society, as it is, and the expression of human nature. Even though it could be considered exclusive and luxurious by many (Chailan, 2018). However, in many instances, art originates from middle and lower classes (DiMaggio & Useem, 1978) and works as a tool of self-defining, protesting and differentiating. Additionally, forms of art such as street art and graffiti are exclusively considered non-luxurious and radical since they were born in the streets of the city and express the urban spirit of modernity. In recent years, artists, such as Banksy, have played a crucial role in the redefinition of art and the meanings that it bears. Most importantly, forms of painting or photography, such as Queer art, represent the artistic views of social groups that have been marginalized for hundreds of years (Danbolt, 2009). Furthermore, there is a chronic debate whether fashion is one of the 10 arts that define humanity (Kim, 2015). Nevertheless, art can be considered a vessel of expression through which diverse social groups communicate their ideas in various ways (DiMaggio & Useem, 1978). Therefore, some forms of art can be considered universal and not exclusive, and Gucci seems to understand and utilize this idea. The present paper will try only to showcase how fashion and luxury brands can use different fields of art, through initiatives, in order to broaden their audiences and appeal in different categories of people.

Collaborations: Collaborations with various artists seem to be a central ground in Gucci's creative processes. The selected house considers fashion are a form of art and it always tries to highlight it in different versions. In the first picture, which is a post for the promotion of an art book inspired by Alessandro Michele (Figure 22), the brand collaborated with the film director

Yorgos Lanthimos. The aesthetics of the specific photograph and the whole collection of pictures are idiosyncratic and express the director's perception of photography. Gucci and its creative director do not hesitate to allow artists to put their own signature in projects that will consequently transform the brand's image and reidentify it. At the same time, they do not hesitate to "utilize" the artists' fame and profile in order to attract broader audiences. In the second post (Figure 23), the caption informs the viewer about a film screening taking place before the "#GucciSS19" fashion show. In this case, there is a combination of two different fields at the same time and the promotion and inclusion of a film in a fashion show. Such a move can be indicative of the appreciation towards cinema and the influence that it can have on the human consciousness.

Figure 22

Figure 23

Figure 24   Figure 25

In Figure 24, Gucci demonstrates the artwork placed in a restaurant that is included in the list of "#GucciPlaces", an initiative that shows inspirational places around the world to the public. In this instance, Gucci provides its followers with information concerning places that impact society by taking leading actions that shape spaces and create new experiences. The last image (Figure 25) is from an exhibition that Gucci held in "#GucciHub", Milan, in collaboration with the curators Gianni Manzella and Enrico Pitozzi. Apart from the chance of collaboration, the firm provides also the needed space in order to stage and house projects worthy of the public's attention. What Gucci tries to prove, by giving space for expression to various artists, is that diversity, inclusivity and different perceptions can always prove vital in the process of creation. To conclude with, the interaction with artists is equal to constant interaction with society and ordinary people, since art is considered one of the basic ways of self and communal expression (White, 1985).

Famous Personalities: In addition to the brand's collaborations, Gucci also hosts guest-artists to the creation of collections as models and brand ambassadors. When a celebrity or a widely important person uses or promotes a product, it can create product awareness and have a positive impact on consumer's minds (Ateke & Onwujiariri, 2016). Going back to one of the previous sub-themes regarding Gucci's sustainable collection, the actress, Jane Fonda, is one of the main ambassadors of the collection (Figure 18). Gucci follows respectively the same policy

in other collections where artists with different backgrounds come together to represent the fashion house's identity. In the two first examples (Figures 26, 27), famous musicians (Lana del Rey and Jared Leto) and actors (Dakota Johnson) are included in campaigns for the promotion of Gucci's scents. All three of them are well known and celebrated personalities in their field who now adopt a new role as models for a specific collection of the brand. However, their role is not marginalized from their natural talents. They all bring in the collection their personal tone of emotional expression and add up value to the character of the brand. Gucci does not attempt to put limitations in their personal expression but embraces the new elements that they have to offer (Danziger, 2017). An objection related to the examples mentioned concerns the lack of diversity. Gucci is using famous personalities, but all of them come from a particular background. A possible proposal for the future would be to use more diverse people to align with the views on diversity that the brand is trying to communicate in other collections.

Figure 26   Figure 27

The two bottom posts (Figures 28, 29) work as an example of a brand ambassador. Two distinguished artists, who come from, what could be considered, different eras of music and its genres, are representing the fashion house by appearing in public events wearing its trademarks. These images bridge two different age groups and apart from a very good marketing strategy for the promotion of products, they also work as a display of how an influential brand like Gucci can bring diverse people together. As a result, the most valuable conclusion to be extracted from the examples mentioned above concerns the diverse groups of people who share a common interest

in Gucci. Even though famous personalities can add prestige to a brand by bearing its trademarks, it is not easy to overtake the fact that they are rich people wearing expensive clothes. As a result, the focal point should be the people whom they "carry" with them. Their fanbases consisting of individuals with different interests come together and find common ground with the brand's help. This doesn't necessarily mean that everyone will love Gucci's products, but that at least Gucci will drag their attention. Respectively, the most important thing that the brand is winning is access to new and broader audiences.

Figure 28   Figure 29

Street Art: In the last sub-theme of art as a direct marketing strategy, street art will be presented. To begin with, street art is an important part of Gucci's initiatives around the world. Sizeable building walls in big cities are chosen as canvases that get painted with the purpose of promoting a new campaign, a new collaboration or funding of a project, or simply of conveying an important message (Figures 30, 31, 32). Most importantly, this fine street art manages to bring creativity and beauty and can be found in an atelier but also on the city streets. In addition, in this way Gucci gives the opportunity to young, ambitious artists to promote their work and exhibit their skills and talent to the public. Apart from that, this is an efficient way of advertising (Antunes, 2014). Not only is it environmentally friendly, since it does not involve the use of paper posters or plastic, but it also an artistic addition to the neighborhood and is visible by anyone. People can see it and might get inspired by it. Finally, it needs to be mentioned, that

after the mural has fulfilled its purpose it gets removed from the walls so that space for more art can be created.

| Figure 30 | Figure 31 | Figure 32 |

4.2. INDIRECT STRATEGIES

The second selective code is built around *indirect strategies* and consists of categories that refer to an attempt to subconsciously appeal to the audience and make it part of the brand's world. To engage with them, Gucci refers frequently to social diversity, brand values, presents posts that can seem familiar to the audience -as they capture everyday life- and highlights art in many forms. These strategies are mostly derived from the visuals posted on the brand's Instagram profile.

4.2.1 Support Social Diversity

One striking and central feature in Gucci's Instagram page is that of *social diversity*. With the signature of its creative director, Alessandro Michele, the brand actively supports the existence of a diverse, unrestricted, society. The way that this tendency is expressed, does not rely on direct "shoutouts" and motivational statements In contrast, Gucci seems to provide the needed space for self-expression to different social groups and it will be explicitly examined in

the following subsections. Differentiation adds value to the brand since it is a characteristic that makes it unique from other competitors (Thompson, 2013). Thus, such an approach results in a colorful "collage of human beings", unattached from norms that the old traditional society promotes.

Subcultures: From the first look, Gucci's trust in unconventional figures for its campaigns is totally visible. The fashion house prefers its models to be of an eerie and unusual appearance, breaking down the "rules" of modeling (Stoppard, 2017). Perfection, in traditional terms of beauty and body features, seems outdated and models seem to celebrate human imperfection as it is witnessed in everyday life (Dhankar, 2019). Most importantly, the brand sheds light on a variety of subcultures that could be considered marginalized and radical for the rest of the society so far. The central role that subcultures, such as real skaters and punks acquire in certain campaigns, can be considered unusual. For instance, both groups were and still are perceived by a certain percentage of people as the misfits of modern society who do not abide by the rules. Gucci's intention seems to focus on the charm of these types of people and their unconventional character. In the two pictures below (Figures 33, 34), the viewer can identify two examples related to the promotion of subcultures as mentioned above. In the Figure 32, the punk group 'Amyl and the Sniffers' is the focal point of the campaigns '#GucciGig' and '#GucciEyewear'. Punks are well-known for their unconventional and edgy style, but Gucci's choice to use them as models might be an indication that under the brand's umbrella even the most visually provoking people can find their position. In the Figure 33, on the other hand, Instagram users can identify a group of young people as skaters. Through the years, skaters have created and acquired their own street style that is quite distinguishable. Gucci's creative directors made skaters the central people of the campaign '#GucciGrip'. Not only does the brand use skaters as models, but it also provides them the space to produce their own stories that can be heard through the social platform of Instagram. With these examples, it is understood that there is a chance for unique cultural groups to become the new norm, and this could be the first step towards complete inclusivity, as well as equality, in every level of fashion and society.

Figure 33

Figure 34

Strong Femininity: Another aspect of Gucci's digital presence, included in the spectrum of indirect marketing strategies is that of *strong, dynamically demonstrated femininity*. The way that women are represented in Instagram posts should not be of great admiration under normal conditions. As Dunn & Skaggs (2006) show at the end of the 20th and the eve of the 21st century, gender inequality can still be measured in factors such as unemployment rates between men and women or wage differences in developed industrial countries. Additionally, according to York (2011), even though women's movements have managed to succeed in some of their objective goals "traditional gender attitudes that are demeaning towards women persist to a considerable degree." The percentage of women murdered by their intimate partners, which is up to 33%, is indicative of the persisting situation (ibid). Therefore, in the world where women are continuously victimized, even in theoretically progressive and secular countries, Gucci advocates for women and supports their need for being emancipated and the sovereigns of their own bodies (Figure 35).

A series of examples extracted from collected posts can indicate the use of female models, with strong, vivid postures that regardless of body weight, age and other particularities, celebrate life and fashion. In Figure 36 there is a model participating in campaign #GucciFW20. The model wearing rectangular frames is looking at the photographic lens with a dull yet confident gaze. Her face characteristics are exposed from the light and angle of the photo shooting; however, her posture does not allow the viewer to doubt about her dynamic character. No matter

how exposed the model's confidence is indicative of how Gucci presumably envisions modern women.

Moving on to the next two Figures (37, 38), their leading theme is different however, it is connected to the previous two. In the bottom left picture, the viewer can see two elderly models sitting in the front row of an imagined fashion show. The fact that the models do not belong in the traditional modeling group age conveys a powerful message. Beauty standards and modeling careers should not be restricted in specific age groups. In contrast, beauty should be celebrated in all its different manifestations and women should not be ashamed of their appearance. As Dhankar (2019) mentions in his research, "ageism-the mindset that models should start their career at a very young age and leave from the fashion world at 30 or 35 years old" has been dominant for many years, but is now old and outworn. In the final picture, the viewers can see model Ellie Zebedee the was born with Down Syndrome. Ellie has participated in numerous fashion collections and constitutes a perfect example of how all women should enjoy the same privileges and not be categorized in accordance with sexist or racist norms. Having a disability is a part of life and people who belong in this group should not be left aside from the rest of society. To sum up this subsection, it is important to mention that women are the first who suffer and get stigmatized by traditional beauty standards. Promoting campaigns that defy a flawless and doll-like point of view is crucial for a future that embraces women that trust in themselves and are not defined by their external characteristics. Finally, this is a first step for society to become familiar with the idea that beauty is not a universal truth applied to everyone.

Figure 35

Figure 36

Figure 37

Figure 38

Deconstruction of human nature: When referring to a possible *deconstruction of the human nature* in Gucci's campaigns, the paper intends not to uncover a hyper-realistic depiction of models. Instead, what is meant to be done is an analysis of the way that humans, as models, are

depicted. As mentioned previously, the brand tries to include diverse social groups and present dynamic women in its campaigns. In general, the same seems to be applied in the brand's approach to portraying human nature. At this point, it is necessary to underline once more Gucci's tendency for the unconventional (Growther, 2020). The way that models are photographed can be considered interesting in terms of used lighting and models' posture. The two examples provided below are quite characteristic (Figures 39, 40). The models are posing simply standing straight and looking directly at the photographic lens. Their body language does not betray any movement. They are standing still and 'vulnerable' to the viewer's gaze. The feeling of being exposed prevails with these progressive portraits. Models are not portrayed as the perfect versions of human beings. They cannot be seen as superhumans anymore, but as normal people, whose beauty springs out of their unique characteristics. In this way, it is easier for the brand's followers to identify themselves through certain pictures since they stumble upon normal humans and not some type of extremely unapproachable figures.

Figure 39

Figure 40

Opposing Doubles: Moving forward, another means through which Gucci chooses to externalize its view over a diverse and inclusive society is that of the concept of *opposing doubles*. In a wide range of Instagram posts (Figures 41, 42, 43), an observative user can spot the existence of opposing doubles in relation to the models' casting. People of different skin color and age, pair with each other to underline the similarities over the differences, as well as the power relations that apply in human interactions. The contrast created in this kind of photographs could not be considered unsettling. The fashion house's directors seem to aim for a contrasting experience that works in two ways: firstly, it eliminates negative racial stereotypes by blending different people (Growther, 2020). Secondly, it subtly underlines the still existent power relations and differences in our society that can result in inequality.

Figure 41   Figure 42   Figure 43

Blended Communities: In continuation of the concept of opposing doubles, Gucci chooses to present groups or communities of people in the same way. Online users can find many instances where diverse gatherings of people take the main stage of campaigns and leave space of equal "imagined communities". The term "imagined communities" is used in this case because the following pictures work as a suggestion towards the desired society. They do not necessarily work as precise depictions of truth. Nevertheless, even as suggestions for a better world these pictures (Figures 44, 45, 46) convey powerful messages that aim to activate the users'

consciousness and motivate them towards an alternative and more open-minded way of thinking (Growther, 2020). In the provided examples, one can see three different, but at the same time similar groups of people. Even though the scenes take place in different settings, all of them have a common feature: the people who participate in them are diverse and unique in their own way. Gucci purposefully chooses all these individuals to wear its creations and create an environment based on different colors, body sizes and face features (Dhankar, 2019). The result is colorful and natural since this diversity of people can be met in real life as well.

Figure 44

Figure 45

Figure 46

4.2.2 Familiarity

Familiarity can be defined as the feeling of experiencing something previously known; something that triggers memories of the same practices or the feeling of safety due to existing motives of behavior (Dodgson, 2017). In this specific case, familiarity is another strategy used by Gucci as an indirect marketing strategy. By provoking the feeling of familiarity, Gucci supposedly intends to bring its customer base closer to the brand's principles and provoke feelings of belonging and of common experiences. The concept of common experiences has been addressed previously as one of the direct marketing strategies used by Gucci. In the following

paragraphs, the paper will attempt to analyze the more subtle and indirect approaches that the house uses in order to achieve a more universal experience of its image.

Photos' set up: Photography occupies a central role in the fashion industry. The way that collections, clothes and models are depicted is critical in terms of communicating a specific image and ideology towards the public. On Gucci's behalf, when it comes to setting up photos there is an interesting approach dictating that scenes should be placed in a familiar, for many people, environment. The following examples highlight vividly this argument (Figures 47, 48, 49).

Αρέσει στο χρήστη **alessandro.borghi** και **χιλιάδες ακόμη άτομα**

gucci Every bag from the #GucciBeloved ❤️ collections has a special detail, an element that connects it to the House, woven into its design by @alessandro_michele. Part of the Beloved lines is the #GGMarmont collection of soft leather matelassé bags. Discover more through link in bio. #AlessandroMichele #GucciCruise20

Figure 47

Αρέσει στο χρήστη **lulubuono** και **χιλιάδες ακόμη άτομα**

gucci The #GucciZumi top handle bag features refined details including the Interlocking G Horsebit—a hybrid of two of the House's most distinctive codes into one symbol in a modern mix of silver and gold tones. Discover more through link in bio. #GucciCruise20 @alessandro_michele #AlessandroMichele

Figure 48

Αρέσει στο χρήστη **lulubuono** και **χιλιάδες ακόμη άτομα**

gucci Crafted in contrasting leather colors, the #Gucci1955Horsebit bucket bags feature gold-toned toned hardware and an adjustable strap. Discover more through link in bio. @alessandro_michele #AlessandroMichele #GucciCruise20

Figure 49

The products in the display are placed in such a way that it creates a feeling that the viewer is witnessing them outside of a photo shooting set. The pictures depicting handbags placed on furniture create the impression that someone walked to a party or gathering in a house and saw the fashion pieces left unattended by their owners. The picture in the middle can feel like it was captured momentarily by the artist's eye while walking in a central street and seeing people standing in a queue or waiting for something. Overall, the feeling of familiarity, in this case, is triggered by the factor of impression. The pictures are staged in a way that could remind people

of their own subconscious experiences. Simplicity and accessibility are critical in these instances too.

Everyday life/habits: Another way of introducing viewers to the feeling of familiarity could be that of conceptualizing ideas in the basic form of everyday habits. By presenting concepts that are applied by ordinary people in real-time then it is possible to make viewers relate the brand with their own habits. Scenes from public transport, an amusement park or even a fish and chips store (Figures 50, 51, 52), address fashion as a down to earth matter and can possibly have an impact on people that would otherwise be indifferent towards a seemingly exclusive brand. With this form of indirect strategy, it is possible to engage greater groups of people, simply because fashion is not depicted as something exclusively luxurious and only for upper classes anymore. It is conceived as something that can be approachable by anyone, in anytime and anyplace.

| Figure 50 | Figure 51 | Figure 52 |

Normalization/Imperfection: In one of the previous subsections the paper focused on the deconstruction of human nature and beauty standards as a way to support diversity and distance the brand's identity from old traditional role models. In this category, the paper will focus on the aspect of normalizing beauty standards and supporting imperfection as a manifestation of fair opportunities towards fashion (Pak, 2019). It is clear by now that many of Gucci's models lack

the standard type of appearance that would apply in the fashion industry a few years ago. It is also clear that even the setting up of the photos tend to make models look as human as every person in ordinary conditions of life. Such a focus on the "normal" side of people used in campaigns and their unique characteristics could also have an impact in terms of familiarity. Apart from suggesting that everyone is "included", Gucci also provokes the feeling that one sees his/her peers in the campaigns. Such an approach does not distance the viewer from the content. Instead, it mediates between him/her and the brand by creating an image of, again, accessibility in the fashion industry and its products.

4.2.3 Brand Values

One of Gucci's imperatives when it comes to indirect marketing strategies is that of the brand's values. Much of the house's focus on Instagram is spent on presenting the values that form its identity and the impact that it wants to have on society. In several posts, the viewer can find references towards the brand's heritage, its aesthetics, originality and traditions, all parts of the luxuriousness of this brand. When Gucci highlights its core values, it becomes easier for the viewer and prospect customer to comprehend the ideology behind a brand in a more approachable way.

Brand Heritage: Alessandro Michele, as the house's creative director, embodies what one could define as the representative of Gucci's heritage. His ideas around fashion pieces, as well as their origins and continuity through time, are indicative of how much the brand's heritage means for the survival and development of the House. Through heritage, one can find the essentials for further creations, inspiration and finally consult for the next steps of the brand. As previously discussed by González, Garcia- Medina, and Romero (2017), brand heritage and history behind a product are features that define a luxury firm and make customers feel like they own something sui generis. In addition, heritage works as the link between past, present and future and it doesn't necessarily mean that the brand is stuck in old motives. In contrast, it shows that the brand has a strong unshakable identity through the course of time, still able to produce progressive and appealing ideas. Focusing on the house's heritage works well in terms of marketing too. This is so because a customer can see the firm's beliefs and become attracted to them, or respectively

reject them. No matter what, the customer has a certain view of what the brand tries to represent. Figures 53 and 54 showcases how Gucci's heritage is promoted on Instagram. In the two posts, users can find in-depth descriptions of specific symbols and logos that provide them with the information to understand the context of the bags in the display. As a result, a prospective customer can "get in touch" with what Gucci considers essential and important in terms of heritage and what symbolizes it.

Figure 53

Figure 54

Originality: On the same context as the brand heritage comes the brands' *originality*. For every brand's success, the possession of some type of trademark is necessary. Combined with heritage, originality in design (Figures 53, 54), shapes and logos is critical because it also enriches the brand's image in terms of a stable identity and builds a strong position within the competitive marketplace (deBara, 2017). Using and reusing original motifs, bringing new life and meaning to them, could be an effective way of reminding to the customers the importance and point of view of the brand, as well as the credibility through which the brand sustains its loyalty and creates trust with the customers (Thompson, 2013).

Unique aesthetics: The paper has already mentioned Gucci's tendency to create and showcase unique stages and people in its campaigns. *Unique aesthetics* are also a key-characteristic to identify the luxuriousness of the firm (Jin & Cedrola, 2017). That aesthetics, as they will be referred from now on, can be used in features such as the lighting of a photo shooting, or the way that specific products, like shoes, are displayed and advertised (Figures 55, 56, 57). They are not only critical for the provocation of the feeling of familiarity. Instead, they are also hugely important for the definition of what the brand stands for. The creation and maintenance of a specific atmosphere around the brand's name is critical for the maintenance of its uniqueness and its character through time. Combined with heritage and originality, uniqueness can contribute to the formation of solid characteristics that are inextricably intertwined with what the brand represents. Consequently, customers can, once more, find it easier to relate and identify with the brand's goals and purposes.

Figure 55   Figure 56   Figure 57

Bizarre scenes: Inseparable from the values mentioned above is also the bizarre scenes that viewers can see unfolding in some of Gucci's campaigns. This time, scenes present a more hyper-realistic reality which is not distant from a bizarre reality that one could witness taking place in slightly more extreme versions of life. These bizarre scenes might as well represent the house's artistic tendencies for an alternative interpretation of the world and the practices included in it. The following examples (Figures 58, 59, 60) and the setup of the photographs are

indicative of the peculiarities mentioned above. The final result could be proof that around these peculiarities Gucci tries to build part of its character that will make it easily distinguishable from the rest of the fashion brands.

Figure 58   Figure 59   Figure 60

Blended traditions: In the last part of the list concerning the brand's values, comes the concept of *blended traditions*. It seems that tradition for Gucci is not only connected to the past. Time does not have a linear development that visibly separates the past from the future. In contrast, time seems to be circular and traditionally recyclable. The term 'recyclable' intends to highlight the brand's ability to adapt to new conditions without losing its character. The blending of the old, with the new and the futuristic, seems crucial for the maintenance of the brand's integrity and image. Once again, traditions prove their important role when it comes to inspiration and reusing and revitalizing older concepts and motifs (Koehler, 2017). Without tradition, there is no link to the present and future. Intense focus on tradition can alienate a brand from current changes and trends. However, the wise use of tradition and the knowledge that it bears can result in a more complex image presentation that will consequently impact the quality and appeal of products. In the captions of the images shown below one can spot the reference to the brand's archive for the inspiration of the designs in the display. The archive in this case works as the source that provides creative stimuli and is used in modern adaptations of older clothes (Figures 61, 62, 63).

Figure 61

Figure 62

Figure 63

4.2.4 Emotions

Research has shown that the power of emotions can influence buying behavior and future decision making. In disciplines ranging from philosophy to neuroscience, there is an increasing quest to find out the effects of emotions correlating to purchasing decisions (Lerner, Li, Valdesolo & Kassam, 2015). One of marketing's goals as a field is to evoke emotion and thus make people interested in a product or service. As O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2003, p.5) have stated "emotion is the adhesive that when mixed with trust, equals loyalty". In the case of Gucci, emotions are not the product of motivational speeches or celebrity influence that would result in attachment with the brand. Emotions, in this specific case, are a result of the combination of memory, use of colors, body language and unfolding scenes. As it will be shown in the following paragraphs, by activating these emotional triggers, Gucci attempts to engage the viewers and customers in a profound sentimental game that can respectively be linked with personal experiences.

Memory recall: Memory is a critical part of human cognition that forms consciousness and understanding of the world. Memories help people create patterns that lead them through their life course and are most of the time intensely linked to specific motives, such as sounds, odors and images (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Triggering a memory can be impactful for a person both in a negative and positive way.

Strategically, focusing on memories can prove impactful in terms of product marketing. Gucci uses the idea of memories in many instances as an indirect way to promote its products. More specifically (Figure 64), for its scent 'Memoire d'une Odeur' the term 'memory' is used not only in the product's name but it is also mentioned in the caption of the post. The analysis of the way that the scent is capturing childhood memories in combination with the sepia visuals, could certainly work as a stimulant for a number of people to recall their own childhood and the scents linked with it. As a result, such a strategy aims to be impactful since it would make customers relate their own memories with the memories that the perfume is supposed to represent.

Αρέσει στο χρήστη **0h_heck** και **χιλιάδες ακόμη άτομα**

gucci Capturing the joy felt as a child, images of the cast of @guccibeauty's new universal scent Gucci Mémoire d'une Odeur by @alessandro_michele launching today. Model Ellia Sophia @buildabrat, artist @olimpiadior, designer @harris_reed, @thomas_riguelle, @_kateagramma96_, Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, aka Stash, and Tex Santos-Shav @teexteex. #AlessandroMichele #GucciBeauty

Figure 64

By recalling memories to its customers, Gucci attempts to create an emotional and not only practical need for a product. Apparently, an emotional need is way more difficult to deny and the attachment to a product is way stronger (Leary, Pillemer & Wheeler, 2013).

Colors: When it comes to *colors* Gucci follows the same regime as with its heritage and originality. The colors and motifs used in every campaign are very specific and stable throughout the years. The iconic "web stripe' (Figure 65) colored in green and red is inseparable from the brand's identity. In addition to the brand's image though, these colors can be inseparable from the subconscious of the consumers who automatically identify the brand through specific color combinations. Being able to do that is important for brands as it creates a code between the brand and its customers. A code which is understood without headlines and allows for plain communication, mutual recognition, empathy and consequently loyalty (Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010). Moreover, when someone considers buying a product, one of the most influential factors (93%) is the visual appearance (Patel, 2019). Colors are included in the visual appearance and are an immediate way to transfer a message to the audience. Finally, colors can also be an indication of inclusiveness since the people who wear them can identify themselves as members of the same community.

Figure 65

Body Language: Body language in photo shootings can also prove critical for provoking emotions to the customers. If one takes a closer look at certain photographs that belong to Gucci's campaigns, it is quite easy to realize that models speak through the pictures with a very strong body language. Dynamic movements and expressions are persistent, but what is more persistent is the sensory factor. Senses seem to be centralized, since the viewers can witness the protagonists of photographs touching each other, tending their hands towards someone or looking intensely at someone else (Figures 66, 67, 68). Such a direction of photographs can grant them a naturalistic character that does not distance itself from emotions and needs that all the people possess. Additionally, when intimacy is of such a central role, it becomes easier to communicate it in external observances that automatically can feel the same intimacy for the brand's products or identify their needs via the sensualism projected.

Figure 66

Figure 67

Figure 68

Unfolding scenes: The final part of the section concerning emotions is that of the *unfolding scenes* observed in Gucci's campaigns. Together with body language, unfolding scenes provide an imagined movement to the photographs presented on Instagram. It feels that a viewer witnesses short stories frozen in time when they are unfolding. The pictures below (Figures 69, 70, 71), for instance, possess the aesthetic of snapshots taken out of a greater context that has multiple meanings. Seeing pictures like that triggers the viewers to perceive them differently than they would with a still image. Understanding the story and the emotions behind a snapshot can provoke equally strong emotions to the observers who then, possibly, identify strongly with

the development of the scene and can link it to their personal experiences and memories from the past. Consequently, when someone connects personal experiences with images so strongly, then the chances of desiring a specific product rise significantly.

Figure 69

Figure 70

Figure 71

The current research explored the ways that the luxury brand of Gucci promotes inclusivity in the fashion sector through its online marketing communication, specifically on Instagram. The research question around which the paper developed was "how does the luxury fashion brand Gucci use online marketing communication on Instagram for promoting inclusiveness". The method used was qualitative content analysis and specifically, the thematic analysis which is considered from the researcher as the most relevant approach for this inquiry. This chapter aims to answer the research question by providing a summary and conclusion of the findings, limitations throughout the process and possible further research.

Gucci as a famous luxury fashion brand has come to the realization that its clientele cannot be restricted only to wealthy people. Instead, and due to the rise of social media, a broader audience is necessary in order to reach success and stand out from other competitors. As a result, the fashion house promotes inclusiveness in social media platforms, creating thus, a new tendency in the luxury fashion industry. To see these brands that used to be entirely exclusive, trying to target a diverse spectrum of audiences, is a quite recent phenomenon that is worth of further research and discussion. Therefore, the specific topic was selected to be investigated. Following the *Methodological Guidelines Thesis Research, September 2019-2020,* 400 posts (both captions and visuals) were extracted from Gucci's official Instagram page. The analysis of the posts identified that Gucci attempts to embrace inclusiveness in the fashion industry, promote its brand positioning and attract a wider audience by using two strategies: *direct* and *indirect*.

The first core code that was analyzed concerned the *direct strategies* that Gucci uses in its online (Instagram) marketing communication to create meaningful relationships with the audience (Castronovo & Huang, 2012) and promote inclusiveness. More specifically, the direct strategies introduced some concepts that can be traced throughout the brand's digital presence and are identified as *storytelling, sustainability, community and art*. *Storytelling*, nowadays, constitutes one of the strongest strategies within digital marketing (González, Garcia- Medina, & Romero, 2017), which helps to cultivate perceptions and enhance brand-customer relationship (Lund, Cohen & Scarles, 2017; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Hence, narrating the brand's history, when promoting something new, but also presenting scenes and experiences that can be easily identified by people in their everyday lives, allows for a bonding with the audience and a direct connection with the brand. Furthermore, the burning issue of *sustainability* is another

category of Gucci's direct strategies. Even though many, if not all, luxury fashion brands still use leather from animals to produce products, Gucci has already reduced this manner in a large percentage and is launching campaigns in which it supports animal protection. Another sustainable habit that is also promoted by the brand is the reutilization of materials and patterns or even the use of exclusively sustainable materials for the manufacture of whole campaigns. As a result, the house seeks to provide the needed space for the discussion of such contemporary and urgent issues, and to attract more people in participating in the community striving for the salvation of the natural environment. For this purpose, numerous calls for action are regularly found within its Instagram posts. Another sub-category of the direct strategies is that of *community*. Loneliness is amongst the most serious issues in today's society (de Jong Gierveld, Van Tilburg, & Dykstra, 2006). People today are trying to become part of a community so that they won't feel excluded and alone. With the direct hashtag #GucciCommunity as well as with the presentation of people from a diverse spectrum of cultures in its posts, Gucci promotes inclusivity in practice and generates an emotional bond with the users. Finally, *art* plays a significant role for the luxury fashion brand and is utilized in various ways. From collaborations with artists of various backgrounds, to famous personalities used as models in campaigns and, finally, to beautiful street art on the walls of neighborhoods around the world, art is used as a unifying power that expresses inclusivity in all kinds of ways.

The second core code that was used to analyze the research question is that of the *indirect strategies*. The findings resulted in another group of concepts that now include *diversity*, *familiarity, brand values* and *emotions*. To sum them up, *diversity* is one of the most common and obvious features on Gucci's Instagram page through which the brand is trying to promote acceptance and inclusiveness. It seems to be a central part of the brand's positioning and because it is directly communicated to the audience, the house is getting widely noticed form the public (Semans, 2010). Unconventional figures, opposing doubles and blended communities are some of the features promoted under the umbrella term of diversity. Additionally, the deconstruction of beauty standards and human nature in general, combined with a strong femininity are of central importance. Moving forward to the concept of *familiarity,* Gucci is used to using scenes from everyday life that spark a feeling of familiarity, in order to promote products or whole campaigns. In many instances, the photo-shooting set-ups are resembling very basic habits that people follow in their daily routines and with which they can easily identify. Furthermore, the

concept of *brand values* is equally important since it captures values such as the House's heritage and originality, or even the unique aesthetics that define its character and the luxuriousness around it. These values serve a very important purpose, that of introducing customers to the identity of the House and thus including them in the whole fashion edifice. Finally, the category of *emotions* in the *indirect strategies* was one of the most complicated to grasp and describe since it combines different and equally complex concepts. Memory, use of colors and motifs, as well as body language and the feeling of unfolding scenes in pictures can be found among them. *Emotions* may not be an obvious tool that can be used in the application of marketing strategies, but it definitely is a powerful one, since it speaks directly to the customers' consciousness.

The above-mentioned findings present the ways that a luxury brand can support and promote inclusivity, openly position itself in the fashion industry and communicate with a wider audience, while being active and creative in one of the most widely used online social media platforms-Instagram. To conclude, the new insights derived from the analyzed data can provide an answer to the research question formulated previously. As a result, the research question can be answered with the scheme of *direct* and *indirect strategies.* In a highly competitive industry, luxury fashion brands need to always remain up to date, but also to come up with new ways of communicating their messages to the audience. Creativity and innovation are two key principles that Gucci follows in its campaigns, along with the embracing of diversity, not only in terms of skin color -as others do- but also in terms of sexuality, ageism, disabilities, body size and more (Dhankar 2019). The conception of campaigns that include various types of people who can be found in everyday life, not only supports inclusiveness, but it also reinforces consumers' perceptions, concerning the brand, in a positive way. The specific approach in one of the main reasons for the company's success and skyrocketing revenues in the last few years (Statista, 2020). Gucci can be considered a role model, whose example should be followed by the rest of fashion brands if they want to stay competitive in the modern marketplace as well as in people's preferences.

To conclude with, in this digital era, things are continuously changing and especially things that happen on social media and brands need to adapt fast. New trends are always coming up but the concept of inclusivity is here to stay. It is here to stay because times have changed and everybody should be treated equally in each and every sense and sector. Therefore, the present

paper might help and be followed by marketers not only in fashion industry but also from other disciplines who wants to include the concept of inclusiveness in their brand and stand out from the competitive marketplace. Hence, they can find out some unique strategies and get inspired of some practices that Gucci already applies. Moreover, there are limited researches on inclusivity in luxury fashion industry thus, this research could be valuable academic reference for people who want to further investigate the topic or combine it with an upcoming trend.

5.1. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

During the process of the research, some limitations appeared. Firstly, the concept of inclusivity within the fashion sector is quite new and has not been extensively examined before. Thus, there was limited literature available out there a fact that created difficulty to be based totally on previous researches; that is why a mix of inductive and deductive approaches was selected. Secondly, the selection of the luxury fashion brand, Gucci, has been made on purpose. Specifically, it is one of the few luxury brands (and maybe the only one after checking the other famous luxury fashion brands profiles on Instagram) that promotes so clearly and openly diversity and inclusivity in many levels.

A quantitative research for further investigation on the topic would be a great idea. In such a case, broader scale of samples/data can be accessible and, thus, more strategies can be identified. Additionally, a good proposition could be to conduct surveys or interviews on people who are Gucci's customers to investigate in-depth their opinions, emotions and behaviors towards the brand. Finally, a comparative analysis with other luxury fashion brands' strategies could be also very insightful and interesting since it would provide a more objective view on the marketing strategies of the industry.

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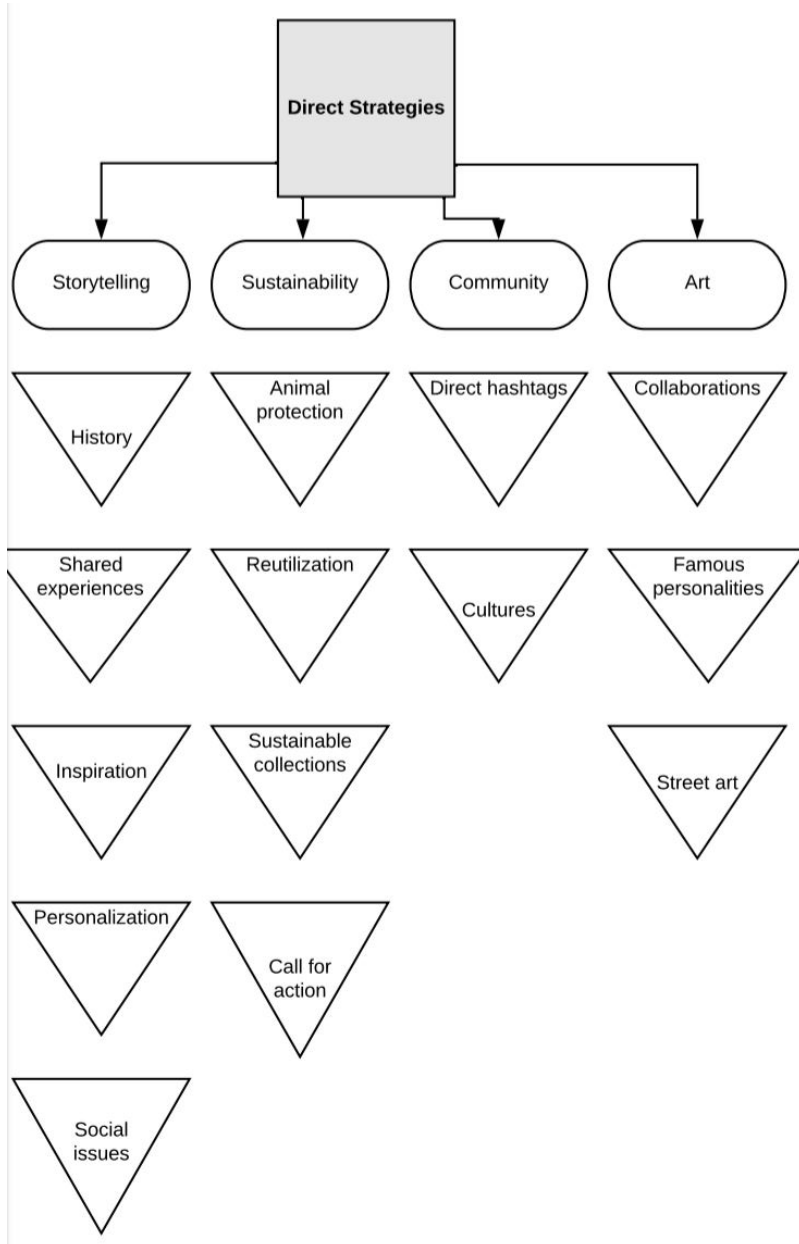
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APPENDIX A

Indirect strategies			
Support social diversity	Familiarity	Brand values	Emotions
Subcultures	Photo's set up	Brand heritage	Memory recall
Strong femininity	Everyday life/ habits	Originality	Colors
Deconstuction of human nature	Normalization/ Imperfection	Unique aesthetics	Body language
Opposing doubles		Bizzare scenes	Unfolding scenes
Blended communities		Blended traditions	