

Championing Gender Fluidity in Luxury Fashion: A Case Study on Gucci under Alessandro Michele's Creative Direction

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the contributions of luxury fashion brands in fostering a discourse on gender identity. Taking Gucci as its primary point of inquiry, the study dissects how one of the industry's iconic brands has navigated gender fluidity in its campaigns and outreach under the avant-garde and audacious vision of its former creative director Alessandro Michele. This investigation delves deep into Gucci's multifaceted dedication to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I), unraveling its strategic undertakings to champion gender inclusivity. The aim is to uncover the depth, significance, and potential ripple effects of Gucci's stance in setting a precedent for the broader luxury fashion domain.

Keywords

Gender; Gender fluidity; Luxury fashion communication; Gucci; Alessandro Michele; Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I)

Introduction and objectives

Recent societal movements and developments, like the #MeToo movement, invite open conversations challenging traditional perspectives on gender roles and norms, and encouraging a reevaluation of power dynamics between genders. Consequently, brands are evolving their strategies to cater to broader gender identities refining their strategies especially to appeal Gen Z consumers (Wunderman Thompson, 2016).

A 2023 study in the *Journal of Marketing* conducted a systematic literature review on gender-based research in marketing, spanning 30 years (Peñaloza et al., 2023). The research revealed that while many studies have focused on traditional gender roles and traits, less than 10% addressed the social construction of gender experiences and identities. There's also scant research on how marketers attribute gender characteristics to products and brands contributing to the underrepresentation of current societal and marketing trends in gender-focused research.

The luxury fashion industry, historically a leader in cultural transformations, has seen increased discussions on gender fluidity, yet, understanding this representation remains limited. Focusing on Gucci - under Alessandro Michele's creative direction (2015-2022) - offers insights into how luxury brands advocate gender fluidity. Michele's designs, which blend traditional gender styles, resonate with younger audiences. Gucci's initiatives, from collections to corporate responsibility efforts, have positioned them as DE&I advocates in haute couture. Analyzing Gucci's strategies can offer guidance for other brands transitioning towards more inclusive messaging.

This research thus contributes to the wider discourse on gender identity in fashion answering the following question: What strategies has Gucci employed to champion gender fluidity within its DE&I initiative under Alessandro Michele's leadership (2015-2022)?

The following section will introduce the theoretical background underpinning the investigation.

Conceptual framework/ literature review/ research model

Gender fluidity relates to individuals who don't confine themselves to the traditional male/female binary, seeing gender more as a spectrum (Cowart & Wagner, 2021). Various terms, such as gender-neutral, gender-free, and genderless, echo this sentiment, all emphasizing a departure from fixed gender identities.

Especially in fashion, the term genderless has gained traction. It signifies the fusion of male and female traits, leading to a deconstruction of gender barriers. This merging idea is akin to the concept of intersexuality, which blends traditional gender orientations, potentially influencing fashion consumption patterns.

Two other primary concepts in gender-fluid fashion are androgyny and unisex. Androgyny stems from ancient Greek words for man and woman and emphasizes the coexistence of masculine and feminine attributes (Oxford Dictionary, 2023). Modern understanding recognizes androgynous individuals as embodying traits of both genders, challenging binary gender perceptions. Androgynous fashion, hence, promotes inclusivity.

Unisex, on the other hand, describes items suited for both genders, avoiding any gender distinctions (Bem, 1981). In fashion, unisex clothing is designed without emphasizing gendered characteristics.

Understanding the evolution of gender fluidity in fashion necessitates a historical overview. Contrary to common belief, gender fluidity isn't a new trend in fashion. As noted by Ranathunga & Uralagamage (2019), androgynous fashion has roots in the 18th century, a time without distinct menswear and womenswear. From the early 20th century onwards, fashion has increasingly played with the idea of gender fluidity. French designer Paul Poiret's groundbreaking pants design for actress Sarah Bernhardt in 1900 was a precursor to women adopting more masculine attire, as seen in the 1920s Garçonne Look and Marlene Dietrich's androgynous style in the 1930s.

The 1960s and 1970s were pivotal, with haute couture houses like Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent, and Dior borrowing elements from men's fashion. This shift mirrored broader socio-cultural movements, particularly the feminist and LGBTQ movements of that era (Butler, 1990). The term "unisex" began gaining momentum in the late 1960s, reaching its zenith in the 1990s, and eventually translating into a minimalist design approach suitable for all genders (Barnard, 2002).

The 1980s introduced groundbreaking designers like Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo, who crafted pieces that challenged traditional gender norms (Kawamura, 2004). Jean Paul Gaultier, in particular, stirred conversations with his introduction of men's skirts in his 1985 collection. By the 1990s, countries like South Korea started to witness the emergence of gender-neutral fashion trends, reflecting a budding inclination to transcend rigid gender binaries (Min & Lee, 2015).

Modern fashion observes an increasing overlap of gender demarcations, mirroring a broader societal evolution towards inclusivity (Rocamora & Smelik, 2016). Contemporary pioneers like Karl Lagerfeld and Harris Reed are venturing into gender-neutral collections, and avant-garde initiatives such as the Pluhid Project are spearheading agender retail experiences (Lewis, 2016).

Google Trends data, which underscores the public's shifting perceptions, has recorded a persistent, albeit fluctuating interest in terms related to gender-neutral fashion since 2004.

As the delineations between male and female fashion become increasingly nebulous, brands are strategizing to enlarge their consumer base through cross-gender initiatives. This not only propels economic growth but also enhances their societal relevance, especially amidst younger demographics that embrace more progressive perspectives on gender (Twigg, 2019).

Method

This study is based on a document analysis as described by Bowen (2009). The method involves analyzing data to extract meaning, further understanding, and gain empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Documents encompass a broad spectrum of materials (Morgan, 2000), with the aim of identifying, selecting, and summarizing collected data into topics and categories through content analysis.

For empirical data collection, the research relied on multiple data sources to ensure triangulation, enhancing the study's validity by cross-referencing information from diverse sources. The main focus was the strategies employed by the Italian luxury brand, Gucci, in promoting gender fluidity, emphasizing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I). Data sources included Gucci's official website, databases like Factiva and EBSCO, and luxury fashion publications like Vogue, WWD, The Business of Fashion, MF Fashion, Interbrand, Lyst, Fashionista, Vogue Business, Dazed Digital, The Luxury Chronicle and Forbes. Keywords guiding the data collection included terms like "Gucci gender-inclusive designs", "Michele's gender-blurring approach", and "Gucci DE&I initiatives".

Subsequent sections of the study delve deeper into these strategies, aiming to understand how Gucci, as a leading Italian luxury brand, addresses the rising demand for a more inclusive fashion industry in terms of gender issues.

Findings

The study examined Gucci's initiatives to promote gender fluidity, prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I). This exploration started with Gucci's official website and expanded to other industry sources. Selected sources for the three strategies can be found in the Appendix.

Through this analysis, three dominant strategies were identified under Alessandro Michele's creative tenure from 2015 to 2022: Product Design, Communication Tactics, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Gucci, 2020).

Under Product Design, Alessandro Michele, serving as the creative director from 2015 to 2022, pursued a transcendent approach to gender in fashion. He seamlessly combined masculine and feminine elements, challenging traditional gender divisions in the industry. This innovative approach dissolved the distinction between menswear and womenswear, forging a new path for androgynous design (Flaccavento, 2022).

In terms of Communication Tactics, since Michele's ascendancy, Gucci combined menswear and womenswear presentations, a shift from traditional norms. Additionally, the launch of Gucci MX on their website in 2020 heralded their venture into gender-neutral fashion, with "MX" reflecting non-binary gender identities (Gucci, 2020). Collaborations with non-binary spokespeople further solidified their commitment (Eden, 2018; Gucci, 2019; Gucci, 2023). This direction aligns with the broader industry's realization of the importance of representing more

fluid gender roles in their messaging (Cooke et al., 2022; Chu et al, 2016; Cowart and Wagner, 2021).

Lastly, CSR Initiatives by Gucci, under Michele, involved multiple partnerships and campaigns. Collaborations with organizations like Rosa Parks Liberi e Uguali in 2017 and Irregular Labs from 2018 onwards were notable (Turra, 2022). The “Chime For Change” campaign, co-initiated with Beyoncé and Salma Hayek Pinault in 2013, and the publication of the Gucci Impact Report series, emphasized their dedication to societal advancements and sustainability (Gucci, 2019; Gucci, 2020).

In essence, under Alessandro Michele, Gucci championed an approach to fashion that was both forward-thinking and deeply rooted in inclusivity, marking a significant evolution in luxury fashion’s portrayal of gender.

Discussion & Conclusion

An increasing number of marketers are taking an active stance, prioritizing the inclusion of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their marketing agendas. By focusing on integrating DEI principles into all aspects of their business strategies, brands have the potential to attract a broader and more diverse target audience. This strategic concentration on DEI pillars not only enables brands to establish deeper connections with consumers but also taps into untapped customer bases. Such implementation of DEI measures fosters a more equitable and inclusive brand image, leading to enhanced brand reputation and financial standing. Beyond being a moral, strategic, and legal requirement, DEI has become an economic imperative that can offer brands a competitive advantage. Demonstrating a strong alignment with DEI values is crucial for attracting and retaining customers and talented employees. By incorporating DEI principles into marketing strategies, brands can stand out in a fragmented marketplace, capturing the attention of consumers (Ferraro et al., 2022).

Managerial implications

In the rapidly evolving socio-cultural environment, addressing genderless and gender-fluid issues has become more critical than ever. Both from a social responsibility standpoint and from a market-centric viewpoint, industries need to evolve.

In the realm of the luxury industry, one of the pivotal steps is product diversification. Instead of collections that adhere strictly to traditional gender divides, brands should ensure designs that resonate with a more diverse range of identities. On the marketing frontier, collaborations with gender-fluid influencers and spokespersons can ensure advertising campaigns are reflective of society’s vast diversity. Beyond products and services, luxury brands can foster deeper connections by organizing events that center around gender fluidity or by initiating CSR collaborations with organizations advocating for gender inclusivity and LGBTQ+ rights.

Moving to the broader fashion retail sector, the very essence of shopping can be revolutionized. Instead of the conventional “men’s” and “women’s” sections, stores can be reimaged around styles, seasons, or trends. In tandem with this, a diverse size range that doesn’t strictly align with gendered expectations can cater to all body types.

When it comes to the cosmetics and beauty sector, there’s ample room for innovation. Developing products targeting non-binary individuals with an emphasis on versatility can be transformative. The very packaging of these products, combined with the language used, can steer clear of gender biases, focusing purely on the merits of the product.

In the technology and electronics domain, the nuances can be subtle yet impactful. For services or products that rely on user profiles, a design that doesn't mandate a binary gender selection can be inclusive. In an age driven by AI, even voice-activated systems can be developed to have gender-neutral voice options and to understand non-binary pronouns.

The publishing and media industry has a significant role in shaping perceptions. By ensuring diverse representations, including gender-fluid characters or stories, they can drive change. Their advertising and promotional campaigns can further endorse this ideology.

Lastly, across all industries, gender-neutral facilities, comprehensive company policies supporting non-binary and gender-fluid employees, regular diversity training programs, and feedback mechanisms are essential. These measures not only ensure the well-being of non-binary and gender-fluid employees but also elevate the brand's image, loyalty, and reach amongst a broader consumer base.

Limitations & Future research

In examining the advocacy of gender fluidity by luxury fashion brands, particularly through the lens of Gucci under Alessandro Michele's stewardship, certain research limitations become evident. Firstly, qualitative document analysis inherently lacks interactivity. Without the ability to engage or seek direct opinions from Gucci's stakeholders, from customers to employees, we possibly leave out vital reactions and insights.

Moreover, focusing on Gucci during Michele's era raises concerns about the generalizability of findings. Every luxury brand has distinct strategies and visions, and what applies to Gucci might not resonate with others. Also, analyzing only a specific timeframe (2015-2022) may miss the evolving long-term impact of Gucci's initiatives.

The ever-changing nature of fashion is another variable. While Gucci positioned itself prominently in gender fluidity discourse during the studied period, the dynamic industry could see other brands presenting novel narratives soon.

Acknowledging these limitations, there are pathways for enriched future research. Researchers could employ interactive methods like interviews, thus enhancing findings' validity. Comparative analysis of various luxury brands could offer broader insights into the diverse strategies around gender fluidity. Opting for a longitudinal approach would trace the progression and impact of gender fluidity advocacy over time.

Understanding consumer perspectives will be invaluable. Deep dives into how consumers, across demographics and cultures, perceive and engage with brands championing gender fluidity can offer nuanced insights.

Examining wider industry dynamics and influencers, the intersectionality of gender fluidity with other diversity dimensions, and the broader societal and cultural impacts of such advocacies will further enhance understanding.

Finally, a global lens, analyzing acceptance and engagement across different cultures, and anticipating future trends and innovations, can chart the evolving trajectory of gender fluidity in luxury fashion.

These directions, tailored based on research objectives and resources, can immensely enrich future studies on the topic.

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Appendix

Alessandro Michele's ideology applied to product design (collections)

STRATEGY	MOST REPRESENTATIVE DOCUMENTS
<p>Alessandro Michele's ideology applied to product design (collections)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mellery-Pratt, R. (2015). <i>Will genderless fashion change retail?</i> The Business of Fashion. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/intelligence/will-genderless-fashion-work-retail - Indvik, L. (2015). <i>Gucci's Alessandro Michele was the most exciting thing to happen to fashion in 2015.</i> Fashionista. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from https://fashionista.com/2015/12/alessandro-michele-gucci-2015 - Blanks, T. (2015). <i>Gucci fall 2015 menswear collection.</i> Vogue. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2015-menswear/gucci - Indvik, L. (2016). <i>Alessandro Michele discusses fashion, Fame and how he landed the top role at Gucci.</i> Retrieved March 31, 2023, from https://fashionista.com/2016/05/alessandro-michele-vogue-festival - Zargani, L. (2020) <i>Seminal moment: When Alessandro Michele reinvented gucci.</i> WWD. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from https://wwd.com/fashion-news/designer-luxury/seminal-moment-when-alessandro-michele-reinvented-gucci-1203679490/ - Lowri, E. (2015). <i>Gucci's mixed show in Milan.</i> Vogue France. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from https://www.vogue.fr/fashion/fashion-news/diaporama/the-mixed-gucci-menswear-spring-summer-2016-show-in-milan/21181 - Singer, M. (2017). <i>Gigi Hadid and Zayn Malik are part of a new generation who don't see fashion as gendered.</i> Vogue. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from https://www.vogue.com/article/gigi-hadid-zayn-malik-august-2017-vogue-cover-breaking-gender-codes -Sarkar, M. (2019). <i>Met gala 2019 served the best of Non-Binary Fashion.</i> Forbes. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.forbes.com/sites/meghnasarkar/2019/05/07/met-gala-2019-served-the-best-of-non-binary-fashion/?sh=167cd82e4f03 - Manfredi, C. (2019). <i>Gucci Porta in scena la fluidità di genere.</i> MFFashion.com. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from https://www.mffashion.com/news/gucci-porta-in-scena-la-fluidita-di-genere-201901141812417057 - Yotka, S. (2020). <i>Gucci's new "impotent" TEE is a challenge to toxic masculinity.</i> Vogue. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.vogue.com/article/gucci-impotent-tshirt-fall-2020-menswear-toxic-masculinity - Bowles, H. (2020). <i>Playtime with Harry Styles: "You can never be overdressed".</i> Vogue. Retrieved April 26, 2023, from https://www.vogue.com/article/harry-styles-cover-december-2020 - Givhan, R. (2021). <i>Perspective As Gucci Turns 100, creative director Alessandro Michele is leading the fashion industry toward a different future.</i> The Washington Post. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2021/11/15/alessandro-michele-gucci-100-anniversary - Gucci. (2022). <i>Gucci Ha Ha Ha - The Harry Styles Collection: Gucci®.</i> The Harry Styles Collection GUCCI®. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from

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Gucci's communication strategies advocating for gender fluidity

STRATEGY	MOST REPRESENTATIVE DOCUMENTS
<p>Communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lockwood, Palmieri, Socha & Zargani (2016). <i>Gucci's coed shift not seen right for every brand</i>. WWD. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from https://wwd.com/feature/gucci-unifies-mens-womens-shows-alessandro-michele-10403532/ - Elan, P. (2016). <i>Gucci to combine men's and women's shows</i>. The Guardian. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2016/apr/05/gucci-to-combine-mens-and-womens-shows - Yotka, S. (2016). <i>Gucci will shake up the fashion system with a single men's and women's Runway show</i>. Vogue. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from https://www.vogue.com/article/gucci-unify-mens-womens-runway-show - Cartner-Morley. (2017). <i>Milan Fashion Week: Gucci embraces its brilliant absurdity with fluid show</i>. The Guardian. Retrieved March 26, 2023, from https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2017/feb/22/milan-fashion-week-gucci-embraces-its-brilliant-absurdity-with-fluid-show - Eden, N. (2018). <i>Actress and model Hari Nef on the beauty of not conforming</i>. Dazed. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.dazeddigital.com/beauty/article/42392/1/hari-nef-gucci-bloom-growing-pains - Gucci. (2019). <i>Amplifying gen Z voices</i>. Gucci Equilibrium Amplifying Gen Z Voices Comments. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://equilibrium.gucci.com/amplifying-gen-z-voices/ - Gucci. (2019). <i>The future is fluid</i>. YouTube. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFUvLNL7E8Q - Gucci. (2019). <i>Presenting 'the future is fluid', a film by Jade Jackman and irregular labs which explores what gender means to gen Z around the world</i>. Gucci Stories. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.gucci.com/us/en/st/stories/gucci-equilibrium/article/chime-for-change-the-future-is-fluid-film - Gucci. (2019). <i>Motus artist Silvia Calderoni performs her work 'MDLSX' at the Gucci Hub in Milan</i>. Gucci Stories. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from https://www.gucci.com/us/en/st/stories/people-events/article/2019-silvia-calderoni-performance-milan - Gucci. (2019). <i>Gucci Mémoire d'une Odeur: the new universal fragrance is captured in a campaign featuring a diverse cast of talents including actor and singer songwriter Harry Styles</i>. Gucci Stories. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.gucci.com/us/en/st/stories/article-category-beauty/article/campaign-memoire-odeur - Gucci. (2019). <i>One of the faces of the campaign for fragrance Gucci Mémoire d'un odeur, Harris Reed writes about what gender fluid means to him</i>. Gucci Stories. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from https://www.gucci.com/au/en_au/st/stories/article/harris-reed-memoire-odeur - Gucci. (2020). <i>Gucci MX Collection: Designer Unisex Clothes: Gucci® US</i>. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.gucci.com/us/en/st/capsule/mx-editorial-looks-grid - Gucci. (2020). <i>FrankensteinMagazinexGuccimx</i>. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.gucci.com/documents/FrankensteinMagazinexGuccimx.pdf - White, R. (2020). <i>Gucci launches its first non-binary section</i>. i-D. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/4ayqqw/gucci-launches-its-first-non-binary-section

	<p>- Russo, G. (2020). <i>Gucci now has a genderless shopping section</i>. Teen Vogue. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.teenvogue.com/story/gucci-genderless-shopping-section-gucci-mx</p> <p>- Gucci. (2020). <i>Episode 1: At Home / Overture of something that never ended / Silvia Calderoni and Paul B. Preciado</i>. YouTube. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKqbG6TLYnc</p>
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Gucci’s Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives supporting gender fluidity

STRATEGY	MOST REPRESENTATIVE DOCUMENTS
<p>CSR initiatives</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Turra, A. (2017). <i>Gucci promotes diversity and inclusion</i>. WWD. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://wwd.com/business-news/human-resources/gucci-promotes-diversity-inclusion-parks-liberi-e-uguali-10810309/ - Gucci. (2017). <i>Parks-free and equal</i>. Gucci Equilibrium. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://equilibrium.gucci.com/parks-free-and-equal/ - Gucci. (2018). <i>Amplifying gen Z voices</i>. Gucci Equilibrium Amplifying Gen Z Voices Comments. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://equilibrium.gucci.com/amplifying-gen-z-voices/ - The Luxury Chronicle. (2018). <i>Italy -Gucci and Chime for Change Partner with irregular labs for Gen z report on fluidity</i>. The Luxury Chronicle. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.theluxurychronicle.com/irregular-labs-for-gen-report/ - Waite, T. (2018). <i>Read gucci and irregular labs' latest report on gender fluidity in gen Z</i>. Dazed. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/42698/1/read-gucci-irregular-labs-latest-report-on-gender-fluidity-gen-z - Gucci. (2019). <i>Gucci launches 'to gather together', the next chapter of Chime for Change Campaign with dedicated ArtWalls</i>. Gucci Stories. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.gucci.com/us/en/st/stories/gucci-equilibrium/article/chime-branding-and-artwalls - Gucci. (2019). <i>CHIME-ZINE-issue-00 2019</i>. Gucci Equilibrium. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://equilibrium.gucci.com/zine/ - Gucci. (2019). <i>CHIME-ZINE_ISSUE_01_ENG 2019</i>. Gucci Equilibrium. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://equilibrium.gucci.com/zine/ - Gucci (2021). <i>Chime zine no. 4</i>. Gucci Equilibrium. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://equilibrium.gucci.com/chime-zine-no-4/ - Gucci. (2021, June 29). <i>#generationequality chime zine</i>. Gucci Equilibrium. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://equilibrium.gucci.com/generationequality-chime-zine/ - Gucci. (2021). <i>Impact report 2020</i>. Gucci Equilibrium. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://equilibrium.gucci.com/impactreport/ - Gucci (2022). <i>Chime zine no. 5</i>. Gucci Equilibrium CHIME Zine No 5 Comments. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://equilibrium.gucci.com/chime-zine-no-5/ - Gucci. (2022). <i>Impact report 2021 – Gucci equilibrium</i>. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://equilibrium.gucci.com/impactreport-2021/